
The Breaking of Men

South African 'solitary'

LEN BLOOM

IN SOUTH AFRICA IN 1963, sixty leading psychiatrists, psychologists and medical specialists (including the Dean of the Medical School of the University of Natal), appealed to the Minister of Justice to abolish solitary confinement (as carried out under the "90-Day" detention clause), and said that solitary confinement is "inhuman and unjustifiable". A substantial report on solitary confinement by two psychologists of the University of the Witwatersrand concludes that detainees who spend even a short time in solitary can suffer "various bizarre experiences". (*Rand Daily Mail*, 19 December 1963.)

One hundred years ago England abolished solitary confinement as a punishment: it was condemned as brutalising rather than as reforming. The theory behind this punishment was that the prisoner, left alone with his thoughts, would mull over his sins and repent of his wickedness. He was kept in the strictest solitude, visited only by the chaplain, and his loneliness was relieved only by the reading of the bible. This punishment broke men's spirits in the mid-1800s. In 1963 the Minister of Justice admitted that "it is not a very nice thing to see a human being broken . . . I am painfully aware of that fact". But: the object of the "90-day" clause was to hold any "person—who is connected with crimes affecting the security of the state . . . for interrogation, and until he has answered those questions to the satisfaction of the Commissioner of Police". Where the criterion for release is the satisfaction of the Police, a little breaking of human beings is as inevitable as it was in Nazi Germany where similar pressures were used by the Gestapo.

During the seven (or so) months the Act has operated human beings *have* been broken. Looksmart Solwandle Ngudle was "found hanged in his cell", and at least four people (including one young woman) were mental hospital patients during their imprisonment. None of these showed the least sign of mental instability before they were imprisoned. The frequent breaking-down in Court of those turning state evidence suggests too that the South African police have learned something about the techniques of brain-washing.

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Up to the beginning of December 1963 there were 586 solitary detainees. At least one man (Alfred Nzo) was starting his third term of 90-Days confinement; and to the 23 men and women still detained at the time of writing, the Commissioner of Police has said that if they "co-operate" with the police they might be released for Christmas 1963. And if they do not . . . ?

HUNDREDS OF STUDIES by psychologists and psychiatrists have analysed the effects of solitary confinement, and there are many autobiographical accounts of what it means to live in solitude. Christopher Burney was kept in solitude for 18 months by the Nazis, and wrote of his experiences: "I feel a sense of impotence, an inexorable subjection to a machine of nameless horror . . ." Admiral Byrd spent six months alone in the Antarctic, and despite the excitement of battling with the elements, the sheer loneliness made him acutely anxious and unbearably depressed. Captain Joshua Slocum who sailed alone around the world "saw" a man at the tiller who assured him that he would steer the ship to safety. Major-General Dean of the U.S. was "brainwashed" and kept isolated by North Korean troops. He felt abandoned and had the greatest difficulty to keep his judgement. "You have no one on whom to test your ideas". What is real? What is going on in the world outside your cell? You cannot tell—except through the filtered and distorted reports of the

Warning To An Absent Lover

*What is lost but today's desire
Or the hurt we praise as love?
It is the breaking tree and the burning tree
And the sky that's blind with fire.*

*We are drugged with absence, or drown
In our sleep that's pain,
Through the wild nerve's urging
In the hours clattering down.*

*Remember little in your separate year
But the structure of muscle and bone,
That we may not build on nothing
Nor speak our prayers from fear;*

*Except the permanent heart
There's little our cells protect;
Come away from the skyline's edge,
Settle the dusk in our eyes.
If we lose this map, we lose our guide
And so much more than hurt or flesh.*

C. J. DRIVER