A terror for our time

In the spring of 1244, the remote fortress at Montségur, in southern France, was the site of one of the most notorious massacres in European history. For months, the rocky promontory had been a refuge for hundreds of Cathar heretics, whose peculiar version of Christianity, which held that the physical world was immoral and that there were, in fact, two gods, deeply offended the Catholic Church. For 10 months, a French royal army, armed with a papal blessing, camped outside the castle walls. At last, at the beginning of March, the Cathars surrendered. Priests of the inquisition, embedded in the besieging army, offered leniency if the heretics abandoned their faith, but more than 200 Cathars refused. Singing and praying, they marched down the slope towards their deaths. Many were still singing as they mounted the inquisition's gigantic funeral pyre, the air smouldering with the smell of burning flesh. Afterwards, the victors sent a message to the Pope: "We have crushed the head of the dragon."

The terrible scenes at Montségur are a reminder that despite the famous Monty Python line — "Nobody expects the Spanish inquisition!" — the Catholic Church's apparatus of surveillance, interrogation and repression was no laughing business. As Cullen Murphy, Vanity Fair's editor at large, points out in his lucid and provocative book, the inquisition lasted more than 700 years and probably killed tens of thousands of people. And as Murphy sees it, the story of the inquisition is a "lens" onto "a central contest of the modern era... in which privacy and freedom of conscience are pitted against forces that would contain them."

This may sound absurd — the intolerant, inquisitorial temper, after all, is as old as humankind itself — but, on second thought, his thesis rings true. For at its peak, he argues, the inquisiti was the embodiment of modenity, relying on a profession of bureaucracy, rapid communication and robust record-keeping, and all fuelled by a burning sense of moral conviction. It was a bureaucratic element that made distinctive — and that made modern. Its heirs were not the civil servants who keep Stalin's Gulags and Hitler's death camps going, but the American officials who set up the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay and the politicians who turned Brit
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Although Murphy’s book makes no pretence of being a comprehensive history, it is a clear and often chilling guide to the inquisition’s excesses. The institution was set up in the late 12th century as a modernising, centralising arm of the Catholic Church, designed to banish dissent and ensure orthodoxy. From the start, it depended on a bureaucratic apparatus that now seems surprisingly contemporary. By 1500, the Pope was sending an estimated 50,000 official letters a year, while the Vatican’s professional clerics had become dab hands at compiling record indexes and drafting

interrogation manuals. All too often, though, the paper trail culminated in horrific violence — if heretics refused to confess, the manuals recommended piercing their tongues with nails. Charged with suppressing the Cathars in 1209, the French baron Simon de Montfort (father of the Simon who called England’s first parliament) gouged out the eyes of 100 men as a warning to their comrades. He left a single man with one eye to guide them across the land, like some wandering reminder of the bloodshed that often underpinned medieval faith.

The inquisition’s most notorious incarnation, of course, appeared in Spain, where it was established in 1480 to deal with Jews and Muslims after the Christian kings had conquered the peninsula. The Spanish inquisition’s reputation was well deserved: by the time it was disbanded in 1834, some 1.5m people had been denounced and perhaps 12,000 executed. Trials were loaded against the accused, with defendants often presumed guilty, and the range of torture techniques (hanging by the wrists, stretching on the rack and a version of waterboarding) was genuinely terrifying.

The Spanish inquisition was more ambitious than its French predecessor and tried to stamp out ideas through censoring books: among the authors prohibited were Ovid, Dante, Erasmus and Thomas More. But its supreme ritual was the infamous auto-da-fe, a festival of persecution held before thousands of people in city squares. Prisoners were paraded into the centre to be burnt at the stake, an experience that was even worse than it sounds. Executioners often used green wood, which smoulders more slowly, to eke out the suffering, the tissues gradually burning, the victims eventually dying of pulmonary failure. Ironically, the Spanish writer Michael Servetus, the man who first described how the pulmonary system worked, himself died a lingering death at the stake in 1553. What lifts Murphy’s book above the realms of potted history is his eagerness to draw parallels between the medieval inquisition and its 21st-century equivalents. As he points out, there is nothing uniquely religious about the inquisitorial temperament. By the time of the French revolution, secular authorities had picked up and refined the inquisition’s emphasis on record-keeping, interrogation and punishment, which reached a kind of climax in the paranoid world of the East German Stasi. At its peak in 1989, this sinister institution had 90,000 official employees and an archive that included an estimated one billion pages of paper.

Yet as Murphy points out, its heirs were not limited to the communist world. Indeed, like so many American liberals, he can hardly wait to turn his work into a breast-beating examination of his native land, casting George W Bush and his colleagues as the modern-day equivalents of de Montfort and his fellow knights. So in one blistering passage, he shows the extraordinary similarities between the techniques of the medieval inquisition’s top interrogator, Bernard Gui, and those recommended by America’s Intelligence Science Board, from sleep deprivation and the production of supposedly damning documents to the good-cop-bad-cop routine that has become a cliché of interrogations in the modern age. And in another, he notes that the point at which the Catholic Church recommended their torturers should stop — organ failure — is the point at which Bush administration torture begins. Everything leading up to organ failure, Bush’s lawyers declared, was not torture, so it was fine.

Murphy’s eagerness to get stuck into Bush and Cheney is a bit of a surprise, coming perilously close to turning a cogent and powerful book into a predictable bien-pensant rant. Occasionally, he comes across as a bit paranoid: the fact that the British Library has his passport details and email address is surely nothing to worry about. Yet his book makes a persuasive argument that we still live in the world the inquisition made — a world of us and them, of moral self-righteousness and intellectual intolerance, in which bureaucracy, surveillance and censorship have become the quintessential qualities of modern society.

And although his main target may be the American security state, British readers will find little grounds for complacency. Living in a country with the world’s largest DNA registry and an astounding 4m CCTV cameras, perhaps we ought to take the Spanish inquisition a little more seriously.