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The Intelligently Disobedient Soldier

by Professor Lloyd Clark, Centre for Army Leadership

On the theme of 'Moral Courage and Human Behaviours In Leadership'

1800hrs 13 May 1940, France, south of Sedan by the River Meuse:

Having survived a hail of French machine gun fire during his river crossing at the head of 10th Panzer Division, Sergeant Walther Rubarth's 11-man team fought their way through several defensive lines to reach its objective. The NCO was then faced with two options, either obey his orders to go firm and await reinforcement, or disobey them and exploit his success. Squatting on the edge of an enemy trench to survey the Stuka devastated landscape, Rubarth was joined by an infantry officer who barked an order to establish a defensive position. Rubarth dissented saying that the neighbouring 1st Panzer Division had stalled on the river bank and that his team were in an excellent position to get behind the defenders trapping their sister division. After a brief discussion (during which the officer lost the argument that 1st Panzer Division was not their concern) he agreed to the new course of action. Within the minute Rubarth had briefed his men and they were setting out on their new mission.

The sergeant's attack was a success. It created such destructive chaos that it unlocked the heart of the French defences and had decisive operational significance. It was precisely for this reason that the Wehrmacht had endeavoured to normalise such moral courage and why its elite all-arms (panzer) formations were so happy to encourage it. Despite the Treaty of Versailles crushing the size and capability of the German Army, the high command had used the helpful climate within the nation and the armed forces to carefully, shrewdly and tacitly rebuild. A succession of service heads had fermented a nurturing but demanding culture based on intellectual development through curiosity, critical thinking, imagination and open-mindedness. It embraced new technologies and radical military thinking while putting an emphasis on the production of two types of leader, those best suited to drive the army in peacetime and those that had potential to excel in war-fighting. In this way, the German Army not only survived near death, but quickly acquired vigorous new life.

The massive growth of the Wehrmacht after the reintroduction of conscription was not conducive to the infusing of a deep professionalism in all, but by 1940 the decision to defy an order was consistent with all ranks education and training - although, perhaps, more challenging to soldiers than to officers. Recently termed 'intelligent disobedience' by Ira Chaleff in his book on the subject, this type of moral courage is not a reflex action but demands careful thought along with the application of skill, knowledge and experience. Chaleff uses the guide dog as an illustration. A blind person instructs an assistance dog that he wishes to cross the road. The dog assesses the situation and on seeing approaching traffic decides to disobey the instruction because she has been trained to use her judgement and avoid unnecessary danger. Critically, both the guide dog and its owner are entirely comfortable with a relationship that seeks to produce the most good and least harm. Thus, although a child is taught to comply with authority - reflex obedience - and this may suit an army, too much deference can lead to the mindless following of orders that can end in the crossing of boundaries between right and wrong (which is why non-politicised troops have carried out genocide) or at the very least fail to produce the best possible effect. The fact that deference to authority is commonplace in armies might make attempts to encourage intelligent disobedience particularly challenging within them. Alternatively, however, a healthy army with the appropriate culture might be especially well-placed to inspire intelligent disobedience because of its *esprit de corps* and consistent focus on professional development.

The challenge of changing the societal norm of ‘purposeless obedience’ was taken up by the Wehrmacht during the inter-war years with especial *élan* wherever critical thinking was accepted without scepticism. The effort required to change relationships between individuals and groups with regards to belonging, tolerance, acceptance, affiliation, as well as attitudes to obedience, peer pressure and group think were considerable. Even so that work, together with that to recalibrate personal relationships with ambition, reputation and personal prestige, was critical to the emergence of a new attitude to the decision-making process. It was anchored firmly in a philosophy of leadership that eventually became doctrine. The 1933 Field Manual *Troop Leading (Truppenführung)* is a case in point, was driven by mission command (*auftragstaktik*) and stated that in all situations every soldier needed to ‘commit his whole mental, spiritual and physical strength’ to deliver ‘decisive action’. It continued: ‘*Everyone from the highest commander down to the youngest soldier, must be constantly aware that inaction and neglect incriminate him more severely than any error in the choice of means.*’

So what can be learned from the German experience? The idea of encouraging challenges to authority was not easy for the Wehrmacht to embrace and only began to gain traction as the wider benefits of improved leadership, critical thinking and decision making began to be enjoyed. Furthermore, although the remarkable results of the panzer divisions during the 1940 campaign was the high water-mark for *avant-garde* German leadership with positive examples abounding, negative examples were rarely captured. It is also likely that the concept of intelligent disobedience only fully penetrated the ‘elite’ formations and not the more traditional and fundamentally conservative parts of the army. This raises the question not only of whether the British Army provides fertile ground for ‘intelligent disobedience’ to take root and flourish, but also whether such ideas can be taken from one army in a unique context and dropped into another. The debate, as well as the answers, will be instructive.

Author’s Note: Walther Rubarth was awarded a commission and the Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross for his leadership on 13 May 1940. He was killed in action during the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

Questions:

1. What are the disadvantages of ‘intelligent disobedience’?
2. How well does the British Army’s culture embrace ‘intelligent disobedience’?
3. To what extent is ‘intelligent disobedience’ compatible with Army Leadership Doctrine?

4. What behaviours from the Army Leadership Code does 'intelligent disobedience' require?
5. How do you differentiate between 'intelligent' and 'purposeless' disobedience in your team and in yourself? How can you promote it in your team?
6. Do you believe that requirements of 'intelligent disobedience' are more challenging to soldiers than to officers?
7. How would culture, education and training in the British Army need to change for 'intelligent disobedience' to become more deeply embedded?

Further Reading

- Burna Martinuzzi *The Art of Intelligent Disobedience*
<https://www.americanexpress.com/us/small-business/openforum/articles/the-art-of-intelligent-disobedience-1/>
- Ira Chaleff *The Principles of Intelligent Disobedience*
<http://irachaleff.com/articles/-govexce>
- *5 Ways to Make 'Intelligent Disobedience' the Leader's Best Friend*
<http://chiefexecutive.net/5-ways-to-make-intelligent-disobedience-the-ceos-best-friend/>
- Ira Chaleff *Intelligent Disobedience: Doing Right When You're Told to Do Wrong*
Available by clicking on the links below:
<https://www.amazon.co.uk/intelligent-disobedience-doing-right-youre/dp/1626564272>
http://www.audible.co.uk/pd/non-fiction/intelligent-disobedience-audiobook/b010pdrx92/ref=a_search_c4_1_1_srttl?qid=1487944973&sr=1-1

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