

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *One Long Night: A Global History of Concentration Camps*

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One Long Night: A Global History of Concentration Camps. By Andrea Pitzer. New York: Hachette, 2017. 474 pages.

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for God, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others make you swerve to do wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear God. For God is well-acquainted with all that you do.

-Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of The Holy Quran*, 2004, Chapter 5:8

The role of chaplains and religious affairs specialists includes engaging in difficult conversations. These conversations require navigating uncomfortable truths. In her book *One Long Night: A Global History of Concentration Camps*, the author Andrea Pitzer reminds me of the common human duty to protect ourselves and others against unjust treatment regardless of our differences, by bringing us to understand that what happens to others may eventually happen to us. The book illustrates how easily such injustices can occur and challenges the assumption that concentration camps began with the Holocaust. Pitzer provides a sobering account of their origins and evolution, offering an alarming perspective on this dark chapter of history.

Pitzer argues that the foundation of concentration camps began when Spanish colonial regimes established their empire in Cuba. The prevailing *modus operandi* during this part of history often included dislocating, consolidating, and imprisoning native populations in Cuba. These practices continued during a Civil War, where several camps saw atrocious acts carried out and people confined in inhumane living conditions under the banner of prisoners of war. These "camps" were overrun with cases of deadly diseases such as dysentery, typhoid, and pneumonia. She argues that the Germans

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borrowed the same practice of isolating local people in Africa by building forts and camps that exploited entire tribes by holding them captive and forcing labor upon them.

Pitzer's book has implications for our future as a Chaplain Corps. In today's socio-political climate of extreme polarizations that arise in the mainstream media, on social media platforms, and a plethora of talk shows, echo chambers establish polarizing positions that can lead to isolating or marginalizing groups based on differences in race, ethnicity, religion or political views. We are one bad decision away from creating a group of people that are isolated and eventually detained. When rigid opinions evolve into justifications for harsh treatment of those held without trial, the path toward a concentration camp becomes visible. Because such a phenomenon can emerge rapidly, it is essential that, in our role as advisors to command, we remain vigilant and aware of these dangers.

The Process

Pitzer outlines a process that leads to some of humanity's worst behavior. She shows how amid periods of war, colonization, social unrest, economic hardships, changing demographics etc., increased forms of intolerance of others by the group in power arise. The justification of mistreatment can lead to scapegoating marginalized populations. Instead of acknowledging failed policies, poor decision-making, segregation, or vast disparities in wealth distribution, it becomes easier to assign blame to vulnerable groups. In such contexts, due process and fair trials are abandoned.

Embedded in the process of detaining people against their will is how people rationalize such treatment. Pitzer lays out this process of mistreatment and how it culminates in dehumanization. Once one group can dehumanize another it becomes easier to justify mistreatment of the other group and ultimately "preemptively" detain them against their will in isolation. "Internment camps" in Cuba were based on a lack of trust and the feeling that in the future these people that may become a hostile threat to the establishment.

Advancements in the production of automatic weapons directly relate to the creation of camps that could detain large groups with a small number of guards. Pitzer shows how these camps maintained their effectiveness with very few personnel. Automatic weapons along with barbed wire played a role in preventing the escape of detained people. Detained people were used as forced labor, tortured, and interrogated for information. Having none of their humanity recognized, such people could ultimately be killed with impunity.

Origins

According to Pitzer, placing unwanted groups in camps began in Cuba in the late 1800s. The Spanish military officer Valeriano Weyler aka “the Butcher” displaced five hundred thousand people into poorly designed temporary encampments that led to the death of over one hundred thousand people from disease and starvation. Although this was condemned by American officials, they instituted the same practice in the Philippines only two years later, killing eleven thousand people. By World War I, the practice took root around the world amid imperial expansions leading to various forms of internment and forced labor camps used by Germans in Namibia and the Russians with Gulag camps.

Although later camps included some forms of education and rehabilitation for the detainees, the justification for most of these camps took the form of “restructuring German society,” e.g., places to consolidate the mentally ill, homeless, political opponents, homosexuals, criminals, and others. The objective during this period was to remove the “the scum of criminality, of failures”¹ from society at large and place them outside of the city limits and keep them away from the main population.² However, the camps operated outside of clear limitations or rules. Camps were not subject to scrutiny and accountability or oversight with strict guidelines for use under the Geneva and Hague Conventions. Ungoverned camps are subject to misuse, mistreatment, and abuse, as evidenced by World War II and beyond.

The Unthinkable

Pitzer eventually lands in Germany. She writes of the concentration camps that initially served the purpose of “restructuring society” to isolate and remove political opponents, communists that opposed Nazi ideologies and other “undesirables” they wanted out of mainstream society. Camps existed for years prior to the war but as the war expanded into countries with majority Jewish populations, Nazis were faced with greater numbers than they could detain. They formulated what they called the “final solution,” the mass extermination of the Jewish people, turning concentration camps into “death camps.”

While the slogan after the German death camps was “never again,” the list of camps across the globe is vast. The author shares horrific details of cases with Armenians by Turkey, North Korea by China, the Russian Gulag, Japanese internment camps and camps in the Philippines by the U.S., Vietnamese

¹ Pitzer, *One Long Night*, 185-186.

² Pitzer, *One Long Night*, 185-186.

by the French, and most recently Guantanamo Bay by the U.S. In each case, groups of “despised people” were detained without trial, confined in conditions that stripped them of dignity and humanity.

Conclusion

Pitzer argues that for any of these camps to come into existence a degree of complicity exists in society. Without this foundational component the momentum stalls out. The military, religious leaders, and missionaries are often at the center of detaining personnel. Reflection on this reality and our role as chaplains is warranted. Furthermore, to establish, maintain, and resource this enterprise requires lots of effort in collaboration, organization, and coordination. The fact that so many camps endured for long periods is sobering. More importantly, the creation of camps strips humanity of millions of people and unjustly takes so many lives.

She also warns that fear, when left unchecked, can evolve into hate. I am aware that the passage above [HQ 5:8] warns us to guard against. Owning fear is reasonable but understanding what that fear is based on is how we overcome it. Often our fear is accompanied by some form of ignorance about other people. Educating ourselves addresses fear in a healthier way. This alternative process prevents us from eventually dehumanizing other groups. Having the willingness and awareness to see humanity in every individual and group of people is important work for the Chaplain Corps. The alternative is contributing to the long history of concentration camps that represent the worst of our humanity.

Military chaplains must embrace the awareness Pitzer calls for in *One Long Night*. “Free exercise” is rooted in the idea of ensuring that people of all faiths and backgrounds have a right to express their religious beliefs. The freedom that chaplains protect may also get infringed upon in ways requiring us to remain responsive when these freedoms get erased. However, we are the vanguard to advocate for the voiceless in such cases and ultimately educate, liberate, and humanize all people.

Pitzer’s account compels us to ask: How might we embody our roles as advisors, advocates, and spiritual healers during these times? How might we have the difficult conversations that lead to resolution? How can chaplains and religious affairs specialists engage in challenging developments? What are our own challenges with recognizing each other’s humanity within our own Corps specifically? It is my hope that military chaplains will seriously engage these questions and continue to develop as professionals.

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