

## Leading the Troops: A German Manual of 1933

reviewed by Dr. Williamson Murray

**DIE TRUPPENFÜHRUNG: Doctrine and Battlefield Effectiveness.  
The German Field Service Regulations, 1933. Not available for sale.**

In the early 1920s the German Army carried out a thorough and searching examination of its performance in the last war. The army's commander in chief, Gen Hans von Seeckt, established no less than 57 different committees to study what had gone wrong (as well as right) on the battlefields of Western Europe. Seeckt and his subordinates then used that extensive lessons-learned analysis as the basis for two doctrinal statements that codified what had been learned (published in the early 1920s). In the early 1930s three senior Reichswehr generals, Werner von Fritsch, Ludwig Beck, and Otto von Stulpnägel, then reworked the initial manuals into a more coherent and thorough exposition of the German understanding of war. Fritsch would soon take over the position of Commander in Chief of the German Army, while Beck would become the army's chief of staff until 1938. The position of these two authors in the German military hierarchy, as well as their obvious concern for the intellectual preparation of the officer corps, says a great deal about the priorities of those at the head of the German Army in the early 1930s.

The resulting manual, entitled *Die Truppenführung*, formed the basis for the German Army's conduct of war at the operational and tactical levels throughout World War II. It remains the most influential doctrinal manual ever written and to a considerable extent explains the extraordinary battlefield performance of German ground forces in Hitler's wars of conquest. It also represents one of the most thoughtful examinations of the

conduct of operations and leadership ever written. Thus, *Die Truppenführung* should be of considerable interest to Marines as they confront the challenges of the next century.

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**“The emptiness of the battlefield demands leaders willing to think and act in an independent fashion—men who as they consider each situation, will act in a bold and decisive fashion.”**

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*Die Truppenführung* begins with a simple set of propositions that encapsulate the German understanding of the fundamental nature of war:

- The conduct of war is an art, depending upon free, creative activity, scientifically grounded. It makes the highest demands on the individual.
- The conduct of war is based on continuous development. New means of warfare call forth ever changing employment. [Such new means] must be anticipated and their influence must be correctly estimated and quickly utilized.
- Situations in war are of unlimited variety. They change often and suddenly and are only rarely discernible at an early point. Incalculable elements are often of great influence. The independent will of the enemy is pitted against ours. Frictions and mistakes are everyday occurrences.
- War is the severest test of spiri-

tual and bodily strength. In war character outweighs intellect [and appearances]. Many stand forth on the field of battle who in peacetime would remain unnoticed.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning *Die Truppenführung* emphasizes the nonlinear aspects of war. War is much more than technology or technological change. It demands the most serious intellectual and physical preparation. And it is a contest in which the enemy attempts to kill, maim, and destroy us. That only serves to maximize the frictions of getting large numbers of individuals to do our bidding.

In their concise introduction, Beck and Fritsch made clear a Clausewitzian view of war at the tactical and operational levels. It was not that they were students of Clausewitz; in fact there is considerable evidence that Clausewitz was not even read at the Kriegsakademie.<sup>2</sup> But the understanding that Clausewitz had brought to German thinking about war, and particularly his influence on the elder Moltke, were clearly still influencing the thinking of the generation that had fought World War I, at least as far as thinking about the battlefield was concerned. The tragedy for the German nation was that Clausewitz's sharp thinking about the strategic and political levels of war remained entirely absent from German military thinking in the 1920s and 1930s (as well as in World War I).

Not surprisingly, the first specific area that *Die Truppenführung* emphasizes is leadership.

In every situation leaders must exert, without evasion of responsibility, their whole personality. Willing and joyful acceptance of all responsibilities is the distinguishing characteristic of all leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Further on, the manual is even more explicit about the need for leadership:

The emptiness of the battlefield demands leaders willing to think and act in an independent fashion—men who as they consider each situation, will act in a bold and decisive fashion.<sup>4</sup>

The crucial elements in success are “boldness and daring.”<sup>5</sup>

Because the Germans believed that war involves a contest against an opponent who can act on his own and because it is also suffused with fear, ambiguity, and uncertainty at every level, they gave particular emphasis to independent decisionmaking on the battlefield. Officers and soldiers were expected to act on their own when the situation called for independent action:

Obscurity [and ambiguity] are the basic [conditions] of war. Seldom will one have exact information on the enemy. Clarification of [what is happening on the other side of the hill] is a self-evident necessity. However, to wait in the midst of intense combat for the situation to clarify, [is more often than not] a sign of weak, rather than strong, leadership.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, subordinates were expected to execute their orders. "The mission designates the objective. A leader must never forget his mission."<sup>7</sup> What has over the past two decades been referred to as "mission oriented tactics" was the basis of the German way of war. Thus, if the actual battlefield situation no longer conformed with the orders or an unexpected opportunity were to occur, then the German doctrine demanded that officers and men *act*.

[Decisions in war arise] from the mission and the situation. Should the mission no longer suffice as the basic guide to conduct on the battlefield [or should events have overtaken the initial mission], leaders must act accordingly. [Nevertheless] he who changes his mission or does not execute the one given must report his actions at once and assume all responsibilities for the consequences.<sup>8</sup>

The seeming contradiction between the demand that officers act independently and obey orders at the same time was in fact no contradiction at all.<sup>9</sup> Rather it represented the German belief that officers must use their judgment in assessing any situation and *act* decisively on that judgment.

Along these lines it was essential from the German point of view that orders be clear and unambiguous; moreover, orders must fit within a reasonable framework that takes into account the situation, the possibilities, and the personality of the subordinate:

An order shall contain all that is necessary for the lower commander to know in order for him to execute independently his task. It should contain no more. Correspondingly, the order must be brief and clear, decisive in tone, and adapted to the understanding of the receiver and, according to the circumstances, to his peculiarities. The commander must never fail to place himself in the place of the receiver.<sup>10</sup>

One of the more interesting aspects of *Die Truppenführung* is the heavy emphasis given to the employment of tank and mechanized units on the battlefield. At the time that Beck and Fritsch were writing their draft in late 1932, the German Army did not possess a single tank due to the strictures of the treaty of Versailles. The German instinct was to employ tanks as a part of the combined arms battle force, distinctly different from what was occurring in Britain. In fact, the Germans saw the tank as adding to the ability to exploit and maneuver on the battlefield and as an essential component to the combined arms

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**“The leaders must live with their troops, participate in their dangers, their wants, their joys, and their sorrows. Only in this way can they estimate battle worth and the requirements of the troops.”**

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team. Again the circumstances of the battlefield would decide how best to utilize armor:

Tank attacks follow either the direction of the infantry attack [or] another. The terrain decided the issue. Closely tied to the infantry, the tanks lose the advantage of their speed and under certain circumstances may become sacrificed to the enemy defense. Yet they are so utilized that they put out of action the hostile arms which are stopping the infantry, and above all the hostile infantry, or they are employed with the infantry to break down the enemy [infantry]. . . .<sup>11</sup> Artillery supports the tank attack. It takes under fire enemy [antitank] weapons, subdues hostile observation posts or places smoke upon them, neutralizes

woods and villages [through] which the tank attack passes, or beats down those areas and prevents the intervention of hostile reserves. Armored and motorized artillery and motorized antitank guns may accompany the tanks in [their] attack.<sup>12</sup>

In all of this, there was a willingness on the part of the Germans to experiment with new technology and concepts in a realistic and intelligent fashion without coming up with a dogmatic theory that would limit the potential of new capabilities.<sup>13</sup>

Towards the end of the manual, its authors examine the problems involved in pursuit in war. Their first comments underline the psychological dimensions of the problem:

The tiredness of the troops may never be the basis for not pursuing. The leader is authorized to demand the apparently impossible. Boldness and daring must guide him.<sup>14</sup>

But the emphasis remains solidly on a combined arms understanding of warfare. In a recipe for what was to destroy the Wehrmacht's opponents in the coming campaigns of World War II, the authors underlined the larger issues involved in pursuit and exploitation:

When the commander, through [aerial reconnaissance] and other reports, through the relaxation of the enemy's countermeasures, and at times through reports of neighboring troops, recognizes that the enemy cannot hold his position, he spurs on to the utmost the 'will of victory' in the lower echelons, he puts into motion in the decisive pursuit direction all available troops, and as soon as possible advances reformed or newly arrived pursuit groups. Weapons of high speed and mobility are to be pushed forward with the foremost troops. Lucrative missions are afforded especially to army cavalry and strong motorized forces. Motorized engineers, anti-tank weapons, and antiaircraft weapons should accompany the motorized elements.<sup>15</sup>

Again the writers emphasize the role of individual initiative.

As soon as the enemy yields, the lower commanders immediately and without awaiting orders, take up the pursuit. They must act boldly and independently. Every advantage [must be taken] of hostile weakness.<sup>16</sup>

It is not hard to see the impact of such doctrinal precepts on the actions of Erwin Rommel, Heinz Guderian, or Erich von Manstein. The conception and execution of German operations in the early war years—operations that came close to bringing the Germans victory in World War II—were entirely within the intellectual framework laid out by German doctrine.

In the end, the Germans failed catastrophically, but that failure resulted from the fundamentally flawed strategic conceptions of the senior leadership (military as well as political); a general failure of logistics and intelligence (due to the undervaluing of those two facets of military power throughout the German military); and a general underestimation of Germany's opponents at every level. Nevertheless, the Germans did understand the modern battlefield with its chaos, uncertainty, ambiguities, and frictions. And their officer corps was superbly prepared to meet those conditions both by the army's coherent and intelligent doctrine as well as the emphasis on the serious study of history. Finally, in their ruthless and thorough training, the Germans were able to inculcate the conceptions of

*Die Truppenführung* into the troops who would fight on the battlefields of the coming war.

At present the U.S. Marine Corps has produced the most coherent and intelligent set of doctrinal publications in the history of the American military. It behooves Marine officers to devote the same level of attention to the serious business of intellectually preparing for war in the next century as the Germans devoted to the study of the profession of arms in the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, the study of history suggests why the study of doctrine and the past experiences of other military organizations is so crucial to preparing for the next war. And war will come, and it will look nothing like what the new generation of Robert Strange McNamara clones are arguing within the beltway. Marines should never forget in the coming debates with the other Services over preparations for war in the next century, the opening words of *Die Truppenführung*:

The conduct of war is an art, depending upon free, creative activity, scientifically grounded. It makes the highest demands on the individual.<sup>17</sup>

## TRUPPENFÜHRUNG (Troop Leading) The German Field Service Regulations of 1933

*The following is the translated introduction to the manual.*

### Introduction

1. The conduct of war is an art, dependent upon free, creative activity, scientifically grounded. It makes the highest demands on the personality.
2. The conduct of war is based on continuous development. New means of warfare call forth ever-changing employment. Their use

must be anticipated; their influence must be correctly estimated and quickly utilized.

3. Situations in war are of unlimited variety. They change often and suddenly and only rarely are from the first discernible. Incalculable elements are often of great influence.

The independent will of the enemy is

pitted against ours. Friction and mistakes are everyday occurrences.

4. The teaching of the conduct of war cannot be concentrated exhaustively in regulations. The principles so enunciated must be employed in accordance with the situation. Simplicity of conduct, logically carried through, will most surely attain the objective.

5. War is the severest test of spiritual and bodily strength. In war, character outweighs intellect. Many stand forth on the field of battle who in peace would remain unnoticed.

6. Armies as well as lesser units demand leaders of good judgment, [leaders who are] clear thinking and farseeing, leaders with independence and decisive resolution,

### Notes

1. *Die Truppenführung* (Berlin, 1933), Paragraphs, 1, 2, 3, and 5.
2. See in particular the letter from Gen Geyer von Schweppenburg to Basil Liddell Hart after World War II. King's College, Liddell Hart Archives.
3. *Die Truppenführung*, paragraph 9.
4. *Ibid.*, paragraph 10.
5. *Ibid.*, paragraph 27.
6. *Ibid.*, paragraph 36.
7. *Ibid.*, paragraph 36.
8. *Ibid.*, paragraph 37.
9. As far as mission type orders, the manual indicates that "orders may bind in so far as they correspond to the situation and its conditions. Still, it is often necessary to issue orders in certain situations." *Ibid.*, paragraph 75.
10. *Ibid.*, paragraph 73.
11. *Ibid.*, paragraph 339.
12. *Ibid.*, paragraph 340.
13. For a comparative examination of the process of innovation through which three major European armies examined the potential of armored warfare, see Williamson Murray, "Armored Warfare," in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, ed. by Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett (Cambridge, 1996), chapter 1.
14. *Die Truppenführung*, paragraph 410.
15. *Ibid.*, paragraph 413.
16. *Ibid.*, paragraph 415.
17. *Ibid.*, paragraph 1.



>Dr. Murray is a professor emeritus of history from Ohio State University and a former Charles Lindbergh Fellow at the National Air and Space Museum, Washington, DC.