

A German Approach to Combat Orders, 1913

While many military organizations establish conventions for the form of orders, the German Army of its classical period (1866-1945) was perhaps the only one to pay a great deal of attention to the "art" of giving orders. The following passage, translated from a privately printed anthology on the more prosaic aspects of military service. The author is Max Schwarte, a German army officer who produced dozens of such anthologies in the decades that straddled the First World War.

The author never uses the term "mission orders" [Auftragstaktik]. From all indications, this expression had yet to be coined. Nonetheless, what he is describing is an approach to giving orders that is almost identical to what later generations of German soldiers would describe as Auftrags-taktik. The chief elements - an emphasis on the self-reliance of the subordinate commander, the use of the superior's intent [Absicht] as a guide for action in unforeseen circumstances, and the belief that the judgement of a junior officer on the spot is better than that of a senior officer linked only by telecommunications.

All of the work of the staff boils down to orders [Befehlen.] "Order" is a simple word and apparently a simple activity, and yet it is interminably difficult when it is a question of giving an order quickly, correctly, and clearly. The art of giving orders is difficult in peacetime, it is frightfully difficult in war, where whatever is falsely explained, whenever a word is falsely understood, the result is damage and disaster. In order to give orders, one needs not only an inborn gift, but, as with any other art, a great deal of practice. Long orders require time to write them down, to read them through, to understand them, but not to think them up; shorter orders requires more time and effort to compose, but require only a few minutes to understand.

And the content of the order? It should contain all that the leader wants to say and what he must say in order that the subordinate might be able to fulfill his

mission [Auftrag.] It should only contain what is absolutely necessary, for each superfluous word makes understanding more difficult. Its expression must be so clear and simple that each receiver understands its properly and doubts or misunderstandings are out of the question. Ideally, its composition should sound so certain and convincing that neither vacillation nor contradiction is allowed to develop.

An order in wartime suffers from a difficulty that is lacking in peacetime [military service] and in civil callings: the uncertainty of its basic assumptions, particularly where knowledge of the enemy is concerned. In this respect, the things that one bases orders on - suppositions, reports, and intelligence - will only be proved true or false in the course of battle. The assumptions underlying orders can change. Intelligence reports contradict each other, one dispatch confirms another, the third contradicts both.

Changes in intelligence lead to a change in point of view and can incline one to alter orders. One should submit to this desire only in extremely pressing circumstances: "order plus counter-order equals disorder." [ordre, contreordre, désordre - the phrase is, in the original, given in French.] In this sensitive age, troops are more than ever influenced by the form and manner of orders. Frequently recurring changes to orders encourage the feeling that the leader lacks clarity and sureness, and weaken the trust that is indispensable in war. Such feelings will eventually find their way to the troops and will express themselves in wasted energy, in vacillation and hesitation, in the abandonment of a strong grip.

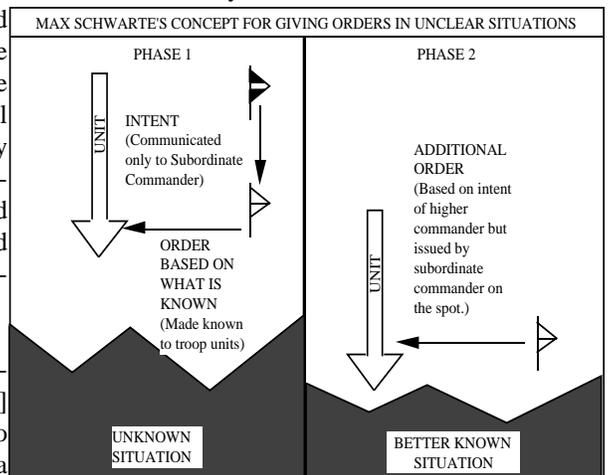
The order, then, is particularly difficult [to compose] when its foundations are so uncertain that it must fit a

variety of possible situations. Certainly, this relates chiefly to the great relationships [i.e. the dynamics of the battle], while instructions based on factors that rest entirely on [the behavior of] the troops can be, as rule, more easily envisioned.

In such cases, it would be better to trust the intelligence of the [subordinate] leader, clearly explain the prevailing uncertainty and [your own] intent [Absicht], and leave further instructions - that is to say, the "orders" [proper] to the subordinate leader. These indications of the intentions for the next day are not known to the troops, they only receive the order for the hours immediately ahead of them, for which, as far as can be predicted, no changes will be required. As soon as the situation has cleared up, they receive additional orders [from the subordinate leader.]

To be sure, these orders which follow each other so closely are likewise unfavorable, but merely more favorable for the spirit of the troops as orders which provide many changes.

In the aforementioned [discussion of the psychological impact of orders] lies the suggestion that one can needlessly introduce things that have a depressing influence on troops. That is not to say that orders should contain untruths about our own successes or the failures of the enemy; but there is much that can be,



for the moment, underemphasized and often expressions can be chosen so that a reduction of the soldiers' faith in victory can be avoided.

It is a mistake to include in an order matters that are self-evident. These make them longer, require time, and make understanding more difficult. This point of view does not predominate in all armies. In those cases the addition of details seems necessary for comprehension and explanations seem necessary for execution. There [in those armies], what we value as beneficial brevity appear to be considerable gaps; there the subordinate leader receives specific detailed guidance that here would be considered an affront to his independence [*Selbständigkeit*].

The standard of what must be included in an order is established by the degree of mental development, intelligence, the education practiced in the Army. The technique of giving orders must take these into account if they are to be surely understood and provide the right basis for the business at hand. It is the experience of decades of schooling by the General Staff, that, in the German Army, directives that allow extensive freedom in the manner of execution and the choice of means can be given, without the person giving orders worrying about the sense of the order being misunderstood.

There is still a wide range of opinion when it comes to the question of how deeply into particulars the instructions [*Anweisung*] to a subordinate must delve; but only one's ability to act on one's own creates enthusiasm for the task and joy in responsibility [*Freude an der Verantwortung*]. Care must also be taken to preserve the chain of command [*Instanzenzug*] and avoid orders which through the avoidance of an intermediate echelon give instructions directly to [someone] far down [the chain of command.] If there is imminent danger ahead and a direct order that jumps over intermediate authori-

ties [*Zwischenbehörden*] [becomes] necessary, these must be informed of them [the orders] as soon as possible.

These days, his solicitude for the chain of command [*Befehlszuge*] must be maintained with particular care because it is far easier today than yesterday for the higher leader to use his many communications means to send orders directly to the most forward fighting line and the farthest detachment.

The great revolution in the security, the capacity, and the rapidity of means of communications brings with it the danger that one [the higher commander] can get involved at a time and place where his intervention can only serve unfavorable ends. The leader located far to the rear pushes for a quick decision without being able to see the obstacles that stand in the way of the execution [of his plans].

Should such an intervention in the sphere of responsibility [*Befehlssphäre*] of the subordinate leader or a change in orders resulting from an altered estimate of the situation occur, feelings of insecurity and the loss of [the subordinate's] trust in [his] own abilities would grow more powerful. Before making the slightest decision or issuing the most trivial instruction, each subordinate leader would seek, by means of the [telephone] line, the advice and orders of his superiors.

This would occur chiefly in the moment of greatest importance, in which, because of unbroken, continuous communications and through the resulting sense of crisis all thoughts and nerves would have been stressed to the limit. The result would be that the officer requesting information would be curtly and rudely dealt with or the question would be poorly understood and erroneously answered. The responsibility, moreover, despite his request for counsel, with the subordinate leader.

The techniques for giving orders are

many. It lies, however, in the nature of the thing, that the essence [*Inhalt*] of orders must generally be the same. They must provide the receiver with a task [*Auftrag*] which he is to carry out with the troops entrusted to him within the framework of the larger unit. To this end, each leader must know the circumstance of the enemy to the degree to which he may be approached with confidence or the degree to which measures will have to be taken. Above all he must have a clear knowledge of the intent [*Absicht*] of the higher commander. Only then can peculiarities be dealt with.

This intent remains the unalterable guideline for the subordinate leader, even when the situation of the enemy has changed and is subject to continuous change. When the subordinate leader must deal with these choices, the knowledge of the intent of the higher leader remains a guiding principle for his actions.

No military unit acts on its own, but rather - whether in close or distant contact - within the framework of the whole [*Rahmen des Ganzen*]. This applies one's own unit. It also applies to the neighboring unit. All work to the same end. Therefore, the order must state which part of the common assignment [*Aufgabe*] is to be fulfilled by which of the neighboring units and on which routes [they are to travel.]

Finally, one's own mission [*Auftrag*] must be expressed sharply and clearly. To what degree the execution [*Ausführung*] should be prescribed can be decided on a case by case basis. The more sure the knowledge [*Unterlagen*], the smaller the unit, the more exact the details of execution should be. The larger the unit, the greater the degree to which freedom of action must be allowed.

Source: M. Schwarte, ed., *Technik des Kriegswesens*, (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1913), pp. 162-5. (Translated for *Tactical Notebook™* by Bruce I. Gudmundsson.)