

Don't give up, don't sell out

Torture and testimony

Phil Kuznetsov and comrades

2021

Contents

Where do principles come from?	3
It used to be no better	4
Experience of revolutionaries	4
How to resist torture?	5
What is wrong with the inquisitorial approach?	6
Dubovsky case	6
A few more words	7
Conclusion	7

Since 2017 our movement has faced repression of a scale and intensity previously unseen. The main distinctive feature of the situation is the massive use of torture by the Federal Security Service (FSB). Previously, cases of beatings and torture of anarchists in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus were rather isolated exceptions. We heard that radical Islamists and fascists were tortured brutally. Some may recall the “Odessa case” against communists and anarchists. But it’s one thing to “know” something in the abstract, quite another to experience it on your own skin.

Torture resulted in many people testifying against comrades and cooperating with investigators after falling into the hands of the special services.

The current crisis of the Russian anarchist movement is not just the result of old splits and brutal repression. Perhaps an even greater challenge faced is the moral one of torture, of giving up information, of betrayal, to which we have not yet fully responded.

How to evaluate the situation where, during the course of an investigation, many people betray comrades? Can torture serve as a justification? What to do when popular members of the movement, as in the case of, for example, Igor Shishkin from the “Network” case, turn out to be among the people crushed by the FSB to the point of collaboration?

These questions cannot be dismissed. Because, after all, they raise the main problem: is the contemporary anarchist movement something serious? Is its existence meaningful at all?

The issue of torture and betrayal is the most important ethical dilemma of the anarchist movement in recent years. Without dealing with it, we can go no further.

The palette of judgments that can be heard in anarchist circles falls on a spectrum between two extreme positions: “No one can be accountable for testimony given under torture” and “It is unacceptable to give new information to the enemy, no matter the circumstances. Anyone who does so is a traitor, a snitch, an informer.”

Spoiler: the truth here is NOT somewhere in the middle. It is much closer to the second thesis. But still not identical to it. Let’s look at it in more detail.

Where do principles come from?

We learn from an early age that “snitching is unacceptable.” But why is that?

Especially in the case of torture, if we look at it from a personal perspective, it is easier to give the torturers what they want and stop the suffering.

There are several arguments why this is not acceptable. At a minimum, by starting to collectively participate in endeavors potentially drawing State repression, people expect shared secrets to be kept safe. Giving them away is a violation of that trust. No one would take these risks knowing in advance that in a bad situation a comrade will reveal everything to the cops. But perhaps the strongest reason to not give comrades up is different: by giving information to your enemies, you literally break the lives of other people, and people who are probably not strangers to you, since you know something about them. Because of you, they will also be facing torture and years in prison.

Yet these arguments are also relative. In fact, like any ethical principle, the principle of not turning comrades in cannot be fully “rationalized.” However, collective tradition, culture, and experience tell us that this principle is true. In Kropotkin’s terms, “moral sense” tells us this.

On the same grounds, we put collective obligations above personal comfort. Moreover, these commitments have no “expiration date”: if someone is disillusioned and leaves the movement,

and after a while finds themselves in front of cops and turn their former associates in, the fault of such a person does not become less.

So, we take it as a principle that it is unacceptable to pass on to the enemy any true information concerning other people. Since the violation of that rule entails grave consequences, the violation itself is a grave offence. The only question that remains is whether torture or something else can serve as a “mitigating circumstance”?

It used to be no better

Of course, we can recall examples when someone from the movement, in the face of repression, provided important information to the authorities. The year 2010 immediately comes to mind. Then, almost simultaneously, both in Russia (after the attack on the city administration of Khimki) and in Belarus (after a series of direct action attacks), the anarchist movement faced repression. Torture, as far as we know, was used only in rare individual cases and with a lesser level of brutality than what we have seen since 2017. Still, in both countries there were people who ended up collaborating with the police. In all identified cases, the community has condemned and expelled the informants.

That is, the anarchist “collective mind” was guided by the principle that there is no justification for testifying against comrades when faced with threats, fear and psychological manipulation. It is hard to disagree with this approach. No matter whether you are being threatened or, on the contrary, the police is playing the “good cop,” the enemy is in front of you. You are obliged to not give them any information on your comrades.

Even if a young and recent member of the movement is being pressed by the police, it is expected that the person already comes into the radical community with a certain pre-set moral code in which the principle of “never turn anyone in” comes first. It seems strange to have to say it, but recent years have taught us that it is necessary to say it. Ten years ago, the question of a permissive approach towards giving testimony against comrades in the anarchist community did not arise. It wasn’t better before, it was easier.

Bottom line: giving information to the State under verbal and psychological pressure is clearly unacceptable. But what about physical torture?

Experience of revolutionaries

Digging through the documents of revolutionary organizations of the past, it is not easy to find a specific attitude to testimony under torture. The statutes of the executive committee of the “People’s Will” succinctly prescribe that all the secrets of the organization be kept in deep secrecy.

Carlos Marighella’s “Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla” also states in a short line and without details: “Those who go to the police of their own free will to make denunciations and accusations, who supply information and who finger people, must be executed when they are caught by the urban guerrillas.” Interestingly, in the movie “Four Days in September,” about the struggle of Marighella and his comrades, the characters have no doubt that their captured comrade-in-arms will talk under torture. And they liberate him later anyway. A movie is a movie: how it really was, the author does not know.

The IRA's "Green Book" devotes a lot of pages to psychological preparation for arrest, interrogation and beatings to help partisans remain silent. However, the text does not directly provide a moral evaluation of testimony given under torture. And the torture mentioned in the Green Book is limited to beatings and burning with cigarettes. The connection of an electric cable to the genitals and prolonged electrocution with a taser may have been outside the realities of Northern Ireland in the 1970s. The modern Russian and Belarusian secret police act more brutally.

So, the principle of not testifying in any case is rather an unwritten rule of revolutionary movements, something taken for granted by default.

In the USSR during the war it was considered unacceptable for partisans and underground fighters to turn in comrades-in-arms, regardless of any torture by the Gestapo. For example, Viktor Tretiakovich, commissar of the "Young Guard" (a Soviet underground organization in the German-occupied city of Krasnodon), is still considered a controversial figure because of the suspicion that before his execution he could not withstand torture and gave the Nazis names and addresses, although this version is refuted by many.

The view is sometimes expressed that in the hands of "professionals" no person can withstand torture. This opinion is not without foundation. Yet it is not true. There are many documented examples of people enduring terrible torture. Here is one.

Boris Donskoy, member of the Left Socialist-Revolutionary party, killed the commander of German occupation corps Hermann von Eichhorn in Kiev in 1918. Boris was captured at the site of the operation. "After he was brought to the jail, he was immediately bound to a bed and tortured, demanding to hand over his accomplices. They tortured him for three days, replacing each other: they burned, pricked, cut, thrust pins and spikes under his nails, plucked all his toenails..."—wrote in her memoirs Irina Kakhovskaya, the comrade of Boris Donskoy. Donskoy said only his name, origin, party affiliation and the motives for his actions. Not a word about comrades-in-arms. His "testimony" actually became a political statement.

Such examples are not unique at all.

How to resist torture?

Everyone who has experienced torture or even just beatings in the police station knows very well how scary, painful and humiliating it is. And how difficult it is not to give in and not give the torturers what they want.

The task of the torturers is to subdue you morally. It is important not to lose clarity of consciousness, to play your own game, depending on the situation feigning fright, exaggerating physical suffering or otherwise confusing the torturers.

Methods for withstanding torture is something we almost never talk about. From what can be said openly: when it becomes unbearable, it may help if you come up with some false version of events which does not involve any real people and information, and "fixate" on it, make yourself believe that it is true, and insist on it during torture.

But it is better, of course, to just keep silent.

Azat Miftakhov showed us another effective way of action. When they started torturing him, he cut his own wrists (with non-lethal transverse cuts), after which the operators were forced to stop and call doctors.

What is wrong with the inquisitorial approach?

We contend that **it can never be “normal” or “acceptable” to turn over people and information to the repressive authorities.** The situation of torture is no exception. The principle of the movement and of each one of us individually can only be: **better torture, prison or even death than betraying comrades and giving important information to the enemy.**

When you hear from a person that “one cannot be accountable for testimony given under torture,” you lose all trust in them. You realize that a slap on the wrist will be enough for them to give up everything. A movement where such an approach is taken as a principle will never attract and raise resilient people in its ranks. **Without resilient people, there will be no radical change.**

Then what is wrong with the position that “anyone who gives information is a traitor”? Yes, resisting torture is realistic. But it is obvious that not everyone succeeds, even those who would like to. No one who has not gone through brutal torture themselves can guarantee their own behavior in such a situation.

Those who resisted the torturers but in the end still gave in under really brutal physical pressure and spoke, can hardly remain our comrades and participants in the anarchist movement (although, of course, each case must be considered separately). But is it fair to write such a person down as a traitor, who, in good conscience, should be subject to retribution? Probably not.

This thesis should not be confused with tolerance of testimony against comrades. **It always remains a grave fault.** It is everyone’s duty to do everything possible and even more to stay clean.

Dubovsky case

The behavior of Dmitry Dubovsky, a member of a Belarusian anarchist partisan group, caused great controversy within the movement. This story is not related to torture, but when talking about testimony and cooperation with investigators, it is impossible to ignore it, as it is the most recent example.

It is silly to deny that during the investigative procedures recorded on video, Dmitry said too much, describing who was standing where and handing over bottles of gasoline. Neither the authorities nor the public need to know such details. However, there is no reason not to believe Dubovsky’s explanation that he and his comrades had agreed in advance to not deny their actions in case of detention in order to make them a political statement. Had this not been the case, other members of the group would have reported it long ago. At least until other members of the group comment the situation, who can know better?

Maybe Dmitry, apparently out of confusion and misjudgement, failed to fulfill their agreement. Some hastened to brand him a “snitch and traitor,” that is, the gravest accusation for a revolutionary. This is a clear example of an “inquisitorial” approach to the issue. In order to stigmatize people in this way, you need good reasons, which in this case we do not have.

In general, in Dubovsky’s case we are faced with a difficult problem: the use of the courtroom as a political tribune. This is quite a canonical practice in revolutionary history. The words spoken during the investigation and in the courtroom can be powerful means of revolutionary

propaganda. But to do so, one would have to openly declare one's views and probably at least part of one's actions.

The main question is whether the imprisoned comrade's actions are aimed at propaganda from behind prison bars, or are an attempt to protect their own skin.

The criteria could be: does the testimony lead to new arrests, does it reveal the inner workings of the movement, does it worsen the fate of other prisoners and alleviates the situation of the one who gives testimony? Do the statements serve to promote the ideas behind the actions? Also, in the case of group detention, the consent of other arrested comrades is important—it is unacceptable to decide such things alone.

According to the proposed criteria, there is no real reason to accuse Dmitry Dubovsky of treason and snitching.

A few more words

The issue of torture has two other important aspects. The first is that the very fact of torture makes us realize through personal sensory experience, not in the world of abstractions and phrases, that the State and its representatives are our real enemies, cruel and despicable. They must be fought hard and seriously.

The second is: the movement must **defend itself against traitors**. If we are talking about a serious struggle, those who willingly and abundantly supplied the repressive authorities with information and confirmed all this at further investigation and trial must expect retribution, as it was in times when the revolution was not merely an imitation. So far this question has not been seriously discussed among present-day anarchists. To organize retribution as an institution of the anarchist movement is one of our important tasks, however dreadful it may sound.

Conclusion

Modern trends: comprehensive egocentrism, fixation on one's own "traumas" and their "healing," are not conducive to resistance to State repression. If personal comfort and well-being are the priority, it is two steps away from preferring them to convictions, ethical principles, and the safety of comrades.

Modern culture promotes an apologia of weakness. As if it were a sacred human right not to show courage and other uncommon qualities, but to break and fall in a difficult situation. A humane attitude to people and understanding of the limits of their capabilities is necessary, but an **apologia of weakness** is vicious and obviously destructive.

Yes, the demand to refrain from testifying under torture is a demand for extraordinary fortitude, but it is embedded in our culture and has accompanied us since childhood.

This is the moment when the right to weakness ceases to apply and the obligation to show inner strength becomes relevant.

Phil Kuznetsov and comrades,
Anarchist Militant

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Translated in May 2025 from

<https://avtonom.org/freenews/ne-sdavaysya-ne-sdavay-pytki-i-pokazaniya>

Original title in Russian: Не сдавайся, не сдавай: пытки и показания

This is an improved English translation compared to the translation that was added to The Anarchist Library in 2021.

“Phil Kuznetsov” has been identified as Dmitry Petrov, who died fighting in the Battle of Bakhmut on 19 April 2023.

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