Conflict, Chaos, and *Auftragstaktik*

Modern Insight on Mission Command Pitfalls from German Leadership at the First Battle of the Marne

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[I] was quite unaware of the all-important fact that the Fourth, Sixth, and Seventh Armies were being held up east of the Moselle, and thus allowing the enemy there freedom of maneuver. Had this been known in time, the idea of crossing the Marne with any large forces of the First Army would not have been entertained!

—Generaloberst [Colonel-General]
Alexander von Kluck

The circumstances preceding World War I—rising industrial nation-states, untested battlefield technologies, and a tinderbox world sparking with conflict—are as striking today as they were in 1914. As the U.S. Army trains for large-scale combat operations, it must capture broad lessons from history that can inform its future. Just as Carl von Clausewitz and Sun Tzu remain glued to shelves of military leaders today, lessons in military philosophy remain eternally relevant even as operational and tactical lessons fade to obscurity. Any number of global hot spots could teeter away from their tenuous stability and devolve into rapid mobilization and large-scale combat. Consequently, World War I holds many lessons for the modern military leader, particularly in the importance of mission command. German leaders developed, practiced, and implemented a system of mission command (*Auftragstaktik*) that would prove effective, but not all used it correctly. Despite their experience in the art of mission command, the actions of German commanders at the First Battle of the Marne illuminate pitfalls in mission command execution that are relevant to modern leaders in large-scale combat operations.

Auftragstaktik and Modern Mission Command

Understanding the nineteenth-century Prusso-German philosophy of Auftragstaktik is necessary to study German commanders at the Marne, since those leaders had practiced Auftragstaktik throughout their careers. Even more, the officer credited with its development, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, was uncle to the German commander at the Marne, Helmuth von Moltke the Younger.

The U.S. Army's modern concept of mission command, as outlined in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, traces its roots to Auftragstaktik.[1]

Defined from the original German, Auftragstaktik attests that "orders given from rearward commands will easily be made obsolete by events" and that "timely action is only possible upon independent decision" by subordinate commands.[2] The philosophy's champion, Moltke the Elder, rejected command by close control because of the inability to timely and effectively react to changing conditions at the front.[3] Although Auftragstaktik initially faced some resistance, military leaders codified its use in the 1888 German drill regulations after its successful application in the late nineteenth century.[4]

Auftragstaktik and ADP 6-0's descriptions of mission command are largely similar, but Auftragstaktik places slightly more emphasis on decentralization. Analogous to ADP 6-0's elements of mission command, the five elements of Auftragstaktik are main effort, commander's place, commander's intent, immediate initiative, and higher-level thinking.[5] Auftragstaktik places special emphasis on the relationship between senior and subordinate commanders and, slightly more than modern mission command, "emphasizes decentralization, commander's intent, and low-level initiative."[6] Nevertheless, analyzing actions at the Marne

German soldiers haul field guns during the Second Battle of Marne in July 1918. (Photo from the Smith Archive/Alamy Stock Photo)

through the lens of modern mission command will enable a better understanding of potential pitfalls as the Army trains using its current doctrine.

The German Right Wing at the Marne

At the outset of the Great War, German strategy largely followed the Schlieffen Plan—a "lightning wheel" through Belgium and France that culminated in the neutralization of Paris, enabling German forces to then rapidly redeploy eastward against Russia.[7] This circumvented the massive French defensive structures erected along Alsace-Lorraine and capitalized on advantages in German mobilization.[8] Initially, Moltke the Younger's execution of the Schlieffen Plan resulted in rousing success, but progress stalled in northern France. Though his army was battered, the German First Army commander on the far right wing, Alexander von Kluck, "was convinced that [the enemy] was permanently out of action … [and] incapable of a concerted attack."[9] However, the German Second Army to Kluck's immediate left, commanded by Karl von Bülow, "had to order a 36-hour pause … for his men to recover."[10] German momentum was running out.

After reevaluating the situation at the front, Moltke published new guidance: Paris was no longer the objective, and the main effort would be the German center destroying the French army at Verdun and Nancy.[11] This drastic shift in objectives struck Kluck as out of touch from "the situation on the ground [and]

Competence. The early twentieth-century German army excelled in professional competence, particularly after honing its doctrine in multiple late nineteenth-century wars.[20] Yet, Moltke, Kluck, and Bülow all possessed shortcomings in competence that cast doubt on their ability to command effectively. For one,

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he decided to continue with his rapid advance [toward Paris]."[12] Ignoring Moltke's orders and continuing toward Paris, Kluck became decisively engaged with the French Sixth Army.[13] He then pulled two of his corps from Bülow's right flank to support his engagement, leaving Bülow exposed.[14] Kluck underestimated the danger in the newly formed gap between the First and Second Armies, which the French Fifth Army and the British Expeditionary Force exploited.[15] Moltke did not know that Kluck ignored his orders until Kluck's army was already committed to fighting the French Sixth Army.[16] Needing to evaluate the severity of the situation, he sent his intelligence officer, *Oberstleutnant* [Lieutenant Colonel] Richard Hentsch, to determine if a general withdrawal was necessary. After visiting the headquarters of First and Second Armies, Hentsch concluded that even though the First Army was successfully fighting its own battle, it risked encirclement. On Moltke's behalf, he ordered Kluck and Bülow to retreat and close the gap in the lines.[17] The German right wing retrograded, began digging positions, and trench warfare commenced in earnest.

Mission Command Pitfalls

ADP 6-0's seven principles of mission command—competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, commander's intent, mission orders, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance—provide the framework for examining Moltke's command.[18] Despite leading an officer corps steeped in Auftragstaktik, severe gaps in the application of mission command principles directly contributed to German failure at the Marne.[19]

Moltke had officers "of relatively junior rank [playing] dominant parts," and he consulted them "on matters of important policy, often without regard to the limitations of their particular fields."[21] Though placing junior officers in positions outside their scope is excellent training in peacetime exercises, large-scale combat is hardly the environment to test mettle at the expense of soldiers' lives. ADP 6-0 stresses the importance of professional military education to achieving professional competence, something Kluck lacked.[22] Kluck was not a career staff officer. He commanded at every level, but he was the only army commander who had not attended the *Kriegsakademie* (war college).[23] However negative those effects might have been, no direct link exists between the seniority of Moltke's staff or Kluck's education and the battle's outcome.

More likely, the advanced age and poor health of German commanders adversely contributed to their competence and ability to command. Moltke's health was poor from the outset of the war, and after having a heart attack a month prior to the battle, he had no way to disguise his poor health from those around him.[24] Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs would affirm that Moltke could not achieve professional competence without an acceptable degree of physical well-being. Moltke's chief of staff attested to this conclusion, describing Moltke as lacking "all self-assurance and thus all self-confidence" during the battle.[25] Bülow also dealt with health issues. He long suffered from thyroid illness, which flared up under combat conditions, making him "edgy, agitated, and hard of hearing."[26] Akin to Moltke, Bülow's health may not have directly impacted the battle at any specific
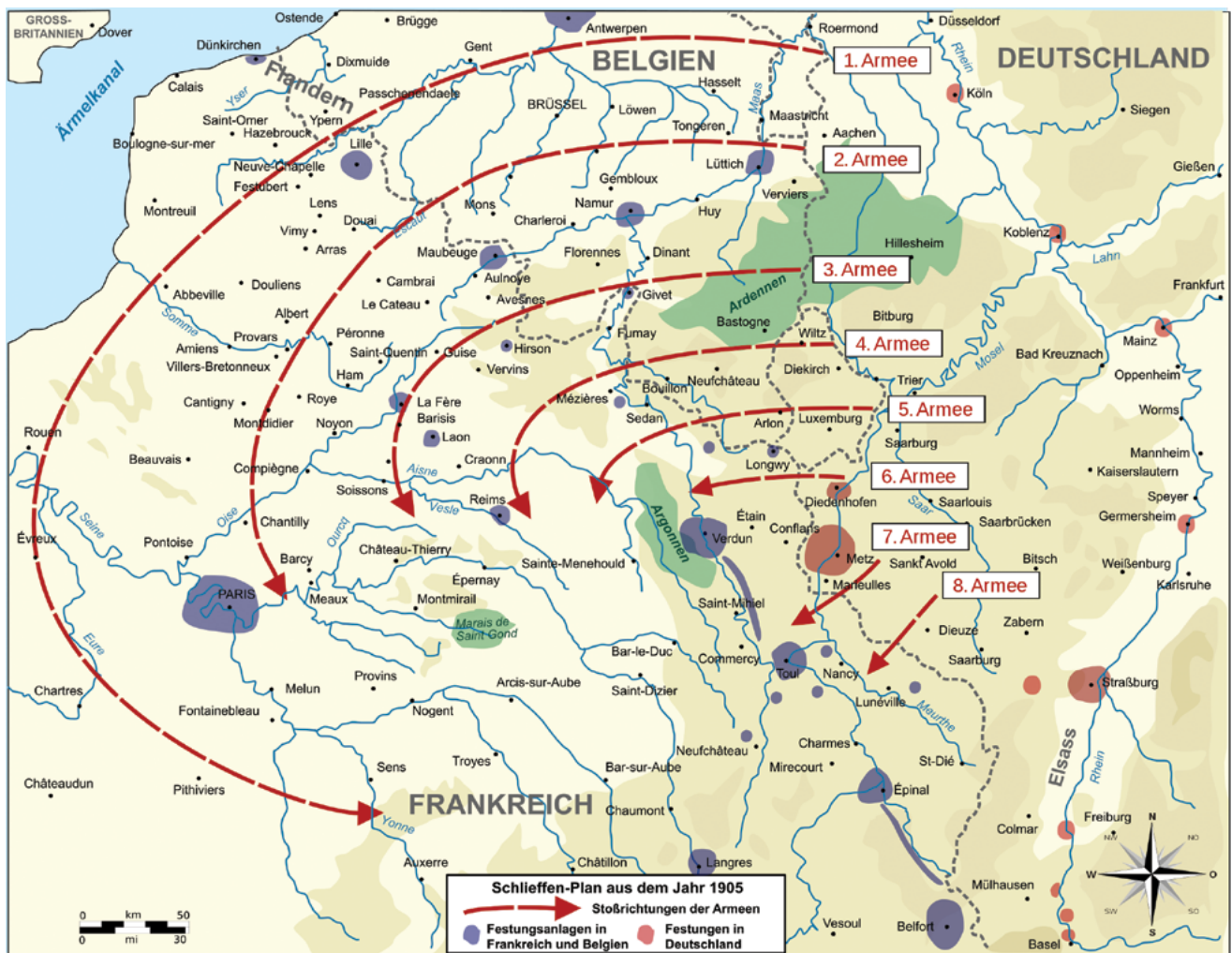
(Map courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Schlieffen Plan of 1905

point but rather dulled and distracted an otherwise sharp, respected commander. Nagging health issues certainly hampered Moltke and Bülow from achieving their full level of professional competence, yet other factors would prove far more influential in German defeat.

Mutual trust. Weakness in mutual trust, both at echelon and between peers, was detrimental to German coordination and allowed for the formation of a gap between first and second armies. ADP 6-0 alludes to training as the means of building trust at echelon in peacetime; likewise, Moltke remained firm that "staff rides and war games had sufficiently honed [his commanders'] skills at interaction and cooperation."[27] Importantly, Moltke opined that training *sufficiently* honed his trust in subordinates. After signing orders, Moltke "rigidly observed the policy [of Auftragstaktik]

… and contented himself with a passive role."[28] Moltke placed abundant trust in his subordinate commanders to execute guidance with minimal interference, but mission command is only effective with *mutual* trust. Kluck famously defied Moltke's orders partly because he chafed at Moltke's prudent approach and did not trust Moltke's decision to subordinate his role to that of a flank guard.[29] While Moltke trusted that Kluck would dutifully fulfill his intent, Kluck's distrust of his commander fueled his defiance and opened a gap in the German lines. Functional trust between peer commanders could have mitigated the imbalanced trust between echelons, but Bülow and Kluck clashed to the point of overt distrust.

Although effective and charismatic generals in their own right, Kluck and Bülow could not build the mutual

trust necessary to coordinate operations and prevent a breach in the German right flank. ADP 6-0 places special emphasis on trusting the initiative of adjacent commanders and synchronizing actions to ensure all forces meet the overall intent.[30] Fundamentally, Bülow was a cautious commander and Kluck was a "thruster," which laid the foundation for their mutual distrust.[31] Bülow describes Kluck's "insistence" with winning his individual battle as the reason the "entire English and fifth army could break through unhindered."[32] Meanwhile, Kluck's resentment for Bülow's slower pace reached a fever pitch as Bülow retreated forces to protect his flank—an act that Kluck deemed as "[snatching] away a victory within [his] grasp."[33] Neither Kluck nor Bülow wished to see eye-to-eye with his peer, and each considered the other either too aggressive or too conservative. Kluck had no confidence that Bülow's operational concept would defeat the French, and Bülow could not tolerate Kluck's rash maneuvers. With both commanders entrenched in their own ideas, a gap in peer trust formed that both foreshadowed and manifested the physical gap formed in the German right flank.

Shared understanding. Breakdown in shared understanding and its resultant impact on decision-making was perhaps most critical to the German outcome at the Marne. Effective shared understanding rests on a bedrock of collaboration that allows for critical and creative problem solving.[34] The animosity between Kluck and Bülow corroded their willingness to collaborate on shared problems. Kluck's readiness to abandon coordination with Bülow surfaced after Moltke's General Directive of 27 August. Kluck became a "free agent, released from the galling restraint of his arrogant colleague and [he] enjoyed a liberty of which he made full use."[35] Similarly, when Bülow noticed a breach in the lines and began to retrograde, he did so "characteristically without consulting either his colleagues or his superiors."[36] In a collaborative environment Kluck and Bülow could have worked together to reinforce the seam between their armies. Alternatively,

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collaborating with Moltke may have enabled a separate solution. Despite the pervasive enmity, collaboration would have only been possible with effective communication.

German leaders at the Marne relied too heavily on the radio, an immature technology, to communicate and build shared understanding. In his later works, Moltke the Elder "warned about the negative influence of the telegraph on the initiative of commanders on the front," a warning his nephew disregarded.[37] Moltke the Younger was content to remain at his headquarters in Luxembourg; meanwhile, scant "communication existed between [Moltke's] headquarters and the three right wing armies, or between these armies themselves."[38] With no regular network of runners, aircraft, or liaisons, Moltke's headquarters relied almost entirely on radio, still in a state of "mechanical imperfection," to communicate with subordinate armies.[39] Radio technology at the time possessed little bandwidth, was entirely unsecure, and often garbled messages. These challenges resulted in "the German high command [often going] twenty-four hours or even longer with no news at all."[40] Building shared understanding across an organization with a twenty-four-hour delay seems an impossible task when the situation at the front changed by the minute. Even if German commanders were willing to cooperate to close the gap in the right wing, technological barriers to shared understanding would have made timely coordination improbable.

Moltke could have employed liaison officers to overcome the nascent radio technology and build shared understanding, but he did too little, too late. Upon identifying the weaknesses of radios, Moltke the Elder recommended that commanders use "liaison parties" to facilitate information flow between units.[41] Moltke the Younger, however, had "no system of liaison officers" at the Marne.[42] Moltke's only notable application of a liaison officer was when he dispatched Hentsch to the front upon learning of a potential breach in the German right wing.[43] Hentsch was an effective liaison, and Moltke empowered him to use judgment to assess the situation and direct the First and Second Armies to close the breach.[44] He did just that; he quickly developed situational awareness, built shared understanding between the commands, and directed them to retrograde. Though controversial, Hentsch liaised within his scope, acted on military necessity, and removed the threat of First

Army's encirclement.[45] Surely, Moltke's staff included other officers of Hentsch's caliber who could detach, gather information, and provide informed, personal guidance to subordinate commands. Had Moltke used liaison officers from the outset of the battle, he could

favour of a new strategical conception the exact nature of which was not included."[49] A drastic shift in theater strategy warranted further explanation. Without the strategic context, Moltke left Kluck to execute Auftragstaktik without being able to visualize his place

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have engendered better shared understanding among his commanders and discovered mutually supporting positions to defeat the enemy. In whole, shared understanding among uncooperative commanders deteriorated when radio technology faltered, and the commanders had no liaisons to better understand their surroundings.

Commander's intent. One of Moltke's strengths was utilizing clear, concise commander's intent, but he left room for misunderstanding without the appropriate context. Auftragstaktik inherently mitigates the chaos and confusion of large-scale combat by empowering subordinates to make decentralized decisions guided by a unified commander's intent.[46] Moltke's 27 August General Directive is an excellent example: bolded, centered, and spaced from the rest of the directive, he "orders that the German armies advance in the direction of Paris" before explaining the purpose, key tasks, and end state for the entire western front.[47] Reducing the overall purpose into a simple, accurate statement provided commanders at every echelon a single, unequivocal touchstone that all leaders could use when making decisions. By all measures, Moltke published acceptable, if not admirable, commander's intent.

Similarly, Moltke's General Directive of 5 September—which canceled Paris as the German objective and ordered Kluck into a flank guard—possessed all of the successful elements of his 27 August General Directive.[48] Although the directive provided an operational reason for departing from the Schlieffen Plan's original encirclement of the French, it failed to provide the new strategic context. Kluck received the 5 September General Directive and immediately recognized the Schlieffen Plan "had been abandoned in

in the western front. Building on a career of successfully executing Auftragstaktik, Kluck determined that Moltke issued the order with faulty information and proceeded within his previous conception of Moltke's intent.[50] Kluck writes in his account on the Marne that "the application of Caesar's maxim that 'in great and dangerous operations one must act, not think,' necessarily produced in this critical situation rapid alternations in the movements of the First Army."[51] To Kluck, time spent deciphering why the intent changed so drastically came at the expense of initiative. Including a clear, concise explanation of changes in the 5 September General Directive may have prevented Kluck from committing additional forces toward Paris and opening the German lines.

Mission orders. As with Moltke's proficiency in issuing commander's intent, decades of practicing Auftragstaktik resulted in effective mission orders at the Marne. ADP 6-0 defines mission orders as directives emphasizing "the results to be attained, not how … to achieve them."[52] Each of Moltke's general directives followed the same general format: situation, commander's intent, and task and purpose for each subordinate unit. However excellent his orders, Moltke was incapable of appropriately supervising their execution. While his commanders made decisions, his armies fought, and the lines moved, Moltke kept his headquarters in Luxembourg, two hundred kilometers away.[53] The U.S. Army recognizes that commanders have a responsibility to "check on their subordinates and provide directions and guidance as required to focus their activities."[54] Moltke was unable to provide direction or guidance with a headquarters so far away. He limited

his own ability to supervise orders execution, which contributed to his inability to control the right flank.

Disciplined initiative. Disciplined initiative resides somewhere on the spectrum between timid and rogue. On one end, a commander lets opportunity slip, while on the other, a commander strays from the overarching mission. Difficult to adequately define, ADP 6-0 refers to disciplined initiative as the duty to "exercise initiative within the constraints of the commander's intent to achieve the desired end state."[55] By defying Moltke and continuing southeast, Kluck seems the obvious target for undisciplined initiative. That defiance, however, fits *within* the definition of disciplined initiative. ADP 6-0 states that "subordinates are required, not just permitted, to exercise disciplined initiative in the absence of orders, when current orders no longer apply, or when an opportunity … presents itself."[56] Kluck assessed that he could continue southeast and that "the whole plan of campaign, which depended on rapid execution for its success, would thereby break down" if he followed the 5 September General Directive.[57] Kluck recognized, if not mistakenly, that the orders he received were either misinformed or erroneous, and he continued to exercise initiative within his conception of the commander's intent. Defying Moltke did not qualify as *undisciplined* initiative; rather, Kluck's willingness to desynchronize the entire operation makes his initiative undisciplined.

When exercising disciplined initiative, ADP 6-0 directs commanders to consider "whether the benefits of the action outweigh the risk of desynchronizing the overall operation."[58] As Kluck discovered his assumptions on the enemy to the southeast were incorrect, Bülow expected Kluck to fall back and establish close contact with the Second Army. After the war, Bülow wrote that if Kluck had accepted a tactical defeat and rejoined with the Second Army, the overall mission at the Marne could have continued.[59] Instead, Kluck continued to exercise initiative outside the commander's intent, became increasingly entangled with the French Sixth Army, and exposed Bülow's right flank. This desynchronization forced Bülow to protect his flank, widen the gap, and seal the German outcome at the Marne.

Risk acceptance. According to modern doctrine, commanders who wait for perfect intelligence and synchronization actually increase risk to their operation; expert mission command requires commanders and subordinates to manage accepted risk.[60] Moltke accepted enormous risk in his decision to provide subordinate commanders almost unchecked decisional authority. Auftragstaktik dictated the need for command oversight to ensure subordinates complied with the overall campaign strategy.[61] In retrospect, Moltke's fault was not risk acceptance, it was risk management. He accepted copious risk but applied few controls to mitigate the risks associated with decentralization. In fact, as the battle raged, his ability to manage the German position slipped. First and Second Armies began to separate, and Moltke "declined to give a direct order to his senior commanders in the field to speed up the advance—all the while mumbling '*ordre–contre-ordre–désordre*'—before … his puzzled staff."[62] Faced with the decision to retrograde and lose the battle, Moltke froze in disbelief. Even after his dutiful liaison Hentsch returned from the front and described the grave reality, Moltke "still had hopes of limiting the retreat to [the right wing]."[63] Moltke's acceptance of risk enabled Kluck to turn his army against the French Sixth Army, but Moltke's inability to manage risk meant he could not promptly control the right wing in time to salvage the battle.

Trends and Applications in Large-Scale Combat Operations

Commanders at the Marne waded blindly into twentieth-century warfare—they dealt with armies of massive scale, technology that reinvented the battlefield, and chaotic engagements with the enemy. Today's Army faces a similar problem set with twenty-first-century competition, albeit with different operational and technological solutions. Therefore, trends from German application of Auftragstaktik to twentieth-century warfare can inform modern leaders as they apply mission command to twenty-first-century conflict. In particular, German failure at the Marne illuminates three potential pitfalls in the implementation of mission command: overreliance on technology, underutilizing liaison officers, and professional affinity for hyperdecentralization.

A faulty, overburdened communication infrastructure at the Marne prevented critical information from reaching commanders in a timely manner. Attributing those issues to overreliance on the fickle early radios would be fair. Likewise, the adolescent information age is blooming immature network technology that the Army eagerly adopts. Useful applications like the Command Post Computing Environment and Joint Battle

Command-Platform are quickly made useless by network outages and degraded environments. Even more, commanders can easily saturate their allotted bandwidth with data that contributes little to their shared understanding. Ironically, the modern Army would benefit from shifting to analog—paper orders are difficult to hack, acetate map overlays seldom have network issues, and the finality of physical media forces staffs to produce quality products. Analog is not without its faults, but the Army knows those faults. At this time, command-and-control network technologies are too young, too vulnerable, and too inconsistent to be reliable during large-scale combat operations against peer threats.

Moltke, Kluck, and Bülow all underutilized liaison officers and, in turn, their shared understanding suffered. The Army already recognizes that liaison officers facilitate effective communication, gain valuable insight, and influence staff planning and execution, but these critical capabilities often come at the expense of the losing staff's manpower.[64] By sending a liaison officer, a staff section will lose a planner, an analyst, or simply additional set of hands. Therefore, many staffs view liaison requirements as a leech or a burden. In the short term, commanders must force their staffs to conduct deliberate, continuous liaison with senior, adjacent, and subordinate staffs. In the long term, the Army should conduct a cost-benefit analysis of appropriately resourcing liaison officers for staffs at echelon. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this research, but the battle at the Marne spotlights the consequence of undervaluing the utility of liaison officers.

Lastly, German desynchronization at the Marne demonstrates that there is a negative limit to decentralization in mission command. Auftragstaktik underestimated the importance of planning and control mechanisms while overemphasizing the value of initiative and improvisation.[65] Leaders today extol disciplined initiative, and for good reason—disciplined initiative is the "secret sauce" of brilliant tactical leaders. However, not all leaders possess the requisite judgment to discern *disciplined* initiative from *undisciplined* initiative. By the law of large numbers, commanders who hyperdecentralize their decision-making are bound to have certain subordinates exercise *undisciplined* initiative. The mistakes of those few could hold operational or even strategic consequences. Worse yet, hyperdecentralized mission command generates the impossible task of supervising the execution of all those decentralized decisions. Rather, commanders should moderate the scope of decentralized decisions under their command. Most commanders already practice this: with a small group of trustworthy subordinates, allow for more decentralization; and with a larger group of unknown subordinates, retain more control. The danger lies with an institutional fascination with unmetered initiative; it carries the potential to breed a generation of officers unwilling to moderate decentralization. Such was the case with Moltke and Auftragstaktik at the Marne and it resulted in a strategic defeat.

Large-scale combat will present challenges that leaders cannot foresee today. Realistically, the best mitigation for those challenges will be effective leadership and application of mission command. The principles of mission command are fundamentally sound, but human execution is seldom perfect. By examining the mistakes of others and training mission command in peacetime, Army leaders gain the agility and guile necessary for victory. Pitfalls exist and unless commanders seek them out, they are likely to fall victim. History does not hold the answer to tomorrow's problems, but without its wisdom, those pitfalls remain cloaked in ignorance. ■

Notes

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12. Sumner, *Marne 1914*, 27.

13. Ibid., 31.

14. Ibid., 50.

15. Ibid., 39.

16. Tyng, *The Campaign of the Marne*, 174.

17. Sumner, *Marne 1914*, 80.

18. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, 1-7.

19. Sonnenberger, *Mission Command*, 46.

20. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, iv. Late nineteenth-century German military professionalism was markedly ahead of its time; the U.S. Army acknowledges the anachronism in its own twenty-first-century doctrine.

21. Tyng, *The Campaign of the Marne*, 36.

22. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, 1-7.

23. Sumner, *Marne 1914*, 14.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 84.

26. Herwig, *The Marne*, 280.

27. Ibid., 122; ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, 1-8.

28. Tyng, *The Campaign of the Marne*, 267.

29. Sumner, *Marne 1914*, 14, 27.

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60. ADP 6-0, *Mission Command*, 1-14.

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