

Sharrock, Justine. 2010. *Tortured: When good soldiers do bad things*

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In the now elaborate, if still incomplete, record of systematic use of torture by the U.S. military and the CIA, one element is missing: the impact of torture on soldiers who inflicted it. Only the prison guards in the infamous 372nd Military Police Company who worked the midnight shift at Abu Ghraib, and whose photographs are now engraved in history, have received attention from the media and documentary filmmakers, and they are hardly representative. What was the experience of the hundreds or even thousands of other Americans, including interrogators, psychologists, commanders, medics, physicians, nurses, and guards at Guantanamo, Bagram, and elsewhere, who witnessed, approved, participated in, or were aware of the practice of torture? Why didn't more soldiers speak out in protest? What happened to the careers and lives of those who did object? What have been the psychological consequences of participating in, witnessing or reporting—or failing to report—the abuses? And how have fellow soldiers and communities responded to those who were implicated or who protested?

Tortured, written by a freelance journalist, explores these questions. Organized around interviews with three guards and a medic, it is essentially a very

limited account. With the exception of Sgt. Joseph Darby, who reported the abuse at Abu Ghraib to criminal investigators, the soldiers portrayed here are very young men at the bottom of the chain of command. They also are unrepresentative of soldiers assigned to detention facilities, as all spoke publicly and received media attention before they were interviewed by Ms. Sharrock and all were active members of anti-war groups. As a result, the book could be dismissed for considering a highly unusual sample of soldiers. Additionally, the author occasionally (and unnecessarily) exaggerates exactly what official policies were. Nevertheless, the author's detailed interviews with the four soldiers, as well as with others in their units and their families, peers, friends, and members of their communities, contribute valuable stories to the accumulating evidence of the destructive impact of torture, not only on the lives of its victims, but also on the perpetrators and indeed everyone exposed to it. The book contains a poignant portrayal of the confusion, defensiveness, and sense of betrayal felt by members of the community in western Maryland where the 372nd is based.

The young soldiers in *Tortured* are far from the stereotypical "movie hero" who sees wrong, wrestles with moral questions, and then stands up for what is right. All participated in detainee abuse. The guards among them intimidated and brutalized detainees, reflecting a culture that sought to dehumanize men in U.S. custody. The medic participated in the manipulation of medical interventions to facilitate harsh

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interrogation or to allow it to continue, even giving laxatives to a detainee with diarrhea. Even now some of the soldiers justify their role, repeating the same rationalizations for torture that officials at far higher levels have articulated, including the need to protect the United States and the approval of what they did by legal authorities. Their dominant emotion, though, seems to have been anger—toward detainees, toward their situations, toward the apparent pointlessness of their task—sometimes accompanied by shame, self-loathing, and depression. When these soldiers finally did speak out or report detainee abuse, they did not feel the least bit heroic.

The soldiers who stepped forward to report abuse or engage in anti-war activities certainly were not treated as heroes by their peers or superiors. Instead, they were ostracized for disloyalty and sometimes suffered retaliation for reporting abuse—and the soldiers had no support system for speaking out. As one says, “If you complained about someone in that type of environment, they would kick your ass, and there’s no way to be protected over there. You would be fucked. And nothing would even come of it.” Even the official channels designed to encourage abuse reporting often were hostile and intimidating, as investigators probed the soldiers’ own bad conduct and delays in coming forward.

As a result, the four protagonists experience confusion, doubt, self-hatred (for participating, for not participating, for going public, for not doing more) as well as depression and PTSD. Most of all, they feel betrayed. Indeed, the interviews with other members of their units and communities reveal that everyone involved feels betrayed: soldiers who participated in torture, soldiers who reported it, soldiers who were bystanders, and even the communities from which alleged abusers hail. On the other hand, these soldiers’ peers suggest they are being penalized for doing their jobs (i.e., defending the country) and following instructions—not just of their immediate superiors but also of civilian and military leaders. The sense of betrayal is well expressed by a sergeant first class named Mike who served twenty years in the Army. The very definition of a professional soldier who takes pride in his work and career, Mike believes in the military’s purpose, traditions, honor, and expectations of soldiers. He wanted to do his job well at Guantanamo Bay. He does not defend the behavior of guards at Abu Ghraib, but claims the

brutal treatment of detainees at Guantanamo was legitimate. He argues that the guards on site were highly professional, showing enormous restraint in the face of prisoners who hurled urine and feces at them. And how could he have acted improperly, Mike asks, if the Red Cross was allowed in and the procedures for treating detainees were approved up the chain of command—in fact, set out in writing in the base’s Standard Operating Procedures?

Now, though, Mike says, “some skinny-assed punk kid was running around telling everyone that they were no better than the guys at Abu Ghraib.” As a result, the author tells us, “Mike feels just as forsaken and betrayed by his country, not because of what was asked of him, but because his country was now turning its back on him and labeling him a torturer.” While in part a rationalization, Mike’s sense of betrayal is in some ways understandable. He went by the book, although in this case the book demanded that guards, interrogators, and psychologists brutalize detainees as an element of breaking them for interrogation. At Guantanamo, for example, a 2004 written Standard Operating Procedure required newly arriving detainees be placed in isolation to increase their disorientation and disorganization in anticipation of interrogation. How could we expect soldiers to believe they were committing wrongs when they acted consistently with the entire regime of detention and were told by those responsible for writing and approving the rules governing that regime that their actions were necessary, morally sound, and legal? Soldiers are trained in the Geneva Conventions and obligated to adhere to the Uniform Code of Military Justice, both of which forbid any abuse of prisoners. But of what use are these rules when torture is condoned up the entire chain of command to the highest military and civilian authorities? For Mike, as for so many others, quandaries about disobeying an illegal order never arose because these were not the orders of a superior, but instead procedures authorized by the entire institution and its lawyers.

We can only conclude that everyone was in fact betrayed—torturers, whistleblowers, bystanders, communities, and the citizens whose civilian and military leaders instituted a regime of torture. In 2006, Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Kimmons, the chief intelligence officer for the U.S. Army, released a new interrogation field manual that outlawed most forms of torture. He said at the time, “No good intelligence is going to come

from abusive practices. I think history tells us that. I think the empirical evidence of the last 5 years, hard years, tell us that” (U.S. Department of Defense 2006). He might have added that no matter what their role in the torture of detainees, whether they went along or resisted, nothing good comes from involving soldiers in the practice of torture. And even more harm comes about when the institutions that order soldiers to perform tortuous acts ignore the psychological consequences of their participation, whether that involves PTSD or a feeling of abandonment and betrayal, leaving the soldiers alone to deal with the consequences. The end to such a betrayal will only come when the institutions that enabled and facilitated torture have been dismantled and those who authorized and ordered it at the highest levels of government are held accountable. That seems unlikely now,

and so the soldiers, the detainees, and the military will continue to suffer its consequences.

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Reference

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