

Chapitre/Chapter 9

The Anatomy of Mutiny

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A rational army would run away.

Montesquieu.¹

There is little doubt that he was right. Combat is noisy, deadly, dirty, and frightening. Those who can, flee the killing zone. But soldiers cannot. They must run toward, not away from, the enemy's guns. Some will never return.

The whole corpus of military discipline has one aim: to make soldiers go forward when reason and natural impulse tell them to go back. So absence without leave is a crime and desertion under fire a capital offense. Disobedience can bring harsh punishment. Soldiers in training repeat the movements of combat until they are numb, not merely to killing, but to the prospect of being killed. They must respond without hesitation lest the strategy become a shambles.

The battlefield is a place of mortal peril. Its rules are not those of normal life: efficient killers gain medals, not prison. Nothing makes sense but fear, the hard slog, and surviving from day to day. Yet running away, which has always been dangerous, is impossible today. Fighting may range over an entire country. Soldiers may have nowhere to go. They must stand and fight. Or they must resist.

One should not expect resistance under fire to take familiar forms. Individuals have refused to go into combat, even at the risk of death. But everything about battle militates against the soldier who stands alone. To disobey openly brings punishment. To turn and flee leads nowhere and may result in quick death at the hands of the enemy. Thus refusal must in most cases be covert, or it must be collective. It may be passive, as in the widespread drug abuse during the Vietnam War. Or it may be active. It may be mutiny.

On April 16, 1917, French troops on the Chemin des Dames left their trenches, certain of victory and the end of the war. The commander was Gen. Robert Nivelle, one of the heroes of the Battle of Verdun. His plan, he said, could not fail.

So confident was Nivelle that when German intelligence learned his troop dispositions he paid no attention. The preliminary bombardment went ahead as planned. It hit nothing. The Germans had abandoned their forward positions, burning and leveling as they went, so that the French infantry charged across miles of wasteland straight into millions of

bullets from thousands of intact machine guns. By the next day, 120,000 had been killed or wounded.

Still Nivelle persisted. “(A) macabre, sheep-like bleating was heard among regiments sent up to the line; this time mingled with cries of ‘Down with the war!’ and ‘Down with the incapable leaders!’ Men on leave waved red flags and sang revolutionary songs. They beat up military police and railwaymen, and uncoupled or derailed engines to prevent trains from leaving for the front.”²

On May 3, unrest became mutiny. Ordered into battle, the 21st Division refused. The leaders were summarily shot or sent to Devil’s Island. Two days later, the 21st went into the line and was decimated. Rebellion spread. First the 120th Regiment refused to fight; then the 128th; then “(u)nit after unit refused duty, some of them the finest in the French Army, and over twenty thousand men deserted outright. Regiments elected councils to speak for them . . . like the Soviets that had already seized power in the Russian Army. . . The 119th Regiment mounted machine-guns on its trucks, and attempted to reach the Schneider-Creusot works (a weapons factory), with the apparent intention of blowing it up.”³ By June, fifty-four divisions—half of the French Army—had rebelled.

Little is known even today about the mutiny of 1917. But it was not, in the euphemism of the French Official War History, mere “collective indiscipline.” On the contrary. Brigades and regiments refused orders as units. Discipline held. Authority broke down. It and the war had lost their legitimacy.

That the 1917 mutiny occurred is not surprising. The French Army was at the end of its tether. Some of these troops had seen the bloody Battle of the Frontiers, in which three hundred thousand Frenchmen lost their lives because the High Command put faith in a wrongheaded strategy. Some had been gassed at Ypres. Some had survived the charnel house that was Verdun. Time and again they had been led to believe in victory, and always they had found only blood and pain among the churned-up corpses of No-Man’s-Land. Nivelle’s Offensive completed the disillusionment.

From revolt against incompetent leadership to revolt against the war itself was only a short logical step. In 1914, the nations of Europe went to war, thinking the fighting would be over by Christmas. By 1917, the truth about the war was plain. The nations fought, endlessly it seemed, with no clear idea why. At home in Paris, life went on as though the trenches were mere illusion. The weapons makers and suppliers of shoddy cloth made fat profits. Little wonder that soldiers waved revolutionary flags and shouted “Down with the war!”

In the French Army, the mutiny was crushed and order restored by a combination of force and reform. In the Russian Army of 1917, mutiny became part of the larger Revolution. In Germany in 1918, mutiny helped to end the rule of the Kaiser and then led nowhere. But in all three armies, the troops rebelled not only against bad conditions and poor leadership but against the war and the regimes which had brought the scourge upon them.

Generals and governments would like to believe that mutiny represents “indiscipline.” In many cases it does not. It is collective resistance to war. Nowhere was this more clear than in the U.S. military in Vietnam.

During the latter part of the Vietnam War, there were at least ten major instances of mutiny.⁴ These ranged from refusals by small groups of soldiers to insubordination by units of a hundred or more. David Cortright describes the largest incident (April, 1972): “When troops of C Company, 2nd Battalion/1st Infantry of the 196th Brigade were ordered into trucks to patrol enemy territory, about one hundred of the GIs refused to advance, considering the mission too dangerous. After some discussion, about half the men agreed to board the trucks, but approximately forty-five soldiers remained adamant.”⁵ The mutiny ended peacefully when the soldiers were persuaded that if they did not advance they would endanger “A” Company.

The parallels between the World War I mutinies and those in the Vietnam War are striking. In 1917, the war had lost whatever meaning it might have had; so, too, in Vietnam. In 1917, the generalship had repeatedly proved incompetent, the promises of victory false; so, too, in Vietnam. In 1917, the armies of Europe were exhausted and demoralized; so, too, were the Americans in Vietnam. And in 1917, troops rebelled against the war as well as the generals; so, too, in Vietnam.

There were differences. The Vietnam War was unpopular at home, and dissent among U.S. troops took many forms, of which mutiny was only one. There was nothing in the experience of World War I to match the hundreds of anti-war newspapers, GI coffeehouses, conscientious objector claims, and lawsuits of the Vietnam era. Nor did the mutinies of the 1970s compare in size to those of 1917. But the similarities remain.

We do not easily accept that mutiny can be disciplined or that it can be war resistance. Military law, after all, punishes those who rebel, often with death. Military histories argue that revolt among the troops is a breakdown of order. To suggest that mutinous troops may act with character and self-control contradicts all we have been told.

Yet in the French mutinies and the Vietnam-era GI revolts there was little less control than there is in combat. The histories, tidying up a brutal reality, usually give little sense of how chaotic a battle is. One could say without seriously distorting truth that combat is chaos and that most fighting forces barely skirt the edges of disorder.

The discipline of some soldiers’ revolts becomes clear by comparison with the behavior of military units which do go out of control. We commonly say of these troops that they “break and run.” Or, more tellingly, we could say that they have become a crowd: “Inside every army is a crowd struggling to get out, and the strongest fear with which every commander lives—stronger even than his fear of defeat or even of mutiny—is that of his army reverting to a crowd through some error of his making. For a crowd is the antithesis of an army, a human assembly animated not by discipline but by mood, by the play of inconstant and potentially infectious emotion.”⁶

There was no such “inconstant” emotion among the mutineers in France or Vietnam. They acted together, and they knew quite well what they wanted.

Not all mutinies are protests against war. To suggest that they are is to disregard the oppressive conditions of military life and the arbitrariness of the command structure. But it is fair to say that the High Command can push its troops only so far before they begin to question not only their daily lives, but the war in which they are fighting and dying.

Soldiers—even philosopher-soldiers—are unlikely to argue against orders in a careful, academic style. The command will pay no heed to them. Nor is there time. They must act. Only action, risky as it may be, promises any success whatever. So they commandeer the unit’s weapons and use them to resist the war. Or they sit down and will not move.

They sit down: it sounds, and it is, nonviolent. One does not think of mutiny in this way. Yet the mutinies in Vietnam were largely nonviolent. Much of the 1917 rebellion in France was group refusal to move. That there is violence in a mutiny is hardly surprising: violence is part of military training. That much of what mutinous soldiers do is nonviolent is less well-known.

Soldiers’ rebellions are rare in history. Military training and the threat of punishment are powerful incentives to conform. So is the army’s belief in what it is doing. But let that belief evaporate, and punishment can become less fearsome. Training and discipline can become a vehicle for halting a war. Like the French Army in 1917, a powerful military force can be paralyzed. Mutiny demonstrates, as few other phenomena, that wars could not go on without the consent of those who fight.

Notes

¹Quoted in John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), p. 308.

²Alistair Horne, *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916* (Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1964), p. 322.

³*Ibid.*, p. 322.

⁴David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt: The American Military Today* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975), p. 35.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁶Keegan, *op.cit.*, p. 173.