

Instruments of torture

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Recent reports of Ukrainian soldiers in a Crimean base blasting out songs by Cher to drown out amplified propaganda onslaughts by the besieging Russian army remind us again that playing music need be neither innocent nor benign. Of course, music and the sound of instruments have been used to military ends at least since Joshua's trumpets flattened the walls of Jericho; a modern parallel might be the US army's 2004 bombardment of Fallujah with high-volume songs by the heavy metal band Metallica.

These days, though, reported uses are typically less to do with military advance than military confinement, the inspiration less that of Joshua than of Alex, the hapless 'droogie' forced, in *A Clockwork Orange*, to listen to loud music for aims altogether more psychological. Of course, freedom of movement for besieged citizens under 'acoustical bombardment' in Iraq is pretty limited; but for those under confinement, whether in Abu Graib, Guantanamo Bay, Israeli jails or elsewhere, music's offensive purpose relies on bodily constriction, often in tandem with other forms of physical and mental discomfort. In Guantanamo that can mean being chained to the floor and subjected to extremes of temperature, or extremely loud rap music. Similarly, in Abu Ghraib intensely loud rock music was often combined with hooding, constricted body positions and sexual or cultural humiliation to induce a sense of psychological helplessness and – in pretty short order – a willingness to 'crack'.

Besides the fact that it leaves no visible evidence, such 'no-touch torture', is by all accounts much more effective than conventional physical abuse. Still more to the point – at least for the US – under the Military Commissions Act, signed by George W Bush in 2006, it is no longer a prosecutable offence under US law. Crucial to this act was its repeal of Part Three of the Third Geneva Convention, under which captive combatants can be subjected to 'no physical or mental torture, nor any other form of coercion'. The 2006 Act, which enforced its definition retroactively until 1997, deemed, by contrast, that only 'grave breaches' of Common Article 3 (whatever they were deemed to constitute) could be prosecuted. The clear aim was to inure the US's own 'interrogators' from international prosecution.

But what kind of music gets co-opted for such purposes? While use of loud sound per se is authorised higher up the chain of command, choice of repertoire seems generally to rest with soldiers/interrogators on the ground. Explaining the offensive use against Fallujah of Metallica, a psychological operations spokesman explained to the St Petersburg (Florida) Times, '...our guys have been getting really creative in finding sounds they think would make the enemy upset...these guys have their own mini-disc players, with their own music, plus hundreds of downloaded sounds. It's kind of personal preference how they choose the songs. We've got very young guys making these decisions.'

So it comes as no surprise to find a widespread preference for highly masculinised, combative idioms, especially heavy metal and rap; nor to hear of the popular deployment of Eminem's Slim Shady, with its incendiary cocktail of rage and sexual violence, against 'high value' Muslim prisoners in Guantanamo. Compared with such blatant cultural offence, the use of Cher's songs in the Crimea seems strangely benign, maybe ironic. What we can be sure of, though, is that music's use as a weapon, already millennia old, has far from run its course.

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