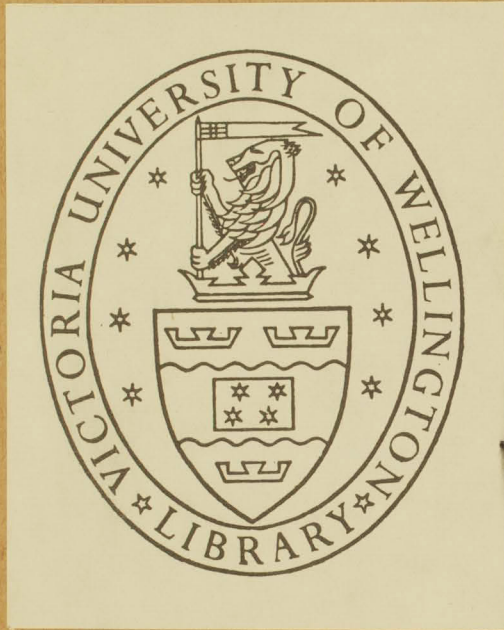


LXBR BREWER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"



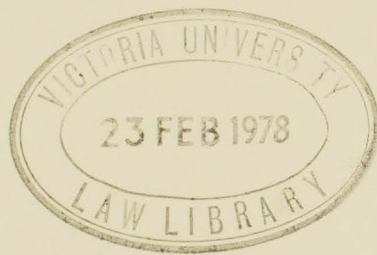
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"THEIR'S NOT TO REASON WHY"  
SOME ASPECTS OF THE DEFENCE OF SUPERIOR ORDERS  
IN NEW ZEALAND MILITARY LAW

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LXBR BREWER, T.C. "Thei's not to reason why"



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It is recognised in every nation of the world that obedience to orders is essential in any Armed Force. In a situation where lives depend on obedience, that obedience must be immediately and unreservedly forthcoming. Military discipline ensures this. From the time he sets foot inside a military camp the recruit is moulded by a process that efficiently transforms him from "Civilian" to "Soldier". Over a period of months his actions and thoughts are controlled and channelled so as to effect this transmogrification. The recruit learns the military skills, and the military dodges, but above all he learns to obey. He is taught to have confidence and faith in the military ability of his superiors, and to respond without hesitation to their instructions.

Necessity compels this. That recruit may one day have to follow his superiors under fire, and victory will depend on the personal interaction between them. The training he has received will largely determine how he will react in a situation where grave injury and death are omnipresent.

In the New Zealand Army obedience is not unquestioning. The New Zealand soldier has a tendency to think for himself, and he knows, in a general sort of way, that his superior could give an order that shouldn't be obeyed. It may be connected with a non-military matter ("take my wife's poodle for a walk") or it may be an order that is palpably unlawful, ("Shoot those children"). He would know that both those orders related to spheres beyond the official competence of his superior.

The lawfulness of the order is important. A soldier is still subject to domestic law and public international law, he is no less a citizen because he is a soldier, and he is no less bound to obey the law. Yet he is also bound to obey all lawful commands, and problems arise when the order in question is not decidedly outside the superior's competence. For the New Zealand soldier this creates a dilemma. As Dicey (rather drastically) puts it: "He may, ... be liable to be shot by a court-martial if he disobeys an order, and to be hanged by a judge and jury if he obeys it." (1)

There is no statutory provision on the question of superior orders as a defence to a criminal charge, the matter is left to the common law. The

XBR BREWER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"

basic rule is that the fact that a soldier committed a criminal act pursuant to superior orders cannot be a defence per se, but may be taken as a plea in mitigation.

The weight that the common law will give to the mitigatory plea has been variously interpreted according to the standard of care that the soldier is expected to exercise. W.E. Stubbs(2) writes that the standard is very high: "... a soldier must disobey any order to commit any offence punishable under the civil law of the land ... or contrary to international law ... the soldier is liable for any unlawful act carried out notwithstanding that he was ordered to perform it either in fact or by implication."(3)

L.C. Green takes a different view. In his analysis of the law of superior orders he concludes that orders cannot be accepted as justifying an illegal act where the unlawful character of the act is palpable.(4) Stated positively; the courts apply a "reasonable man" test to determine palpability, and if the act ordered was not palpably unlawful, then the soldier may be exonerated.

It is apparent that it is of some interest to the New Zealand soldier to know which of these views (if either) represents the law. Is he liable for the consequences of any unlawful order he carries out, or only for the consequences of those orders that he <sup>knows</sup> reasonably should have known to be unlawful? Does the law lie somewhere between these formulations? This paper will examine these questions in an attempt to ascertain the law as it applies in New Zealand.

#### INTERNATIONAL LAW VERSUS DOMESTIC LAW

W.E.Stubbs based his opinion on the British "Manual of Military Law", the relevant provisions of which he saw as reflecting the international law position. The Manual states:

"23. If a person who is bound to obey a duly constituted superior receives from the superior an order to do some act or make some omission which is manifestly illegal, he is under a legal duty to refuse to carry out the order, and if he does carry it out he will be criminally responsible for what he does in doing so. It has been

XBR BREWER, T. C. "This is not to reason why"

suggested that if such an order is to do an act ... which is not manifestly illegal a person who obeys it will not incur criminal responsibility by doing so, especially if he had little opportunity to consider the order before carrying it out. The better view appears to be, however, that an order to do an act ... which is illegal, even if given by a duly constituted superior whom the recipient is bound to obey and whether the act.... is manifestly illegal or not, can never of itself excuse the recipient if he carries out the order although it may give rise to a defence on other grounds ..."(5)

The above paragraph was adopted by the "Manual" in 1944 and reflected the view expressed in the 1944 edition of Oppenheim's "International Law" which was prepared by Sir H. Lauterpacht. The hesitancy with which Lauterpacht expressed the "better view" (third sentence above) reflects the fact that this view contradicted the earlier editions of both Oppenheim and the "Manual".(6) Paragraph 23 was adopted when the Allies were contemplating the trial of the German war criminals and superior orders were not to be allowed, given the nature of the offences, to exonerate. The vagueness in the expression of the "better view" is indicative of its disputed validity.

The "defence on other grounds" refers to general criminal law defences, (coercion, lack of intent, mistake etc.) that could arise from the fact that an offender was acting under superior orders. This aspect will be discussed later.

If W.E. Stubbs' interpretation of the "Manual" reflects the international law then it also, subject to certain qualifications, reflects the law in New Zealand. Under the rule of common law known as the Doctrine of Incorporation customary international law is a part of the common law. As Lord Chancellor Talbot said in 1735 in Burbuit's Case ; "The law of nations in its fullest extent is and forms part of English law."(7)

The doctrine was affirmed more recently by Lord Atkin in Chung Chi Chung v. The King, a Privy Council decision:

"The courts acknowledge the existence of rules which nations accept among themselves. On any judicial issue they seek to ascertain what the relevant rule is, and having found it, they will treat it as incorporated into the domestic law."(8)

LXBR BREWER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"

The doctrine is, however, subject to certain qualifications. The one that most concerns us is the effect of precedent. The traditional view has been that since international law is part of the common law it is subject to the doctrine of Precedent in the ordinary way, and the courts tend to favour local decisions over foreign ones. (9)

This means that when the courts adopt a rule of international law precedent binds them to apply that rule until it is changed or disapproved by superior courts or by Act of Parliament. Thus the law applied by domestic courts would not necessarily follow the changing rules of international law.

This view has, however, been disapproved by the English Court of Appeal in the recent case of Trendex Trading Corporation v. Central Bank of Nigeria:

"Seeing that the rules of international law have changed - and do change - and that the courts have given effect to the changes without any Act of Parliament, it follows to my mind inexorably that the rules of international law, as existing from time to time, do form part of our English law. It follows, too, that a decision of this court - as to what was the ruling of international law 50 or 60 years ago - is not binding on this court today." (10)

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In the present case this indicates that domestic precedents at variance with international law should not be followed by the courts once that variance is established. A new rule of international law displaces the old. Lord Justice Shaw confirmed this:

"What is immutable is the principle of English law that the law of nations (not what was the law of nations) must be applied in the courts of England. The rule of stare decisis operates to preclude a court from overriding a decision which binds it in regard to a particular rule of (international) law, it does not prevent a court from applying a rule which did not exist when the earlier decision was made if the new rule has had the effect in international law of extinguishing the old rule." (11)

It would seem therefore that the law in New Zealand must reflect the current international law position if it is to be good law. If W.E. Stubbs' strict interpretation of the "Manual" accurately represents the international law of superior orders, then it also represents the New Zealand law of superior orders.

LXBR BREWER, T.C. "There's not to reason why"



To decide what the international law of superior orders is, and whether "domestic" New Zealand law accords with it, this paper will first examine "domestic" New Zealand law before having regard to the pertinent rules of international law. In a sense this is impossible because, as has been seen above, these rules are presumed to be a part of New Zealand law. However, much of international law is customary and to determine what is "custom" it is relevant to refer to domestic codes.

"DOMESTIC" NEW ZEALAND LAW OF SUPERIOR ORDERS

For our purposes we shall confine our attention to the Armed Forces Discipline Act 1971; the New Zealand Army Act 1950; and the New Zealand Army "Code Of Military Law".

The Armed Forces Discipline Act 1971 is intended to bring all the Armed Services under one disciplinary statute. However, the Act will not come into force until a new "Code Of Military Law" has been compiled to interpret it for the military. The courts still apply the New Zealand Army Act 1950.

In any event the statutes have no differences relevant to this paper. Neither statute mentions superior orders as a defence to a criminal charge they merely provide that lawful orders must be obeyed. Thus the Armed Forces Discipline Act 1971 states:

"Disobeying a lawful command - Every person subject to this Act commits an offence, and is liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years, who disobeys a lawful command of his superior officer by whatever means communicated to him."(12)

The New Zealand Army Act 1950 is a little more elaborate but, for our purposes no different:

"Disobedience to superior officer - (1) Every person subject to military law who commits the following offence, that is to say, -  
Disobeys in such a manner as to show a wilful defiance of authority any lawful command given personally by his superior officer in the execution of his office, whether it is given orally, or in writing, ... shall, on conviction by Court Martial, be liable to suffer imprisonment for a term not exceeding ten years ...

(2) Every person subject to military law who commits the following offence,

LXBR BREWER, T.C. "There's not to reason why"

that is to say, - Disobeys any lawful command given by his superior officer, - shall, on conviction by Court Martial, if he commits any such offence on active service, be liable to suffer imprisonment for a term not exceeding ten years, ... and, if he commits any such offence not on active service be liable to suffer imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years ... "(13)

Neither Act defines what is meant by a "lawful command", nor do they positively define the duty of obedience. It is left to the New Zealand Army "Code Of Military Law" to interpret the above section. The Code purports to interpret the New Zealand Army Act 1950 according to the common law. It is understood that the next edition of the Code which will deal with the Armed Forces Discipline Act 1971, will not substantially differ in this area.(14) The Code provides:

"Lawful Command -

12 "Lawful Command" means not only a command which is not contrary to the ordinary civil law but one which is justified by military law; in other words, a lawful military command to do or not to do or to desist from doing a particular act ..."(15)

"Duty of Obedience" -

13 "If the command were obviously illegal the inferior would be justified in questioning, or even in refusing to execute it, as, for instance, if he were ordered to fire on a peaceable and inoffensive bystander. So long, however, as the orders of the superior are not obviously and decidedly in opposition to the law of the land, the duty of the soldier is to obey and (if he thinks fit) to make a formal complaint afterwards."(16)

The "Code Of Military Law" is not definitive. It only purports to interpret the New Zealand Army Act 1950 according to the common law. It represents the law only in so far as the courts have approved its contents, though in a more practical context it largely governs the behaviour of the military.

The above paragraphs were expressly approved by the Courts-Martial Appeal Court in an unreported judgement delivered by that Court earlier this year.(17) To that extent they can be seen as representing the common law in New Zealand. It will be noticed though that the paragraphs refer to the "ordinary civil

LXBR BREWER, T.C. "There's not to reason why"

law" and "the law of the land". Both these phrases must, according to the doctrine of Incorporation, include international law.

If the "law of the land" (in its wider sense) makes it a soldier's duty to obey all commands unless that command is "obviously and decidedly in opposition to the law of the land", then the position of the New Zealand soldier is not as onerous as the British "Manual of Military Law" might suggest. Paragraph 23 of the "Manual" was couched in tentative terms that need not necessarily be interpreted narrowly.

It is pertinent to note here that paragraph 13 (supra) of the New Zealand Code is a re-statement of paragraph 18 of the 1939 reprint of the British "Manual". A paragraph that was deleted from the 1944 edition because Lauterpacht considered that his "better view" now represented the international law.

#### THE COMMON LAW

What is the common law basis for the statement made by para. 13 of the New Zealand "Code"? The cases are few and far between.

In R. v. Thomas (1816) (18) it was held that a mistaken belief in the existence of orders could not justify an illegal act.

In Keighley v. Bell (1866) Mr Justice Willes<sup>J.</sup> said:

"If it were necessary to state any principle on which it would be competent to me to decide such a case it would be that a soldier, acting honestly in discharge of his duty - that is acting in obedience to the orders of his commanding officers - is not liable for what he does, unless it be shown that the orders were such as were obviously illegal. He must justify any direct violation of the personal rights of another person, by showing not only that he had orders, but that the orders were such as he was bound to obey."(19)

From the context of the case and Mr Justice Willes' own words the above remarks are clearly obiter dicta. Moreover, in the same year he appears to contradict himself in Dawkins v. Lord Rokeby:

"If the military should injure (ordinary citizens) in their person or their property not even the command of a superior officer will justify a

XBR BREWER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"

soldier in what he does unless the command should turn out to be legal."(20)

The two cases are, however, distinguishable in that the latter was a civil case concerned with a civil action.

In 1900 the case of Smith was tried in South Africa. Smith, a British soldier during the Boer War, on the orders of his commanding officer at a moment of military stress, shot and killed a civilian farmer who failed to produce a bridle for a horse. He was found not guilty of murder. The Judge, Solomon J., said:

"After looking at the authorities ... it seems to me that the rule laid down in the Manual Of Military Law is a reasonable and proper rule to apply in such a case as this. This states that if the commands are obviously illegal, an inferior would be justified in questioning or even refusing to execute such commands, but so long as the orders of a superior are not obviously and decidedly in opposition to the law of the land ... so long must they meet with complete and unhesitating obedience. I think that if a soldier honestly believes that he is doing his duty in obeying the commands of his superior, and if the orders are not so manifestly illegal that he must or ought to have known that they are unlawful, the private soldier would be protected by the order of his superior officer."(21)

The passage referred to by Mr Justice Solomon is the one appearing in the British "Manual" prior to 1944, and which is restated by para. 13 of the New Zealand "Code".

These four cases are representative of the pre-Second World War law in this area. They show that the courts would grant a soldier protection for acts committed pursuant to superior orders provided that the orders were not "obviously" or "manifestly" illegal and that the soldier acted "honestly" in that he did not know that what he was doing was unlawful.

In 1944 the British changed their "Manual" as they felt that the law laid down by these cases was no longer in keeping with international law. New Zealand did not change its "Code", and did not take the stricter view

XBR BREWER, T. C. "This is not to reason why"

that Lauterpacht considered to be the "better" one. In order to see if this was justified the International Law must now be considered.

INTERNATIONAL LAW ON SUPERIOR ORDERS

When the question of the trying of war criminals at the end of the Second World War arose, the London Agreement of 8 August 1945, signed by the Allies, established the Statutes of the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal. Article 8 of the Charter of the Tribunal provided:

"The fact that the Defendant acted pursuant to orders of his Government or of a superior shall not free him from responsibility but may be considered in mitigation of punishment if the Tribunal determines that justice so requires."(22)

This seems to be a clear statement that precludes the fact of superior orders as such from exonerating an accused.

Article 8 appeared to authoritatively express the international law, especially since it was unanimously affirmed by a resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1946 that approved the principles laid down in the Nuremberg Charter and judgement:

"Affirmation of the principles of international law recognised by the Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal."

"The General Assembly ...

Affirms the principles of international law recognised by the Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal and the judgement of the Tribunal;

Directs the Committee on codification of international law established by the resolution of the General Assembly of 11 December 1946, to treat as a matter of primary importance plans for the formulation, in the context of a general codification of offences against the peace and security of mankind, ... of the principles recognised in the Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal and in the judgement of the Tribunal."(23)

It would seem that Article 8 was well established in international law and that a strict rule of law applied. However, the situation was not quite so clear cut. The judgements of the various tribunals and further attempts at codification made the position seem more ambiguous.

The Nuremberg Tribunal had to reject the defence of superior orders, for

XBR BREWSTER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"

this was clearly provided by its Charter of establishment:

"The true test which is found in varying degrees in the criminal law of most nations is not the existence of the order, but whether moral choice was in fact possible... Superior orders ... cannot be considered in mitigation where crimes as shocking and extensive have been committed consciously, ruthlessly and without military excuse or justification ..."(24)

This passage rejected the defence of superior orders where the mere existence of the order is relied upon. But it qualified this statement by bringing in the question of "moral choice". What does this phrase mean? Might it not mean that where a soldier did not know that the order was unlawful then he could make no moral choice and he should be exonerated, unless the unlawful nature of the offence was manifest? The point of manifest illegality was never disputed in the trials, probably because, given the nature of the offences charged, there was no point to dispute. Throughout the trials the emphasis was on the "shocking and extensive" nature of the crimes committed. It was iterated and reiterated that superior orders could not mitigate such crimes, but the judgements left open the interpretation that superior orders could mitigate where the unlawfulness of the orders was not manifest. It is arguable, therefore, that a strict interpretation of Article 8 (along the lines of the British "Manual") is not justified.

This view may be supported by the High Command Trial where the Tribunal said, in relation to the liability of a commander issuing illegal orders:

"He cannot be held criminally responsible for a mere error of judgement as to disputable legal questions. It is therefore considered that to find a field commander criminally responsible for the transmittal of such an order, he must have passed the order to the chain of command and the order must be one that is criminal upon its face, or one which he is shown to have known was criminal."(25)

The meaning of Article 8 was further mystified in the Hostages Trial where the defence cited the earlier British Manuals in an attempt to prove that the Tribunal was applying ex post facto law. In refuting this the Tribunal stated:

"The rule that superior order is not a defence to a criminal act is a rule of fundamental criminal justice that has been adopted by civilised nations extensively ...

XBR BREWER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"

The municipal law of civilized nations generally sustained the principle at the time the alleged criminal acts were committed. This being true, it properly may be declared as an applicable rule of International Law ... Implicit obedience to orders of superior officers is almost indispensable to every military system. But this implies obedience to lawful orders only. If the act done pursuant to a superior's order be murder, the production of the order will not make it any less so. It may mitigate but it cannot justify the crime ... If the illegality of the order was not known to the inferior and he could not reasonably have been expected to know of its illegality, no wrongful intent necessary to the commission of a crime exists and the inferior will be protected. But the general rule is that members of the armed forces are bound to obey only the lawful orders of their commanding officers and they cannot escape criminal liability by obeying a command which violates International Law and outrages fundamental concepts of justice."(26)

The Tribunal restates the basic rule that superior orders per se cannot justify, but then qualifies it by bringing in a mens rea stipulation. The final sentence of the passage further qualifies it by bringing up the manifest illegality principle. Article 8 may have been affirmed by the General Assembly, but the meaning of that Article is, at least, open to argument. It is arguable that "moral choice" goes to the unlawfulness of the order. If it was manifestly unlawful then the accused had a moral choice to make because it was evident that to obey the order would be unlawful. If the order was less than manifestly unlawful, then the fact of the order may be absolving, depending upon the circumstances and upon the knowledge of the accused.

If Article 8 could be said to bear this interpretation, then the New Zealand position would be valid law.

#### JUSTIFICATION OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

It will be recalled that the General Assembly directed the Committee on codification of international law to codify the principles laid down in the Nuremberg Charter and Judgement. The efforts of this Committee went further to mystifying, and perhaps destroying the principles of the Charter and Judgement. What was a subject of some ambiguity became one of dissent,

XBR BREWER, T. C. "This is not to reason why"

and resulted in no-one knowing the international law position.

"What started out to be a "formulation" of the Nuremberg Principles became enmeshed in a number of other projects which ... would have carried the international legal order too far and too fast. ... The collapse of all the efforts that followed after the affirmation of the Nuremberg Principles has not only failed to advance international law but it has also set it back ... The shifting meanings given to obedience to superior orders ... merely added more difficult choices to those which the lawyer was already called upon to make in extracting the "true" rule of law from the evidence available to him... Ambiguity has been replaced by controversy and active opposition. The failure of an exercise in progressive development and codification has been no more and no less than law-destroying."(27)

In order to ascertain what interpretation of Article 8 has survived this "law-destroying" process it is necessary to return to first principles.

International law is consensual. When nations evolve a clear and continuous habit which they come to regard as being obligatory or right, that habit becomes part of the customary international law. The nations have consented, in common, to be bound by that habit.

" 'Common consent' can therefore only mean the express or tacit consent of such an overwhelming majority of the members that those who dissent are of no importance as compared with the community viewed as an entity in contradistinction to the will of the single members. The question whether there be such a common consent in a special case is not a question of theory but of fact only ..."(28)

To decide whether such an overwhelming consent has been given to the strict interpretation of Article 8 it is now expedient to have regard to the domestic laws of some of the nations. For inasmuch as international law is customary, that custom must be reflected by the common principles enunciated in domestic codes. Nations are not going to agree to be bound internationally by principles that they deny domestically.

Professor Sahir Erman (Professor in criminal law and military criminal law, Istanbul University) collated the responses to a questionnaire on superior orders (29) that was sent out to the following countries: France, Belgium, West Germany, America, Italy, Britain, Israel, Greece, Denmark, Norway, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Turkey.

XBR BREWER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"



Of these countries, only Britain appeared to have a code that strictly interpreted Article 8. Nearly all admitted that the duty to disobey orders only applied to those that were obviously illegal, and that orders not so unlawful could be absolute.

Professor Erman summarised:

"A subordinate must in the first place refuse to obey orders unconnected with the requirements of military service. But leaving this aside, it is admitted almost unanimously that if the execution of the order obviously implies the commission of an offence, a subordinate must refrain from obeying the order and in case it is carried out superior orders in no way protect the subordinate from the penal consequences of his acts. It is therefore admitted that a duty of obedience yields to a duty of disobedience and the liability attaching thereto if the unlawfulness reaches such a point as to impart to the order a manifestly criminal element."(30)

Thus the West German provision is:

"If a subordinate commits an act subject to punishment upon orders, guilt shall devolve on him only if a major or minor crime is involved and he recognises this or if such fact is obvious under the circumstances as they are known to him."(31)

This provision takes cognizance of the soldier's subjective knowledge of the lawfulness of the order. If he does not know a crime is involved he can be exonerated, unless it should have been obvious to him that a crime was involved.

The Israeli law is more objective.

"A person is not criminally responsible for an act or omission if he does or omits to do the act under any of the following circumstances, that is to say ... (b) in obedience to the order of a competent authority which he is bound by law to obey, unless the order is manifestly unlawful."(32)

The United States' view is also a liberal interpretation of Article 8.

"The fact that the law of war has been violated pursuant to the order of a superior authority, whether military or civil does not deprive the act in question of its character of a war crime, nor does it constitute a defence in the trial of an accused individual, unless he did not know

LXBR BREWER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"

and could not reasonably have been expected to know that the act ordered was unlawful."(33)

The Turkish Criminal Code takes the view that liability depends on the subjective knowledge of the accused.

"It is clearly observed that the manifest unlawful character of an order, the existence of circumstances from which such a character would obviously be inferred, even a serious doubt, are not sufficient for a subordinate to be held liable; his knowledge of the criminal purpose of the order must be shown."(34)

The Turkish position contrasts strongly with Article 8 and provides an illustration of the point of this "Cook's Tour" through the various criminal codes. That point follows on from the consensual nature of international law. With the affirmation of the principles of the Nuremberg Charter and Judgement, international law had an accepted base in this area. The exact nature of Article 8 in the light of the "moral choice" of the Judgement may have been ambiguous, but it was not openly controversial. As Professor Baxter pointed out in his article (op cit. note (25)), the efforts of the various committees to codify the principles has led to dissention and disagreement. The exercise has been law-destroying in that the nations no longer purport to be agreed upon the nature of the defence of superior orders. As has been seen, the Nations' customs differ in their expression, and Article 8 of the charter can no longer be said to represent customary international law.

The law-destroying theory was further evidenced by the result of the Diplomatic Conference on the reaffirmation and development of international and humanitarian law applicable in armed conflict. At this Conference the nations recently met to consider draft additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions of 1949. The Third Session of the Conference (21 April - 11 June 1976) considered the following draft article on superior orders:

"Article 77 (Superior Orders)

- 1) No person shall be punished for refusing to obey an order of his government or of a superior which, if carried out, would constitute a grave breach of the convention or of the present protocol.
- 2) The fact of having acted pursuant to an order of his government or of a superior does not absolve an accused person from penal responsibility if it be established that, in the circumstances at the

XBR BREWER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"

time, he should have reasonably known that he was committing a grave breach of the conventions or of the present protocol and that he had the possibility of refusing to obey the order."(35)

Paragraph one provides a counterpoint to Article 8 in that it puts the onus on the State to ensure that orders do not require the commission of grave breaches of the Conventions or the Protocol. It does not apply to customary war crimes or breaches of the Conventions that are not "grave".

Paragraph two admits the possibility that a reasonable lack of knowledge and a lack of physical freedom to refuse the order might constitute a defence.

The Article was much debated and an amended version was voted on by the Conference in its final Session earlier this year. It gained majority support but not the two thirds vote necessary for adoption.

Article 77 was drafted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (I.C.R.C.) and was seen by them as embodying the principles of the Nuremberg Charter and Judgement. (36) The fact that it was not adopted reflects the wide interpretations that have been given to the principles, and also the mystifying effects of the codification attempts.

Paragraph 1 of the draft Article 77 related solely to grave breaches of the provisions of the Geneva Conventions and Protocol 1. The reason given by the I.C.R.C. for restricting the scope of the absolviatory plea to grave breaches was that the exigencies of military discipline could not permit soldiers to contest, in all circumstances, the orders of their superiors.(37)

This view was contested by several nations, including the United States of America which proposed that the word "grave" be deleted. However the main ground of objection to paragraph one was its interpretation as "... an unwarranted intrusion into the criminal law of States."(38) It was seen as limiting the power of governments to control their soldiers and as a matter of practical politics many nations were not prepared to accept this.

"It would be unrealistic to absolve from any penalty persons who refused to commit a grave breach of the provisions of the Convention or the Protocol, since that would enable a subordinate to disobey an order of his Government or of a superior. ..."(39)

LXBR BREWER, J. C. "There's not to reason why"

Paragraph two foundered on the inability of the nations to agree on the precise obligations of the soldier. The I.C.R.C. had included the phrase beginning "he should have reasonably known that he was committing a grave breach ..." to lessen the dilemma that the soldier faces when he is subject to regulations that compel him to obey orders. Reaction to this phrase varied according to the provisions of domestic codes.

For example, the United States of America proposed the revision of paragraph two to read:

"The fact of having acted pursuant to an order of his government or of a superior does not absolve an accused person from responsibility if it be established that, in the circumstances at the time, he knew or should have known that he was committing a breach of the Conventions or of the Present Protocol. The fact that the individual was acting pursuant to orders may, however, be taken into account in mitigation of punishment."(40)

This amendment deletes the word "grave", covers the case where the offender had actual knowledge of the unlawfulness of the order and allows for punishment to be reduced. It also follows closely the view expressed in the American "Field Manual".

From this discussion it can be seen that the international principles relating to superior orders have been very widely interpreted, and that that width was evidenced by the diversity of the national "Codes". The task of the Conference became virtually to standardise the codes and this proved to be impossible. Indeed, it is arguable that in its reconciliation attempts the conference went beyond the topic of superior orders.

The two implications of the I.C.R.C. text (and basically of the United States amendment as well) are (1) that a person who acted according to an order and who did not know or should not reasonably have known that his action was unlawful is absolved from responsibility, and (2) that a person who acts according to an order and who did not have the possibility of refusing to obey the order is absolved. However, acting according to an order is irrelevant to those two defences. Lack of knowledge or mistake of fact or lack of intent are separate general defences. If they are lacking in a case, then an essential general element of the offence is absent.

LXBR BREWER, J. C. "There's not to reason why"

ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

This argument has been extended to contend that all qualifications to the basic rule (that the fact of superior orders is not a defence per se) have been irrelevant incursions into the ordinary defences of criminal law. The circumstances surrounding the issuing of orders may give rise to a defence in so far as they relate to the general defences of coercion, mistake of fact, and the lack of the necessary intent specific to many offences.

The validity of this argument is readily apparent. If a soldier commits murder because he is ordered to and in circumstances where he could not have known that his act was murder, then his lack of knowledge or intent might constitute a defence to a charge of murder. But that defence owes nothing to the defence of superior orders.

This is the position taken by W.E. Stubbs, and in his opinion nothing more is needed to protect the soldier.(42) But these general defences are limited in scope and do not satisfactorily relate to the position of the soldier. The Codes of the nations cited make special provisions for the soldier because it is recognised that his is a special case. To illustrate the unsuitability of these general defences we will briefly consider some of them as they apply in New Zealand.

Coercion: At common law a person is not criminally liable for acts which he is physically made to perform. The law in New Zealand is to be found in S.24 of the Crimes Act 1961.

"Compulsion - (1) Subject to the provisions of this section, a person who commits an offence under compulsion by threats of immediate death or grievous bodily harm from a person who is present when the offence is committed is protected from criminal responsibility if he believes that the threats will be carried out and if he is not a party to any association or conspiracy whereby he is subject to compulsion."

However s.s.(2) provides that s.s.(1) won't apply where the offence committed is murder, attempted murder, wounding with intent, injuring with intent to cause grievous bodily harm, abduction, kidnapping, robbery or arson.

This very much limits the defence, especially so far as the soldier is concerned. Disobedience to superior orders ordinarily does not raise the

LXBR BREWER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"

fear of "immediate death or grievous bodily harm." Even if they did, the statutory qualifications remove much of the exonerating solace of the defence.

On the other hand, the defence might be of some use to a soldier charged with an offence not included in New Zealand legislation. Section 9 of the Crimes Act 1961 provides:

"Offences not to be punishable except under New Zealand Acts - No one shall be convicted of any offence at common law. ... provided that ...

(b) Nothing in this section shall limit or affect the jurisdiction or powers of any Court Martial, or of any officer in any of the New Zealand forces."

This means that a soldier can be charged with war crimes that are a part of the common law in that they are defined by customary international law. As these crimes are not excluded by s.24(2) (supra) from the defence of coercion, that defence might be of some use to the soldier. However, given the nature of the New Zealand Army it is very unlikely that orders would raise the necessary fear that would make compliance with those orders motivated by the dread of the physical consequences of disobeying.

Mistake: The mistaken belief that an order is lawful may operate as a defence if the mistake is one of fact and not of law. In some cases an honest belief in the validity of certain facts will operate so that the accused will be judged as though those facts were valid. Whether the mistake was one of law or of fact will be a matter for the tribunal to decide.

"At common law an honest and reasonable belief in the existence of circumstances, which, if true, would make the act for which a prisoner is indicted an innocent act, has always been held to be a good defence."(43)

Mistake may also operate as a defence if the offence is one requiring a specific intention. It may negative the mens rea necessary to constitute some specific offence.

"Thus a soldier unlawfully seizing property in obedience to an order which he believed to be lawful would have a good defence to a charge of theft."(44)

LXBR BREWER, J. C. "There's not to reason why"

However, lack of intent cannot assist the soldier where the offence committed is one where it is not necessary to establish a mental element to prove the offence. In other words a "strict liability" offence.

This is illustrated by the case of R. v. Ball and Laughlin (45)

Ball was the driver of an Army Scout Car whose range of vision was so limited that he was required to rely on the orders of Laughlin as to when he must start, turn or stop. At a road junction Ball turned to follow another road on Laughlin's directions. The Scout Car struck and killed a motorcyclist. Because of his restricted vision Ball was in no position to have seen the motorcyclist, he was relying solely on Laughlin's orders. Ball was found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving and Laughlin of aiding and abetting him.

Here the soldiers were treated as civilians and no heed was taken of Ball's position as a soldier under orders. In this situation a civilian could, if he wished, have got out to check the road for himself, he could have required a civilian - Laughlin to affirm that the road was clear. As a soldier Ball could do neither of these things, as a soldier he lacked the freedom of action that a civilian would have had in the same position.

The New Zealand soldier has the same general defences to criminal charges as any civilian, and superior orders may form a part of such a defence to the extent that they evidence coercion, mistake, lack of intent etc. That this is so has never been doubted, the soldier is as subject to the law as any other citizen. The problem is that by his position the soldier lacks the freedom of action enjoyed by his civilian counterpart. The military ethos to a very real extent dictates his actions and his responses to the orders of his superiors. This fact makes it unrealistic to apply to him the rules of justification and excuse in the same manner as they are applied to civilians.

In the writer's opinion the special position of the soldier has been recognised by most of the Codes of the nations surveyed. The basic rule that superior orders per se do not constitute a defence is recognised in these Codes, but it is qualified by a provision that takes into account the circumstances relevant to the accused's status as a soldier.

It is submitted that the International Law has always recognised the special

LXBR BREWER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"

position of the soldier, and some general absolving principle to soften the basic rule must be included in whatever law survives the present controversy.

SUPERIOR ORDERS EXTANT

The basis of the law of superior orders is the rule that if an unlawful act is committed pursuant to superior orders, the fact of those orders will not constitute a defence per se. This was the principle clearly stated by Article 8 of the Nuremberg Charter, affirmed by the General Assembly, and incorporated into the domestic Codes of most of the nations surveyed. The principle was not seriously challenged at the recent Diplomatic Conference and it is submitted that it survives as a valid rule of international law.

What has been mystified is the extent to which the rule may be qualified by the circumstances surrounding the issuing of the orders. The domestic Codes of the nations vary, and the Diplomatic Conference failed to produce a standard formulation. However, from the Codes and cases surveyed it is apparent that in many nations superior orders may exonerate so long as they are not "palpably" (46) or "manifestly" (47) or "obviously" (48) unlawful. They may be used to mitigate punishment if the circumstances warrant it. (49)

Given the diversity of the various national systems it is submitted that international law lays down no firm rule or guideline as to the permissible extent of the qualifying provision. The basic rule of international law (enunciated above) remains, but within this rule the nations have a wide measure of discretion, a discretion which is limited only by the rule.

It is submitted that where there is no specific rule of international law sovereign states are responsible for devising whatever regulations seem to them to be the most equitable in the circumstances. As sovereign entities the jurisdiction of states is not to be limited except by express provisions of international law, provisions which in themselves represent the will of the states.

The Permanent Court Of International Justice considered this point in the case of the S.S. Lotus. (50) The case dealt with the question of the limits of the territorial jurisdiction of nations. The majority of the court ruled that before the sovereignty of nations could be limited there must be an

LXBR BREWER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"



express rule of international law to that end. In the absence of such a rule every state is free to adopt whatever principles it regards as most suitable provided they do not contradict international law:

"In these circumstances, all that can be required of a State is that it should not overstep the limits which international law places upon its jurisdiction; within these limits, its title to exercise jurisdiction rests in its sovereignty."(51)

The responsibility of nations to adhere to the rules of international law that apply in time of war was admitted and adopted by the Diplomatic Conference.

"Article 41 (Organization and discipline).

1. ... Such armed forces shall be subject to an internal disciplinary system, which, inter alia, shall enforce compliance with the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict. These rules include those established by applicable treaties, including the Conventions and this Protocol, and all other generally recognised rules of international law."(52)

It is submitted that the nations have a responsibility at international law to ensure that their domestic regulations do not contradict the basic rule (supra) of superior orders. Within the scope of this rule they may require their soldiers to adhere to whatever standard of care they think desirable.

#### CONCLUSION

Paragraph 13 of the New Zealand "Code Of Military Law" embodies the principle that a soldier is bound to obey all orders that are not obviously and decidedly in opposition to the law of the land.

That this principle is part of the law of New Zealand has already been discussed, and it is submitted that its validity is not impaired by any contrary rule of international law.

If a New Zealand soldier should commit an unlawful act pursuant to an order that was not obviously and decidedly in opposition to the law of the land, then the nature of that order may provide a defence at common law

XBR BREWER, J. C. "There's not to reason why"

depending upon the circumstances.(55)

The circumstances that the court will have regard to are not clear, but from the discussion above it would seem that an important consideration will be the soldier's knowledge, actual or constructive, of the lawfulness of the order.

From this it can be seen that the New Zealand law does not follow the strict interpretation of Article 8 of the Nuremberg Charter, but places a lesser burden on the New Zealand soldier. It is submitted that the New Zealand courts are free to apply this law in that it does not contradict international law.

The international law of superior orders is in a state of flux and the full extent of the defence has yet to be formulated. Until such a formulation it is the responsibility of the individual nations to enunciate their own rules within the framework of the existing international law. In this respect the New Zealand position on superior orders as a defence to a criminal charge may be said to be valid law.

XBR BREWER, T.C. "There's not to reason why"

FOOTNOTES

XBR BREWER, T.C. "There's not to reason why"

- (1) Dicey, The Law of the Constitution (10th ed. 1959) p.303.
- (2) In 1971 W.E. Stubbs was Assistant Judge Advocate General (U.K.).
- (3) Stubbs, "Military Obedience In British Law" (1971) 10 Revue De Droit Pénal Militaire Et De Droit De La Guerre 285-286.
- (4) Green, "Superior Orders And The Reasonable Man" (1970) 8 C.Y.I.L. 103.
- (5) Manual Of Military Law (1951 ed.) Part 1. para. 23.
- (6) The first edition of Oppenheim's International Law stated that:

"... in case members of forces commit violations ordered by their commanders, the members cannot be punished, for the commanders alone are responsible, and the latter may, therefore, be punished as war criminals on their capture by the enemy." (1906 ed.) vol.2,s.253.

The 1935 edition, the first prepared by Lauterpacht, mentioned First World War cases that had appeared to dissent from the traditional view, but Lauterpacht did not consider that the view had been changed by those cases. The 1940 and 1944 editions recorded a fundamental change in this position.

The earlier Manuals expressed the question of superior orders thus:

"If the command were obviously illegal, the inferior would be justified in questioning, or even in refusing to execute it, as, for instance, if he were ordered to fire on a peaceable and unoffending bystander. But so long as the orders of a superior are not obviously and decidedly in opposition to the law of the land, the duty of the soldier is to obey and (if he thinks fit) to make a formal complaint afterwards." (1939 reprint) para. 18.

- (7) Barbuit's case (1735) 25 E.R. 777.
- (8) Chung Chi Chung v. The King [1939] A.C. 160.  
And see Lord Justice Alverstone's judgement in West Rand Mining Co. v. The King [1905] 2K.B. 391.
- (9) Brierly, The Law of Nations (6th ed. 1963) p.86.
- (10) Trendtex Trading Corp. v. Central Bank of Nigeria [1977] 2 W.L.R. 357, 365, per Lord Denning.
- (11) *Ibid.* p. 388.
- (12) Armed Forces Discipline Act 1971, s.38.
- (13) New Zealand Army Act 1950, s.29.
- (14) This was made clear to the writer in interviews with two Officers who are concerned with preparing the next edition of the Code. - 0682

- (15) Code Of Military Law para. 12, pp. 329-330
- (16) Ibid. para.13,p.330.
- (17) This was an application for leave to appeal by Warrant Officer Class Two Vincent Lawrence. It was held before Mr Justice Ongley, Sir Hamilton Mitchell and G.E. Bisson Esq., on 7th April 1977.

A District Court-Martial had found Lawrence guilty of disobeying a lawful command given by his superior officer (an offence under s.29(2) N.Z. Army Act 1950), and of using insubordinate language to his superior officer (an offence under s.28(b) N.Z. Army Act 1950). In dismissing the application for leave to appeal the court expressly approved paragraphs 12 and 13 of the New Zealand Army Code Of Military Law.

- (18) 105 E.R. 897.
- Thomas was a Royal Marine in H.M.S. Achille who had been posted as a sentry with orders to keep off all boats. When one boat approached in defiance of his warnings he shot and killed one of its occupants. The Court for Crown Cases Reserved unanimously held that his act was murder, but recommended that he be pardoned.
- (19) 176 E.R. 781.
- (20) 176 E.R. 800.
- (21) 17 Cape of Good Hope Special Court Reports 561. Cited by Green, supra, p.78
- (22) Charter Of The International Military Tribunal (1945) Art.8.
- (23) Charter And Judgement Of The Nürnberg Tribunal.  
(Memorandum submitted by the Secretary-General, 1949) 12.
- (24) The International Military Tribunal (Nuremberg 1947) vol.1,p.224.
- (25) re Von Lieb (1948) 12 Law Reports Of Trials Of War Criminals 1,74.  
Quoted by Green op. cit supra note (4), p.88.
- (26) re List (1948) 15 Ann. Dig. 632, 651.
- (27) Baxter, "The Effects Of Ill-Conceived Codification And development Of International Law" in Recueil D'Études De Droit International En Hommage A Paul Guggenheim (1968) pp.163-164.
- (28) Lauterpacht (ed.) Oppenheim's International Law (8th ed. 1955) vol.1,p.15.
- (29) Sent out by Revue De Droit Pénal Militaire Et De Droit De La Guerre and reported in (1971) 10 Ibid. 371.
- (30) Erman, "Compliance With Superior Orders Under Domestic Criminal Law And Under The Law Of War" Ibid. 401.

XBR BREWER, J. C. "There's not to reason why"

- (31) Criminal Code Ordinance (1930) s.19(b).
- (32) Erman, op. cit. supra note (30) 202.
- (33) Field Manual (U.S.) (1956) 27-10, 182.
- (34) Erman, op. cit. supra note (30) 403.
- (35) Draft Additional Protocols To The Geneva Conventions Of 12 August 1949, (1974), Article 77 of Protocol One.
- (36) The I.C.R.C. said of Article 77: "This present article is based on the principles of international law recognised in the Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal and in the judgement of the Tribunal, affirmed by the United Nations General Assembly in its resolutions 3(I) and 95(I) and subsequently formulated by the United Nations International Law Commission at the General Assembly's request." Draft Additional Protocols To The Geneva Conventions Of 12 August 1949, (1976) Conference document D1385b, pp6-7.
- (37) Summary Records Of The Forty-Second to Sixty-Fifth Meetings, (1976) Conference document CDDH/I/SR 42-65, p.127.  
The I.C.R.C. said that the restriction was imposed on the advice of most of the experts consulted, but that other experts disagreed.
- (38) Draper, Ibid. 131. Draper was a U.K. delegate.
- (39) El-Fattal, Ibid. 128. El-Fattal was a Syrian Arab Republic delegate.
- (40) United States Of America: Proposed amendment of Article 77 - Superior Orders. (1976) Conference document CDDH/I/308.
- (41) op. cit. supra note (37) 128.
- (42) W.E. Stubbs sees the strict interpretation of the British Manual as compensating for the readiness of military tribunals to acquit an accused soldier:  
"My experience of courts-martial is that in the majority of cases they will lean over backwards in order to acquit an accused of a serious charge. Indeed I am often tempted to believe that they have studied to acquire the ability of the Queen in "Alice through the Looking Glass" to believe six impossible things before breakfast." Stubbs, op. cit. supra note (3) 418.
- (43) Tolson (1889) 23 Q.B.D. 168, 181.
- (44) Stubbs, op. cit. supra note (3) 290.
- (45) (1966) 50 Criminal Appeal Reports 266.
- (46) Green, op. cit. supra note (4) 290.
- (47) op. cit. supra note (30).
- (48) op. cit. supra note (19).
- (49) op. cit. supra note (33).
- (50) Publications of the Permanent Court, Series A, Judgement No. 10.

XBR BREWER, J. C. "There's not to reason why"

- (51) Ibid. p.35.  
(52) Draft Additional Protocols To The Geneva Conventions Of 12 August 1949, (1974), Article 41 of Protocol One.

This article was adopted by consensus at the forty-seventh meeting of the Conference on 31 May 1976.

- (53) op. cit. supra note (17).  
(54) op. cit. supra note (21).  
(55) Crimes Act 1961, s.20.

"General rule as to justifications - (1) All rules and principles of the common law which render any circumstances a justification or excuse for any act or omission, or a defence to any charge, shall remain in force and apply in respect of a charge of any offence... except so far as they are altered by or are inconsistent with this Act or any other enactment."

Thus the defence of superior orders may be raised as a defence in a New Zealand court to the extent that the defence is recognised by the common law.

- (56) For a comprehensive review of the law on this point see the article by Green, op. cit. supra note (4).

XBR BREWER, T. C. "There's not to reason why"

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LXBR BREWER, T.C. "Their's not to reasion why"

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L.C. 2



