

Life from a Camp Delta cell

Burhan Wazir reflects on the memoirs of a Guantánamo inmate

Guantánamo Diary
Mohamedou Ould Slahi,
Canongate, £16.00

As long as there have been prisons, there have been prison memoirs. Thomas More wrote *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, a spiritual reflection, as he awaited execution in the Tower of London in 1534; Napoleon Bonaparte dictated his memoirs in exile while on Saint Helena between 1817 and 1820.

Guantánamo Diary by Mohamedou Slahi is noteworthy because it is the first autobiography to be published by an inmate still being held in the US prison in Cuba. Slahi's story informs the arc of our modern history. He was admitted to the prison in 2002 when he was 32 years old; he is now 44. Since his arrest, governments in Washington, London, Kabul and Baghdad have all been replaced. The Arab Spring has given way to civil war in Syria and the jihadist cult of Islamic State. Both Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein are dead.

In Cuba, Camp X-Ray has been expanded and replaced by Camps Delta and Echo. The military prison's population peaked at 800 and since dwindled to 127. Six people committed suicide – two more died of natural causes. Large numbers of prisoners held hunger strikes in 2005 and 2013.

The facts that were said to justify Slahi's confinement are





legally dubious and alarming. Born in Mauritania, he graduated with an engineering degree from Germany and twice travelled to Afghanistan. He lived in Canada for a year before returning to settle in Mauritania where he found work as an electrical engineer.

Like many Muslims, Slahi was appalled by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. He travelled there in 1990 and 1992 to help the mujahedin topple the Russian-backed President Najibullah. He has admitted that he trained in a jihadist camp. He also says he subsequently disowned Al Qaeda. The US government accuses Slahi of recruiting for the terrorist group.

After the events of September 11, 2001, Slahi voluntarily turned himself over to Mauritanian authorities for questioning about a string of failed Millennium plots that targeted Jordan and the United States. After a week-long interrogation, he was cleared but put aboard a rendition flight to Jordan at the request of the US Central Intelligence Agency. He was held for eight months at a 'black site' where he was tortured by Jordanian intelligence.

In 2002, he was cleared of any wrongdoing, but was then designated a 'special project' by the US and transferred to Bagram airbase in Afghanistan and then Guantánamo Bay.

A detainee is led back from the bathroom in Guantánamo Bay

During his ordeal, he was beaten, sexually humiliated and faced isolation and death threats.

Guantánamo Diary, which was written during 2005-2006, began as a series of letters to his lawyers. The text was banned by the US government and finally declassified in 2013, although heavily redacted in places. It first emerged as a three-part series in *Slate*, the online magazine.

Slahi offers bouts of optimism, gallows humour and absurdity throughout his writings. Remarkably, English is his fourth language. He writes that inmates in Guantánamo Bay are not masters of their own schedules – they are told when to sleep and eat. Alternating between hope and despair, he describes being cooperative and uncommunicative with his captors. He learns to appreciate *The Catcher in the Rye* and finds inspiration in Ridley Scott's film *Gladiator*. He even cultivates a small garden. Slahi is not the only prisoner to have published an account of their time on the Cuban archipelago. Moazzam Begg, who was arrested by Pakistani police in Islamabad in 2002, relates his story in *Enemy Combatant: a British Muslim's Journey to Guantánamo and Back*, co-authored by Victoria Brittain. After a year in Bagram, he was moved to Guantánamo Bay and released in 2005.

Despite the passing of a

year between his liberation and the memoir's appearance in 2006, it reads like a hasty draft. *Enemy Combatant* provides scant details about Begg's life behind bars. In passages describing his funding of charities and fighters in Bosnia and Afghanistan, the writing is both implausible and fails to capture his voice.

A more precise take is to be found in 2007's *Five Years of My Life: An Innocent Man in Guantánamo* by Murat Kurnaz with Helmut Kuhn. Kurnaz is a Turkish citizen and legal resident of Germany who at 19 travelled to Pakistan for religious studies in 2001. In an act of naivety common to many teenagers he declined to tell his parents. He was arrested in Peshawar and taken to Kandahar and then Guantánamo Bay. During his ordeal, Kurnaz was beaten, had his head dunked in water and was chained to a ceiling and hung by his hands for days.

Kurnaz was released in 2006 and returned to Germany as a free man. Slahi's anguish looks no closer to being over. He leaves readers of this book with one final thought: 'So has American democracy passed the test it was subjected to with the 2001 terrorist attacks?' The answer is self-evident – the notion of American idealism is weakened each day its longest-running military prison remains open.

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