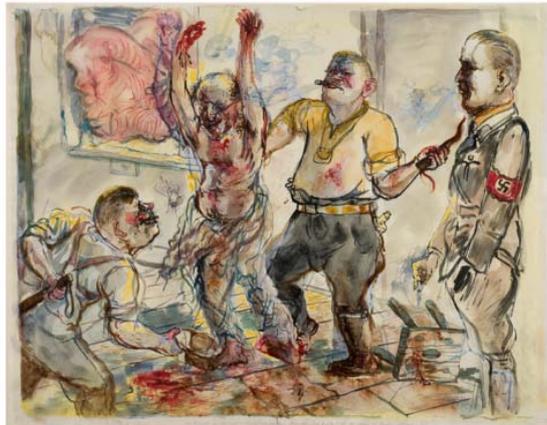


## George Grosz 1893 – 1959- *Interrogation*

Ink and watercolour on paper 43.8 x 55.9 cm

*Inscription:*

*“And, can’t you dance something entertaining for us comrade, you learned this so beautifully in Moscow, indeed.”*



### Overview of the artwork

George Grosz is renowned for challenging the politically corrupt regime and the decadence of Germany in the 1920's and early thirties through his satirical compositions. He was a modern day pioneer of using almost graffiti like illustrations to challenge the establishment. Even though he was not Jewish, Grosz correctly feared for his life and fled Nazi Germany in 1933. Soon after his arrival in New York, his work was declared 'Degenerate' in Germany.

The detailed, evocative watercolour depicts a horrific scene of Nazi soldiers torturing a man. Painted in a free, illustrative style, it displays Grosz's skilful use of the medium and his flair for capturing the moment.

Grosz made this painting in New York, about three years after his escape from Nazi Germany.

It is a scene of torture, featuring four men. The man second from the left is clearly the victim; covered in blood and stripped to his waist. The two men flanking him are inflicting the torture, while a fourth man on the right looks on.

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The fourth man, to the far right of the picture, wears a bright red armband emblazoned with a black swastika (the symbol of the Nazi party). He is the only person wearing full uniform, and is probably in charge of the other two soldiers – he appears to be overseeing the torture, and is casually smoking a cigarette, as though this is a common occurrence for him. The casual stance of the senior soldier, who stands with his hand in his pocket, adds to the shocking nature of the picture; Grosz hints that this probably happens all the time and the men are familiar with such violence.

The two men executing the torture are depicted as brutish and ugly. They too are smoking, but are dressed more casually, as though they have removed parts of their uniform to “work”. The third man (with the shaved head) is overweight and has a red face. A corked bottle pokes out of his pocket; this may be alcohol, which could account for his red face. He has an air of nonchalance about him, and like the fourth man, seems quite unaffected by the horror of the scene. He is already covered in the victim’s blood and holds a whip, which is pulled back in order to strike the victim.

The first man from the left leans in towards the victim, holding out a hat. He is taunting the second man, and laughs, dribbling, holding a weapon behind his back as he waits for his turn.

We are told a lot about the characters of the men in picture simply by the way that Grosz has drawn them. There is a strong element of caricature, from the drooling torturers to the complacent, toothy guard. The victim too is a caricature of an intellectual, with his glasses (which have been smashed) and balding head and moustache. We know that many intellectuals were tortured and killed in Nazi Germany, and Grosz makes it clear that this is one of them. Furthermore, the inscription on the painting suggests that he is involved with the arts or dance- perhaps the famous Moscow Ballet.

Above all, this picture depicts the horrific violence and torture, which was commonplace in Nazi Germany. Although the piece is titled ‘Interrogation’, there seems to be no interrogation happening here; it seems that the soldiers are enjoying beating this man.

## **Looking Closely**

### **Content and Ideas**

In this picture, a scene of torture takes place in a bare, white room, where the only furniture is a small wooden stool that has been over turned. The floor tiles are cracked and covered in blood and the air is heavy with cigar and cigarette smoke.

As commonplace as this kind of torture is to these soldiers, it is still being hidden away. The open window is stuffed with a blanket, to prevent onlookers and muffle the sounds.

What do the stances of the men tell us about their roles in the scene?

The first soldier from the left leans towards the victim, eagerly waiting his turn. He is also leaning towards the uniformed soldier, as though to impress him. The second soldier shows off less obviously. He leans back slightly with his knees bent—he is steady and confident in his abilities as a violent bully. Both the uniformed soldier and the victim stand upright, but in very different ways. The beaten academic's arms are raised; he is exposed and vulnerable, while the soldier is relaxed and secure.

It is also very likely that Grosz was also referencing the flagellation (whipping or beating) of Christ in this picture.

### **Form and Composition**

The space is very cramped in this picture. The men stand very close to one another. The viewer is positioned as a spectator, observing the scene. The fact that we can see the door and the blocked up window makes us also feel trapped in the room.

The first and fourth men are standing closer to us than the two in the middle. This makes us feel as though we are part of their world, rather than the victim's, who is trapped in between two soldiers and unable to communicate with us.

### **Materials and Techniques**

Grosz has used ink and watercolour for this work. The colour is faint and watery, which makes the red blood all the more obvious. Just as our eyes are drawn to the red splashes, so too are we drawn to the red armband of the Nazi soldier, reminding us of the reason for the flowing blood.

Grosz's technique is free and fluid, and does not seem to sit well with the horrific scene he depicts. The light and easy brush strokes and pastel colours emphasise the routine and carefree nature of these events; it looks almost like a cartoon, or book illustration.

The quality of line describes the action in the scene. The shaky wavering lines of the victim remind us he is probably shaking with pain and fear, while also giving the impression that he has been reduced to a quivering man by this violence.

In contrast, the uniformed soldier is depicted using thicker, darker lines that express confidence in his position above the other three. The bolder lines also reflect the lines of the swastika. He is the only figure untouched by blood; he has the luxury of being removed from the scene somewhat.

The lines depicting the other two soldiers fall somewhere in between: the crouching soldier's lines are looser than his comrades are, these are only slightly less firm than those of the uniformed soldier.

## **About the Artist**

Georg Ehrenfried Grosz was born in Berlin in 1893. He attended the Dresden Academy from 1909 to 1911, studying drawing, and Berlin's School of Arts and Crafts from 1912 to 1914. During that time he also spent a few months at the Atelier Colarossi in Paris, during 1913. He spent short periods of time serving in the army during the First World War, but then went on to create fiercely anti-war art criticising the middle class and capitalist corruption. He produced political satirist drawings that were published, but was taken to court several times for offensive and blasphemous content.

He played a major role in the Dada movement, taking part in an exhibition, which invited gallery-goers to destroy the art on show. A radical and a Communist, Grosz fled Berlin in 1933, settling in America. Had he stayed, he would have almost certainly been killed for his outspoken views on Nazi Germany.

Although he had always dreamed of America, he did not have the artistic success he hoped for, and moved back to Berlin in 1958, where he died the next year.

## **Why is this picture important?**

This picture explores the horrific violence that was carried out by the Nazi's during World War II.

Even today, when society is perhaps more desensitised to such violence, as a result of violent images being more commonplace within the media, it is still a very graphic artwork and becomes all the more disturbing given that the events took place in reality. There are no metaphors or symbols used to express subtly what is happening here; Grosz has drawn the scene as if he is actually there. As he moved to the USA in 1933, it is unlikely that he ever witnessed such an act, but would have heard by word of mouth about the violence inflicted on people there.

When learning about victims of the Holocaust, we might immediately think of the millions of Jews that were murdered. However, Grosz reminds us here, that it was not just Jews who were killed, but also people who spoke out against the Nazis such as the academic in this picture. Furthermore, Grosz was not Jewish himself, but risked his own life by criticising what he believed was wrong with Germany.