

Conditioned Reflex, Drugs and Hypnosis in Communist Interrogations

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In this and the following article two research psychologists debunk some of the exotic methods of suggestion attributed to the Communists and ballyhooed for commercial use.

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The dramatic confessions of persons brought to trial by the Communists and the pro-Communist sentiments expressed by some Americans released from Communist prisons have led to much speculation about Communist use of Pavlovian conditioning techniques, drugs, hypnosis, and other exotic means of controlling human behavior. This speculation presupposes that behavioral scientists participate in the formulation and development of Communist control methods.

A specific investigation of this supposition has been undertaken. The findings of this investigation are that scientists have not participated. The uniformity of control methods throughout the Communist countries makes it apparent that they have been organized into a more or less formal body of doctrine,¹ and it is known that those who use the methods are trained in the doctrine and try to follow it, but all of the evidence points to the fact that the doctrine was developed and organized by the police officials themselves.

The central staff of the KGB and its predecessors does not have any section devoted to psychological or medical research. No scientists are known to have participated in the planning of any of its procedures. It is said that during World War II Beria maintained a highly secret laboratory section in Moscow, in which physicians and other scientists attempted to develop new methods of covert poisoning and other means for eliminating or disabling target individuals. He and his associates were inspired by the activities of the Gestapo along these lines, and established their laboratory primarily in order to keep up with technological advances in the field. It is reported that the results of this work were disappointing and the whole outfit was abolished shortly after the war. The physicians who took part in the work were not considered top flight and were looked down upon by KGB officers in general.

Soviet and Satellite police officers have an earthy contempt for psychology in general and for psychologists and psychiatrists in particular. Former secret police informants are unanimous in affirming that no training in psychology or psychiatry is given to officers who attend the KGB schools.

Aside from the question of scientific participation in formulating procedures, reports on the actual use of these exotic devices is also negative. There are reports of Communist experimentation with them, but no instance of operational use except for normal medical purposes.

Much of Soviet psychology is concerned with adaptations of the conditioned reflex concepts of Pavlov, one fundamental aspect of which is the belief that men can deliberately be made to develop predesigned types of thought and behavior under appropriately controlled environmental conditions. Soviet laboratories have experimented with a variety of situations for the acquisition of conditioned reflexes, and the conditioning method has proved useful in describing and predicting the learning of simple behavior sequences. But so far as can be ascertained the limited scientific applicability of conditioning to intelligence operations has never been exploited by the Communists.

The KGB has a medical department which is organized along the lines of the medical departments in our armed forces. Its mission is to take care of the illnesses of prisoners and KGB personnel. It does include a few psychiatrists, but no medical officer or psychiatrist is ever used in the interrogation process itself. Their function in relation to prisoners under

interrogation is simply that of evaluating the state of their physical and mental health, advising the interrogator when men are too ill for further interrogation, and treating prisoners for the effects of the tortures which have been carried out on them. They sometimes administer stimulants to tired or sleepy prisoners to enable them to continue with prolonged interrogations.

They may give sedatives to excited prisoners. They use antibiotics, vitamins, and any other available adjuncts of medical therapy in the treatment of wounds and illness. But we have no reliable evidence of any direct medical or psychiatric participation in attempts to elicit information from prisoners or to produce confessions.

Since the time of the purge trials there have been recurrent reports that the Communist secret police use drugs as a means of obtaining confessions. All the reports which could be found have been reviewed. In no case has it been possible to obtain any substantial evidence that any drug played an important role in a known interrogation or confession. Our informants, former Communist secret police officials, state that no drug had been issued to the MVD for use in interrogations as late as 1953.

There is good reason to believe that secret police in the Communist countries, especially those of Czechoslovakia and Russia, have experimented with the use of all the commonly known psychochemicals and so-called "truth drugs." The drugs of potential importance in interrogations fall into three categories, stimulants, hypnotics, and hallucinogenic agents.

The stimulants, in general, have the effect of increasing wakefulness and alertness at the expense of creating tremulousness, feelings of anxiety and overactivity. Caffeine, benzedrine, and dexedrine fall into this category. There are a number of derivatives of benzedrine which have essentially the same action. "Aktedron," a synthetic benzedrine derivative, has been used in Czechoslovakia and Southeast Europe. Coffee and Benzedrine derivatives are sometimes administered to tired or sleepy prisoners in order to wake them up enough so that the interrogation can be carried on. They have been used in this manner in Eastern Europe, in Russia, and in China. In and of themselves they have no important effect in producing confessions. Used in combination with a system of psychological and physiological pressures they will in many cases accelerate and exacerbate the profound fatigue, confusion, loss of

critical judgment, and breakdown of resistance which is a consequence of the full course of control techniques.

The so-called "hypnotics" do not actually produce hypnosis. They are sleep-producing drugs which have a moderately intoxicating effect in small doses. The barbiturates such as nembutal and phenobarbital fall into this category. So-called "truth serums," sodium amytal or sodium pentothal, are rapidly acting barbiturates administered by vein. When these drugs are given in the proper dosage, they have a relaxing and befuddling effect similar to that produced by moderate amounts of alcohol. Under some circumstances, individuals intoxicated by these drugs become loose in their talk. But they have no effect in producing truth, and persons under their influence can resist their action to the same extent that they can resist the action of alcohol. There is no evidence that the Communists have effectively or extensively used amytal interviews as a means of extracting confessions, although it is quite probable that they have experimented with this maneuver. The hypnotic drug which is most frequently mentioned as a Communist tool is scopolamine, a naturally occurring substance long known in medical science. It is one of the ingredients in the "twilight sleep" medication used by obstetricians on women in labor. It, too, has an intoxicating and befuddling effect in small doses, an effect which would be difficult to distinguish from that of the profound fatigue, sleep loss, undernourishment, anxiety and confusion produced by the usual Communist control techniques.

In every instance in which there is direct evidence that Communist police have given hypnotic and sedative drugs to prisoners, they have administered these drugs for the purpose of calming and relaxing excited and fatigued individuals. American physicians would be likely to use these drugs in a similar manner for the same reason.

The hallucinogenic agents have likewise been known for a long time. Marijuana falls into this category. Persons under the influence of these agents have a disturbance of their thought processes which can be profoundly disorganizing to them. During the past few years LSD-25 and mescaline (a derivative of a Mexican plant) have attracted much attention because of their use in experimental psychiatry. It is known that the Russians, like other intelligence services, have investigated both of these substances, but there is no evidence that they have ever used them in attempts at operational interrogation.

It should be emphasized that the covert administration of *any* drug (stimulant, hypnotic, or hallucinogenic agent) can produce an impact on the individual undergoing the stress of prolonged imprisonment and interrogation which goes beyond merely accelerating the fatigue, disturbed judgment, and other effects of the usual prolonged control pressures. The covertly administered drug can make the prisoner feel that the interrogation is affecting him more than it really is. It may make him feel that the interrogator is more powerful or more prescient than he really is, or that the situation has become more intolerable and inexorable than it is in fact.

This impact can be exploited by an interrogator to increase the prisoner's cooperation, providing the interrogator is sufficiently perceptive and appropriately flexible in his approach. To what extent this fact is known to the Communists we cannot say. It is likely, however, that so long as they continue to employ the doctrinaire approach of their present imprisonment-interrogation procedure they will not have sufficient flexibility to exploit this aspect of drug effects.

Another question that recurrently arises is whether prisoners at the time of police confession are in a state of hypnosis. No evidence of the use of hypnotists or of hypnotism in any of the Communist confession procedures has been found. At the time of his Gestapo-like experiments, it is said that Beria experimented with the use of hypnosis also. Our informers state that the experiments were a failure and the attempts did not continue.

Although formal hypnotism is not used, the confession routine as it has been described does create in those exposed to it an increased degree of pliability and suggestibility. It is not clear to what extent the Communists are aware of this and purposefully exploit it.

1 For a description of these methods see Hinkle and Wolff, "Communist Interrogation and Indoctrination of 'Enemies of the States,'" *AMA Archives of Neurology and Psychology*, August 1956, Vol. 76, pp. 115-174.

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