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# Books of The Times

By John Gross

**AGAINST ALL HOPE.** By Armando Valladares. Translated by Andrew Hurley. 381 pages. Illustrated. Alfred A. Knopf. \$18.95.

**A**RMANDO VALLADARES was a 23-year-old civil servant when he was arrested by the Cuban political police early in 1961 and charged with "acts of public destruction and sabotage." In effect, he was being put on trial for his beliefs, since the prosecution didn't and couldn't produce any evidence of "public destruction" beyond the fact that he had frequently spoken out against Communism, rejecting it as a system that went against his religious convictions and what he calls "some of my more idealistic notions of the world."

This was more than enough, however, to get him sent to jail. He was to remain a prisoner for the next 22 years, refusing to submit to the "political rehabilitation programs" that in principle held out the possibility of freedom — at a price. In the 1970's his case slowly began to attract international attention, but it was only after the personal intercession of President François Mitterrand of France that he was eventually released. Now, in "Against All Hope," he has written an unforgettable account of his ordeal.

Mr. Valladares was given a good idea of the kind of treatment in store for him while still awaiting trial in the fortress of La Cabaña. Every morning there were the "inspections" that began with soldiers armed with truncheons, chains and bayonets, rushing into the cells and striking out blindly. At night there were the constant firing squads, supervised by an official executioner (an American) who reportedly had a dog he took with him so that it could lap up the dead men's blood.

From La Cabaña Mr. Valladares was transferred to a notorious island prison, the Isla de Pinos. Not long after his arrival there, he was able to hear and see gunfire during the landings at the Bay of Pigs — a crisis to which the prison authorities responded by packing the foundations of the jail with dynamite, promising to blow it up if there was another invasion attempt.

In doing so, they were adding one more level of terror to a system already governed by incessant cruelty and fear, a world where men could be

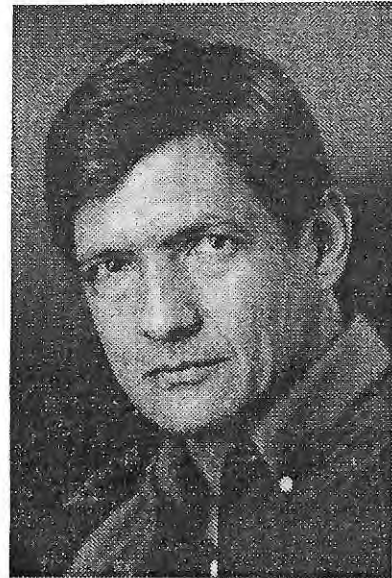
casually beaten unconscious or forced to pull weeds with their teeth and made to eat dirt. (Not that their normal rations, pullulating with yellowish-white worms, were that much more palatable.)

Mr. Valladares describes — very soberly — an endless succession of torments and obscenities. One prisoner was stabbed in the thigh with a bayonet that was then rotated in the wound. (He bled to death within minutes.) Another prisoner — "an idealistic young man, freckled, very pleasant" — cried out for water while succumbing to the effects of a hunger strike; his plea was answered by a guard urinating over his face, "in his eyes, his gasping mouth." (He died the following day.)

After a daring attempt to escape, which very nearly succeeded, Mr. Valladares and his companions were subjected to some particularly vile treatment. (In beating him up, his captors didn't fail to jump on his broken leg, which was already black and swollen.) But the descriptions of forced labor in the nearby quarries and in the camp sewer are just as bad, and even worse was to come when Mr. Valladares was moved to a prison called Boniato. Comparisons with the Nazis should be used very sparingly, but in the case of Boniato they are surely justified; it was the scene of such biological "experiments" as the administering of massive doses of diuretics, which left prisoners' bodies so monstrously distended that they were barely recognizable.

If the catalogue of atrocities becomes oppressive, you can always turn from Mr. Valladares's text to the illustrations — photographs of individual prisoners, for the most part. But here, too, you will find plenty of painful reading, since the captions give details of the fates they suffered. There are also smudgy pictures of some of the worst of the tormentors, among them the director of prisons on Isla de Pinos, who was rewarded for his efforts by being promoted to the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. He was also presented with an Alfa Romeo, a gift from Fidel Castro himself.

In holding out against such terrifying odds, Mr. Valladares and his fellow prisoners plainly showed extraordinary courage. Courage alone, however, would probably not have been enough to sustain them, if they hadn't also had faith. That faith was poorly



Luis Melendi

Armando Valladares

rewarded by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, a body that consistently failed to respond to the pleas it received on the prisoners' behalf — which means that all the more credit should go to those organizations that did take up Mr. Valladares's cause, in particular Amnesty International and the French and Swedish chapters of PEN.

"Against All Hope" is an important book. Revelations of the kind that Mr. Valladares makes would, of course, be significant whatever the political coloring of the regime concerned, but they are all the more valuable when it is a regime that has been the source of so many illusions. It should not be forgotten that while the horrendous scenes described were taking place, a procession of influential visitors from the United States and elsewhere — writers, academics and others — were busy proclaiming the virtues of the Cuban revolution in the most radiant terms.

And since so much of the revolution's appeal has been bound up with the charisma of its leader, it is worth mentioning that Castro makes a number of fleeting personal appearances in these pages, almost all of them characterized by meanness or vindictiveness. It seems only right, on the other hand, that Mr. Valladares should grant him the last word, an extract from a statement he made to a group of journalists in 1983: "In twenty-five years of revolution, in spite of the difficulties and dangers we have passed through, torture has never been committed, a crime has never been committed." So now we know.

**1**

1964, when a legend The dif and reali famed c American 14 in Vance part of Ex perfectly l York.

The Cana (other cities 6-9, and Ott the new cultu between the Soviet Union ber. When ti was too late t theater in Ne other America jumped in to pl One of the m grew out of an e Trenton busin Zeiger, who ha the Soviet Uni Mr. Zeiger, ch County Chambe ton division, stopped off Su city's War Mem only that, the l one-time progr performing in

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GOING OUT

biomedical research will at Sinai Medical Center. Using on the subject, logical Theories of the scientific present Sinai are under such error Catastrophe and Repair." Artists will give 8 tonight.

tomorrow and Thursday at the American Museum of Natural History (873-1300), on Central Park West between 77th and 81st Streets. The two introductory lectures tonight will be "The Longevity Revolution," by Robert N. Butler of the Mount Sinai Medical Center, and "Evolution and Aging in Primates," by Sherwood L. Washburn of the University of California at Berkeley. Admission is free.

Entertainment Events is on page C14. Tuesday Sports is on page A24.

C. Gerald Fraser

The Calcutta Internatio

# Surviving Castro's Tortures

## AGAINST ALL HOPE

The Prison Memoirs of Armando Valladares.  
By Armando Valladares.  
Translated by Andrew Hurley.  
Illustrated. 381 pp. New York:  
Alfred A. Knopf. \$18.95.

By Ronald Radosh

IN 1958, Jean-Paul Sartre helped rouse the conscience of France by writing an introduction to "The Question" by Henri Alleg, a small book that recounted the torture of a French opponent of the Algerian war in Algerian prisons. One had to decide, Sartre wrote, "whether to be the torturer or the tortured." Alleg suffered the fate of all those tortured, Sartre wrote, and he showed "the calm courage of the victim," as well as a modesty and lucidity "which wake us and show us the truth."

Now Armando Valladares, a Cuban poet, awakes us to the same task and truths. How ironic that a year after Sartre wrote these words, he visited Cuba and proclaimed to the world that Fidel Castro was motivated above all by a hatred for injustice, and that he had brought about the liberation of Cuba from despotism. It has taken us 25 years to find out the terrible reality — Mr. Castro has created a new despotism that has institutionalized torture as a mechanism of social control.

At the beginning of his book, the author of "Against All Hope: The Prison Memoirs of Armando Valladares" was a young employee of the Postal Savings Bank of Cuba's new revolutionary government. His misfortune was to be a man with outspoken opinions. He openly expressed his philosophical opposition to the Communist system and as a result his home was searched by the agents of the political police. They found nothing, but he was arrested as a counterrevolutionary and spent a nightmare of 22 years in Mr. Castro's prisons. In his introduction, Mr. Valladares speculates that when the truth about Cuba's political prisoners is made known, "mankind will feel the revulsion it felt when the crimes of Stalin were brought to light." It is not too tough a judgment.

How did a revolution whose leader promised a humanist, non-Communist and democratic revolution descend to such depravity? In his memoir of the revolutionary struggle, "Family Portrait With Fidel" (1984), Carlos Franqui, the editor of the official revolutionary newspaper, *Revolución*, for some years after the Cuban revolution, notes how shocked he was to hear reports of the torture of counterrevolutionary suspects. Bringing news of this to Mr. Castro, Mr. Franqui quickly learned that the torture had the leader's blessings. Mr. Franqui points out that the decision to execute the former Cuban president Fulgencio Batista's worst goons created "a new repressive power that would be implacable." When Mr. Franqui raised the issue of the moral degradation torture implies, Mr. Castro told him that it "annihilates the enemy," and hence was necessary.

Until the publication of this book, in a serviceable translation by Andrew Hurley, we had not had a full picture of the brutality meted out to real and imaginary opponents by the Castro dictatorship. What Mr. Valladares gives us is a picture of the hell that was the Cuba he lived in, and the story of how one man's deep Christian faith enabled him to sustain the most evil treatment and never abandon hope, no matter how fruitless hope appeared.

Mr. Valladares and other prisoners who refused "political rehabilitation" were forced to live in the greatest heat and the dampest cold without clothes. They were regularly beaten, shot at and sometimes killed; they were thrown into punishment cells, including the dreaded "drawer cells," specially constructed units that make South Vietnam's infamous tiger cages

Ronald Radosh, a professor of history at the City University of New York, is the editor of "The New Cuba: Paradoxes and Potentials."

seem like homey quarters. Eventually, together with several others, Mr. Valladares plotted an escape from their prison on the Isle of Pines. But the boat that was to pick them up never arrived. He and his accomplices were brought back to their cells and given no medical attention, though Mr. Valladares had fractured three bones in his foot during the escape attempt.

The retribution was swift. Mr. Valladares writes: "Guards returned us to the cells and stripped us again. They didn't close the cell door, and that detail caught my attention. I was sitting on the floor; outside I heard the voices of several approaching soldiers. . . . They were going to settle accounts with us, collect what we owed them for having tried to escape. . . . They were armed with thick twisted electric cables and truncheons. . . . Suddenly, everything was a whirl — my head spun around in terrible vertigo. They beat me as I lay on the floor. One of them pulled at my arm to turn me over and expose my back so he could beat me more easily. And the cables fell more directly on me. The beating felt as if they were branding me with a red-hot branding iron, but then suddenly I experienced the most intense, unbearable, and brutal pain of my life. One of the guards had jumped with all his weight on my broken, throbbing leg."

That treatment was typical. In the punishment cells, prisoners were kept in total darkness. Guards dumped buckets of urine and feces over the prisoners who warded off rats and roaches as they tried to sleep. Fungus grew on Mr. Valladares because he was not allowed to wash off the filth. Sleep was impossible. Guards constantly awoke the men with long poles to insure they got no rest. Illness and disease were a constant. Even at the end, when the authorities were approving his release, Mr. Valladares was held in solitary confinement in a barren room with fluorescent lights turned on 24 hours a day. By then he was partially paralyzed through malnutrition intensified by the lack of medical attention.

Political prisoners, the author reminds us, were not always treated so brutally in Cuba. When Fidel Castro was imprisoned following his attack on the Moncada barracks on July 26, 1953, he was given good food, large and airy quarters, full mail privileges and even conjugal visits. Mr. Castro himself wrote of "many pleasant

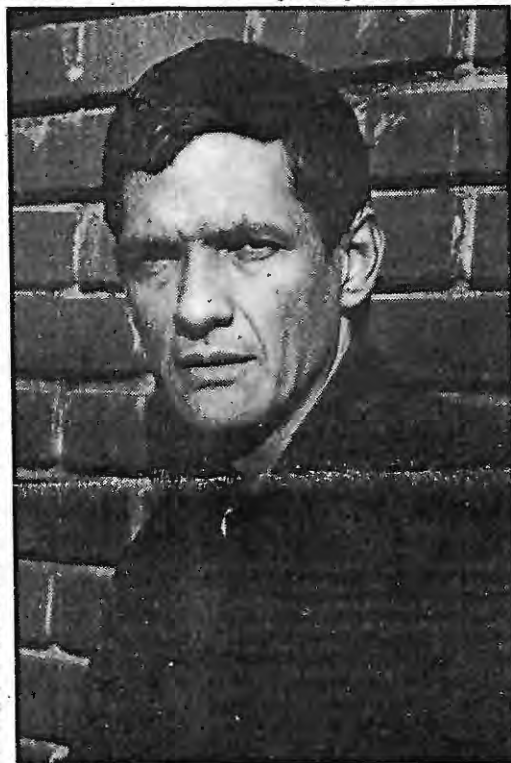
hours" spent in an airy yard, of good dinners with Italian chocolate for dessert and two baths a day. "They're going to make me think I'm on vacation," he quipped in a letter. By his own account, Mr. Castro had "plenty of water, electric lights, food, clean clothes, and all for free."

The future dictator obviously learned from his own pleasant experience how not to treat political prisoners. Mr. Valladares's fellow inmates were tagged as such, and they were of all types — unreconstructed Batistianos, Christian proselytizers and, it seems, more than a few of the revolutionaries who fought with Mr. Castro in the Sierra Maestra but had certain differences or doubts years later. For them, the treatment was unrelentingly harsh. Even some socialists and a French Marxist found themselves condemned to the brutal prisons. At one point, Mr. Valladares encountered a young political commissioner sent from Havana to supervise prisoners. The latter was shocked to find that his wards were not murderers, rapists and thieves as he had been told they were, but "revolutionaries" who helped the Revolution come to power, students, professionals, campesinos. When that man defended the prisoners against new repressive measures, he was arrested for "ideological weakness" and imprisoned.

Like the Marxists he opposes, Mr. Valladares at one point announces that "poetry is a weapon." During his time in prison, he became a writer and a poet. His poems, smuggled out and published in the West, gained him a following and some stature. Amnesty International and PEN took up his case. The pressure eventually led to his freedom, thanks to the direct intervention of France's President, François Mitterrand. But Mr. Valladares knows, and reminds us constantly, that scores of his friends are "at this moment" being brought to the blackout

cells, beaten and forced to live in solitary confinement. Had he not been an opponent of Fidel Castro, the international left would have rushed vociferously to his support. Yet the author reports that one prominent Swede, Pierre Schori, the international secretary of the Social-Democratic Party and current Undersecretary of Foreign Relations, refused to appear publicly with Mr. Valladares's wife, because he did not want to give the United States "a publicity weapon." Both he and Régis Debray, then a special adviser to President Mitterrand and himself once a prisoner of the Bolivians suggested she use what we today call quiet diplomacy.

Mr. Valladares's story is confirmed by that of other recently released prisoners, such as Jorge Valls, whose "Twenty Years and Forty Days: Life in a Cuban Prison" has just been published by the Americas Watch Committee. Mr. Valladares ends his book by quoting Fidel Castro, who informed journalists in 1983 that Cuba has "no human rights problem — there have been no 'disappeareds' here, there have been no tortures here, there have been no murders here. In twenty-five years of revolution . . . a crime has never been committed."



Armando Valladares in 1983, shortly after his release from 22 years in Cuban prisons.

*"Mr. Castro has created a new despotism that has institutionalized torture as a mechanism of social control."*