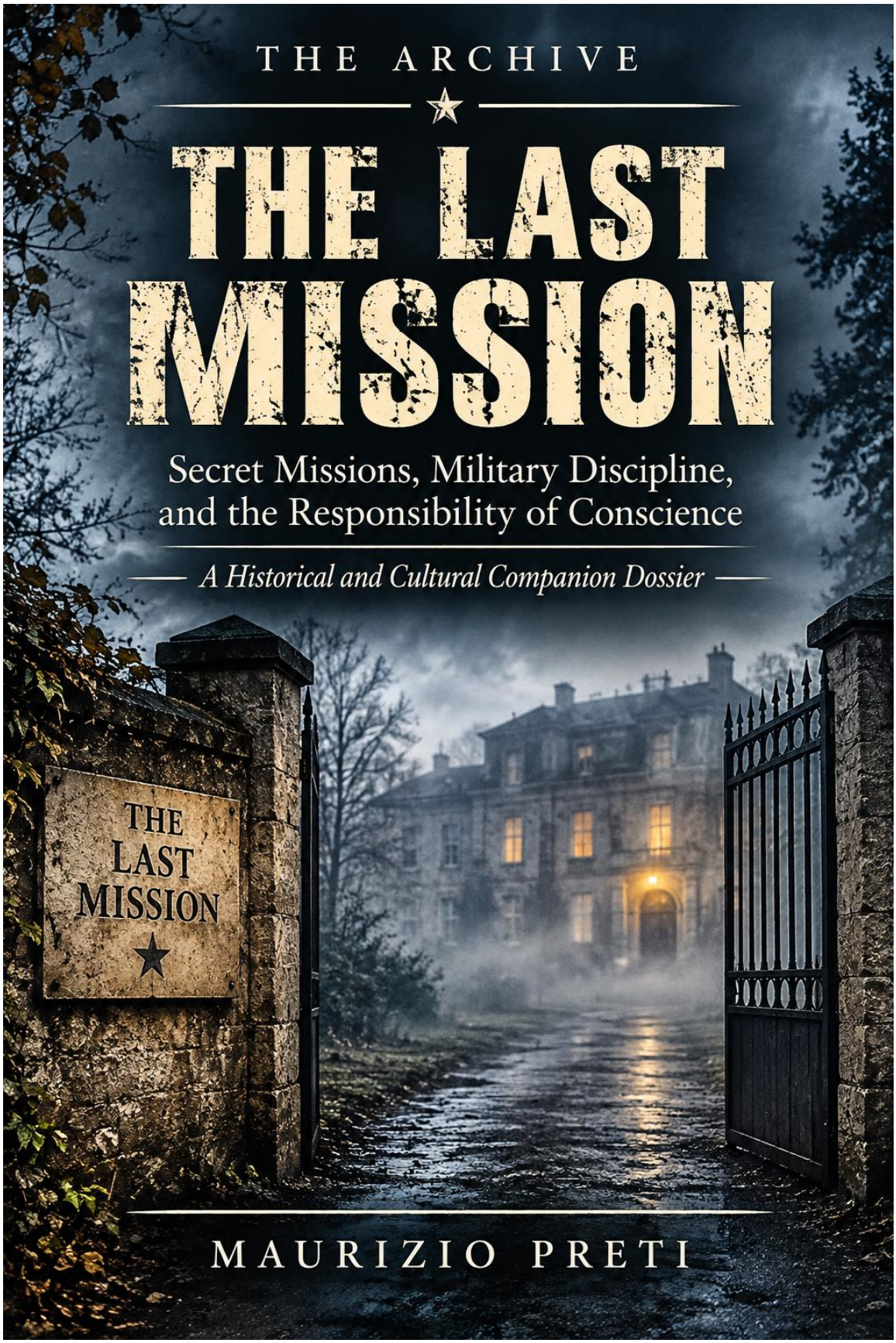


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Why I Wrote The Last Mission

Some true stories already seem like novels. Others, even though they have come to an end, leave questions that are difficult to answer.

When I first became interested in military missions conducted behind enemy lines, I was struck not only by the dangers faced by the men who took part in them, but above all by the conditions under which they were expected to operate. Far from their bases, often isolated, with incomplete information and a mission to accomplish even when everything seemed to be going wrong.

Among the accounts that most captured my imagination was that of Scott O'Grady, the American pilot shot down over Bosnia in 1995, who remained hidden in hostile territory for six days before being rescued. His experience would help provide loose inspiration for the film *Behind Enemy Lines*, starring Gene Hackman and Owen Wilson.

But as I imagined the story that would become *The Last Mission*, another question interested me, one perhaps even more difficult to confront.

A soldier receives an order and is expected to carry it out. Discipline is the very foundation of an army. Without it, a mission may fail and the lives of fellow soldiers may be placed in danger.

But what happens when that order seems unjust? When circumstances change? When the person who issued it is no longer able to confirm, modify, or revoke it?

Is it still simply a matter of discipline, or does it become a personal choice?

These questions were present from the very beginning of the writing process. I wanted to tell the story of men who would have to confront not only an enemy, but also the weight of their own decisions, their loyalty to the commitments they had made, and the consequences of what they had chosen to do.

The history of the twentieth century has left us with terrible questions about these matters. The Nuremberg trial, in particular, raised an issue that extends far beyond the military: no one can automatically consider themselves absolved of responsibility simply because they obeyed a superior.

I did not want to write an essay about war or military justice. I wanted to tell a story. But one that would leave readers with questions even after the final page.

This dossier grew out of the same desire: to explore some of the real events and moral questions that accompanied the creation of the novel, without claiming to offer simple answers to problems that are anything but simple.

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

What happens when a mission must continue, but the circumstances that justified it have changed?



Secret Missions of the Second World War. Members of the Jedburgh teams receive instructions during a briefing in London, circa 1944.

Source: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), National Archives Identifier 540064. Photograph from the archives of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Unrestricted use according to the archival record.

War has an apparently simple geography: on one side, your own soldiers; on the other, the enemy. Between the two forces lies a front line.
But not every war is fought along that line.
Some men are sent beyond it, into territory controlled by the enemy, where they cannot rely on reinforcements arriving immediately, where an intercepted communication can compromise an entire operation, and where even a chance encounter can become a death sentence.
These are missions behind enemy lines. Operations in which courage is essential, but often not enough.

A War Far from the Front

During the Second World War, the Allied powers organized numerous clandestine operations in territories occupied by Nazi Germany.
Their objectives varied: gathering intelligence, sabotaging infrastructure, disrupting communications, supporting resistance movements, and preparing the way for the advance of regular armies.

In 1940, the United Kingdom established the Special Operations Executive (SOE), an organization responsible for conducting special operations in occupied territories. In 1942, the United States created the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), which would become one of the predecessors of the CIA.
These operations were not entrusted solely to large military units. Often, a handful of men was enough, trained to move through hostile environments and cooperate with people they had to learn to trust.
But trusting someone in enemy territory also meant exposing oneself to the risk of betrayal.

The Three Men of the Jedburgh Missions
One of the most significant examples was Operation Jedburgh, launched in 1944 in connection with the Allied landings in Normandy.
Small multinational teams, generally consisting of three men, were parachuted into occupied France. Their task was to establish contact with the Resistance, coordinate sabotage operations, organize weapons deliveries, and communicate with Allied command.
The teams generally included officers and a radio operator. The latter provided a vital link with command, but also represented a potential vulnerability: without communications, the team risked becoming isolated.
The men knew the mission they had been assigned, but they could not anticipate every circumstance they would encounter.
A drop zone might turn out to be different from the one planned. A contact might fail to appear. A road might be under surveillance. A partisan unit might need assistance at precisely the moment command was requesting another operation.
At that point, their training and the orders they had received had to contend with a reality that no one could have described in full.

When the Plan Fails
In August 1944, a Jedburgh team known as Bruce was parachuted into France but landed far from the point where its members were supposed to meet their contacts.
The men found themselves in darkness, in the middle of a thunderstorm, in territory they did not know well enough. They struggled forward, trying to find their bearings, until they came upon a farmhouse.
Knocking on the door meant taking a risk: behind it, they might find help or someone ready to denounce them.
They decided to take the chance.
The farmhouse housed a French Resistance radio post. Thanks to that encounter, they were able to report their position and eventually reach their intended destination.
The episode illustrates a defining feature of clandestine operations: even a plan prepared down to the smallest detail may depend, at the decisive moment, on the choices made by a handful of men.
It is not always possible to ask for instructions. There is not always time to wait for an answer.

Discipline and Initiative
An army cannot function if every soldier decides independently which orders to obey. Discipline makes it possible to coordinate personnel, equipment, and operations, particularly in situations where a mistake can cost many lives.
Yet in missions conducted behind enemy lines, obedience cannot be purely mechanical.
Those operating far from command must be able to interpret orders, adapt to unforeseen circumstances, and take responsibility for decisions that no superior can make on their behalf.
Here, the first contradiction emerges.
A soldier is expected to obey, but also to think. To follow the plan, but also to modify its execution when circumstances demand it. To complete the mission, but without forgetting the consequences of their actions.
The problem becomes even more complex when the question is no longer simply how best to carry out an order, but whether the order itself is legitimate.
These are two different issues: the autonomy needed to deal with unforeseen circumstances, and the moral responsibility involved in carrying out what one has been ordered to do.

Both concern the conscience of those who wear a uniform.

The Weight of a Mission

Accounts of clandestine operations often focus on their most spectacular moments: the parachute jump, the pursuit, the firefight, the escape.

But there is another, less visible dimension.

It is the experience of the man who must decide whether to continue when the situation has changed. Who does not know all the reasons behind the order he has received. Who must trust his superiors without being able to verify every piece of information.

Loyalty to a mission can become an extraordinary demonstration of courage and commitment.

But it can also become a burden that is difficult to bear, particularly when duty seems to conflict with personal judgment.

It is from this tension that some of the deepest questions in military stories arise.

Does an order always retain its meaning, even when everything surrounding it has changed?

And can the person required to carry it out truly surrender the responsibility to choose?

SECRET MISSIONS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Can a mission be judged solely by its operational success, or must we also consider the price paid to accomplish it?



Vemork, Norway, 1943. Amid rugged mountains and snow-covered valleys, the heavy-water production plant became the target of one of the most daring sabotage operations of the Second World War.
Digitally recreated image inspired by a historical photograph held by the Norwegian Industrial Workers Museum (Norsk Industriarbeidermuseum, NIA), reference number 4F01840. An evocative reconstruction, not an original historical photograph.

The history of the Second World War is a history of great battles, armies on the move, bombed cities, and millions of men fighting on the front lines.
But part of that war unfolded far from the battlefields.
In intelligence offices, occupied territories, mountains, and along enemy coastlines, small groups of men were assigned tasks upon which the success of much larger military operations might depend.
Sometimes they had to destroy an industrial facility. At other times, they were required to deceive the enemy, retrieve intelligence, or eliminate a target considered strategically important.
They did not always know the full extent of the plan. Nor could they always foresee the consequences of their actions.
Three episodes help illustrate just how different these missions could be, and how complex the decisions they involved.

Norway, 1943: Stopping Heavy-Water Production
In German-occupied Norway, a substance largely unfamiliar to the general public was being produced at the Vemork plant: heavy water.

It was not a weapon. It was a particular form of water that could be used as a moderator in certain types of nuclear reactors. During the war, the Allies feared that Norwegian production might contribute to Nazi Germany's nuclear research programs.
The plant had to be shut down.
An initial British attempt, known as Operation Freshman, ended tragically in November 1942. The gliders intended to carry the saboteurs crashed; some of the men died in the accidents, while others survived only to be captured and killed by the Germans.
The Allies decided to try again.
In February 1943, a group of Norwegian saboteurs trained in Britain reached the Vemork area. The operation was given the codename Gunnerside.
The plant was protected, and the most direct approach was guarded. The men therefore chose a far more difficult route, passing through a gorge and following a path that allowed them to avoid the main defenses.
On the night of February 27–28, they managed to enter the facility and plant their explosive charges.
The sabotage was successful. The men withdrew without suffering any casualties or causing any deaths during the operation.
It did not bring heavy-water production to a permanent halt, but the mission represented an important achievement in the Allied campaign against the Norwegian facilities.
What makes this episode interesting is not merely the audacity of the saboteurs.
It is the relationship between the task they had been assigned and the decisions required to carry it out.
Command had established the objective. But it was the men on the ground who had to decide how to reach it, assessing the risks and adjusting their route in response to the enemy's defenses.
In this case, obedience also required personal initiative.

Spain, 1943: A Dead Man Sent to Deceive the Enemy
Not every secret operation involved armed men crossing enemy lines.
Some were fought primarily through information.
In the spring of 1943, the Allies were preparing to invade Sicily. To increase their chances of success, they wanted to convince the German command that the real target lay elsewhere.
This gave rise to one of the most remarkable deception operations of the war: Operation Mincemeat.
British intelligence services prepared the body of a dead man, giving him the fictitious identity of a Royal Marines officer, Major William Martin.
They placed personal belongings and documents in his pockets to make the false identity convincing. Among these were fabricated military communications suggesting that the Allies were preparing operations against Greece and Sardinia rather than Sicily.
The body was left in the waters off the coast of Spain, where it was recovered.
The planners were counting on the information reaching German intelligence.
The plan worked: the documents were considered credible and contributed to the Allied deception strategy.
By the time the Allies landed in Sicily in July 1943, the deception operation had already helped shape German expectations and some of their defensive deployments.
There was no fighting during the execution of the plan. The operation's principal instrument was a carefully constructed lie.
Yet secrecy was just as essential here.
Very few people could know the truth. An authentic document falling into the wrong hands, an inconsistency in the fabricated identity, or a careless communication could have compromised the entire operation.
Mincemeat raises a different question from the one posed by sabotage.
In war, deceiving the enemy can be a legitimate part of military strategy. But secrecy inevitably creates a distance between those who make decisions and those who bear their consequences.
How many people must remain unaware of the truth for a mission to succeed?

Prague, 1942: Operation Anthropoid

The third episode is more dramatic and leads directly to the question of responsibility.
In 1941, the Czechoslovak government-in-exile and British intelligence prepared an operation targeting Reinhard Heydrich, one of the highest-ranking officials of the Nazi regime, responsible for severe persecution and a central figure in the organization of the extermination of European Jews.
The operation was given the codename Anthropoid.
Two Czechoslovak soldiers, Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš, were trained in Britain and parachuted into occupied territory.
On May 27, 1942, they attacked Heydrich's car in Prague. The operation encountered unexpected difficulties: Gabčík's weapon jammed, and Kubiš resorted to an explosive device.
Heydrich was wounded and died on June 4.
The mission had achieved its objective.
But the story did not end there.
The Nazi regime unleashed brutal repression against the Czech population. The village of Lidice was destroyed; the men were executed, while women and children were deported. Further reprisals struck the civilian population and the Resistance.
The two attackers, together with other resistance fighters, died during a confrontation with German forces that had tracked them down inside a church in Prague.
Responsibility for the massacres belongs to those who ordered and carried them out: the Nazi regime. It cannot be transferred to the victims or to those who resisted the occupation.
Nevertheless, a difficult historical and moral question remains: how should those responsible for a clandestine operation assess the risk of reprisals against innocent people?
Leaders of the local Resistance had expressed concern about the dangers the operation might entail.
The episode demonstrates that a mission can achieve its military objective while simultaneously setting the stage for a human tragedy of unforeseen proportions.
Operational success alone does not settle the historical judgment of its consequences.

Secrecy and Responsibility
Vemork, Mincemeat, and Anthropoid illustrate three different ways of waging a secret war.
In the first case, a handful of men destroyed a strategic facility while facing extreme risks.
In the second, an intelligence operation succeeded in deceiving the enemy command without resorting to armed confrontation.
In the third, an attack against a senior Nazi official was followed by criminal reprisals against the civilian population.
These events are not equivalent, nor can they be judged according to a single criterion.
Yet they all demonstrate that the relationship between an order and its execution is far less straightforward than it may appear.
A commander establishes an objective but cannot anticipate every unforeseen development. A soldier receives an assignment but must often decide independently how to act. An operation succeeds, yet its outcome may produce consequences extending far beyond those originally anticipated.
Military discipline makes collective action possible. It does not, however, eliminate the question of responsibility.
Indeed, in the most difficult situations, it can make that responsibility even more apparent.
What does it really mean to complete a mission?
To achieve the assigned objective, whatever happens?
Or to preserve, even in obedience, the ability to judge one's own actions?
This is a question that belongs not only to the history of warfare. It concerns every situation in which a human being entrusts an authority with the power to decide what they must do.

SCOTT O'GRADY: SIX DAYS BEHIND ENEMY LINES

> *What remains of a soldier when he loses his aircraft and is cut off from his comrades, and every possibility of receiving immediate orders?*



Bosnia, June 1995. Alone among the mountains and forests of hostile territory, American pilot Scott O'Grady waited six days for rescue. A story of courage, isolation, and survival, in which every decision could mean the difference between life and death.

Evocative digital reconstruction inspired by the historical experience of Scott O'Grady. The image is not an authentic photograph of the event.

On June 2, 1995, Captain Scott O'Grady, a pilot in the United States Air Force, was flying his F-16 over Bosnia.
The war that had accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia was still underway. NATO was conducting Operation Deny Flight, whose objectives included enforcing the no-fly zone imposed by the United Nations over much of Bosnian airspace.
O'Grady was taking part in a patrol mission.
It was not a secret operation behind enemy lines. He was not supposed to infiltrate hostile territory, reach a target on the ground, or recover a document.
His mission was to patrol the airspace.
But war can turn an apparently routine assignment into an extreme situation within seconds.
An SA-6 surface-to-air missile launched by Bosnian Serb forces struck his aircraft.
The fighter was destroyed. O'Grady managed to eject and descend by parachute.
Below him, there was no Allied base.
There were mountains, forests, and territory controlled by enemy forces.

The Pilot Who Had to Disappear

Once on the ground, O'Grady understood that his first priority was not finding a way home.
It was avoiding detection.
Bosnian Serb patrols were searching for him. At times, they passed so close to his hiding place that he could hear them moving among the trees.
He had been trained in survival and evasion, but no amount of training could eliminate the fear of being discovered.
He had to limit his movements, avoid open ground, choose his hiding places carefully, and conserve his strength.

Water immediately became a problem. He collected rainwater and, according to his own account, even resorted to moisture recovered from his clothing. When his food supplies ran out, he ate whatever he could find in his surroundings.
He had no team with whom to share guard duty.
He had no superior to ask which direction to take.
Every decision, even the smallest, could prove to be his last.
His task was simple only in words: endure, avoid capture, and try to communicate with rescuers.
In reality, it meant facing six days of isolation, hunger, exhaustion, and uncertainty.

A Radio and the Risk of Discovery
O'Grady had an emergency radio, but using it carried risks.
A transmission could reveal his presence and give enemy forces an opportunity to locate him.
Remaining silent, however, meant giving up, at least temporarily, his only connection to the men who might save him.
It was a difficult choice: communicating too soon could compromise his safety, while waiting too long could reduce his chances of rescue.
In the early hours of June 8, he finally managed to establish radio contact that Allied forces recognized as genuine.
From that moment, what had until then depended primarily on one man's ability to survive became a complex military rescue operation.

The Rescue
The American amphibious assault ship USS *Kearsarge* was stationed in the Adriatic Sea.
On board were Marines and equipment prepared, among other duties, for operations to recover personnel isolated in hostile territory.
Following radio contact with O'Grady, a rescue mission was organized involving helicopters, protective aircraft, and numerous military personnel.
CH-53E Super Stallion helicopters entered Bosnian airspace and reached the area where the pilot was located.
O'Grady was not the only one in danger.
To recover one man, others had to land in enemy territory, expose themselves to hostile fire, and take off again before enemy forces could intervene.
When the helicopters arrived, O'Grady marked his position with a smoke flare.
He emerged from the vegetation and ran toward his rescuers.
Within moments, he was on board.
During the return flight, the helicopters came under enemy fire and were targeted by missiles that failed to hit them. Nevertheless, the aircraft managed to return to the *Kearsarge* without any casualties among the rescuers.
It was June 8, 1995.
After six days, Scott O'Grady was safe.

From a True Story to a Film
The incident attracted considerable international attention.
For the public, the story contained all the elements of a cinematic adventure: a downed aircraft, a man isolated in enemy territory, a search for the missing pilot, and a rescue carried out under the threat of enemy weapons.
In 2001, *Behind Enemy Lines*, directed by John Moore and starring Owen Wilson and Gene Hackman, was released.
The film drew loosely on the situation of an American pilot shot down over Bosnia, but transformed it into an action story featuring different characters and events.
The film's protagonist faces pursuits, firefights, and situations that do not correspond to O'Grady's actual experience.
The distinction matters.

Cinema often seeks spectacle and dramatic tension where historical accounts rely on documented events.
O'Grady, moreover, publicly challenged certain similarities between the film and his own experience and filed a lawsuit against its producers. Among his objections was the behavior of the film's protagonist, who disobeyed orders, contrary to what O'Grady believed he himself had done in reality.
This is a particularly revealing detail.
Because it brings the story, once again, back to the question of military discipline.

The Solitude of Decision-Making

What makes Scott O'Grady's story so significant is not merely the dramatic nature of his rescue.
It is the long interval between the destruction of his aircraft and the arrival of his rescuers.
Six days during which the pilot had to apply everything he had learned, without being able to rely on continuous instructions.
Military discipline had not disappeared.
It had become something different: internalized training, a set of learned behaviors that had to guide him even when no one could tell him, moment by moment, what to do.
He was not being asked to decide whether to carry out a criminal or unjust order. His situation was different: he had to remain faithful to his mission of surviving and avoiding capture, independently making the decisions necessary to achieve it.
It is important not to confuse these two issues.
On the one hand, there is the operational responsibility of someone acting in isolation, adapting instructions to circumstances.
On the other, there is the moral responsibility of someone who must determine whether an order they have received is legitimate.
Yet both reveal the limitations of obedience understood as mere mechanical compliance.
A man does not stop thinking simply because he wears a uniform.

What Remains

Perhaps this is precisely why stories of men isolated behind enemy lines continue to fascinate us.
They are not simply accounts of the courage required to confront danger.
They tell of the moment when familiar certainties disappear: the protection of the group, the proximity of command, the possibility of receiving an immediate answer.
What remains is the individual, with his training, his fear, his sense of duty… and the need to choose.
Scott O'Grady managed to survive and return to his comrades. But his experience leaves us with a question that extends beyond the events of those six days.
When no one can tell us what to do anymore, are we truly free to choose, or do we continue to obey the orders we have made our own?

MILITARY DISCIPLINE: A NECESSITY OR A SURRENDER OF FREEDOM?

A soldier must obey. But can he stop thinking?



The Weight of an Order. Alone in a military office, an officer reflects on the instructions he has received. Discipline demands obedience, but it does not eliminate doubt: how far can duty take precedence over conscience?
Evocative digital reconstruction. The image does not depict a documented historical event, but rather the moral conflict between obedience and individual responsibility.

An Order is not a Request

In an army, discipline is not merely a rule of conduct. It is what enables thousands of men to act together, often in circumstances where hesitation can cost lives.
When a commander orders his troops to advance, retreat, or hold a position, he cannot wait for every soldier to assess the merits of the decision independently.
War does not always allow time for discussion.
An order may be issued in a matter of seconds, under enemy fire, while communications are breaking down and the available information is incomplete.
This is also why military training places such emphasis on discipline. Soldiers must learn to react, coordinate with their comrades, and trust those who command them.
But this very necessity introduces a problem.
If obedience becomes a habit, to what extent does an individual retain the ability to question what is being asked of him?
And when a man puts on a uniform, what happens to his conscience?

The Power of Hierarchy

The military structure is built around a chain of command.

Every rank carries authority and responsibility. Those in higher positions issue orders; those in subordinate positions are required to carry out orders lawfully issued to them.

Hierarchy makes it possible to distribute tasks and assign specific responsibilities. In combat, knowing who is in command and who must act can prevent chaos.

But hierarchy depends on more than regulations.

It also rests on trust.

A soldier must be able to believe that his commander understands the situation better than he does, has assessed the risks, and will not demand unnecessary sacrifices.

The commander, in turn, must have confidence in the competence and loyalty of his subordinates.

This relationship is particularly important during dangerous missions, when a small unit is sent far from its bases.

Those taking part may not know all the reasons behind an operation. Sometimes secrecy requires that certain information be withheld even from the men entrusted with carrying out the plan.

A soldier must therefore place his trust even in what he does not know.

It is a difficult position, because trust is not the same as certainty.

Obedience Does Not Mean Acting Mechanically

At first glance, discipline and autonomy appear to be incompatible concepts.

In reality, modern armies have developed doctrines in which the initiative of subordinates is regarded as an essential component of operational effectiveness.

One of the best-known examples is the German tradition of *Auftragstaktik*, generally translated as mission-type command.

The principle is relatively simple: a superior identifies the objective to be achieved and communicates his intentions, while allowing subordinates a degree of freedom in choosing the means.

This does not mean authorizing everyone to do whatever they please.

It means recognizing that those on the ground may be aware of circumstances that command cannot observe directly.

A bridge may have been destroyed. A road may be impassable. The enemy may be positioned somewhere no one expected.

An officer who continues to follow an outdated plan mechanically could jeopardize the very mission he intends to fulfill.

The United States Army has developed a related approach, known as *mission command*, in which particular importance is attached to disciplined initiative: the ability to act when orders do not cover an unforeseen situation or no longer correspond to the circumstances.

Discipline, therefore, does not necessarily require the abandonment of judgment.

In certain situations, it demands precisely the opposite.

When the Commander Is Far Away

Imagine a small unit assigned to reach a particular location by a specified time.

The commander has assigned the task, indicated the route, and explained the reasons for the operation.

During the journey, however, communications are cut off. The planned route is blocked, and the unit discovers that the situation is different from what it had been told.

What should the officer in charge do?

Follow the instructions to the letter, even though they are no longer appropriate?

Or seek a different solution, personally accepting responsibility for the decision?

This is where a fundamental distinction emerges between the letter and the purpose of an order.

A commander may have specified a particular road because, at the time the operation was planned, it was the safest option.

If that road becomes impassable, continuing to follow it does not necessarily mean remaining faithful to his intentions.
It may mean misunderstanding them.
For this reason, operational autonomy does not always constitute a form of disobedience.
On the contrary, it may be the most responsible way to fulfill the mission entrusted to the unit.
But there is another possibility, an even more difficult one.
What happens when the problem concerns not the route or the means, but the order itself?

When Obedience Confronts Conscience
The question changes profoundly when a soldier is ordered to perform an act that violates the law.
The need for discipline does not grant a commander unlimited authority.
Nor does a subordinate position automatically erase the personal responsibility of someone who carries out an order.
This is not merely a moral principle.
International law has explicitly addressed the question of superior orders, distinguishing between the responsibility of those who command and that of those who act.
However, we must avoid oversimplifying the issue: an order that is difficult, dangerous, or personally unwelcome is not necessarily unlawful.
A soldier may be required to carry out a dangerous assignment with which he disagrees.
The situation is different when he is ordered to commit a crime.
The law, too, distinguishes between the circumstances, the individual's knowledge that the order is unlawful, and the nature of the act required.
It is here that military discipline encounters one of its most delicate limits.
A man may be held responsible for what he does even when someone else has ordered him to do it.

The Citizen in Uniform
An interesting approach to these questions emerged in Germany after the Second World War.
When the Bundeswehr was established in 1955, efforts were made to develop a different relationship between the armed forces, the democratic state, and the conscience of military personnel.
This led to the development of the principle of *Innere Führung*, a concept of military leadership based, among other things, on constitutional values and personal responsibility.
One of its fundamental ideas is that of the citizen in uniform.
According to this approach, a soldier does not cease to be a citizen endowed with rights, duties, and the capacity for judgment.
Blind obedience is not an ideal to be pursued.
Military personnel must understand the meaning of their service, respect the law, and retain their moral responsibility.
This conception arose in part from the need to confront Germany's past and the consequences of military discipline placed at the service of a criminal regime.
Its significance extends beyond Germany.
It reminds us that the strength of an army depends not only on how quickly orders are carried out, but also on the quality of the decisions made by those who issue them and those who receive them.

Loyalty and Doubt
Loyalty is one of the virtues traditionally associated with military life.
Loyalty to one's unit, to one's comrades, to the mission, and to one's word.
It can lead a man to face risks that he might not otherwise accept on his own.
But loyalty also raises difficult questions.
Is it possible to remain loyal to a mission while questioning the decisions of those directing it?
Can a sense of duty become a burden when circumstances change?

And does an order retain its authority when the person who issued it can no longer be reached?
There is no single answer that applies to every situation.
We must distinguish between the nature of the order, the information available, the soldier's responsibilities, and the foreseeable consequences of his decisions.
It is precisely this complexity that makes the relationship between discipline and conscience one of the most important themes in military history.

The Man Behind the Rank
A uniform confers a role.
A rank defines a position.
An order prescribes a course of action.
But none of these things completely erases the individual.
Behind the soldier remains a man who thinks, fears, judges, remembers, and must live with the consequences of his actions.
Sometimes courage means carrying out an order despite the danger.
Sometimes it means recognizing that circumstances demand a different decision.
And in extreme cases, it may mean refusing a criminal order, even at the cost of facing personal consequences.
Discipline and conscience, therefore, are not necessarily enemies.
The real problem arises when one is expected to cancel out the other.
Perhaps the most difficult form of loyalty is the one that requires us to honor a commitment without surrendering our responsibility to judge it.

WHEN THE COMMANDER IS GONE, DOES THE ORDER STILL STAND?

Is loyalty to an order still a virtue when the world around us has changed?



The Philippines, Lubang Island. In the solitude of the jungle, a Japanese soldier contemplates an old military order. Time has passed, the war is over, yet his sense of duty continues to hold him captive to a mission. How long can loyalty take precedence over reality?

Evocative digital reconstruction inspired by the historical experience of Hiroo Onoda. The image is not an authentic photograph and is not intended to reproduce his appearance faithfully.

The Commander's Voice

A military order can be given in a matter of seconds.

A commander identifies an objective, assigns a task, and expects it to be carried out. His men understand what those words mean: they are neither advice nor a request that they may accept or reject according to their personal preferences.

But what happens when the commander can no longer intervene?

When communications are cut off, when a unit becomes isolated, or when circumstances make it impossible to obtain new instructions?

An order does not necessarily disappear with the absence of the person who issued it.

It may continue to guide the actions of the men who received it.

Indeed, sometimes the very absence of a superior makes that commitment even stronger. A soldier may feel compelled to prove that the trust placed in him has not been betrayed.

At that point, however, a question arises.

Is he still obeying a command, or is he personally choosing to remain faithful to it?

The distinction may seem subtle.
In reality, it profoundly changes the meaning of responsibility.

A Soldier Forgotten in the Philippines
In December 1944, Hiroo Onoda, a young officer in the Imperial Japanese Army, was sent to Lubang Island in the Philippines.
The war in the Pacific was turning against Japan.
Onoda had been assigned to conduct guerrilla operations and gather intelligence, with orders to continue resisting and never surrender.
When American forces captured the island, the young officer withdrew into the forests with several fellow soldiers.
In August 1945, Japan announced its surrender.
For Onoda, however, the war did not end.
He and his companions continued to regard themselves as soldiers engaged in a mission. When leaflets announcing the end of hostilities were distributed, they interpreted them as possible instruments of enemy propaganda.
This fear was not entirely incomprehensible in a conflict in which deception and disinformation had been used systematically.
But as the years passed, that conviction became increasingly detached from reality.
Repeated attempts were made to persuade the Japanese soldiers to surrender. Some men abandoned their resistance; others died in armed confrontations.
Onoda remained on the island.
The years went by, Japan underwent profound changes, and the world entered a new era.
But for him, the mission continued.

Twenty-Nine Years After the End of the War
In 1974, a young Japanese man named Norio Suzuki traveled to Lubang and managed to meet Onoda.
He explained that the war had ended almost thirty years earlier.
Onoda refused to abandon his assignment solely on the strength of that information.
He maintained that he had received an order and believed that only an authorized superior could revoke it.
Yoshimi Taniguchi, a man who had been one of his commanders during the war, was then located.
Taniguchi, who had since returned to civilian life, traveled to the Philippines and formally informed Onoda that his mission had ended.
Only then did Onoda lay down his weapons.
It was March 1974.
For almost twenty-nine years, he had continued to behave as a soldier at war, convinced that loyalty to the order he had received was a duty he could not abandon.
His story aroused both emotion and astonishment.
But beneath the apparent peculiarity of the episode lay a much more difficult question.

When Loyalty Becomes Captivity
At first glance, Onoda's story might seem an extraordinary demonstration of discipline.
A man continuing to carry out his assignment despite isolation, deprivation, and the passage of years.
But accepting only this interpretation would mean ignoring an essential part of the story.
During their years on the island, Onoda and his companions carried out armed attacks against local inhabitants.
Filipinos were killed, food was stolen, and clashes occurred with security forces.
For those people, the war that Onoda believed was still being fought was not an abstract matter.
It had real consequences.
The Japanese soldier's behavior, therefore, cannot be portrayed solely as a heroic story of perseverance.
Loyalty to an order may explain a man's motivations, but it is not enough to justify all his actions.

It is precisely this contradiction that makes the case significant.
An individual may sincerely believe he is doing his duty while, at the same time, causing suffering that his conviction cannot make legitimate.
The mistake does not necessarily lie in having taken a commitment seriously.
It may lie in having transformed that commitment into a certainty that can no longer be questioned.

The Order and Its Meaning
A commander issues an order in a particular situation.
He possesses information, objectives, and intentions that belong to that moment.
But situations change.
An enemy may withdraw. An ally may alter its position. A war may end. An objective may lose all strategic value.
What remains of an order when the reason for which it was issued no longer exists?
It is not always enough to say that an order remains valid until it is revoked.
The applicable rules, the nature of the command, and, above all, its purpose must be considered.
Contemporary military doctrine recognizes the importance of the commander's intent: understanding not only what must be done, but why.
This distinction becomes fundamental when soldiers find themselves isolated.
If a unit has been ordered to defend a bridge so that a military column can cross it, its task cannot be interpreted independently of that objective.
If the column has changed its route, if the bridge has been destroyed, or if the overall mission has been canceled, the meaning of the instructions received may change radically.
Loyalty guided by reason must therefore also take new information into account.
But this is precisely where the most difficult problem arises: who decides whether that information is reliable?
And how certain must a soldier be before changing his course of action?

When a Promise Becomes a Choice
Military life attaches great importance to keeping one's word.
Never abandoning one's comrades. Never shirking an assigned duty. Never betraying the trust of those in command.
These principles can sustain a man through the most difficult circumstances.
After all, loyalty is not an exclusively military virtue.
In civilian life, too, we value those who honor their commitments despite difficulties.
But keeping a promise does not necessarily mean forever surrendering the right to question it.
Sometimes circumstances change.
Sometimes facts emerge that we did not previously know.
Sometimes we discover that the objective to which we devoted our efforts no longer exists, or that pursuing it would lead to unjust consequences.
Continuing, then, is not always an act of consistency.
It may become an independent decision for which we must accept responsibility.
The decisive point is this: when an order can no longer be discussed with the person who issued it, anyone who continues to carry it out must inevitably interpret it.
And interpretation means choice.

The Duty to Remember and the Duty to Understand
Onoda's story is an extreme case, but it allows us to examine a mechanism that also operates in far less exceptional circumstances.
People build part of their identity around the commitments they have made.
A soldier may define himself through the mission he has been given. An official through the duties of his position. An individual through a promise made to someone who is no longer present.
Abandoning that commitment may feel like a betrayal not only of others, but of oneself.

This is why it is so difficult to acknowledge that a decision which was right at a particular moment may no longer be right later on.
Loyalty requires memory.
Responsibility also requires understanding.
The two are not necessarily in conflict, but they can become so when the past is transformed into an unchangeable obligation.
It is then that the sense of duty risks losing its original meaning.

The Order That Remains
A commander may leave.
Communications may break down.
A man may find himself alone, with a task to complete and no one to turn to.
At such moments, discipline is a valuable resource. It allows him to withstand uncertainty and prevents him from immediately abandoning a commitment when difficulties arise.
But discipline cannot entirely replace conscience.
Because, ultimately, even the decision to continue obeying belongs to the person who makes it.
And the longer a man remains faithful to an order without being able to verify it, the more important it becomes to ask whether he is still respecting the commander's wishes or the meaning he himself has attached to those words.
Does loyalty mean never changing one's decision, or knowing when duty requires us to change?

NUREMBERG: "I WAS ONLY FOLLOWING ORDERS"

Can a man claim to be innocent simply because someone ordered him to commit a crime?



Nuremberg, 1945–1946. The defendants before the International Military Tribunal sit under the watch of Allied guards. Leading officials of a defeated regime are called upon to answer individually for the crimes committed, even when they maintain that they were merely following orders from their superiors.
Original historical photograph. Source: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), National Archives Identifier 540127. Unrestricted use according to the archival record.

The War Is Over. The Reckoning Begins

On November 20, 1945, a trial destined to change the history of international law began in the courtroom of the Palace of Justice in Nuremberg.
The Second World War had ended only a few months earlier.
Europe still bore the wounds of bombing, deportation, destruction, and the extermination of millions of people.
The concentration and extermination camps had revealed to the world the systematic organization of Nazi persecution.
Now some of the principal figures responsible for the Third Reich were sitting before a tribunal.
These were men who had held government positions, commanded armies, administered occupied territories, and participated in organizing the Nazi machinery of repression.
The International Military Tribunal had been established by the four Allied powers: the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and France.
Its task was not to pass judgment on a defeated nation as a whole, but to determine the individual criminal responsibility of those accused of crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.
The distinction was fundamental.

Because behind the decisions of a state, behind the operations of an army, and behind the orders of a government, there were still individuals who had chosen, organized, authorized, or personally carried out particular actions.
And it was their responsibility that the tribunal was called upon to determine.

The Defense of Following Orders
Many of the defendants did not deny that extremely serious crimes had been committed.
Instead, they sought to reject their own personal responsibility.
They maintained that they had acted within a hierarchical organization, complied with the laws and directives of their state, or carried out orders issued by their superiors.
Some invoked the authority of Adolf Hitler directly, regarding him as the unquestioned head of the Nazi political and military system.
In essence, their position raised a question: how could someone be considered guilty if he had merely obeyed orders?
The issue was not new.
For centuries, armies had been founded on discipline and the principle that subordinates must obey their commanders.
But Nuremberg was confronted with something different from ordinary military obedience.
The directives issued by the Nazi regime had led to deportations, murders, persecution, and other extremely serious violations of the law.
Could the chain of command turn those crimes into legitimate acts?
And could a man escape responsibility simply by claiming that someone else had made the decision?

Article 8: The Limits of Obedience
The answer was already contained in the Charter of the Tribunal, signed in London on August 8, 1945.
Article 8 established that acting on the orders of one's government or a superior did not relieve a defendant of responsibility, although the tribunal could take such circumstances into account to mitigate punishment when it considered this just.
It was a provision of enormous importance.
It did not mean that military orders had become optional.
Nor did it mean that every soldier was required to question every decision made by his commander.
It established a more precise principle: the existence of an order is not enough to make criminal conduct lawful.
The responsibility of the person issuing an order and that of the person carrying it out are not necessarily mutually exclusive.
They can coexist.
A superior may be responsible for ordering a crime, and a subordinate for knowingly participating in it.
Hierarchy, in other words, is not a shield capable of automatically erasing personal responsibility.
This was where the defense based on obedience lost its force as a general justification.

Wilhelm Keitel: A Soldier Before the Judges
Among the defendants was Wilhelm Keitel, a field marshal and head of the German Armed Forces High Command, the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*.
Keitel had occupied a central position within the military structure of the Third Reich.
During the trial, numerous orders and documents bearing his signature, or passing through the command he directed, were examined.
One concerned the treatment of Allied special forces.
On October 18, 1942, Hitler had issued the so-called *Kommandobefehl*, or Commando Order.
The directive required Allied military personnel engaged in certain special operations to be killed even when they had been captured or intended to surrender.
It was a criminal order because it denied prisoners the protections established by the laws of war.

The order was actually carried out in several incidents.
During the trial, it emerged that Keitel was aware of the problematic nature of these directives.
He maintained that he had considered those orders wrong, but had failed to oppose them because he was bound by Hitler's authority and feared the consequences of openly challenging him.
His defense therefore presented the problem in its most difficult form.
What can a soldier do when he recognizes that an order is unjust but believes he has no power to prevent it from being carried out?
Is it enough to disagree inwardly?
Or does someone in a position of command have a duty to accept even the risk of opposition?
The tribunal did not regard subordination to Hitler as a justification capable of erasing Keitel's responsibility.
The field marshal was found guilty and sentenced to death.
His case demonstrated that even at the highest levels of military hierarchy, obedience could be invoked in an attempt to transfer responsibility still further up the chain of command.
Until it reached an authority that, according to this logic, would have to answer alone for every decision.

The Possibility of a Moral Choice
In its 1946 judgment, the Tribunal addressed the decisive issue.
To assess the significance of a superior order, it was not enough to establish that the order had actually existed.
It was necessary to consider whether, in the specific circumstances, the individual had been able to make a moral choice.
This is an important distinction.
Not all subordinates find themselves in the same situation.
A general involved in planning an operation does not possess the same information or authority as an ordinary soldier.
A man acting under an immediate and extremely serious threat is not necessarily in the same position as someone who voluntarily carries out a criminal order.
Responsibility must be assessed by considering the individual's role, the knowledge available to him, his actual ability to act differently, and the provisions of the applicable law.
Nuremberg did not erase these differences.
But it rejected the idea that obedience was, by definition, proof of innocence.
If a genuine possibility of choice existed, that choice could entail responsibility.
And this principle directly concerned the relationship between authority and conscience.

The Fear of Disobeying
Decades later, it is easy to state that a criminal order must be refused.
It is much harder to imagine the circumstances of someone living under an authoritarian regime, where disobedience may lead to punishment, loss of freedom, or danger to one's life.
Fear can profoundly restrict freedom of action.
But acknowledging this difficulty does not mean accepting that every act demanded by a superior is automatically justified.
A distinction must be made between pressure exerted by the hierarchy and genuine coercion.
Fear of damaging one's career, a desire not to appear disloyal, or the habit of following orders do not necessarily carry the same significance as an immediate threat to one's life.
It is also necessary to distinguish between someone who merely receives an order and someone who actively helps organize, expand, or make a criminal system more efficient.
Many of the Nuremberg defendants were not simply men carrying out instructions.
They had exercised power, made decisions, and contributed to the functioning of the regime.
Their responsibility could not be understood by isolating the last order they received from the long series of choices that had preceded it.

The Verdicts and Their Meaning

On October 1, 1946, the Tribunal delivered its verdict.

Of the twenty-two defendants tried, nineteen were convicted and three were acquitted.

Twelve received death sentences. The remaining convicted defendants were given prison terms.

The acquittals demonstrated that the tribunal had not adopted a principle of automatic guilt based merely on membership in the Nazi leadership.

It had to establish individual responsibility on the basis of the evidence and the applicable legal rules.

The trial also generated debate and criticism, particularly concerning the relationship between the power of the victors and international justice, as well as the definition of crimes and whether they could lawfully be punished.

But it left a fundamental legacy.

International crimes could no longer be regarded exclusively as impersonal acts of states.

They could be attributed to identifiable individuals, who could be called upon to answer for them before a court.

In the following years, the United Nations recognized and developed the legal principles established at Nuremberg.

Among them, the principle of individual responsibility for those acting under superior orders remained central.

Obedience and Responsibility Are Not Opposites

The principle established at Nuremberg does not mean that discipline and conscience must necessarily be in conflict.

A democratic army still needs orders, hierarchy, and obedience.

But military authority operates within legal limits.

A soldier is not entitled to disregard a lawful order simply because he disagrees with it.

At the same time, he cannot regard his subordinate position as an automatic justification for participating in a crime.

This distinction requires care.

An order may be dangerous without being unlawful.

It may be strategically questionable without being criminal.

It may demand personal sacrifice without violating the law.

The question of criminal responsibility arises when an order requires acts prohibited by law and when the legal conditions for holding the person carrying it out responsible are met.

Nuremberg did not turn every military decision into a referendum on individual conscience.

Rather, it established that obedience has limits and that the law cannot refrain from judging people's conduct simply because they belong to a hierarchy.

The Individual and His Conscience

There is one aspect of the Nuremberg Trial that continues to challenge us even beyond military history.

It is the ease with which an individual can convince himself that responsibility for his actions always belongs to someone else.

To the superior who issued the order.

To the institution that authorized it.

To the law that seemed to permit it.

To the need to protect his position.

But a society in which no one considers himself personally responsible for his actions risks becoming a society in which every injustice can find an administrative justification.

The principle of individual responsibility also exists to prevent this.

It does not assume that every human being possesses absolute freedom, independent of circumstances.

It does, however, recognize that within the actual limits of their possibilities, individuals must answer for the choices they make.

The Nuremberg Trial left us with a question that concerns more than the defendants of that time.

When authority orders us to do something we know is unjust, how far can we continue to claim that all we did was obey, and that the responsibility belongs to someone else?

MILITARY SECRECY AND REASONS OF STATE

> *When does silence protect a country's security, and when does it serve instead to conceal the responsibility of those who govern it?*



The Weight of Secrecy. In an intelligence office, classified files contain information kept from public view. Silence can protect a mission and save lives, but it can also conceal mistakes and responsibility. Who decides when a secret must finally be revealed?
Evocative digital reconstruction. The documents depicted are fictional and do not reproduce authentic historical files. The image evokes the relationship between military secrecy, reasons of state, and the right to know the truth.

The Power of What Remains Unknown

Not every war is fought with weapons.
Some are decided through information known to a handful of men and withheld from thousands of others.
An intercepted communication may reveal the movements of an army. A document taken from the enemy may provide advance warning of an attack. An undercover agent may know the identities of people whose lives depend on no one discovering their names.
In such circumstances, secrecy is not necessarily a questionable choice.
It may be essential to the success of a mission.
A commander who publicly reveals the destination of his units risks compromising their security. An intelligence service that discloses its sources may expose them to capture or death.
But secrecy has a particular characteristic.
Those who do not possess information cannot verify it, discuss it, or challenge it.
And those who control that information possess a power others do not have.
It is precisely this imbalance that makes the relationship between secrecy and responsibility so delicate.
Because a secret can protect a legitimate operation.
But it can also prevent mistakes, abuses, and indefensible decisions from becoming known.
How can we distinguish between the two situations?

Bletchley Park: The Secret That Helped Win the War

During the Second World War, mathematicians, linguists, cryptographers, technicians, and military personnel worked on an undertaking of extraordinary importance at an English country estate north of London.
The place was called Bletchley Park.
Their task was to intercept and decipher the secret communications of the Axis powers.
Among the encryption systems used by Germany was Enigma, an electromechanical machine that transformed messages into seemingly incomprehensible sequences.
Its operation was complex. Settings changed, making continuous work necessary to reconstruct the encryption keys.
The Allies also benefited from the fundamental breakthroughs achieved before the war by Polish mathematicians, which were subsequently developed further by British specialists and other groups engaged in cryptanalysis.
One of the best-known figures at Bletchley Park was Alan Turing, who made a decisive contribution to developing methods for deciphering German communications.
The information obtained through these systems became part of the intelligence network known as Ultra.
For the Allies, it represented an invaluable advantage.
It could help them reconstruct the enemy's intentions, the movements of military units, and the characteristics of opposing defenses.
But there was a problem.
If the Germans had discovered that some of their communications were being read, they could have changed their encryption procedures, rendering the intelligence obtained unusable.
Secrecy therefore had to be protected with the utmost care.

Knowing but Being Unable to Tell

The intelligence obtained from deciphered messages could not be distributed indiscriminately.
Access to it had to be restricted, and its use carefully controlled.
Even when a piece of intelligence was useful for a military operation, it was necessary to prevent the enemy from discovering its source.
This created a dilemma.
On the one hand, using the intelligence meant exploiting an advantage that could save lives and contribute to the success of an operation.
On the other, careless use risked exposing the interception system, jeopardizing the ability to obtain intelligence in the future.
Commanders therefore had to consider not only what they knew, but also how much they could afford to reveal that they knew.
During preparations for the Normandy landings in June 1944, intelligence derived from enemy communications contributed to Allied knowledge of German defenses.
Yet the importance of the work carried out at Bletchley Park remained hidden from the general public for decades after the war.
The case demonstrates that not every secret is an attempt to evade scrutiny.
Sometimes silence is necessary to protect people, equipment, and operational capabilities.
The problem arises when the need to safeguard information is transformed into an absolute principle, one that survives independently of the reasons that originally justified it.

Reasons of State

The expression *reasons of state* refers, in general terms, to the idea that protecting the fundamental interests of the state may require difficult, confidential, or exceptional decisions.
It is an ancient concept, one that runs through the history of political thought and the relationship between rulers and those they govern.
But it presents an obvious risk.

If those in power can independently determine what is necessary for the security of the state, who oversees their decisions?
And who can establish whether secrecy is genuinely indispensable?
In a democratic state, secrecy should not be equivalent to an absence of oversight.
National security may justify restrictions on the disclosure of information, but it should not eliminate political and legal accountability.
The issue becomes particularly delicate in military and intelligence operations, where information is often distributed according to the need-to-know principle.
A soldier may know only the task he has been assigned.
An officer may know part of the plan.
An intelligence official may possess information that is not shared even with other government officials.
Such an arrangement may be necessary.
But it can also make it difficult to reconstruct who decided on a particular action, what information informed that decision, and what objectives it was intended to achieve.
When something goes wrong, the fragmentation of knowledge risks becoming a fragmentation of responsibility.

Vietnam: The Report That Was Supposed to Remain Secret
In 1967, while the Vietnam War continued to involve hundreds of thousands of American military personnel, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara commissioned a classified study of the history of American involvement in Indochina.
The study would reconstruct the political and military decisions made under successive administrations, from the postwar years through 1967.
The report was intended for a limited audience.
It contained documents, analyses, assessments, and reconstructions of decisions made by American governments.
It was classified Top Secret.
That collection of materials would become famous as the Pentagon Papers.
The report revealed a more complex history than the one many citizens had come to know through public statements.
Among other things, it documented confidential decisions, internal assessments, and the gradual expansion of American involvement in Vietnam.
Not all the information contained in the study necessarily constituted evidence of criminal conduct.
But reading it made it possible to compare what political leaders knew and the decisions they made with the accounts presented to the public.
It was precisely this comparison that made the document politically explosive.

Daniel Ellsberg and the Decision to Reveal
Daniel Ellsberg had worked as an analyst within the American defense establishment and had participated in preparing the study.
Over time, he became increasingly critical of the Vietnam War.
He came to believe that citizens had a right to know the information contained in the report.
He therefore decided to provide copies to the press.
On June 13, 1971, *The New York Times* began publishing articles based on the classified documents.
The disclosure triggered a political and legal crisis.
President Richard Nixon's administration attempted to prevent further publication, arguing that national security needed to be protected.
The dispute reached the Supreme Court of the United States.
On June 30, 1971, the Court rejected the government's attempt to prevent the documents from being published.
The decision did not establish that every state secret could be freely disclosed.

Rather, in the circumstances of that case, it held that the government had failed to meet the exceptionally heavy burden required to justify a prior restraint on freedom of the press.
The question of confidentiality, therefore, did not disappear.
But the decision recognized the importance of preventing the mere invocation of national security from automatically becoming sufficient grounds to stop the disclosure of information of significant public interest.

Can Secrecy Outlast Its Justification?
The story of the Pentagon Papers had a significant sequel.
The report remained formally classified for many years, even though a substantial portion of its contents had already become public.
Only in June 2011, forty years after the first disclosures, did the U.S. National Archives release the complete, declassified version of the study.
It comprised approximately seven thousand pages.
The long interval between the preparation of the report and its full publication raises an important question.
How long should information remain secret?
The answer cannot depend solely on the wishes of those who originally classified it.
The reasons for secrecy may change.
An operation may come to an end. A source may no longer be at risk. A technology may become obsolete. A conflict may have passed into history.
In such cases, maintaining secrecy requires a new justification.
Otherwise, there is a risk that what remains concealed is not something that still needs protection, but something that someone would simply prefer to keep unknown.
The distinction is not always easy to make.
And that is precisely why clear criteria, procedures, and independent oversight are necessary.

Two Secrets, Two Responsibilities
Bletchley Park and the Pentagon Papers represent very different situations.
In the first case, secrecy protected military intelligence whose disclosure could have compromised a strategic advantage during wartime.
In the second, the publication of a classified study made possible a public discussion of decisions taken by American governments during the Vietnam War.
It would be incorrect to conclude that the secrecy surrounding the first was legitimate in every respect, while that surrounding the second was illegitimate by definition.
History calls for more careful judgments.
But the comparison shows that the word *secret* is not enough to explain the purpose of concealed information.
We must ask who is protecting it, for what reason, in whose interests, and with what consequences.
Above all, we must consider one particular question.
Does secrecy protect an activity that could be subjected to legitimate oversight, or is it being used to prevent that oversight?
This is a fundamental distinction.
Because the security of a state and the accountability of those who govern it should not be regarded as incompatible requirements.

The Burden of What Remains Unspoken
Secrecy does not weigh only on institutions.
It can also become a burden for individuals.
A soldier assigned to a classified mission may be required to remain silent even with his own family.
An official may hold documents whose very existence he cannot explain.
A witness may know a truth that no one seems willing to hear.
Sometimes silence is a form of loyalty.

Sometimes it becomes a prison.
And it may happen that, as the years pass, someone entrusted with a secret comes to regard it as part of his own identity.
Revealing it would then mean not only breaking a commitment, but also questioning the decisions and sacrifices that have shaped his life.
This is one of the most profoundly human aspects of secrecy.
Behind a classified document there may be men who obeyed, men who made decisions, and men who were never able to understand the reasons for what happened.
But there may also be people who paid the price for decisions made far away from them.

When Silence Must End
Military secrecy can be indispensable.
Without confidentiality, many operations could not be conducted, and many people would be exposed to unnecessary danger.
But secrecy should not become a permanent means of escaping responsibility.
Time can change the circumstances that justified its existence.
History can bring forgotten facts to light.
A rediscovered document can change the meaning of an event that seemed to have reached its conclusion.
And a witness's testimony can restore a voice to someone who, for years, had no opportunity to tell what he knew.
Perhaps the problem is not choosing between secrecy and truth as though they were two irreconcilable principles.
It is understanding when secrecy ceases to protect something legitimate and begins to prevent the truth from emerging.
A state certainly has the right to protect its secrets. But how far can it claim that the truth itself belongs to the state?

CAN THE TRUTH WAIT TWENTY YEARS?

When a document resurfaces from the past, can it change a story everyone believed was over?



Memory Preserved. Among shelves filled with forgotten files, an old document comes to light after decades of silence. Time may conceal the traces of the past, but it cannot erase what happened. Sometimes a single rediscovered page is enough to reopen a story that seemed to have reached its conclusion.
Evocative digital reconstruction. The image does not depict a specific historical archive, but evokes the importance of documents in the search for truth and the reconstruction of responsibility.

Time Does Not Erase Everything

Some events seem destined to remain unexplained.
The people involved disappear, witnesses grow old, and documents are transferred from one archive to another. Those who knew what happened die, and those who remain sometimes come to believe that the truth will never be known.
Time seems to work in favor of silence.
But that is not always the case.
A forgotten letter, a file preserved for decades, a photograph, or a witness's testimony can reopen an event that seemed to have been consigned permanently to the past.
Modern history offers numerous examples of truths that emerged long after the events themselves.
Some had been deliberately concealed.
Others had remained buried beneath incomplete documents, conflicting memories, and mistaken interpretations.
Discovering a document does not always resolve every question. But it can profoundly change what we believed we knew.
And then a question arises.
Does the truth become less important simply because twenty, thirty, or fifty years have passed?

Katyn, 1940: The Massacre and the Lie

In the spring of 1940, thousands of Polish officers and other prisoners held by the Soviet Union were murdered on the orders of the highest Soviet authorities.

The executions were carried out by the NKVD, the political police of Stalin's regime, at several locations, including the Katyn Forest near Smolensk.
The victims belonged largely to Poland's military, administrative, and intellectual elite.
When German authorities announced the discovery of the mass graves at Katyn in 1943, the issue immediately became the subject of a political and propaganda battle.
Nazi Germany attributed the massacre to the Soviets.
The Soviet Union denied responsibility and accused the Germans instead.
The source of the accusation did not make the information false, but the wartime context made an open examination of the evidence particularly difficult.
After the war, the official Soviet account continued to blame Germany for the crime.
For decades, openly discussing Soviet responsibility in Poland meant exposing oneself to political and personal consequences.
Yet the truth was not entirely unknown.
Testimonies, investigations, and documents had already enabled numerous scholars and observers to identify those responsible. In 1952, a committee of inquiry established by the United States House of Representatives concluded that the executions had been carried out by the NKVD.
The problem, therefore, was not simply a lack of information.
It was also the refusal of the Soviet authorities to acknowledge it.

A Document from 1940 Resurfaces in 1992

On April 13, 1990, fifty years after the massacre, the Soviet Union officially acknowledged the NKVD's responsibility.
It was a historic turning point.
But another decisive development came in October 1992, when Russian authorities handed Poland copies of documents that had long remained secret.
Among them were records relating to the decision of March 5, 1940, by which the highest Soviet leaders had authorized the killing of the prisoners.
This was more than another testimony.
It was documentary evidence of a decision made at the highest levels of power.
The document made it possible to reconstruct the chain of responsibility.
It showed that the massacre had not resulted from an isolated initiative by military personnel on the ground, but from the execution of a deliberate political decision.
Official acknowledgment did not bring the victims back to life, nor did it erase decades of lies.
And it did not resolve every controversy surrounding memory, investigations, and responsibility.
But it permanently changed the relationship between the historical record and the account that Soviet authorities had maintained for half a century.
Katyn demonstrates that a truth can be known, debated, and documented long before it receives official recognition.
And that access to archives can help transform a disputed truth into a historically documented responsibility.

The Documents Someone Wanted to Destroy

Another significant episode unfolded in Germany in 1989, during the crisis of the German Democratic Republic.
For decades, the Stasi, East Germany's Ministry for State Security, had built an extensive surveillance system.
It gathered information about citizens, political opponents, religious groups, artists, officials, and people suspected of not sharing the regime's views.
The information came from intercepted communications, surveillance, interrogations, and a network of collaborators and informants.
The result was an enormous collection of files.
These documents recorded not only the activities of the political police, but also the private lives of millions of people.

When the regime began to collapse, some officials attempted to destroy portions of the archives.
Papers were torn up, shredded, or otherwise rendered unusable.
But citizens intervened.
Between December 1989 and January 1990, groups of demonstrators occupied several Stasi offices to prevent evidence of surveillance activities from being destroyed.
It was an act of extraordinary significance.
The very citizens who had been spied upon were demanding the right to preserve the documents produced against them.
They did not want the past to disappear along with the regime.

Opening a File and Discovering Your Own Life

In January 1992, citizens began gaining access to their personal records held in the Stasi archives.
For many, it was a profoundly disturbing experience.
They were able to read reports describing private conversations, meetings, opinions, and everyday behavior.
In some cases, they discovered that confidential information had been passed to the political police by acquaintances, colleagues, or people they had trusted.
Not every file provided a complete and reliable reconstruction of events.
Security service documents also reflect the prejudices, objectives, and methods of those who produced them.
An accusation could be false. A report could contain arbitrary interpretations. Information might have been collected without the consent of the person concerned.
Archives should therefore not be regarded as repositories of unquestionable truth.
They are repositories of evidence that must be examined critically.
It is necessary to establish who prepared a document, when it was written, for what purpose, and on the basis of which information.
And, whenever possible, to compare it with other sources.
Nevertheless, opening the Stasi archives gave many people the opportunity to discover a part of their own history that had been kept beyond their control.
It also demonstrated how deeply a society's past can continue to live within the documents it preserves.

Memory Is Not a Perfect Recording

There is a fundamental difference between a document and a memory.
A document may preserve words written at a particular moment. Testimony, on the other hand, conveys what a person remembers, interprets, and is able to recount.
Both can be indispensable.
But both require careful examination.
Human memory does not function like an archive in which every event remains unchanged.
Memories can change over time. Some details disappear, while others are reinterpreted in light of knowledge acquired later.
A person may sincerely believe that they remember an event exactly as it happened, yet be mistaken about the sequence of events, the words spoken, or someone's identity.
For this reason, anyone reconstructing an event from the distant past must compare witness accounts with the available evidence.
Dates, letters, recordings, photographs, official reports, and administrative records can confirm or call into question what is being recounted.
Even a witness's silence deserves attention, but it does not automatically justify drawing conclusions.
A person may remain silent out of fear, loyalty, shame, or simply because they do not consider what they know to be important.
The search for truth often requires us to distinguish between what is said and what can be demonstrated.

When the Truth Has Remained Hidden for Too Long

The passage of years also changes the possibility of obtaining justice.
A witness may die.
Someone responsible may no longer be subject to prosecution.
A document may be lost.
And some consequences of past decisions become irreversible.
But this does not mean that historical reconstruction loses all value.
Knowing what happened can restore dignity to victims, correct unjust accusations, and allow a community to confront its own past.
Acknowledging responsibility does not always lead to a criminal conviction.
Historical truth, judicial truth, and the truth officially acknowledged by institutions may follow different paths.
A court must apply specific rules and evaluate evidence according to legal standards.
A historian may reconstruct an event even when the conditions necessary to bring a case to trial no longer exist.
An institution may belatedly acknowledge facts that had already been documented for many years.
These distinctions are important.
Especially when dealing with events that remained hidden for decades.

The Past That Refuses to End
Some people devote much of their lives to searching for an answer.
A family member who wants to know the fate of someone who disappeared.
A historian examining forgotten documents.
An investigator returning to an unsolved case.
A witness who, after many years, finally decides to speak.
Sometimes these searches seem pointless.
The world has changed, the people involved have disappeared, and those affected have built new lives.
Why reopen something that happened so long ago?
The answer is not always the same.
It may be the desire to obtain justice.
The need to free oneself from suspicion.
Or the profoundly human need to know what really happened.
Not every mystery has to be solved.
But when silence protects a lie or prevents responsibility from being acknowledged, the passage of time does not automatically make the search for truth less important.

The Responsibility of Those Who Discover
Discovering a document means more than simply possessing information.
It also means having to decide what to do with it.
A file may contain allegations that were never proven.
A letter may reveal personal secrets.
A testimony may implicate people who are no longer able to defend themselves.
Anyone reconstructing the past must therefore proceed with caution.
They should not turn every suspicion into a certainty, or treat every document as definitive proof.
They must distinguish facts from interpretations, hypotheses from conclusions, and proven responsibilities from those that have merely been imagined.
The search for truth carries its own responsibility.
Because a revelation, too, can have consequences.
And because justice does not simply mean replacing one version of events with another.
It means seeking an account grounded in evidence, one capable of withstanding questions and scrutiny.

Twenty Years Later
Twenty years can change everything.

A young person becomes an adult, a commander leaves military service, a government disappears, and a document passes from a desk into an archive.
Those who took part in an event may no longer recognize themselves in the men and women they once were.
But the events themselves do not cease to have happened.
An order issued many years earlier may have produced consequences that continue to shape the present.
A secret kept for too long may become the focus of new questions.
And something that seemed forgotten may suddenly come to light again.
The stories of Katyn and the Stasi archives demonstrate that time can make the truth more difficult to discover, but it can also create the conditions for it to emerge.
The question is not simply how long we must wait.
It is what happens during that waiting.
Because the truth can survive in documents.
But the people who need it cannot wait forever.
Does a truth discovered twenty years later come too late, or does its very reappearance prove that it had never ceased to matter?

JUSTICE, REVENGE, AND RESPONSIBILITY

> *When someone has committed a crime, do we want that person to be brought to justice, or to suffer as much as the victims suffered?*



The Delicate Balance of Justice. On one side of the scales lie the documents of a trial; on the other, the memory of a family. On one side, the rules of law; on the other, the pain of those who have suffered a wrong. Justice must establish responsibility without allowing the desire for redress to turn into revenge. But can a verdict restore what has been lost?
Symbolic digital reconstruction. The documents and family photograph are fictional; the image represents the conflict between the human need for justice and the risk of revenge.

Justice and the Desire to Punish

When confronted with an injustice, our first instinct is not always to place our trust in a court of law.
It may be anger.
The need to have the wrong we have suffered acknowledged. The desire to know that the person responsible for causing suffering will not be able to carry on living as though nothing had happened.
When a crime is particularly serious, this reaction can become a desire for revenge.
It is an understandable emotional response, but it raises a fundamental question.
If someone who has suffered a wrong decides independently what punishment to inflict on the person responsible, what distinguishes that action from the one that caused the original harm?
Justice exists, in part, to break this cycle of wrongdoing and retaliation.
This does not mean abandoning the punishment of those who are guilty.
It means entrusting the determination of responsibility to rules that do not depend exclusively on the wishes of the person who has been harmed.
A trial must establish what happened, who was responsible, and what legal consequences should follow.
Revenge, by contrast, tends to begin with guilt already considered certain.
And it is precisely in this difference that one of the most difficult dilemmas in human history lies.

A Man Hiding in Buenos Aires

In 1960, an apparently ordinary man was living in a suburb of Buenos Aires.
He called himself Ricardo Klement.
He led a modest life, worked, and tried to avoid attracting attention.
But his real name was Adolf Eichmann.
During the Nazi regime, Eichmann had held important positions within the SS and the apparatus responsible for organizing the deportation of European Jews.
He had not been a mere clerk carrying out bureaucratic procedures without understanding their purpose.
He had played an active role in coordinating transports to ghettos and extermination centers.
After Germany's defeat, he had managed to evade justice and, using a false identity, had made his way to Argentina.
For years, he had lived far from Europe and the places where the crimes to which he had contributed had been committed.
But the past had not disappeared.
Efforts to locate him continued, aided by information gathered by people committed to identifying Nazi criminals who had escaped the postwar trials.
Among those who helped trace his whereabouts was the German prosecutor Fritz Bauer, who was determined to prevent those responsible for Nazi persecution from escaping punishment.
The information collected eventually led Israeli intelligence services to locate Eichmann in Argentina.
A profoundly delicate question then arose.
What should be done with this man?

A Capture Beyond National Borders

On May 11, 1960, agents of Mossad, Israel's intelligence service, captured Eichmann near his home.
The operation had been organized clandestinely.
The Argentine authorities had neither been informed nor authorized the intervention.
Eichmann was held in hiding, questioned to verify his identity, and subsequently transferred to Israel.
On May 23, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion publicly announced that the former Nazi officer was in the country and would stand trial.
The news attracted enormous international attention.
But it also triggered a diplomatic dispute.
Argentina denounced the violation of its territorial sovereignty. The fact that Eichmann was accused of extremely serious crimes did not automatically resolve the question of how he had been captured.
The dispute reached the United Nations Security Council.
The issue was not whether Eichmann's responsibility needed to be established, but how that necessity related to the rules governing relations between states.
This is an important distinction.
Even when the objective being pursued appears just, the methods used to achieve it may raise questions of legitimacy.
Those who decide to act outside ordinary procedures assume a responsibility that does not disappear simply because they intend to pursue someone guilty of a crime.
The Eichmann case therefore forced the world to confront two demands that were difficult to reconcile: preventing a major participant in Nazi persecution from escaping punishment, and respecting the legal limits governing one state's actions within the territory of another.

The Prisoner Before the Judges

Once Eichmann had been brought to Israel, he was not secretly executed.
He was handed over to the judicial authorities and subjected to a public trial.
The proceedings began on April 11, 1961, in Jerusalem.
Before the court stood a man accused of contributing to the organization of crimes on an enormous scale.
But that man had a defense lawyer.

He could challenge the charges, present his own account of events, and make use of the remedies provided by legal procedure.
The court was required to examine documents, hear testimony, and explain the reasons for its decisions.
This did not make the alleged crimes any less serious.
It made it possible to address them through a judicial process rather than through summary punishment.
Because justice, if it is to deserve that name, cannot depend solely on the moral certainty of the accuser.
It must be capable of establishing responsibility through evidence.

The Voices of the Survivors
The Eichmann trial had a significance that extended far beyond the fate of the defendant.
In Jerusalem, numerous survivors of Nazi persecution were called to testify.
They described deportations, the separation of families, violence, and conditions of life in the ghettos and camps.
Their testimony brought before international public opinion experiences that many people had previously encountered only through news reports, photographs, and official documents.
Until then, some survivors had spoken very little about what they had endured.
The trial helped bring their voices more prominently into public awareness.
Not every testimony served to prove directly a specific act committed by Eichmann.
Taken together, however, they made it possible to understand the workings of the system of persecution within which the defendant had operated.
Justice thus acquired another function: that of preserving memory.
Not merely establishing guilt, but allowing the victims to be heard.
It was an outcome that no secret punishment could have achieved in the same way.

Once Again: I Was Following Orders
As had already happened at Nuremberg, Eichmann also attempted to minimize his responsibility by referring to his position within the Nazi hierarchy.
He maintained that he had carried out decisions made by others and had not been principally responsible for the policy of extermination.
His defense sought to portray him as a cog in the machinery of the state, without the power necessary to change how it functioned.
But the documents examined during the trial and the testimony presented revealed a far more active role.
Eichmann had organized deportations, coordinated offices, and made a concrete contribution to the persecution of European Jews.
The court had to distinguish the defendant's formal position from the responsibilities revealed by his actions.
A bureaucratic assignment did not become innocent simply because it was performed behind a desk.
An order did not lose its criminal nature because it had been transmitted through an administrative chain.
Once again, the trial demonstrated how inadequate it was to assess individual responsibility solely in relation to the rank a person held.
The decisive question concerned what the defendant had actually done and the contribution he had made to the crimes.

The Sentence
In December 1961, Eichmann was found guilty on numerous counts, including crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.
On December 15, he was sentenced to death.
The defense appealed to the Israeli Supreme Court, which upheld the sentence in May 1962.
A subsequent request for clemency was also rejected.
Eichmann was executed during the night of May 31–June 1, 1962.
Capital punishment raises its own moral question, one on which there is no universally shared position.
For some, the gravity of the crimes committed justified the most severe penalty available under the law.

For others, not even crimes of such magnitude should have resulted in the state putting the convicted man to death.
These are different positions within the long-standing debate over the purpose and limits of punishment.
But regardless of one's judgment on the sentence, the trial had achieved something that simple revenge could never have guaranteed: a public determination of responsibility, based on documents, testimony, and reasoned judicial decisions.

Why Revenge Is Not Enough
Revenge means seeking to inflict harm on someone who has caused harm.
Justice, by contrast, should pursue a broader purpose.
It must acknowledge the wrong, establish responsibility, protect society, and impose a proportionate penalty according to the rules of the legal system.
This distinction does not imply that the desire for revenge is always incomprehensible or morally contemptible.
A victim may feel anger, hatred, or the need to see the person who destroyed their life suffer.
We cannot expect pain to disappear simply because a court exists.
But if the law merely gave effect to that desire, it would abandon its own purpose.
Justice must not ask victims to forget.
It must, however, prevent suffering from becoming the sole criterion for determining guilt and punishment.
This is why the right to a defense does not belong only to the innocent.
It also belongs to those accused of the most terrible crimes.
Not because society must be lenient toward those crimes, but because it must ensure that they are judged according to rules that do not change depending on who is sitting in the defendant's chair.

When Institutions Fail to Respond
Yet there is an even more difficult situation.
What happens when institutions are unable, or unwilling, to deliver justice?
An investigation may be abandoned.
Evidence may disappear.
Someone responsible for a crime may be protected by political or military power.
A family may wait years for an answer that no one seems willing to provide.
Under such circumstances, the temptation to act independently can become very strong.
Those who feel abandoned by the justice system may convince themselves that only their own initiative will be capable of restoring some measure of balance.
Eichmann's story demonstrates how difficult it can be to pursue someone responsible for crimes when that person is hiding abroad and ordinary procedures encounter obstacles.
But it also demonstrates that, once captured, the defendant was brought before a court.
The clandestine operation and the trial must not be confused: the former raised legal and diplomatic controversies; the latter was the forum in which criminal responsibility was examined and judged.
The desire to obtain justice does not automatically authorize every possible means.
It is an uncomfortable conclusion, particularly when institutions have failed.
But it is precisely in such situations that the boundary between justice and revenge becomes more important.

The Passage of Time and Responsibility
Many years may separate a crime from its punishment.
During that interval, the person responsible may change identity, place of residence, and habits.
He may build an apparently normal life.
The victims, meanwhile, continue to live with the consequences of what they suffered.
This imbalance gives rise to a profoundly human question.
Does the passage of time make responsibility for a crime any less serious?
The answer also depends on the nature of the crime and the applicable legal rules.

But from a moral standpoint, the passage of time does not automatically erase the consequences of an action.
A man may have stopped committing crimes.
That does not mean that what he did ceases to be part of his history.
The Eichmann trial demonstrated that, even many years after the end of the war, responsibility for Nazi crimes could still be reconstructed and judged.
At the same time, it served as a reminder that the need for justice does not belong only to the past.
It concerns the survivors, their families, and the society that must confront what happened.

The Most Difficult Choice

Revenge often offers an immediate answer.
It identifies someone guilty, determines a punishment, and promises to restore what has been broken.
Justice is slower.
It requires evidence, listening, examination, and a willingness to accept that not every suspicion can lead to a conviction.
It does not guarantee that pain will disappear.
It cannot bring back those who have been lost.
And it cannot always repair the consequences of a crime.
But it offers something different: the possibility of breaking the cycle of denied responsibility and arbitrary punishment.
Those who have suffered injustice have the right to seek the truth and demand that responsibility be established.
The problem arises when that right is confused with the power to decide, alone, what should become of others.
Because the pursuit of justice also carries responsibility.
Being on the side of someone who has suffered a wrong is not enough to make every action automatically just.
And being right about what happened does not necessarily mean being right about what one decides to do afterward.
When we seek to remedy an injustice, are we still capable of recognizing the moment when we risk committing another?

WHEN MONEY MEETS MILITARY POWER

Who really holds power when economic interests and military force end up supporting one another?



The Power of Arms, the Power of Money. Chile, during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. A military uniform, classified financial documents, and banknotes evoke the intertwined relationship between political authority, the armed forces, and economic interests. When control over weapons is combined with control over resources, who can ensure that power is not exercised for the benefit of a privileged few?

Symbolic digital reconstruction inspired by Chile's historical context between 1973 and 1990. The documents, banknotes, and objects depicted serve an illustrative purpose and are not reproductions of authentic historical artifacts.

Two Powers That Seem Worlds Apart

A general commands armed men.

A banker manages money.

The former has troops, orders, and hierarchical structures at his disposal. The latter operates through credit, investments, loans, and financial holdings.

At first glance, they belong to different worlds.

But history shows that military and economic power can intersect far more often than we might imagine.

Armies need resources. Weapons, equipment, infrastructure, and operations require funding. Businesses may depend on government contracts, economic policies, and the stability provided by institutions.

In a democratic state, these relationships should be governed by laws, budgets, and oversight.

But what happens when the armed forces take direct control of political power?

Who decides how national resources are used?

Who gains access to credit?

Who benefits from privatization?

And who can challenge those decisions if Parliament is dissolved, political parties are outlawed, and the freedom to oppose those in power is suppressed?

To understand these questions, we must return to Latin America in the 1970s.

In particular, to Chile.

Santiago, September 11, 1973

On September 11, 1973, the Chilean armed forces overthrew the government of President Salvador Allende.

Allende had been elected in 1970 at the head of a left-wing coalition, Unidad Popular.
His program called for major economic and social transformations, including greater government involvement in the economy and the nationalization of strategic sectors.
The country was experiencing a profound crisis.
Inflation was high, strikes and protests were widespread, society was deeply polarized, and political confrontation had become increasingly bitter.
Chile was also affected by international tensions associated with the Cold War.
The United States regarded Allende's government as a strategic problem. Documents subsequently declassified have demonstrated that the Nixon administration authorized covert initiatives to oppose it, including activities supporting opposition political forces and plans intended to encourage military intervention.
These initiatives do not, by themselves, explain all the causes of the coup. Political divisions, the economic crisis, and the decisions of Chilean actors played a decisive role.
But they demonstrate how closely geopolitical and economic interests could become intertwined with the struggle for control of a country.
On September 11, the presidential palace, La Moneda, came under attack.
Allende died during the coup.
Power passed to a junta composed of the commanders of the armed forces and the Carabineros, Chile's national police force.
Among them was General Augusto Pinochet.
Before long, Pinochet established a dominant position, giving rise to a dictatorship that would last until 1990.
Chile had not merely changed governments.
It had lost the fundamental safeguards of its democratic system.

A Dictatorship and a New Economic Model

The military regime did not confine itself to repressing political opposition.
It also initiated a profound transformation of the economy.
From the mid-1970s onward, a group of Chilean economists who had studied at the University of Chicago, either directly or through university exchange and cooperation programs, gained increasing influence.
They became known as the Chicago Boys.
They advocated policies aimed at liberalizing markets, reducing state intervention, opening the economy to international trade, and privatizing numerous economic activities.
The regime adopted a substantial part of these proposals.
Many state-owned enterprises were transferred to private ownership. The banking sector was reorganized, regulations governing various financial activities were relaxed, and the country gradually opened itself to international capital flows.
Supporters of these measures argued that they were intended to curb inflation, stimulate production, and modernize the economy.
Their effects, however, were complex.
Some transformations would have lasting consequences for Chile's economic system. Others contributed to the development of imbalances and vulnerabilities that would emerge dramatically in the years that followed.
But there was also a political question.
These decisions were being made in a country where normal democratic debate had been suppressed.
Citizens lacked the ordinary means to discuss, oppose, or change government policies.
Military power thus made it possible to carry out a process of economic transformation without normal political competition.
This does not mean that every economist was a military officer, or that every entrepreneur supported all the regime's decisions.
It means that economic policies were implemented within an authoritarian system in which dissent was subject to severe restrictions and grave risks.

When Banks Become Centers of Power

Chile's financial liberalization had one particularly significant characteristic.
Following the nationalization of much of the banking sector under Allende's government, the military regime began returning banks to private ownership.
By 1975, almost all nationalized commercial banks had been sold, with the exception of Banco del Estado.
But privatization did not automatically produce widely distributed ownership.
In an environment characterized by insufficient rules governing economic concentration, several institutions ended up in the hands of large business and financial groups.
These groups simultaneously controlled banks, industrial enterprises, and service companies.
The result was a complex network of cross-ownership.
A group could own a bank and, at the same time, obtain financing from that same bank to purchase other companies within its own network.
In this way, credit could become an instrument for expanding economic control.
Naturally, not every financial transaction of this kind was necessarily unlawful.
But excessive concentration of credit and loans granted to companies connected to the same owners increased the risks facing the banking system.
The issue therefore concerned not only the functioning of the market, but also the distribution of power.
Those who controlled banks could influence which businesses gained access to the capital needed for growth.
And when a small number of individuals control important financial instruments, their influence can extend far beyond the economic activities they own directly.

The Crisis of 1982: Who Pays for the Mistakes of Finance?

In the early 1980s, the Chilean economy entered an extremely severe crisis.
The financial system had accumulated vulnerabilities through credit expansion, foreign-currency debt, concentrated lending, and inadequate regulation.
These internal weaknesses were compounded by international difficulties, including deteriorating external financial conditions.
In 1982, the Chilean peso underwent a sharp devaluation.
For businesses that had borrowed in dollars, repaying their loans became much more difficult.
Numerous financial institutions found themselves in crisis.
The state intervened to prevent a broader collapse of the banking system.
Several banks were placed under government intervention, while the Central Bank supported the sector through guarantees and rescue operations.
A paradox thus emerged.
A regime that had promoted privatization and reduced state intervention was forced to commit substantial public resources to confronting the crisis of private financial institutions.
The problem was not unique to Chile.
Other economies have also experienced situations in which the profits generated by financial activities remain private, while part of the cost of financial crises is transferred to society as a whole.
But in Pinochet's Chile, this process took place in a context where citizens lacked the normal safeguards of democratic representation.
This raises a question.
If a financial group enjoys substantial benefits during a period of economic expansion, who should bear the losses when its decisions contribute to a crisis?
And who oversees government decisions when public money is used to rescue the system?

Copper and the Financing of the Armed Forces

There is another, less widely known aspect of Chilean history that illustrates with particular clarity the relationship between economic resources and military power.
Copper is one of Chile's principal natural resources.

For decades, it has represented a fundamental source of revenue for the country.
As early as 1958, legislation had been introduced allocating a portion of copper revenues to the financing of the armed forces.
Pinochet, therefore, did not invent the principle underlying this system.
But under the military regime, the mechanism was modified and consolidated.
Beginning in 1973, the allocation was set at 10 percent of certain foreign-currency revenues derived from copper exports by the companies covered by the law.
These resources were intended for the purchase of weapons and the maintenance of military capabilities.
The system, known as the *Ley Reservada del Cobre*, or Secret Copper Law, had a particularly sensitive characteristic: the text of the law and many aspects of its operation remained classified.
For a long time, a significant portion of the resources allocated to the armed forces was managed outside ordinary budgetary procedures, with limited or nonexistent parliamentary oversight.
This helped provide the military leadership with a relatively independent source of funding.
One that did not depend, through ordinary procedures, on Parliament's annual decisions.
It was an issue of considerable institutional importance.
Because democratic control over the armed forces does not concern only who has the authority to issue orders to generals.
It also concerns who decides how much money to allocate to them, which weapons to purchase, and what procedures should govern the verification of how those resources are used.
The system survived for many years after the dictatorship ended.
In 2019, Chile approved a reform intended to gradually replace that mechanism with a defense-financing model subject to greater civilian and parliamentary oversight.
It was a significant change.
Because it demonstrates how difficult it can be to alter certain relationships of economic and institutional power, even after democracy has been restored.

Money Does Not Wear a Uniform

The relationship between finance and military power should not be interpreted as though a single group of interests always existed, capable of controlling every decision.
The armed forces do not necessarily constitute a homogeneous bloc.
Nor is the economic world composed of actors who always share the same objectives.
Entrepreneurs, banks, investors, and financial institutions may have different, and sometimes conflicting, interests.
Some may support a government.
Others may oppose it.
Still others may be primarily concerned with securing favorable conditions for their business activities, regardless of the political nature of those in power.
It is therefore necessary to distinguish documented facts from interpretations.
The Chilean case demonstrates the existence of relationships between the military junta, economic groups, privatization programs, and transformations of the financial system.
It does not, however, justify claiming that every decision made by the regime was imposed by bankers, or that all those who benefited from its economic policies participated in the repression.
A serious reconstruction must ask who made the decisions, which relationships can be documented, and who benefited from them.
Power, after all, is not exercised solely through the issuing of orders.
It can also manifest itself through the ability to direct resources, provide financing, award contracts, and determine who has access to economic opportunities.
It is a less visible form of power than the power of weapons.
But not necessarily a less important one.

Force and Silence

The political system established after the 1973 coup was also founded on repression.
Democratic institutions were suspended, political opponents were persecuted, and the security apparatus exercised extensive control over society.
Thousands of people were arrested, tortured, killed, or forcibly disappeared.
The regime also employed specialized organizations, such as the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional, known as DINA, and subsequently the Central Nacional de Informaciones.
Repression cannot be regarded as a mere detail of the economic context.
It was a fundamental component of the dictatorship.
And it is here that the relationship between military power and financial decisions takes on a broader significance.
In a democracy, an economic policy may provoke protests, strikes, parliamentary questions, and demands for change.
Under a dictatorship, those mechanisms may be restricted or suppressed.
The use of force does not, in itself, demonstrate that a particular economic policy was designed to facilitate specific crimes.
But it radically changes the conditions under which that policy is adopted and challenged.
The question then becomes unavoidable.
What value does consent have when dissent cannot be freely expressed?
And to what extent can an economic decision be considered autonomous when those affected by it have no democratic means of opposing it?

The Question of Responsibility

The Nuremberg Trial, which we examined in earlier chapters, demonstrated that individuals cannot automatically consider themselves innocent merely because they followed a superior's orders.
But the history of authoritarian regimes raises another question.
Does responsibility belong only to those who command and those who physically carry out their orders?
Or must we also examine the role of those who provide resources, structures, and economic instruments?
There is no single answer.
Financing a lawful economic activity is not equivalent to participating in a crime.
Maintaining commercial relations with a state does not automatically demonstrate complicity in violations committed by its government.
Establishing legal responsibility requires specific facts, verifiable conduct, and the conditions prescribed by applicable law.
But from a historical and moral perspective, it remains important to understand how the networks that sustain power operate.
A regime does not survive solely through the will of those who lead it.
It needs administrative structures, financing, supplies, infrastructure, and people willing to keep its institutions functioning.
Analyzing these relationships does not mean assigning blame indiscriminately.
It means reconstructing the conditions that make the exercise of power possible.

Who Controls Those Who Wield Force?

The case of Chile brings us back to one of the central questions of this dossier.
A military commander exercises authority over his subordinates.
But that authority should not be unlimited.
It is constrained by law, personal responsibility, and institutional oversight.
The same principle can be extended to the relationship between the armed forces and economic resources.
National security requires investment and funding.
But those who wield military force should not be able to shield their economic decisions from public scrutiny indefinitely.

Otherwise, military secrecy risks becoming not merely an instrument for protecting classified operations, but also a means of concealing how money is distributed.
And economic power can become a form of influence that is difficult to scrutinize.
The issue does not concern dictatorships alone.
Even in democratic states, the relationship between governments, defense industries, banks, and the armed forces requires rules, transparency, and oversight.
The fundamental difference lies in the existence of institutions capable of examining decisions and holding those responsible to account.

The Order, the Money, and the Conscience
We began with secret missions behind enemy lines.
We encountered men forced to survive in isolation, soldiers who remained faithful to orders issued long ago, and defendants called upon to answer for crimes committed within hierarchical structures.
We examined hidden documents, truths that resurfaced after decades, and the boundary between the desire for justice and the desire for revenge.
The relationship between finance and military power adds one final question.
An order is issued by a man.
But the reasons behind it may lie far beyond his reach.
In a political decision, a strategic interest, an economic relationship, or the desire to protect a position of power.
The person carrying out that order may know only a small part of the story.
This does not mean that every military mission conceals interests that cannot be openly acknowledged.
It means that the discipline of those who obey should not prevent us from questioning the responsibility of those who make the decisions.
Because power can take different forms.
It can appear in uniform, sit on a board of directors, sign a classified document, or issue instructions from a distant office.
And it may happen that none of those involved fully understands the consequences of what they are helping to bring about.
The real difficulty, then, lies in reconstructing the relationships between decisions, interests, and responsibilities.
When money supports power and power protects money, who retains the freedom to demand accountability for the decisions made?

THE QUESTION THAT REMAINS

A Reflection by the Author

When I began writing *The Last Mission*, I was fascinated by stories of men sent on missions behind enemy lines. I was interested in the courage, uncertainty, and solitude of those who find themselves far from their commanders, forced to confront situations that no plan can fully anticipate.

But there was something that intrigued me even more.

The relationship between a man and the order he has received.

A soldier is trained to obey. Discipline is part of his identity, the foundation of mutual trust between comrades and commanders. But an order is more than an instruction to be carried out. It can become a personal commitment, a promise, something that continues to live in a person's conscience even when circumstances have changed.

And then the question is no longer simply one of discipline.

It becomes a question of responsibility.

Throughout this dossier, we have encountered men who faced impossible missions, soldiers who remained faithful to orders issued long ago, and individuals held accountable for crimes who attempted to justify their actions by invoking obedience to their superiors.

We have seen how secrecy can protect a mission, but also conceal responsibility. How the truth can resurface after decades. How the desire for justice can come into conflict with the desire for revenge.

And we have encountered another form of power, less visible than weapons: money. Because behind a military decision there may be political, economic, and strategic interests that the person receiving an order knows nothing about, and perhaps never will.

I do not believe that all these questions have simple answers.

Loyalty can be an extraordinary virtue. But it can also become a prison.

Obedience can save lives. But it cannot justify every action.

Secrecy can be necessary. But it should not become a permanent right to conceal the truth.

And justice, if it is to remain worthy of its name, must recognize its own limits even when confronted with the gravest injustices.

These are the questions that accompanied me as I wrote *The Last Mission*.

I did not try to resolve them through a novel. I preferred to leave the decisions to my characters, allowing each of them to face the consequences of their own choices.

Because fiction, at least as I understand it, does not necessarily have to provide answers.

It can simply place the reader in a situation where it is difficult to distinguish what is right from what merely seems right.

I would like those who read *The Last Mission* to ask themselves one question when they reach the end.

Not whether they would have had the courage to undertake a dangerous mission.

But whether they would have had the courage to question an order they had received, even when obeying it meant remaining faithful to everything they had always believed in.

Because sooner or later, the most difficult moment is not the one in which we must obey.

It is the one in which we must decide whether to continue doing so.

Maurizio Preti

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Una selezione di archivi, istituzioni e raccolte documentarie per approfondire gli episodi storici del dossier. Le ricostruzioni digitali sono indicate nelle rispettive didascalie e non sono documenti storici originali.

Secret Missions and Special Operations

U.S. National Archives — https://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/oss
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Obedience and Responsibility: Nuremberg

U.S. National Archives, fotografia 540127 — https://catalog.archives.gov/id/540127
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum — https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/

Military Secrecy and the Pentagon Papers

U.S. National Archives — https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers
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Katyn and the Stasi Archives

Institute of National Remembrance (Polonia) — https://ipn.gov.pl/
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U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian — https://history.state.gov/

BEYOND THE ARCHIVE

THE LAST MISSION

An order that outlives its commander. A secret buried for years. A truth that refuses to remain hidden.

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This dossier is an independent historical and cultural companion to the novel. It contains no major plot spoilers.