

MIHÁLY CZEGLÉDI¹**Moltke's Legacy (The Origin of Mission Command)****Moltke öröksége (a küldetésorientált vezetés eredete)****Abstract**

Jelen tanulmányban a szerző a küldetés orientált vezetés kialakulását vizsgálja, majd annak jelenkori megjelenését hasonlítja össze a különböző doktrínális kiadványokban. Elemzi a parancsnok, a rendelkezésre álló technika, valamint a harccászati felkészítés szempontjából. A küldetésorientált vezetést Moltke velünk élő örökségeként értelmezve arra a következtetésre jut, hogy az a szervezeti kultúra része, annak meghatározó eleme.

Kulcsszavak: küldetésorientált vezetés, doktrína, szervezeti kultúra

Absztrakt

In this study the author examines the origins of mission command and compares its contemporary appearance in various doctrinal publications. He also analyses it from the commander's perspective, in terms of the available military technology, and tactical preparation. By understanding mission command as Moltke's living legacy he concludes that it is a defining part of organizational culture.

Keywords: mission command, doctrine, organizational culture

The Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF) face a new challenge. Despite the fiscal constraints and the continuous reorganisation of the last 30-40 years, the main topic nowadays is development. A programme called ZRÍNYI 2026 has been initiated to rebuild the capabilities that can be characterised by the term of lack of development.

The challenge is huge. The 21st century's technical improvements cause unpredictable effects. It is not enough to make a big shopping, the whole needs to be transformed in order to restore old and build new capabilities. The transformation requests open minded

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persons on all level who know exactly what is necessary and how the HDF can achieve new goals.

The abovementioned circumstances are not new. In the second part of the 19th century, during the zenith of the industrialization, a new power emerged. It was the German Empire built on the Prussians, earlier almost totally defeated by Napoleon.

The current and emerging operational environments, the speed of innovations force the military thinkers to look for new solutions, but it is worth sometimes to examine the past in order to avoid the mistakes and learn from prestigious grandsires.

Command and control of organized armed forces have it roots before Christ, written form of it in the Middle Ages. According to experts, it is not a question that the main principals recorded in doctrines used by Western armed forces were born back in the 1800's Prussian Army. It is also clear that all changes should be started with changing the brains. More and more soldier are familiar with Liddel Hart quotes: *"The only thing harder than getting a new idea into military mind is to get an old one out."* The Prussian Army won at least three major wars during Helmuth von Moltke' era as the Chief of Staff of the Prussian, later the German Army. The principals which was laid down by him are still valid, especially those thoughts that define the contemporary mission command philosophy.

The writer attempts the respected readers to combine the reads below with the recent doctrines. There is nothing new under the sun, but developing the mind first is essential to build real capabilities.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Historically, the birth of mission command or "mission-based leadership" can be tied to the Prussian defeat by Napoleon in the twin battles of Jena and Auerstedt. The result of the Prussian military revolution – through a 50 years long transformation – was a complex change in military thinking and leadership. The shift itself was away from a doctrine based on orders to one based on the mission ('Auftrag'). *Auftragstaktik* left the methodology based on iron discipline. The achievement of the task itself became important, not how it was done.²

General Helmut Graf Von Moltke (Commander in Chief of the Prussian Army) promulgated and partly wrote the new Field Service Regulations in 1869. According to that milestone document Senior Commanders do not order more than what is absolutely necessary but ensure that the goal is clear. In case of need subordinate commanders can seize the initiative. This 'invisible secret weapon' delivered them victory in the return match with the French and later with the Russians. A choreography-based design has been replaced by

² Bryan Watters: *Mission Command–Mission Leadership (Creating the Climate for Maximising Performance)–A Corporate Philosophy* (2002) 1. (accessed 10/11/2015) http://www.raf.mod.uk/pmdair/rafcms/mediafiles/225D11C3_5056_A318_A8AF63C0D16C7670.doc; Ancker III., Clinton J.: *The Evolution of Mission Command in U.S. Army Doctrine, 1905 to the Present*. In: *Military Review*, Volume 93, No. 2, 2013, 42-53.

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improvisation with a guiding philosophy. The result was the autonomy to achieve the desired outcome.³

A neutral Russian observer wrote about the Prussian defeat of the French in 1870 that "Every German subordinate commander felt himself to be part of a unified whole; in taking action, each one of them therefore had the interests of the whole at the forefront of their mind, none hesitated in deciding what to do, not a man waited to be told or even reminded"⁴

The First World War was not a scenario in which Auftragstaktik was able to triumph, although General Eric Ludendorff nearly pushed the Allies back to the North Sea coast. Unfortunately for Germany, the 'Storm Trooper' led attacks were the last tactical victories of the German Army. They were defeated by a combination of Allied resilience, leadership and firepower.⁵

Second World War's German generals (Von Kleist, Guderian, Von Manstein, Rommel) personified Moltke's philosophy. The first half of the war was the top of Auftragstaktik. Despite a doctrine – now acknowledged by NATO as well – the Axis lost again. The reason for the German military machine to fail to achieve victory is complex and not a subject for this essay. But when the Germans attacked France Colonel Kurt Zeitzler (later Chief of Staff of *Panzergruppe* Kleist) told to the assembled subordinated commanders: "Gentlemen, I demand that your divisions completely cross the German borders, completely cross the Belgian borders and completely cross the River Meuse. I don't care how you do it, that's completely up to you." Lieutenant-General Heinz Guderian (commander of XIX *Panzerkorps*, subordinated to *Panzergruppe* Kleist) gave a famous order to his units in the spirit of *Auftragstaktik*. They have a "ticket to the last station," which were the respective towns on the French coast. How his troops got there was entirely up to them. As a result the German fast troops made an unbelievable and unbeatable progress.⁶

MISSION COMMAND – DOCTRINAL PRINCIPLES

Almost all of the Western armies have their own doctrines to define what command and control rules exist or what is the required philosophy to lead people.

US ARMY DOCTRINES

"Mission command is the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ [Thomas E. Ricks: An elusive command philosophy and a different command culture.](http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/09/09/an-elusive-command-philosophy-and-a-different-command-culture) (accessed 27/05/2018) <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/09/09/an-elusive-command-philosophy-and-a-different-command-culture>

and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations. The six principles of mission command are:

- Build cohesive teams through mutual trust.
- Create shared understanding.
- Provide a clear commander's intent.
- Exercise disciplined initiative.
- Use mission orders.
- Accept prudent risk.⁷

“...Through leadership, commanders build teams. They develop and maintain mutual trust and a shared understanding throughout the force and with unified action partners. Commanders understand that subordinates and staffs require resources and a clear intent to guide their actions. They allow them the freedom of action to exercise disciplined initiative to adapt to changing situations. Because mission command decentralizes decisionmaking authority and grants subordinates' significant freedom of action, it demands more of commanders at all levels and requires rigorous training and education.”⁸

UK JOINT DOCTRINE

“The UK's philosophy of mission command has four enduring tenets:

- timely decision-making;
- thorough understanding of a superior commander's intent;
- clear responsibility on the part of subordinates to fulfil intent;
- and determination to take the plan through to a successful conclusion.

The fundamental guiding principle is the absolute responsibility to act, or to decide not to act, within the framework of a superior commander's intent. This approach requires a style of command that promotes decentralised command, freedom and speed of action and initiative, but which is responsive to superior direction when subordinates overreach themselves.”⁹

NATO JOINT DOCTRINE

„Command is an intrinsically forceful, human activity involving authority as well as personal responsibility and accountability. ... This philosophy promotes a decentralized style of

⁷ ADP 6-0, Army Doctrine Publication, 1. (2012) (accessed 19/05/2018)

http://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/adp6_0.pdf

⁸ ADRP 6-0, Army Doctrine Reference Publication, 2-1. (accessed 19/05/2018)

https://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/adrp6_0.pdf

⁹ JDP 01, Joint Doctrine Publication 01 (2014) 103. (accessed 19/05/2018)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/389775/20141209-JDP_01_UK_Joint_Operations_Doctrine.pdf

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command based on freedom and speed of action, and initiative, while remaining responsive to superior direction. This style is commonly referred to as mission command. However, the philosophy is flexible enough to allow commanders to exercise detailed command and command by veto according to the prevailing situation and type of joint force.”¹⁰

MISSION COMMAND – REAL MEANING

In spite of the doctrinal definition, the essence of mission command can be presented by using Jan Ted Hove's words back in 2015:

“Allied forces were pushing to Germany and they were facing the River Rhine. A young captain was requested into his commander's tent and the commander was pointing at the map. He said: - Captain you need to seize that bridge before tomorrow morning 7 o'clock. Is that clear? - Understood, Sir! - He said. Started to go out, but he turned back and asked: - Sir, why I need to seize that bridge? In a military environment it seems unbelievable, because every soldier follow orders. But, this commander took the time, and explained how important, how crucial that bridge. - We need it to push our armour or logistics into Germany to close into Berlin and to end the war! In that moment, the captain knew exactly what he had to do, and why he had to do. The how, the plan was for himself. He was the specialist. He went and conducted a commander's reconnaissance patrol to find out how he can solve the problem. He looked into his binoculars and he recognized that the bridge was destroyed. It was blown up. What now? Normally, we think, he could go back and report: - Mission accomplished, there is no bridge. But the captain took out his map, looked at the map for another bridge 10 clicks north, and informed his commander that he could capture and seize another bridge. This is the essence of mission command: knowing exactly what you need to do and why you need to do it keeping speed and momentum in the organization. It's about what and why leaving the how to the individual.”¹¹

Not new thoughts are the above mentioned principles. Just few examples from famous generals, to strengthen the gentle reader. Patton: “Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.”

MISSION COMMAND PHILOSOPHY: MOLTKE'S VIEW

Moltke's transformation caused changes in the basics of the discipline in the German Army. The German type obedience did not mean following orders blindly, but acting in accordan-

¹⁰ AJP-01 E, Allied Joint Doctrine (version E, 2017) 5-1. (accessed 19/05/2018)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/602225/doctrine_nato_allied_joint_doctrine_ajp_01.pdf

¹¹ Jan Ten Hove (US Marine Corps) speech (2015) (accessed 19/05/2018)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbnPyyRARxY>

ce with intentions. Using Von Manstein's words "Two well established German leadership principles:

- always conduct operations elastically and resourcefully;
- give every possible scope to the self-sufficiency of commanders at all levels.

Unfortunately, the German national archives were destroyed during World War II. A number of the original transcripts were lost and the German Staff College probably edited some of Moltke's works after his death. Yet, the basic thought of his work remains valid. This paragraph will examine the Field Marshall's literature using his writings. His thoughts can be separated into three subparagraph: - views about the commander's role, - the influence of technology, - and finally, the tactical preparations.

COMMANDER'S ROLE

Moltke provided guidance and directives about command and staff work methods shaping his vision on two paradigms. First, he had no faith in any fixed system or set of rules. He always searched for new ways to provide the solution for a problem. Secondly, he accepted the existence of uncertainty when executing a plan.¹²

Moltke's two ways of command are general directives and definite orders. General directives contain information to allow subordinate commanders to act (plan, execute) independently. They enable commanders to organize their units for battle and preparing for the upcoming operation. Definite orders are more detailed instructions. They direct future actions, concerning time, space, and coordination. Moltke, here makes a difference between operational and tactical level. He required to distribute definite orders below corps level. He argues for simplicity, clarity, and confident orders without too many details. According to him, detailed orders prevent flexibility during operations. Moltke wants to maintain the ability to react in an environment which is characterized by uncertainty: "On the whole, the advantage the leader believes he has by continually interfering personally is in most cases only an apparent advantage. In doing so he performs duties with which others are charged, forgoes more or less their help and increases his own work in such a measure that he finally will be unable to perform all of it."¹³

In the vision of Moltke, understanding the situation is key for good decision making. It comes from mental calmness and physical power. Both of these qualities relate to Clausewitz' military genius model. Moltke sets forward the following guidelines:

- commanders on the battlefield must understand the situation of their unit and their neighbour;
- they must create a mental picture of the situation, permanently assess their situation, and communicate with their neighbours and commander.

¹² Daniel J. Hughes: *Moltke on the Art of War-Selected Writings* (New York, The Random House Ballantine Publishing Group, 1993) 16.

¹³ Ibid. 20.

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“The more similar the picture which all portions of the whole – the higher and the lower leaders – make to themselves of the situation, the easier and more correct all orders will be understood and the better will the team-work be.”¹⁴ He expected that each headquarters and every commander did not merely repeat the instructions towards the lower echelons.¹⁵

“In war everything is uncertain as soon as operations commence, except that which the commander-in-chief carries himself in will and energy.”¹⁶ The agility and adaptability of the subordinate commander, combined with the ability to act independently, based upon accurate reporting, provide feasible circumstances for the basic elements to solve the upcoming problems.¹⁷

Moltke also focused on information sharing between units and commanders. The Prussian army created a system with specific staff officers whose job was to report to the higher headquarters. They named it the directed telescope. Nowadays we can call them liaison officers, but unfortunately it does not mean the original German way of linking different levels of military HQs. Back to the Prussians, specially selected, highly qualified, and trustworthy young officers became sensors for the commander on the battlefield.¹⁸ Their mission was to supplement the higher commander with additional information. They were highly respected officers with good analytical skills. Their activity contributed to the overall mission.¹⁹ Due to this practice, Moltke could conduct tactical and operational actions through decentralization, but retained control. He wished to preserve a direct link to the front in order to take timely correct decisions.

INFLUENCE OF TECHNOLOGY

It can seem platitude, but Moltke spoke and wrote that the value of technology lies in its practical application. It's a banality, but if we try to think back in the 19th century, using new inventions (like the needle gun) properly was the key of Prussian military supremacy during Moltke's 30 year long era as a Chief of Staff. He told “If the military cannot use technology appropriately, it has no place on the battlefield.”²⁰ Use of railroads to move troops faster, the invention of the telegraph to communicate, and the premature use of balloons to provide early warning on the battlefield are a few examples. The application method of technological inventions can/could determine the campaign outcome. In other words, people who know how to use technology most effectively can win. Russian Major General Dragomirov,

¹⁴ Ibid. 28.

¹⁵ Ibid. 27, 29.

¹⁶ Ibid. 29.

¹⁷ Ibid. 132-133.

¹⁸ Gary B. Griffin, “The Directed Telescope: A Traditional element of Effective Command” (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1991) 1. (accessed 12/05/2018) <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a244830.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid. 14.

²⁰ Hughes: Moltke on the Art of War-Selected Writings 257.

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observer of the battle of Königgrätz, wrote the following to the Russian tsar: "It wasn't the needle gun by itself that won the victories of 1866, but the men who carried it."²¹

TACTICAL PREPARATIONS

The problem is still true, how to prepare and train a unit for diverse circumstances and rapid change. First of all, discipline is still the basics of executing a mission. Soldiers (regardless of level) are working together providing mutual support to each other. On the lowest tactical level they pursue to acquire the fire supremacy. Move on the battlefield using different formations, protecting each other. Certain restraints ensure the execution of difficult missions and a discipline in terms of technical procedures. Additionally, discipline facilitates the teamwork and fosters the esprit de corps. Apparently, this contradicts Moltke's other guideline: to allow the greatest independence to every officer. The execution of the order is essential, the method of execution can be varied.²²

Therefore, Moltke's type orders contained no more than what is strictly necessary to avoid directives pointing too far into the future. In Moltke's logical reasoning, if a commander dictates too much, the subordinate would get confused about the task.²³

Moltke did not specify the initiative behaviour. He called it the duty of every leader. The only guideline he specified: "If nothing is ordered, the order of battle is valid. If the chain of command is lost, it is everyone's duty to restore it, (...) especially is the duty of the leaders of small detachments, which, particularly in an engagement, are dissuaded by their subordinate units. Such leaders should not allow themselves to be searched after but should eagerly return to the struggle under the command of their nearest superior."²⁴

MOLTKE'S LEGACY

Helmuth von Moltke laid the foundations for modern campaign planning and staff work. The German Army transformed its command structure successfully, adapted its education model to provide skilled officers, and proved its capability to integrate the technological innovations of the industrialization into its organization. As of then, commanders' and staff officers' role is to understand the situation, to assess the conditions. They need to be able to provide accurate, timely decisions and directives to subordinates. This kind of capabilities requires educated, independent thinking officers, who can adapt to situations and think

²¹ Gunter Rosseels: *Moltke's mission command philosophy in the twenty-first century: fallacy or verity?* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2012) 50. (accessed 19/05/2018)

<http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a563054.pdf>

²² Hughes: Moltke on the Art of War-Selected Writings 133-177.

²³ Ibid. 185-186.

²⁴ Ibid. 177.

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critically on problems. Applying the technological advantages in the decision process can provide dominance on the present and future battlefield.²⁵

Moreover, since Moltke it is clear that armies require leaders who understand how to achieve mission success. They have to feel comfortable themselves in the strategic environment in which they operate. They must know and understand the difficulties of communicating orders. And it must be accepted that small unit tactics and initiative on lowest level have become more important and decisive in the overall campaign.²⁶ In total, Moltke transformed the Prussian (later German) Army to the most adaptable, innovative armed organization for more than 60 years, in which mission command philosophy played a key role. According to Bundeswehr officers, 'Auftragstaktik' is comprised of four essential elements:

- obedience,
- proficiency,
- independence of action,
- and self-esteem.

All four must be present for the concept to exist. Obedience refers to strict adherence to a commander's intent (purpose, method, endstate). Proficiency refers to technical and tactical competence. It includes the ability to synchronize warfighting functions reinforced by rigorous professional development. Independence of action is the heart of the abovementioned four. The higher commander provides subordinates a great deal of latitude enabling them to seize the initiative. Self-esteem is emboldened through rigorous training programs and fostered by the application of initiative without fear of retribution for failure. Self-confidence is created because mistakes are accepted as an integral part of leader development. In general, one can conclude, that the concept of 'Auftragstaktik' (understand Mission Command) is more than an idea or operational term. Rather, it is a culture.²⁷

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²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Richard D. Heyward: *Embedding Mission Command in Army Culture*. (United States Army War College 2013) 2. (accessed 23/05/2018) <http://www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA589283>

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