

## MISSION COMMAND – AN AUFTRAGSTAKTIK MODEL

Cdor. (Navy) Cristian ABAIANIȚI, PhD Student\*

Command and control represented throughout military history, and still arising even during the present days, a strong concern of military theorists about the effective use of these attributes of military conduct to achieve the objectives of the war. Moreover, the fact that doctrines and manuals mentioned aspects regarding the role of decentralized or centralized command and control in conducting an operation is a consequence of operational practice in the history of armed conflicts.

**Keywords:** mission; task; command; control.

„Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”  
*Winston Churchill*

In the context of the emergence and exponential expansion of actions in the sphere of hybrid warfare, the use of the military instrument in conjunction with the other instruments of power produces the most effective results precisely because of the experience gained during the military history of using a suitable C2 (command and control). Both command and control are two concepts that work in parallel and have seen a simple evolution from being concentrated in the authority of one person to a decentralized type where authority is divided on the levels of military art.

Throughout the military history, both social organization and the volatility of the conditions of the battlefield required the adoption of a military conduct style consistently meeting the needs of achieving the objectives of the war. Command and control, as well as attributes of military conduct, have been applied in such situations, both centralized and decentralized, depending on the conditions of the combat environment, military culture and education, as well as technological developments in the field of military technology but especially in the information field.

The original concept describing how to apply the two attributes of military conduct was the „auftragstaktik”<sup>1</sup> and appeared in the Prussian military society prior to World War I period.

\*"Carol I" National Defense University  
e-mail: [cristache\\_jurie@yahoo.com](mailto:cristache_jurie@yahoo.com)

Although this concept has been known by American military leaders since the end of the Second World War, its significance is mentioned only in 1986 in FM 100 5 „Operations” under the name of „mission orders”<sup>2</sup> and the so-called concept of „mission command”<sup>3</sup> was recently adopted in 2010 in the NATO’s AJP 01 (D) „Allied Joint Doctrine”, and in 2011 in the US Army Force’s doctrine ADP 3-0 „Unified Land Operations”.

Both the Prussian concept and its American successor aim to provide the level of flexibility necessary to adapt to the interchangeable conditions of the battlefield in order to make appropriate decisions by commanders on the ground but not to exceed the limits imposed by the intention of the higher echelon that is not on the spot, on the battlefield. Such a condition of respecting intent is the only distinct element that has brought about changes to the current concept compared to the original concept. Expression of intent only in terms of tasks during the Prussian period has been improved by adding the purpose and end state precisely to clearly state the limits within which freedom of decision must be manifested.

### **The concept of auftragstaktik – appearance, evolution and meanings**

The sources of the Prussian concept of auftragstaktik are attributed to the period of the Seven Years War (1756-1763) when Frederick II the Great (1712-1786) considered the need to keep to his own person the authority to command

and coordinate all the army corps in order to achieve concentrating them on the place and time chosen for the decisive battle. The reasons for this rudimentarily centralized C2 are due to the non-mobilization of the population for war just to bear the economic costs with it. As a result, the army was largely made up of prisoners of war, detainees and mercenaries without any national conscience, culture and military education that only the Prussian nobles commanders had. Such an army did not present serious assurances about the delegation of authority and the exercise of the initiative by the subordinates represented a major risk for the achievement of the objectives of the war, so that the Kaiser's decision was known to the level of the fighter having the law of the latter. At the end of this war, Frederick the Great took the decision to demobilize the army and retain a small number of military commanders.

The battles of the Fourth Coalition (1806-1807) made up of Prussia, Russia, the Kingdom of Saxony, Sweden and the United Kingdom in response to Napoleon I's campaign during his wars (1803-1815) represented a moment of deep reconsideration of the need to keep a centralized C2. This new European conflict found Prussia with the demobilized army and the same commanders during the Seven Years War, but in their old age with and unfamiliar with the Napoleonic warfare. Under these circumstances, Prussia suffered a disastrous defeat during the Jena Campaign (1806), bearing heavy conditions through the Paris Convention (8 September 1808) when „Prussia had to cede half her territory and population, pay an indemnity of 141 million francs, limit army strength to 42,000 men and accept French garrisons in key fortresses”<sup>24</sup>. In the immediate aftermath of the Jena Campaign, King Frederick Wilhelm III became aware of the need for reforms in all domains, and in the military field he called, in 1807, a ”Military Reorganization Commission (Militär-Reorganisationskommission)”<sup>25</sup> which, in addition to reforming the military system, was also charged with identifying the mistakes committed during the Jena Campaign, finding those who will be blamed and establishing the necessary measures that had to be implemented immediately. One of the reasons for the failure in the Jena Campaign was the lack of effective coordination of the three army corps led by general Christian Karl August

Ludwig von Massenbach, general Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst and general Karl Ludwig August Friedrich von Pfull.

During the same period, there appeared in the doctrine „Exerzierreglement”<sup>26</sup> published in 1806 what would later be attributed to the meaning of the concept of auftragstaktik, namely „commander should give his divisional commanders the general concept in a few words, and show them the general layout of the ground on which the army is to form up. The manner of deployment is left up to them [the subordinates]; fastest is best. The commander cannot be everywhere”<sup>27</sup>. The concept in this context is regarded as the concept of concentration all of the army corps and concentrating them in order to carry out the decisive battle. So, the first ideas about the need to decentralize C2 in the dislocation stage appear.

A remarkable Prussian personality with remarkable operational thinking was General Helmuth von Moltke Sr. (1800-1891), Chief of the Great General Prusac from 1857 to 1888, who realized that the ”million-man”<sup>28</sup> armies could not be ruled to the point of concentration or even during the decisive battle only through the intuition of one commander of the whole army. He supported the idea that any subordinate must take „the actions (...) in the absence of orders that supported the senior commander's intent”<sup>29</sup>. This kind of developing military actions in that period was later named as ”mission tactics”<sup>30</sup>. Also, Moltke Sr., in his writings, in order to apply of mission tactics, used the conduct philosophy described above through two types of „mission orders”<sup>31</sup>: the first category of order, called direct or express orders („Befehl”) were those orders that described in detail both the task and the method of accomplishment, and the second category of order, called the directive („Direktiven”), were those orders sending the task to the subordinates, and explaining the reasons for the commander to designate that task, leaving the subordinates free to act in fulfilling that task<sup>32</sup> which supported that decentralized form of C2. Moltke acknowledged that he was much more in favor of directives than the direct orders that he adopted during the Austro-Prussian War (1866) when he won a resounding victory in the Battle of Königgratz (3 July 1866) as well as during the Franco - Prussian War (1870-1871). As a identified lesson from wars involving

Prussia, Moltke emphasized the importance of an order-based conduct system that emphasizes why instead how to perform a task<sup>13</sup>. Still, Moltke mentioned that „it is crucial for the subordinate to understand the purpose of the operation, and then work for realization even if it means working against the actual orders. Within the higher commander’s perspective it is necessary to tell the subordinate only what is necessary to accomplish the purpose”<sup>14</sup>. In order to implement the mission orders system as a centralized C2 (if direct orders are applied) or decentralized (if directives are applied) in mission tactics, Moltke together with Julius von Verdy du Vernois and Hermann von Wartensleben Carow, in 1869, edits „Instructions for Large Unit Commanders”<sup>15</sup> where he lists three principles that support these tactics, thus: accentuating the purpose instead of the method, non-execution of a direct order if the situation in the combat area has changed and the subordinates can fulfill the commander’s intention by other means and, the last principle, the impossibility of complete and timely fulfilling of an picture about the battlefield by commanders who are not on the terrain.

In conclusion, Moltke’s period is characterized by the application of mission tactics by using mission orders with a focus on directives, which denotes a decentralized C2 but without neglecting the usefulness of direct orders to mark command and control centralized when the initiative of subordinates exceeds the limits of accountability. The conduct style based on directives will later materialize in the concept of *auftragstaktik*.

General Otto von Moser is the one who would re-make the philosophy of conducting from Moltke’s vision by naming as *auftragstaktik* which he first mentioned it in the ”Training and Control of the Battalion in Combat”<sup>16</sup> manual in 1906. Also, in 1914 this concept was mentioned in the battalion field manual where it was defined „as a method of command and control in which the higher commander relied primarily on the cooperation of subordinates, rather than on detailed and binding orders, in the accomplishment of tasks”<sup>17</sup>.

The concept of *auftragstaktik* generally became valid and applicable from the beginning of the interwar period when General Hans von Seeckt (1866-1936) defined this concept as „a method of troop command and control based on providing subordinates freedom of action in

the accomplishment of their assigned tasks”<sup>18</sup>. Also, in 1933, the field manual „Troop Command and Control”<sup>19</sup> it is stated that the „foundation of command and control is the mission and the situation”<sup>20</sup>. This manual was also applicable in the first three years of World War II when German commanders assured freedom of action for subordinates as long as this freedom did not jeopardize their intentions. This kind of decentralization of C2 led to somewhat unexpected results by Wehrmacht achievement until 1942 when Hitler’s interference in the decisions of conducting German forces on the eastern front led to the abandonment of the *auftragstaktik* because of direct orders given by Führer which produced a chain of defeats.

### **Mission command – from the outset and to the present**

Following the same pattern of the concept of *auftragstaktik*, and the emergence of ”mission command”<sup>21</sup>, or mission-based command as it is found in some national doctrinal textbooks, is initially predicted through debate and mention of its meanings in the American literature.

As I previously mentioned, at the end of the Second World War, the US Army, through its military representatives, first contacted the concept of *auftragstaktik* and its significance. The mission orders system described by Moltke is assimilated to directives excluding direct or express orders. The significance of the directives that formed the basis of the concept of *auftragstaktik* would, for the first time, be mentioned in the doctrine of the US Army in 1976 without giving a name for that meaning. Thus, through this doctrine, they recognized the need to use orders to „allow flexibility within a plan for a subordinate to accomplish the mission within the commander’s intent”<sup>22</sup>. Starting with the 1982 edition of FM 100 5 ”Operations”, the significance attributed to the Prussian concept was mentioned, which was completed with the adoption of the concept of mission-type orders in the doctrine edited in 1986. The 1993 version of the same doctrine calls for ”willingness and ability to act independently within the framework of the commander’s intent”<sup>23</sup>, which is an important step in passing the command and control from being centralized to decentralized. The US Joint Doctrine (2007) provides that the unity of effort in an ”unified action”<sup>24</sup> involving both the military instrument

and other governmental or non-governmental or international agencies "is made possible through decentralized execution of centralized, overarching plans"<sup>25</sup> with the commander's intention which represents „unifying idea that allows decentralized execution within centralized, overarching guidance (...) a clear and concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the military end state"<sup>26</sup> and mission orders that aims to "direct a subordinate to perform a certain task without specifying how to accomplish it"<sup>27</sup>. With this doctrine, the principle of decentralization of command and control marks the definitive migration of this philosophy from the centralization of the C2, which represented a type of military conducting actions in case of a defensive war that had been in place for more than 50 years of Cold War.

The Mission Command Concept was adopted and stipulated for the first time in 2010 in the AJP 01 (D) "Allied Joint Doctrine" where it describes how „commanders generate the freedom of action for subordinates to act purposefully when unforeseen developments arise, and exploit favourable opportunities"<sup>28</sup> and in the 2017 version of the allied doctrine, this concept was developed and refined, adding to it besides freedom of action also initiative and speed of action, but in accordance with the commander's directives. The last edition also mentions the flexibility that a commander must demonstrate in relation to the application of decentralization C2 or the application of decentralized control and the command remains a detailed type or "command by veto according to the prevailing situation and type of joint force"<sup>29</sup>. In line with the Allied Doctrine of 2017, there is also the UK Doctrine of the Land Forces which, in addition to the initiative, the freedom and speed of action as tools of this concept also emphasizes the expected results of achieving the mission command, namely the objectives and effects. Therefore, expressing them in the intention is very important than specifying the detailed ways in which they can be fulfilled. Also this doctrine emphasizes mission orders as a means of materializing C2 decentralization.

In the year following the adoption of this concept in the NATO doctrine, the mission command is stipulated for the first time in the US Army, respectively in the ADP 3-0, "Unified Land Operations", where the following definition

appears: "the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land operations"<sup>30</sup>. What stems from this definition is that imposing discipline on the initiative is a desiderate for avoiding situations that would lead to further escalation of existing tensions in an operational environment.

By enumerating these meanings of the mission command in the order of their appearance, we can all say that they provide a sufficient degree of freedom of action for subordinates to carry out the missions entrusted but without exceeding the boundaries imposed by the intention of the commander and resulting from the restrictions and constraints established according to the conditions of the operational environment and conditions describing the desired end state. The commander's intention is the essential tool that guides how extensive the initiative and freedom of action can be. According to the Operations Planning Manual, the commander's intent is formulated to cover the key tasks (essential) that will lead to the achievement of purpose necessary in order to the accomplish the desired end state (acceptable conditions). So these three elements are the ingredients of a solid and reference intent for subordinates.

### **The pros and cons for applying mission command**

The most remarkable advantage of applying this type of command is to encourage the subordinates' creativity in accomplishing the tasks that will compete to fulfill the objectives of the higher echelon required to achieve the strategic desired end state. Such creativity must be weighed in such a way that it does not produce unnecessary escalation of already existing tensions in the operational environment. Especially when in certain operations, such as NEO or anti-piracy operations, creativity must be restricted and supplemented by maintaining a reserved position in accordance with the rules of engagement.

Another factor influencing the importance of this concept is represented by the independence of actions performed by subordinates. For example, in the early years of the First World War the actions carried out and characterized by independence from the expected results at the strategic level led to the

creation of the so-called stationary war or trenches war which caused unnecessary loss of life.

The unity of effort is better achievable in the case of a centralized C2 than in the case of decentralization, especially when performing tactical action or operation but having a strategic effect such as a mining operation to impose sea denial, or the actions of special forces that must be limited in terms of freedom of action.

An advantage of command and control decentralization is the management of a large amount of information that, in a centralized C2 situation, may lead to increasing the time for decision-making process, which would slow down the tempo of action or making the decision to exploit opportunities.

Military education and culture is a decisive factor in the successful implementation of a decentralized C2. In the absence of an operational culture, some subordinate commanders prefer not to have an initiative as a justification for not being accountable for failures of actions taken thus they have been agreeing of transmitting by the commander the way to accomplish the task. On the other hand, the C4ISTAR system, besides other requirements, wants to be just what compensates for the lack of initiative of such commanders by monitoring, evaluating and correcting their actions.

The nature of the objectives may be a justification for the centralized or decentralized use of C2. Thus, in the case of predominantly non-military objectives, a centralized C2 is preferred, unlike the situation in which the decentralization of command and control is favorable for increasing the speed of action in order to achieve military objectives that will lead to the fulfillment of a desired end state expressed in military terms. In peace-support operations, it is also appropriate to centralize command and control due to objectives that need to be met with limitations (constraints and restrictions) that go beyond the military sphere.

Instead, in operations where the objectives are military in nature, the results of applying a centralized C2 reside in exaggerated attrition due to the removal of morals and motivation of subordinates, as it happened to the German army in 1941, after the failure of having Stalingrad conquered when Hitler took command of the whole armed forces by transmitting befehl-type orders known as „Führerbefehle”<sup>31</sup>.

## Conclusions

Describing how to use command and control in a centralized or decentralized way to conduct an operation, from the outset and to the present, I have emphasized that the actual mission command concept is nothing more than a refinement of the auftragstaktik Prussian concept. Beginning with Frederick the Great, continuing with Scharnhorst, then Moltke, and finally Seeckt, all recognized the usefulness of using a military conduct originally based on a centralized C2 that migrated to the decentralized variant by using mission orders to apply mission tactics.

Although the first category of order, namely the direct orders that details both the task and the method of accomplishment that are appropriate to the centralized form of the C2, were considered useful for conducting an army without culture and military education, but along with the reform of the Prussian military system after the Jena Campaign, with emphasis on achieving appropriate military education, it has needed for cooperation between commanders and their investment with the necessary confidence in their actions. Thus, a system of directives has emerged that mentions the task and the reasons of the commander for subordinates to accomplish the task, which implies giving a freedom of action in accordance with the directive of higher echelon. These transformations of operational thinking were the prerequisites for the emergence of the concept of auftragstaktik which was mentioned first in 1906 and, after that, in 1914 it was consecrated as it is known in present days.

The period between World War II and 1986 was marked by the consequences of the Cold War where western military culture was under the auspices of a possible defensive position in the event of escalation of military action between NATO and the Soviet Union. This mentality has decisively contributed to maintaining a centralized C2 through the use of orders with a focus on mission and the exaggerated detailing of the ways of accomplishment. The reluctance to grant the subordinates' initiative was also justified by their lack of education about the creative capacity to accomplish the tasks. Although the 1976 US doctrine recognized the usefulness of orders to allow subordinates some flexibility in carrying out their tasks, the concept of mission orders was later defined in the 1986 edition of the

same doctrine. Statutory military conduct based on mission orders was accomplished in the allied doctrine of 2010 and, also, in the 2011's edition of US Army by mentioning the mission command. This type of decentralized command and control aimed at encouraging creativity in subordinates carrying out tasks by giving initiative, freedom and speed of action but consistent with the intention of the commander expressed solely in terms of purpose, the essential task(s) and the desired end state.

In modern operations that go beyond the military domain, such as stability operations, the application of a decentralized C2 pays particular attention to the nature of non-military objectives, the accomplishing of which requires action supported by all instruments of power. In such situations, a centralized C2 will be the common denominator for military action to support those of other non-military organizations or agencies.

In conclusion, adopting a military conduct style appropriate to an operation from a command and control point of view will be the commander's attribute that has to make the most of a mix of art and science to identify those requirements that justify the centralized or decentralized C2.

#### NOTES:

1 The concept of *auftragstaktik* is an artificial one made up of two German terms: *auftrag* which translates through the mission (see: Milan Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare – Theory and Practice*, US Naval War College, Second Printing, 2009, p. X-34) and *taktik* which means military tactics (see: Maj. Michael J Gunther, *Auftragstaktik: The Basis for Modern Military Command?* US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2012, p. 7).

2 Maj. Michael J Gunther, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

3 \*\*\*ADP 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, Department of the Army, October 2011, p. 6.

4 Clau Telp, *The Evolution of Operational Art, 1740 – 1813, From Frederick the Great to Napoleon*, Frank Cass, 2005, p. 89.

5 *Ibidem*, p. 91.

6 Maj. Michael J. Gunther, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

7 *Ibidem*.

8 Milan Vego, *A short history of operational art*, Naval War College Faculty, April 2007, p. 2.

9 Maj. Michael J. Gunther, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

10 *Ibidem*.

11 *Ibidem*.

12 *Ibidem*, p. 8.

13 *Ibidem*.

14 *Ibidem*, p. 9 (apud: Helmuth Karl Bernhard von Moltke, "Moltkes Taktisch-Strategische Aufsätze aus den

Jahren 1857 bis 1871," in *Moltkes Militärische Werke*, vol. 2, no. 2, ed. German General Staff (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1892-1912), 183. Hereafter cited as *MMW*).

15 *Ibidem*, pp. 9 - 12.

16 Milan Vego, *op. cit.*, p. X - 34.

17 *Ibidem*.

18 *Ibidem*.

19 *Ibidem*.

20 *Ibidem*.

21 \*\*\*AJP-01(E), *Allied Joint Doctrine*, NSO, 2017, p. 5 - 1.

22 Maj. Michael J. Gunther, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

23 *Ibidem*, p. 50.

24 \*\*\*JP 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, NSO, 2007, p. II - 2.

25 *Ibidem*, p. IV - 15.

26 *Ibidem*, p. IV - 16.

27 *Ibidem*.

28 \*\*\*AJP 01 (D), *Allied Joint Doctrine*, NSA, 2010, p. 6 - 3.

29 \*\*\*AJP 01 (E), *Allied Joint Doctrine*, NSA, 2017, p. 5 - 1.

30 \*\*\*ADP 3-0, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

31 Milan Vego, *op. cit.*, p. X - 23.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

\*\*\* *Operations planning manual*, Military Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011.

\*\*\* *Operations planning manual*, Military Publishing House, Bucharest, 2016.

\*\*\* *Doctrine of Operations Planning in the Romanian Army*, Bucharest, 2013.

\*\*\* *FN-1, Doctrine of Naval Forces*, SMFN Printing House, Bucharest, 2010.

\*\*\* *FN-1.3, Doctrine for Operations of the Naval Forces*, DHM Printing House, Bucharest, 2012.

\*\*\* *FN-1, Naval Forces Doctrine*, SMFN Printing House, Bucharest, 2018.

\*\*\* *FN-2, Doctrine for Operations of the Naval Forces*, SMFN Printing House, Bucharest, 2018.

\*\*\* *Allied Command Operations, Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive COPD Interim V2.0*, Supreme Headquarters of Allied Power Europe, Belgium, 04.10.2013.

\*\*\* *AJP 01 (D), Allied Joint Doctrine*, NSA, 2010.

\*\*\* *AJP 01 (E), Allied Joint Doctrine*, NSA, 2017.

*JOPP, Joint Operation Process Workbook*, JMO Department, Naval War College, July 2013.

\*\*\* *Planner's Handbook for Operational Design*, Suffolk, Virginia, 2011.



\*\*\* ADP 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2011.

\*\*\* JP 1, *Doctrine of the Armed Forces of the United States*, JFD, 2007.

\*\*\* JP 1, *Doctrine of the Armed Forces of the United States*, JFD, 2013.

\*\*\* ADP, *Operations*, 2010.

\*\*\* ADP, *Land Operations*, 2017.

Romanian Academy, *Explanatory Dictionary of Romanian Language*, 2nd edition, Univers Enciclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998.

Nistor Florin, *Let's rediscover the MARITIME OPERATIVE ART*, "Carol I" National Defense University Publishing House, Bucharest, 2017.

Telp Claus, *The Evolution of Operational Art, 1740-1813, From Frederick the Great to Napoleon*, Frank Cass, 2005.

Vego N. Milan, *Joint Operational Warfare – Theory and Practice*, US Naval War College, Second Printing, 2009.

Vego Milan, *A Short History of Operational Art*, Naval War College Faculty, 2007.

Maj. Gunther J. Michael, *Auftragstaktik: The Basis for Modern Military Command?* US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2012.

Foley Robert, *Attrition: his theory and application in German strategy, 1880-1916*, King's College, University of London, 1999.

Maj. Charles K. Pickar, *Blitzkrieg: Operational Art or Tactical Craft?*, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1992.