

Auftragstaktik and Innere Führung: Trademarks of German Leadership

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IN MAY 1940, the seizure of the Belgian fortress of Eben Emael was critically important to the successful conduct of the French campaign by the German Wehrmacht in World War II. And yet, preparation and conduct of this special operation were entrusted to a first lieutenant of the paratroopers, which at the time was a branch of the air force. At his disposal were just 77 paratroopers. At the very beginning of this operation the glider aircraft of the assault force leader, First Lieutenant Rudolf Witzig, was forced to make an emergency landing in a field near Cologne, which was approximately 100 kilometers from the objective. The remaining aircraft flew on and landed inside Eben Emael. The paratroopers completed their mission, but under the leadership of a staff sergeant.

During the landing approach to Eben Emael, another glider had to force-land approximately 60 kilometers from its objective. The assault section leader, Staff Sergeant Meier, took decisive action by appropriating two vehicles and then threading his way through the columns of the main attack divisions marshaled at the border. Reaching Maastricht, he crossed the Meuse River and advanced into the glacis of Eben Emael. He was prevented from storming the fortress by the canal surrounding it. So, he decided on his own initiative to attack the Belgian forces in the environs of the fortress. Wounded in the course of the fighting, Meier captured 121 Belgian prisoners of war, whom he turned in the following day against a receipt as proof that he had done everything in his power to complete his mission. In the meantime, Witzig had located another aircraft to tow his glider. Taking off again for Eben Emael, he landed inside the fortress, immediately assumed command of his assault force, and brought about the surrender of the Belgian fortress.

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The action at Eben Emael [in 1940] is a particularly good example of Auftragstaktik. . . . The successful completion of this operation was an absolute prerequisite to ensure the Wehrmacht's rapid advance across the Meuse River and, thus, was essential to the rapid conclusion of the French campaign. The initiative and battle command skills of a first lieutenant and a noncommissioned officer were put to the test, and both gave an excellent accounting of themselves.

rapid advance across the Meuse River and, thus, was essential to the rapid conclusion of the French campaign. The initiative and battle command skills of a first lieutenant and a noncommissioned officer were put to the test, and both gave an excellent accounting of themselves, for which they received the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, at the time, Germany's highest decoration for bravery.¹

The action at Eben Emael is a particularly good example of Auftragstaktik—a leadership principle the German Armed Forces have practiced for 200 years. Auftragstaktik is a command and control principle that evolved during the 19th and 20th centuries. The tactical and operational military manuals of the German Army repeatedly refer to Auftragstaktik and call it the “pre-eminent command and control principle of the Army.”² In 1998, Auftragstaktik was codified once again in German Army Regulation (AR) 100/100 (Restricted), *Command and Control in Battle*, the bible of the German Army.³

The Origins of Auftragstaktik

Auftragstaktik was not an idea introduced into German military thinking by decree. Far from simple or rapid, its adoption was a difficult, long-running process. The beginnings of Auftragstaktik can be dated to 1806, following the disastrous defeat of the Prussians at Jena and Auerstedt. Napoleon's modern brand of warfare exposed Prussian deficiencies and



German AR 100/100 describes Auftragstaktik very succinctly: "Auftragstaktik is the pre-eminent command and control principle in the Army. It is based on mutual trust and requires each soldier's unwavering commitment to perform his duty." The challenges for the leader are diverse since the regulation goes on to say: "The military leader informs what his intention is, sets clear achievable objectives, and provides the required forces and resources. He will only order details regarding execution if measures which serve the same objective have to be armonized, if political or military constraints require it."

the need for modernizing the Prussian Army.

Initial reform was brought about by the infantry drill regulations of 1812, in which the set-piece conduct of battle was abolished, and at least for the higher levels of leadership, initiative and indepen-

dent thought and action became important factors. For the lower levels of command, column tactics, with its massive bodies of troops, continued to impose severe limits on the conduct of battle.

In the mid-19th century, the breech-loading rifle began to replace the far less efficient muzzle loader. The breechloader represented a revolution in armaments technology. This revolution in military affairs was the starting point for a transformation of the infantry and was a decisive direction-setting development that set the course for the eventual adoption of Auftragstaktik.

The German wars of unification of 1864 against Denmark, of 1866 against Austria, and of 1870-71 against France proved that advances in armaments had outstripped advances in tactical and doctrinal development. To reimpose some form of command and control, it now became important to develop a new concept that, on one hand, would enable some independence of action while, on the other, would preclude misguided action by lower-level leaders.

One of the first to recognize the signs of the times and draw the right conclusions was Field Marshal Helmut von Moltke, Chief of the General Staff of the Prussian Army from 1857 to 1888. Moltke is considered in Germany the creator of operational-level command and control and the spiritual father of operational principles. Moltke also played a decisive role in the development of Auftragstaktik.

In his writings, his memoranda, his publications but particularly in his everyday life as a leader, Moltke promoted the introduction of Auftragstaktik. One of his main concerns was to foster independent thinking and acting among his subordinates: "Diverse are the situations under which an officer has to act on the basis of his own view of the situation. It would be wrong if he had to wait for orders at times when no orders can be given. But most productive are his actions when he acts within the framework of his senior commander's intent."⁴ By saying this, Moltke stated a key principle of Auftragstaktik: the subordinate is to act within the guidelines of his superior's intent. Knowing his superior's intent, the subordinate thus works toward achieving it.

The years after 1871 were characterized by two conflicting trends. The conventional tacticians, or Normaltaktikers, were tight-rein supporters who wanted to specify the troops' battle actions down to the last detail. Tight-rein supporters argued that detailed orders would counteract the dispersal effect brought about by modern armaments and the supposed unrestrained independence at lower command levels.

On the other hand were the Auftragstaktikers, mission-command supporters who urged the inde-

pendence of small units which, they said, was the necessary consequence of modern armaments. The mission-command supporters did not issue detailed orders to limit the freedom of action of lower command levels, but rather, assigned each unit its own, clearly defined task—its mission. From 1914 until today, *Auftragstaktik* has had a firm place in the German Army's command and control philosophy.

Although throughout the 19th century the principle of *Auftragstaktik* was being incorporated into German military doctrine, it still met resistance. The term *Auftragstaktik* first surfaced in the early 1890s. It was coined by those who resented the process, as the term was to show disdain. *Auftragstaktik* was considered a threat to military discipline and, thus by extension, to everything military.

Auftragstaktik and Innere Führung

The military leadership of today's German Army recognizes two cornerstones: the concept of *Innere Führung* and the principle of *Auftragstaktik*. *Innere Führung* is today inseparably linked with *Auftragstaktik*.

Innere Führung. The German Army's common image of man is that the soldier is a free person. His individual dignity is respected just as well as his basic rights and rights of liberty. These rights are guaranteed for all citizens, and thus also for soldiers. Only the responsible citizen will act out of his own free will and the responsibility he feels toward the community. He recognizes that the values of the community have to be defended even at the risk of his own life.

In the Bundeswehr, this image of man finds its conceptual expression in what is called *Innere Führung*, meaning leadership and civic education. *Innere Führung* is the commitment of German soldiers to moral-ethical standards. *Innere Führung* is the German Armed Forces' corporate culture, and it integrates the Bundeswehr into German society.



Defense Secretary William S. Cohen congratulates General Wesley K. Clark, U.S. Army, after presenting him the Department of Defense Distinguished Service Medal at a 1999 Pentagon ceremony.

Peace operations in particular are subject to intensive media coverage. Every action a soldier takes is broadcast into living rooms in almost real time, and political leaders must answer for it immediately. The pressure on the political leadership to act or to explain is particularly acute [and] frequently generates a tendency to want to control everything. . . .

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Auftragstaktik. German AR 100/100 describes *Auftragstaktik* very succinctly: "*Auftragstaktik* is the pre-eminent command and control principle in the Army. It is based on mutual trust and requires each soldier's unwavering commitment to perform his duty."⁵ The challenges for the leader are diverse since the regulation goes on to say: "The military leader informs what his intention is, sets clear achievable objectives, and provides the required forces and resources. He will only order details regarding

execution if measures which serve the same objective have to be harmonized, if political or military constraints require it. He gives latitude to subordinate leaders in the execution of their mission.”⁶ Thus, *Auftragstaktik* is more than giving a mission to a

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subordinate and allowing him the latitude to execute it. Rather, it is the superior’s duty to specify the objective and the framework within which the subordinate has to accomplish the mission. The commander provides all resources required to carry out the mission. This, in turn, means that execution itself becomes the executor’s responsibility. His skills, creativity, and commitment will be the key elements of execution. Thus, *Auftragstaktik* is not merely a technique of issuing orders but a type of leadership that is inextricably linked to a certain image of men as soldiers.

Auftragstaktik in Peace Operations

Although *Auftragstaktik* was developed during war and proved its worth in battle, *Auftragstaktik* has a role in peace operations. German AR 100/100 states: “The principles of ‘Auftragstaktik’ also apply to peace operations but are subject to unique constraints, which often severely limit freedom of action on the ground.”⁷ The unique constraints are to be seen in the political dimension of these operations.

The CNN factor. In their recently published respective memoirs, U.S. Army General Wesley K. Clark, former Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, and General Dr. Klaus Reinhardt, former Kosovo Force commander, described a number of political interventions into their areas of responsibility. Clark recalled that he had just given a press conference in connection with NATO air attacks in Kosovo in April 1999 when Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), General Hugh Shelton called that evening and said, “The Secretary of Defense asked me to give you verbatim guidance, so here it is: ‘Get your

f-----g face off the TV. No more briefings, period. That’s it.’ I just wanted to give it to you like he said it. Do you have any questions?”⁸

Peace operations in particular are subject to intensive media coverage. Every action a soldier takes is broadcast into living rooms in almost real time, and political leaders must answer for those actions immediately. The pressure on the political leadership to act or to explain is particularly acute. This pressure frequently generates a tendency to want to control everything. This tendency often finds its expression in direct interference with the operational and tactical leadership on the ground, as was the case with Clark.

The West’s no-loss mentality. The no-loss mentality prevalent in free societies is, of course, something to be approved of, in principle. No military leader wants losses among his men. “Take care of your soldiers” is the maxim military leaders at all command levels voice, including former CJCS General Colin Powell. In the context of media presence, however, even minimal casualties can have serious implications of strategic dimensions. Recall the terrible pictures of October 1993 in Mogadishu, Somalia. These pictures caused the United States and subsequently the UN to withdraw their military commitment from Somalia.

The soldier as strategic player. During peace missions, it is frequently important to uphold the principle of impartiality, in particular under difficult circumstances. In this environment, the still-smoldering fuse on the powder keg can be quickly reignited, and the peace force can become the enemy of one faction or another. Such a loss of credibility would have serious political implications. Therefore, in contrast to war, actions of even a single soldier in peace missions can have strategic significance. As a result, political leadership has a high interest in pushing its particular intentions as far as possible. The political outcome can depend on the right or wrong action of a single soldier at a checkpoint. Therefore, detailed political guidance is seen as the guarantee to success, with the result that the military has a limited field of action.

The rules of engagement. Peace missions are no longer unique operations. They currently are more probable than actual warfighting. The boundary between war and peace is becoming increasingly blurred. Today, in Afghanistan, one even sees the concurrent conduct of a combat operation and a peace operation. Peace operations are always complex, protracted, and frustrating. A mission’s overall success eminently depends on many small suc-



Sole reliance on satellite images will only yield partial success. As a general rule, the individual on the ground—the human intelligence expert, the Green Beret, the forward air controller—provide the decisive information to deliver the crucial blow. The decisionmaking process can only be expedited decisively and sustainably if we accept the fog of war as a system-inherent facet, even in an environment of total information immersion.

cesses, which promote trust and reconciliation and help to overcome hatred and bloodshed. Narrowly defined rules of engagement limit a peace mission's scope of action and are intended to guarantee the security of multinational contingents while they perform their sensitive and complex tasks.

"We [the German Army] have no use for soldiers without a will of their own who will obey their leaders unconditionally. We need self-confident men [and women] who use their whole intelligence and personality on behalf of the senior commander's intent."⁹ A German author wrote these words in 1906, and they are still valid today in the difficult environment of peace missions and in the presence of new forms of modern warfare, such as terrorism. During peace operations, in particular, soldiers must do more than just obey orders and operate their individual weapons. Every military leader at every level of command maintains that he has the best soldiers. If this is so, he must be allowed to prove it. It is, therefore, out of the question that a colonel or

even a general appoint himself squad leader to direct traffic at a road intersection or to instruct a patrol leader about his mission.

Auftragstaktik in the 21st Century

As mentioned earlier, Auftragstaktik was triggered by a revolution in military affairs brought about by the invention of the breech-loading rifle and other 19th-century developments in armaments technology. Today, the question is, have military affairs again reached such a revolutionary point? Some authors consider information technology just such a watershed.

Information technology. Where information technology is concerned, the U.S. Armed Forces are without peer. Although others are developing and implementing information technology, they are limping far behind, and the Bundeswehr is currently limping on both legs. In the future it will be increasingly possible to transmit data in real time. The precise location of the patrol leader will be visualized

for every command level; observations and information of all kinds will be available to all levels at the same time. Excellent opportunities for outdoing the enemy unfold: “See First—Understand First—Act First—Finish Decisively” is the leading tenet of the recently published U.S. Army White Paper, *Concept for the Objective Force*.¹⁰

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The transmission of information does not represent a problem anymore; the challenge of information lies with its processing. If the time one gains through real time transmission is spent receiving, processing, and assessing information only to discover that the information is untimely, irrelevant, or redundant, then time is wasted and information technology quickly develops into a drawback. . . . Auftrags-taktik sets the framework for meaningful reception and dissemination of information . . . [and] holds the key to information management and thus, by extension, to successful command and control.

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Therefore, in this connection, two things are important. First, the handling of information must be learned and practiced. Relevant information must be distinguished from irrelevant information. Information must be collected, assessed, and distributed horizontally and vertically in a manner useful for the respective recipient. Second, the distinguishing feature of leadership is not the mere possession of an information medium; it is having the ability and the will to assess the information that the medium contains. At no command level can assessment be dispensed with. This means that orders must be adapted to the command level to which they are issued.

Auftragstaktik sets the framework for meaningful reception and dissemination of information. It forces the superior commander to assess information and to convert it into orders for subordinate command levels. Auftragstaktik holds the key to information management and thus, by extension, to successful command and control.

Micromanagement. The availability of the technical resources to manage information gives rise to

a behavior that is particularly conspicuous at higher levels of command, namely, micromanagement. These higher command levels often and incorrectly believe they know better than lower command levels. Consequently, they interfere directly with lower command levels, with the laudable intention of making their information available to everyone. Therefore, to translate the information advantage into an actual time advantage, intermediate command levels are skipped, and the information is passed directly to the intended recipient, while the actual responsible level is only included at most as an information addressee. In such a situation, the actual responsible command level degenerates into an information administrator while the superior level involves itself in matters of excessive detail. Already, under Napoleon, the danger of “ordre, contreordre, désordre” existed. Today, this danger is linked with micromanagement.

It is unacceptable that subordinate levels are disregarded and that higher command levels skip intermediate command levels and interfere with tactical decisions on the ground. In addition to the implications for freedom of action and the operations of soldiers, risks emerge for the tactical and operational levels of military command.

Today we notice an increasing dispersal of battles, of operations, of campaigns, and even of war itself. While in the past the core of operations consisted of a campaign directed at crushing the enemy in a relatively clearly defined area, today the situation is less distinct, more diffuse, and more difficult. Nevertheless, the relation between space, time, forces, and information continue to be critical.

The commander who attempts to specify everything is doomed to get lost in detail. He will lose track of things and fail. What is more, the commander who reaches down to exercise command and control at subordinate levels will lose the support of his men and women and undermine their bases of action.

Transparency. The vision of the transparent battlefield is realistic in principle. From the technological perspective almost everything is possible today. “See First—Understand First—Act First—Finish Decisively” is the guideline. It implies that speed is necessary to be “first.” But what speed is being talked about here? It is not the speed in transmitting information from the patrol leader to the division G2 section. Rather, it is the speed in planning that is part of the staff work at all levels, and of course, it is the speed of the leader’s decisive decisionmaking. These are the factors that will drive the speed of action.

What is important is to turn inside the enemy’s decision cycle. One’s own decisions have to be made

and implemented at the right time and must be valid for a certain period of time. What is more, the subordinate command levels must be able to keep up with the rhythm of decisions of higher command levels. At the cutting edge of the decision chain is the tank company that has to counterattack out of the reserve. It simply cannot be moved in real time from the assembly area to the location where the counterattack is to take place.

It is, therefore, important for the military commander to develop what Carl von Clausewitz calls “Takt des Urteils,” or “the tact of judgment,” in such a way that the commander’s judgment will expedite the command and control process when combined with modern technology.¹¹ The history of warfare is full of examples of people who relied on the sophistication of their own technology while they neglected their command and control and training doctrines. Clausewitz will continue to be right when he highlights the fog of war and friction as system-inherent key characteristics of warfare.

Sole reliance on satellite images will only yield partial success. As a general rule, the individual on the ground—the human intelligence expert, the Green Beret, the forward air controller—provides the decisive information to deliver the crucial blow. The decisionmaking process can only be expedited decisively and sustainably if we accept the fog of war as a system-inherent facet, even in an environment of total information immersion. The major challenge for command and control in the information age will be to recognize where transparency will be required and where it will not be needed. Otherwise, the time gained through sophisticated assets will be wasted again.

While Auftragstaktik has proven its worth for over two centuries, it is still a modern leadership principle. The decisive foundation for Auftragstaktik is peacetime training with a deliberate focus on training sol-

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diers to think independently and to act according to the superior commander’s intent. The superior’s specified objective, his confidence in his subordinates’ capabilities, his and his subordinates’ acceptance of their respective responsibilities, and their freedom to act are the four cornerstones of Auftragstaktik on the one hand and its secret on the other. The onus, nevertheless, still remains with the commander, who must provide the necessary means to accomplish the mission.

Auftragstaktik is based on an image of man who values his individual dignity and freedom and who harnesses them to achieve superior strength. This concept is still valid for the 21st century. Based on the premise that leadership encompasses two aspects—being a role model and accepting responsibility—leadership requires competence, strength of character, trust, initiative, judgment, assertiveness, and decisionmaking ability at all command levels. Only Auftragstaktik enables the meaningful exploitation of the most sophisticated technology, and only Auftragstaktik allows mastery of the increasingly complex challenges of the 21st century. Most important, it takes the encouragement of superiors and the courage of subordinates to make Auftragstaktik work. **MR**

NOTES

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 2. German Army Regulation (AR) 100/100 (Restricted), *Army Command and Control* (Bonn, GE: 15 October 1998), 302.
 3. *Ibid.*
 4. *Moltke's Taktisch-strategische Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1867 bis 1871: Zur hundertjährigen Gedenkfeier der Geburt des General-Feldmarschalls Grafen von Moltke* (Moltke’s tactical-strategic essays from the years 1867 to 1871: on the hundredth anniversary of the birth of General Field Marshal Grafen von Moltke), the Great General Staff, Department of the History of War, ed. (Berlin, GE: 1900) as published in *Verordnungen für die höheren Truppenführer* (Guidelines for higher commanders), 29 June 1969, as quoted in Major General Millotat Christian, Deputy Commanding General, II (GE/US) Corps, “Auftragstaktik, Das oberste Führungsprinzip im Heer der Bundeswehr—ihre

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 5. German AR 100/100, 302.
 6. *Ibid.*
 7. *Ibid.*, 3,818.
 8. Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat* (New York: Public Affairs, May 2001), 273.
 9. Ernst van den Bergh, *Die seelischen Werte im Frieden und im Kriege* (Ethical values in peace and war), a study in *Militär-Wochenblatt* 91 (Military weekly) (91, 1906), Beiheft 6 (insert 6), 233, as quoted in Leistenschneider, 95.
 10. U.S. Department of the Army White Paper, *Concept for the Objective Force* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), ii.
 11. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Hamburg, GE: Rowohlt, 1963), 34.

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