

Donald Trump and the Morality of War.

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4 March 2016

During the presidential debate on the 3rd March Donald Trump was challenged on his earlier expressed intention to have U.S. troops to torture suspected terrorists and “take out” their families. The former CIA director general Michael Hayden had earlier stated that the US army would have to [refuse](#) to carry out what would obviously constitute the most grievous type of war crimes. Trump [doubled down](#) on his claim, insisting that the army would carry out his orders and citing a debunked September 11 conspiracy theory to justify murder of non-combatants.

While Trump’s statements have been noted by a number of critical media outlets, their full implications have been hardly considered, mostly because probably nobody (myself including) takes these promises seriously. Most likely, like most or perhaps all of Trump’s promises they are merely election time hot air, which will be forgotten by the candidate the moment he is in position to attempt to put them into practice. But the fact that millions of Americans have reacted to such statements with almost complete indifference points to a profound change that has taken place in American society that should be worrying both for Americans and for everyone else.

First one should note that statements advocating open violation of international laws that go back to the 19th century (and in practice earlier) have not been heard from any leaders of major states at least since the second world war, when Hitler forbade the Wehrmacht to practice “chivalry” in the war in the East and dismissed the protests of general Johannes Blaskowitz against the murder of civilians in Poland as “Salvation Army attitude” - (something that sounds like it could well be said by Donald Trump). For example, Vladimir Putin, for all the murders of political opponents that took place during his time in power and atrocities in Chechnya, Ukraine or Syria, has left making such statements to his Chechen henchman Ramzan Kadyrov and has never openly endorsed them.

It is worth recalling that among the senior Japanese military and political leaders convicted of war crimes none had ever advocated murder of women and children or torture of captives (although torture often took place, it was never ordered by any senior government official). In particular, although Japan’s war-time prime minister Hideki Tojo was convicted of ordering, authorizing and permitting inhumane treatment of prisoners of war, the actual evidence against him amounts to several conversations of this kind (Uemura was the director of the POW Bureau):

“Uemura: We rejected a British offer to send relief goods to the POWs at Hong Kong and now the Americans are making a similar offer for the POWs at Bataan.

Tojo: Where Japanese troops are facing hardships...there is no need to pamper the POWs.

Uemura: The Red Cross wants to send quinine...

Tojo: Reject them all. There is no knowing where this might end.

Uemura: The Red Cross want to send their delegates to the areas we have occupied. We'll turn that down, too."

Now if this deserves the death penalty...

Apart of the [overblown and partly bogus](#) "comfort women" allegations, the Japanese were not accused of deliberate targeting of women and especially children. In fact, even in the area of Nanking, where a massacre of civilians (mostly prisoners of war) took place in 1937, a very small number of bodies of children were uncovered, and there is no allegations of the Japanese committing any atrocities directed at them. Since when speaking about the need to "take out" the families of terrorists Trump did not exclude the children, one has to assume that it was not by accident. Which means that in order to understand the dilemma of US soldiers facing the kind of orders Trump has in mind one has to look elsewhere. One such place was Bjelaja-Zerkow, a town in the Kiev district in Ukraine. Here on the 22 September 1941 a few German soldiers from a Wehrmacht unit occupying the town, heard the crying of children coming from a building and informed two military chaplains, a catholic and a protestant one. The chaplains decided to investigate and were shocked by their discovery. They found about 90 Jewish children of both sexes and ages between 2 and 6 kept locked in a barn in unspeakable conditions without food, water or supervision. The parents of the children had already been executed a group of SS commanded by SS Obersturmfürer August Häfner, but the children were temporarily spared, probably because Häfner was concerned about the mental health of his men if they carried out such an action.

The chaplains, who falsely believed that the situation was the result of independent actions by Ukrainian auxiliaries of the SS, approached lieutenant colonel Helmuth Groscurth, a member of the staff of the division. By accident, Groscurth was a very rare Wehrmacht officer - a member of the Abwehr (military intelligence), a firm anti-Nazi and an important member of the small anti-Nazi resistance in the German Army. What followed was doomed efforts by Groscurth to prevent the inevitable. Groscurth ordered the building where the children were housed to be surrounded by Wehrmacht soldiers, with orders to prevent the SS from executing them. On Groscurth's instruction the children were provided with food and water. He then wrote a report which he sent to the command of the 6th Army. Groscurth report infuriated the commander of the 6th Army field marshal Walter von Reichenau, particularly a passage in which Groscurth compared the methods of the SS to Soviet ones. Von Reichenau approved the execution of the children and issued an official reprimand to Groscurth, whom he forced to read it out publicly and sign. The children were executed, but not by the SS whose commander Häfner continued to refuse to carry out the shootings, but by Ukrainian auxiliaries.

Von Reichenau is often described as one of the few enthusiastic Nazis among the senior Wehrmacht commanders yet this is not strictly true. In fact, Reichenau did not care for the

Nazi ideology and was not even an anti-semitic. His daughter had a Jewish boyfriend whom she was hiding throughout the war and was aware of this and even would sometimes meet with the couple. However, he warned his daughter that he would not be able to do anything if the matter was uncovered. In other words, von Reichenau was, like many others, a cynic and a careerist, whose relations with the Nazis, including even horrific murders such as the one in Bjelaja-Zerkow were merely means to personal advancement. This puts in perspective the argument that Trump can't be a Nazi because he has an orthodox Jewish daughter. Of course he need not be one and neither was von Reichenau.

In a letter to his wife after these events Groscurth wrote: "we cannot and we should not win this war". After Reichenau's death of heart attack in 1942, the command of the 6th Army was taken over by general (later field marshal) Friedrich von Paulus. The 6th Army was surrounded at Stalingrad where both von Paulus and Groscurth taken prisoner, the latter dying of typhus. In the 1960s diaries of Helmuth Groscurth, which had been buried for over 20 years were discovered and gave detail of his resistance activities against the Nazis and in particular of the plot against Hitler in September 1938, during the Sudeten crisis. Groscurth was a close associate of the Chief of Staff Franz Halder who in 1938 lead a group of senior military and intelligence officers, who planned to overthrow Hitler in order to prevent a European war which they believed Germany was sure to lose. The plot collapsed after Chamberlain capitulated to Hitler at Munich.

Historians often divide the conspirators into two groups: the "anti-Nazi group" and the "anti-war" group. This is an oversimplification because human motives are rarely based on a single issue but nevertheless the division does throw an important light on the subsequent events and even the present. The leading members of the anti-Nazi groups were the Deputy Chief of the German Military Intelligence Hans Oster and Helmuth Groscurth. Oster had been a firm enemy of nazism since the Knight of the Long Knives of 1934. From that time he thought that Hitler was committed by an evil ideology that would lead Germany and the world to a catastrophe and which could only be removed by force. Oster tirelessly worked on planning and preparing numerous military coups against the Nazis and collecting evidence of their criminal activities intended to be used in a trial of Nazi leaders after their overthrow. Less is known of Groscuth's views before 1938, but in 1938 Oster, Groscurth and some others agreed that the overthrow of the Nazis was primarily a moral issue. Hitler's apparent drive to a catastrophic war was only additional evidence that their view of him and the Nazis was correct and not the foundation of this view. For most of the others, however, chief among them Halder, the prospect of a lost war was the only thing that could justify outright rebellion. None of the plotters was a Nazi sympathizer, but nothing that the Nazis did or said short of war, justified a coup d'etat. Hence once Chamberlain capitulated at Munich, for them the whole issue was over (to be renewed again a number of times in the future culmination on the failed plot of July 1944).

Does all this have any significance for the present situation of the United States? While it is still extremely unlikely that anything like the situation that Groscurth found himself in at Bjelaja-Zerkow will ever be faced by a American Army officer, Donald Trump has forced on everyone the realization that it is no longer "unthinkable". How would and should the

military respond to an order of the kind that he has repeatedly spoken about ? (While I am writing it is being reported that Trump has again changed his mind and now says would not issue such order. Well...) Would the army chiefs be unanimous in their refusal and or would American Reichenau be found? (Especially if one remembers that Reichenau was neither a nazi not an anti-semite).

In principle, if the Army stood firm and remained united, the issue between the President and the military would become a matter for Congress to resolve. In case of President ordering criminal actions and impeachment process could be started. But the process is long and complicated and has never yet succeeded in removing a president from power. It would be hard to imagine that it could succeed in the case of a president who retained a substantial and devoted popular following. One can imagine a situation therefore when some US officers would begin to feel the way Oster and Groscurth felt in 1938. Would they be necessarily wrong?

Any talk of a military coup in the United States is still considered outlandish by most Americans. However, Trump and his presidential campaign have further damaged the prestige of practically every institution in the United States, already hugely damaged by the lawlessness and cynicism Obama and Clinton. While the military has not escaped entirely unscathed, it is almost certainly the one remaining institution in whose sense of honor, morality and probity most Americans still believe. This would be a dangerous situation in any country. One has to hope that this belief is justified.

https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masakra_dzieci_żydowskich_w_Białej_Cerkwi

Peter Hoffman “The history of the German Resistance”.

Joachim Fest “Plotting Hitler’s Death. The German Resistance to Hitler”.

<http://www.strangehistory.net/2013/04/26/the-children-of-bjelaja-zerkow/>