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The Economist explains

What is mission command?

Democracy and freedom can play a role in military effectiveness



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GREATER FIREPOWER and a disregard for civilian lives are helping Russia to make slow territorial gains in Ukraine. But soldier for soldier, Ukraine's forces are proving more effective. Part of their edge comes down to a principle that Western armies call "mission command". What is it and why is it helping Ukraine hold off the numerically superior Russian forces?

Mission command is a style of military management that gives more agency to rank-and-file soldiers, says Tyler Zagurski of America's Marine Corps.

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them to exercise their own initiative and judgment. This speeds up decision-making and allows armies to respond flexibly, and even to surprise enemies who may expect them to stick to textbook procedures. As long as troops respect the commander's intent, forces with mission command can be creative, altering tactics and seizing opportunities that arise. Its cultural foundations include trust, individualism, innovation and entrepreneurial spirit—qualities often associated with liberal democracy.

In Ukraine, training by Western instructors helped to inculcate mission command in an army that, like Russia's, emerged from old Soviet military forces. Especially in the early battles around Kyiv, Ukrainian soldiers were often split into small groups that nimbly ambushed lumbering Russian columns, using light anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons provided by the West. It helped that Ukrainians had trained in close combat, in which personal initiative is especially important. This forced Russia to withdraw from Kyiv and regroup around the Donbas, a region in the east, where it has been using grinding artillery fire to inch forward.

Authoritarian regimes, like Russia's, squash personal initiative and are often disinclined to give troops the leeway to implement mission command. Dictators tend to prefer loyalty over competence. And restricting speech dulls creativity. Stephen Webber of the RAND Corporation, an American think-tank, argues that

the China's People's Liberation Army, which is strictly subordinate to the Communist Party, fosters "control and command". But some undemocratic regimes have adopted the philosophy. Adolf Hitler saw *Auftragstaktik*, a term broadly analogous to mission command, as the foundation of *Blitzkrieg*—the tactic of using swift, focused attacks with mobile forces to advance rapidly and throw the enemy off balance, which Germany used with great success in the early years of the second world war. A field manual for German soldiers from 1933 extolled "the joy of taking responsibility". Rather than wait for orders from above, soldiers should take "independent and decisive" action. Germany's defeat—and in more recent times America's failures in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan—make plain that mission command is not enough in itself to win wars.

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hand, it might also allow distant commanders to micromanage. “It’s very tempting,” laments Eitan Shamir of Israel’s Bar Ilan University, for superiors to call in “and say, ‘Go right, left.’” American soldiers call such meddling “the 9,000-mile screwdriver”. ■

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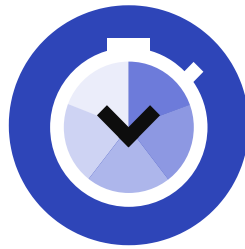
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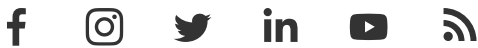
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