

PATHS OF GLORY  
(U.S., 1957, 87 Minutes)

“The paths of glory lead but to the grave.” (Thomas Grey, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, 1751)

After 28 year old Stanley Kubrick directed the film version of Humphrey Cobb’s 1935 semi-fictional novel in 1957, he was asked why he had produced an anti-war film at the patriotic height of the Cold War. Kubrick reportedly replied that he had not made an anti-war film but rather a political one about authoritarian ignorance. Both the film and the novel are not so much anti-war and pacifistic as they are critiques of the bureaucratic apparatus organized to conduct modern warfare.

As is currently being described in OLLI course F304, by 1915 the Great War in the West reached a bloody stalemate. The German Army, with minimal ground holding forces and skillful deployment of men and guns, repulsed every Allied attempt to drive it from France and Belgium in battles at Ypres, Arras, the Argonne Forest, and in Champagne. French losses alone reached a staggering 1,000, 000 fatalities. Against this backdrop (and with portents of Verdun to come), *Paths of Glory* presents the story of common French infantrymen caught in the web of military gamesmanship and blind ambition in command. The film emphasizes the gap between those who receive orders in the trenches and their self-serving, ruthless and opportunistic commanders in the rear. Focusing on the chain of command, the film targets the army as an institution which seems to lurch from one murderous horror to the next, guided by the ambitions and vanities of the moment. After a suicidal attack on an impregnable German position fails (allusion to Ft. Douamont at Verdun?), the generals attempt to cover their errors by

cynically court-martialing three common soldiers for cowardice in the face of the (unseen) enemy. Kirk Douglas, who financed the film and persuaded United Artists to make it, stars as the regimental commander who leads the doomed charge and the defense counsel for the accused.

After the unforgettable climax, a final extraordinary scene (not in Cobb's novel) depicts the faces of those who must endure in the trenches to the end.