



THE RAPE OF ATHENS, ALABAMA

In the middle of April 1862, the 18th Ohio under Turchin's command occupied Athens, Alabama, a prosperous town of about 1200 population. On May 1, however, they were driven out by a combined regular and partisan Confederate cavalry force of only 112 men and retreated back to Huntsville. The Confederate cavalry was greeted with cheers and waving handkerchiefs by the citizens in the streets. Reports indicate that some Athens civilians may have fired on the Union troops from their homes as they left. The Confederate forces, however, quickly pulled out of town.

The next morning Turchin marched into Athens unopposed with at least three regiments of his brigade.

The townspeople, including the ladies, turned their backs to him as he rode into town. Turchin was furious with this gesture of impertinence and told his troops he would close his eyes for a few hours while they took their pleasure in looting the town and terrorizing its citizens. He then left them to their depredations for the rest of the day. At least some of Turchin's troops stayed a few weeks.

Later testimony indicated that numerous homes, offices, and stores were pillaged. Money, jewelry, dishware, silver, watches, clothes, shoes, medical supplies, medical instruments, and anything else of value were stolen. Furniture, carpets, artwork, and fixtures were destroyed. Books and especially bibles were viciously destroyed. Numerous testimonies indicated that the soldiers' language to women was rude, insulting, threatening, and vulgar. One white woman, the pregnant wife of a Confederate cavalryman, was singled out and gang-raped, shortly thereafter dying from a miscarriage. Several black servant girls were raped, and several more had to fend off attempted rapes. The commander made his headquarters in the home of a prominent citizen and refused to let his sick daughter receive any medical treatment. She subsequently died. Shots were fired into homes and terror reigned. Some of the troops billeted themselves in the slave quarters on a nearby plantation for weeks, debauching the females. They roamed with the males over the surrounding country, plundering and pillaging.

Some Union officers of integrity among Turchin's troops, however, reported this to his Division Commander, Major General O. M. Mitchell. Mitchell immediately rebuked Turchin and notified General Buell and Secretary of War Stanton. After some delay on the part of Stanton, General Buell, a very effective officer of high integrity who was especially concerned that his soldiers conduct themselves with honor, stepped in and relieved Turchin of command, insisting on his court-martial.

Most of the information in the previous paragraphs was taken from the court-martial proceedings of August 1862. Brigadier General James A. Garfield, a future President of the United States, presided over the court-martial. Turchin and one of his regimental commanders, Col. Gazlay, were found guilty and dismissed from the Army. Charges against several other officers were dropped on proof they were only acting on Turchin's orders. General Buell approved and signed the verdict.

The proceedings of Turchin's court-martial received considerable national attention and became the focus of a debate on the prosecution and conduct of the war. The Chicago newspapers bitterly condemned Buell for Turchin's dismissal and court-martial. Their howl for harsh policies including devastation and plundering by Union armies was picked up by many other papers. The Radical Republicans in Congress were especially pushing for a more vigorous and punishing war policy.

Turchin's wife, evidently a very formidable woman in many regards, personally went to see Lincoln

and persuaded him that not only should Turchin be reinstated but that he should also be promoted to Brigadier General: Hearing of this, General Buell protested to Secretary of War Stanton that: "If as I hear, the promotion of Colonel Turchin is contemplated I feel it is my duty to inform you that he is entirely unfit for it. I placed him in the command of a brigade, and now find it necessary to relieve him from it in consequence of his utter failure to enforce discipline and render it efficient."

But within a few days of the court-martial, President Lincoln reinstated Turchin and promoted him to the rank of Brigadier General. A few months later Lincoln would make a similar promotion. In November Lincoln promoted Col. John McNeil, one of the senior officers responsible for the October 1862 Palmyra Massacre in Missouri, to Brigadier General. It was obvious that Total War policy had many advocates in Washington.

Brigadier General Turchin and his wife returned to their home in Chicago to cheering crowds. He was presented a sword, and a band played "Lo, the Conquering Hero Comes." On August 30, General Buell was informed that a large part of Athens, Alabama, had been burned by Union troops passing through the town.

Source: The Un-Civil War By Mike Scruggs
Truths Your Teacher Never Told You
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[BACK](#)