An art historian announced recently that he had uncovered proof that anarchist artists had constructed secret psychological torture chambers in Barcelona for prisoners of war and political enemies during Spain’s civil war.

According to him, a team of anarchists led by Alphonse Laurencichaddesigned a warren of jail cells that utilized advanced principles of color, abstraction, and perception developed by Bauhaus artists and the surrealists. These rooms were meant to mentally destabilize and emotionally grind down inmates who fought on the side of the clerico-fascists or who were the left-wing rivals of the CNT anarchist labor federation.

A major Spanish newspaper originally carried the story of this discovery; before long, it was translated and reported in a variety of European dailies, and was featured in the U.S. during an evening news broadcast of National Public Radio.

It’s odd that an academic footnote would garner so much international attention when there are one or two other issues on the world stage that might warrant a little more coverage. Doubly strange is the fact that the evidence used by the art historian
in his research came from a notoriously unreliable source that
would be immediately apparent to the majority of pressroom
fact-checkers, yet still the story has been dutifully re-told by
professional journalists without a trace of skepticism.

From what I have seen so far, the art historian’s research
relies solely upon the transcript of Laurencic’s confession be-
fore a Francoist military court — to be more, accurate, the
source is a pamphlet published in 1939 by the fascist Solidari-
dad Nacional press that draws from these trial records. Written
by one R.L. Chácon, the pamphlet \textit{Porqué hice las 'Chekas' de
Barcelona} (“chekas” being term for vigilante Stalinist political
police units) is regarded by researchers today as an excellent
example of the show trials that had been staged by the Franco
regime after the Civil War.

Franco’s political theater had been inspired by a similar tac-
tic used a few years earlier by another murderous autocrat:
Stalin had rigged similar kangaroo courts in 1936 and in 1938
as a means for purging real and imagined opponents among
the old-school Bolshevik elite.

In the Soviet example, the accused were tortured until they
“confessed” to espionage, sabotage, or to some other ridiculous
crime against Stalin and the people of the U.S.S.R.; in Franco’s
Spain, captured anarchists, communists, and Republicans ad-
mitted before military tribunals that they had raped nuns, en-
couraged homo-sexuality, and published hardcore pornography
— and, in the case of Alphonse Laurencic, psychologically
tortured political prisoners with repeated screenings of
Buñuel’s \textit{Un Chien andalou} — as part of a fictitious, sprawling,
Judeo-Masonic conspiracy based in Moscow.

The repression in Spain after the Civil War was brutal. Hein-
rich Himmler once visited Franco and advised him to cut back
on sheer number of firing-squad executions, which eventually
topped 300,000 deaths; our comrade and friend Federico Ar-
cos, himself a veteran of the Civil War and of later clan-destine
struggles against Franco’s police state, pointed out to me that
Italy’s Minister of External Affaire fondly recalls that between
200 and 250 people in Madrid alone were being executed ev-
every day starting in mid-July, 1939. Countless thou-sands of
communist, anarchist, and social democrats were forced into
slave labor gangs to construct memorials to fallen Francoist
soldiers, and a half a million more were driven into exile. At
a concentration camp built at a monastery near Burgos, a pre-
eminent Spanish military psychiatrist and Catholic eugenicist
forcefully interrogated captured International Brigades volun-
teers for a Gestapo-advised study on “the biopsyché of Marxist
fanaticism” and found data to support his claim that those who
struggled against fascism were “psychopaths,” “schizophren-
ics,” “mental retards,” and “social imbeciles.” In such a nightmar-
ish context as this, bizarre atrocity propaganda about anarchist
torturers’ use of “degenerate art” is not at all surprising.

But what about the enthusiastic way in which this story has
been so uncritically circulated by large corporate news organi-
zations in 2003? Even given the fact that mass media organs
have a long, inglorious history of pimping anti-anarchist and
anti-surrealist slander, it’s surprising how an unsubstantiated
claim- of modern art torture centers allegedly built by libertar-
ian socialists sixty-five years ago could push other reports out
of the spotlight, such as, let’s say, the torture of prisoners at
Camp X-Ray in Guantanamo Bay.

Yet, a highly dubious piece of fascist propaganda about psy-
chological torture that supposedly happened half a century ago
has been given a place of prominence in many major news or-

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