

Burhanuddin Mogul

Hist 390 101

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Paths of Glory: Coward or Victims of Ambition

Cowardice is a trait that a soldier cannot have to successfully complete their jobs. If a soldier is deemed a coward and acts upon such cowardice, the death penalty is applied. Even to this day, the U.S. military enforces these laws within the military, article 99 from title 10 of the United States Code states that acts of cowardice and misbehavior in front of the enemy is punishable by death (United States, 10 U.S.C. § 899). The BBC series *Our World War* depicts Great Britain executing a similar code in episode 2 “Pals”, while the movie *Paths of Glory* directed by Stanley Kubrick depicts France executing three soldiers for the act of cowardice. The act of killing a coward is commonplace within militaries across the globe, and its reasoning can be justified,, but many times, as depicted in both works mentioned above, innocent soldiers are killed under the pretense of cowardice to set an example. Corporal Philippe Paris, Private Maurice Ferol, and Private Pierre Arnaud were French soldiers during World War One in the movie *Paths of Glory*. These three men were all executed by the decision of a court-martial, initiated by General Paul Mireau, on the ground of cowardice in front of the enemy. More accurately, these men were killed to protect Mireau’s reputation when his decision to send his men into a battle he knew they would not survive resulted in a failure. The siege on the anthill and the events leading up to them, along with the court-martial, these parts of the film illustrate how absurd the decision to execute these soldiers were and how they were no cowards but merely victims.

Before looking at the character of the three soldiers it's important to understand how the man who condemned them to die perceives things. The film starts with General George Broulard pitching the siege to Mireau, with the not so

subtle hint that a successful siege will result in Mireau gaining a promotion (*Paths of Glory* 00:03:10). Before the promotion is mentioned we see Mireau standing up for his men, stating it is impossible and that they will die, but as soon as Broulard suggests the promotion, Mireau's whole attitude shifts and the siege all of a sudden is possible. This entire interaction tells the audience everything they need to know about who Paul Mireau is, and how the higher ups of the French military view their soldiers. For Mireau and Broulard, the soldiers fighting on the frontline are merely tools used to gain status, power, and glory. The first instance of "cowardice" seen in the film is when Mireau greets a shell shocked soldier and kicks him out for being a coward (*Paths of Glory* 00:07:52). During this interaction we can see how out of touch Mireau is, stating as a matter of fact that shell shock does not exist, and the soldier is simply a coward. We get a clear understanding that Mireau does not actually understand what being on the battlefield does to a person and the full depth of the dangers involved.

At this point in the film we can see how the three soldiers who were sentenced to die for cowardice act while on the frontline. The night before the siege, we see Corporal Paris on a night mission along with Lieutenant Roget, scouting the battlefield. Roget panics and accidentally kills one of his men and runs away while Paris stays and completes the mission (*Paths of Glory* 00:18:55). Corporal Paris showed no signs of cowardice here, and his character can be understood as a brave individual. Once the battle starts we can see Colonel Dax leading a charge with his men into no man's land under heavy fire, and while many soldiers keep falling dead, the rest continue to follow Dax forward (*Paths of Glory* 00:29:20). As the siege continues we see that company B has failed to leave the trenches, and once Colonel Dax gets there and attempts to get them out, he is hit by a falling body (*Paths of Glory* 00:34:40). The soldiers see the carnage and how almost everyone who left the trenches were dying, even Dax was unable to leave the trenches without being hit by the body of a fallen soldier. Many of the men had followed Dax forward and

those who didn't, well they saw how impossible a task it was. It is not cowardice to refuse a suicidal order. If the soldiers had gone out most would have died and the siege would have still resulted in a failure. An argument can be made that the result cannot be known unless the soldiers actually charged forward and died, which Mireau does make and states "If it was impossible the only proof would be their dead bodies lying in the trenches" (*Paths of Glory* 00:37:40). But as mentioned above, Mireau himself said that it was an impossible task, so his argument itself is contradictory.

After the siege fails, the court-martial begins where three soldiers chosen more or less at random are being tried for cowardice. First up was Private Ferol, who was asked how far he got, and what did he do after he got there (*Paths of Glory* 00:46:18). Ferol tried to explain his decision but no explanation was even entertained. It seemed the only thing that was being judged were the actions and not the context of the actions, during the trial "the court [had] no concern with [his] visual experiences" (*Paths of Glory* 00:46:55). This line of questioning continued for the other two accused as well. In Private Arnaud's case, he was asked if he advanced and Arnaud replied "Yes, sir, until I was ordered back to the trenches" (*Paths of Glory* 00:48:45). After that the questioning continued, completely ignoring the reason behind Private Arnaud's actions. Arnaud was a man who was distinguished "in some of the bloodiest battles of the war" yet this was dismissed (*Paths of Glory* 00:50:45). We then get to see Corporal Paris stand for trial, the only question that was asked was "So you never even left the trenches?" (*Paths of Glory* 00:51:50). Even though there was an obvious injury on Corporal Paris's face, the court did not care. It was only a matter of what happened. Now the idea of judging an individual solely on his actions is great, but context matters. Each of these men had reasons, valid reasons as to why they were unable to complete the orders given to them. Private Arnaud only retreated by following orders, yet in the end he retreated so that's all that mattered. Corporal Paris was knocked out during the battle, as evident by his

scar, yet this was deemed self-inflicted and thrown out, all that mattered was that he did not leave the trenches. Private Ferol did indeed retreat but after making a valiant effort and only after his commanding officer also retreated. It wasn't out of cowardice but rather a strategical retreat. But none of this was truly considered, the men were to be made examples of despite not being cowards.

During the final moments of the men they begin to lose hope, and are executed for being cowards. An example is set for all the soldiers in the French army, but not the intended example. All that is learned is that their lives are not theirs, and that if someone in power deems them to be a sinner than they shall be condemned for it. Mireau's ambitions doomed his men, and if it were not for his own foolish actions and those of a few brave men willing to stand up to him, he would have continued on the path to glory. Colonel Dax had quoted Samuel Johnson early on in the film, that patriotism "is the last refuge of the scoundrel" in response to Mireau's use of patriotism to convince Dax to lead his men to their deaths (*Paths of Glory* 00:13:30). It is men like Mireau who use patriotism as a pretense to justify their actions when in reality their actions are only self-serving. The cost of Mireau's ambitions, and the men he represents, were the many men who died a needless death all to set an example.

Works Cited

Kubrick, Stanley,, et al. *Paths of Glory*. Santa Monica, CA, MGM Home Entertainment, 1999.

"Pals." *Our World War*, season 1, episode 2, BBC Three, 7 Aug. 2014.

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