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### Abstract:

*This article adopts a realist perspective to analyse the experience from the Russia-Ukraine war with the aim of understanding the challenges related to the implementation of Mission Command in military transformation. The analysis is based on assumptions that go beyond the immediate reality and offer a valuable perspective on current events. Consequently, the text addresses organisational and doctrinal aspects, as well as the adaptability of the fighting forces in the largest European conflict since the Second World War. Finally, it draws possible lessons that this conflict offers for refining the Spanish model of Mission Command.*

### Keywords:

*Leadership, Mission Command, transformation, war, experience, adaptation, doctrine.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Crises, conflicts, or emergencies are often seen as opportunities to learn and transform how we think and act. The etymological origins of the term 'emergency' can be traced back to the Latin word 'emergere', signifying 'to rise or come up', and thus associated with the notion of emergence, implying a shift or transition in circumstances.

The way we understand and process information is closely linked to our cognitive abilities, making it difficult to grasp abstract concepts. By focusing on our concrete, observable surroundings, we develop the maturity needed to solve problems effectively. This approach allows us to blend the intangible qualities of leadership with the practical aspects of warfare.

Drawing lessons from the war between Russia and Ukraine, the largest conflict on European soil since World War II, presents an opportunity that goes beyond material, technology, weaponry, or technical considerations. As a result, many armed forces are shifting their focus to learning from the dynamics of Eastern Europe.

«Mission command» or the Spanish approach known as *mando orientado a la misión*, is not a rigid model. Instead, it is built on experience gained through training, practice or learning and is part of the command philosophy that the armed forces are seeking to consolidate. Key qualities include adaptability to change and disciplined initiative, guided by a clear understanding of the requirements at every level.

The core pillars of this philosophy—building trust, establishing shared understanding, enabling effective action, and fostering strong command relationships—highlight the need to learn from the Russian-Ukrainian war. These lessons are essential to meet the challenges of modern warfare.

Comparing the trends seen in the Russia-Ukraine war with the principles of Mission-Oriented Command offers valuable insights into the challenges many armies face in applying this leadership style effectively. It also prompts reflection on whether it aligns with the demands of modern conflicts.

## THE CHANGE

To assess if we are on the right track, we must consider change and its implications. Our era is distinguished by the constant emergence of new terms, a natural outcome of transformation. Technological and scientific advances often require new vocabulary to

describe innovations and concepts. Terms such as, «multi-domain», «drones», «hypersonic», and «Trojans» may seem novel now, but they are likely to become commonplace in the years ahead.

When examining change within the US Army, the role of the US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) stands out. Established in 1973, TRADOC emerged during a period of significant transformation following the Vietnam War, the end of the draft, and intense doctrinal debates about the use of force. A similar organizational innovation occurred with the creation of the Spanish Mando de Adiestramiento y Doctrina (MADOC) in 1997, which adopted the motto "Knowledge, our value" and is also recognized as the driving force for change within the Spanish Army.

Learning from past conflicts is not optional; it is essential to remain relevant and effective in future scenarios. Wars like Vietnam, the Yom Kippur War, Iraq, and Afghanistan provide valuable lessons and practical insights. Today, the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine is attracting significant media attention and has been the focus of numerous specialized publications, highlighting its potential as a strategic turning point in global affairs.

Although an agreement was signed at that time regarding states' free choice of alliances and the inviolability of borders, today NATO has identified its greatest threat: Putin's Russia<sup>1</sup>. A time of change, or perhaps a change of era, highlights the need to define perspectives that can be applicable to the current Ukrainian conflict and that can be related to the principles of Mission Command.

## **THE DRIVERS OF CHANGE**

The principles of Mission-Oriented Command may be more abstract in nature, but it will be the perspectives of change, the drivers that can make us learn in a more realistic way.

Technology, a major player in the 21st century, can focus us on the use of concrete materials, both new and traditional, but which have a concrete performance in such a different war.

Command action, as part of the tactical function of Command and Control, is decisive in developing operations in a synchronised manner and achieving the desired effects within

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<sup>1</sup> NATO Strategic Concept, 2022.

the framework of the conflict.

Doctrine as a mean of reflection on whether it empowers decision-makers who plan operations in a way that is adapted to current times, allowing the necessary strategic agility in changing scenarios.

Cohesion is associated with the implementation of practices in the field, if they promote trust-building or block it.

The integration of the evolving nature of conflict with the principles of Mission Oriented Command offers a foundation for ongoing reflection on change and the potential for crises to serve as catalysts for learning and growth.

### **Technological driver**

The concept of a 'strategic inflection point' was initially coined by Andrew Stephen Grove, an early employee of Intel<sup>2</sup>, during the 1980s. However, it is important to note that this term was employed within the context of a technology company. In the present context, the potential impact of technological advancement on societal transformation is evident, with the advent of supersonic weaponry, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), the electromagnetic spectrum, and the preeminence of cyberspace serving as notable exemplifications. These technological developments have the capacity to influence critical junctures, thereby precipitating substantial societal shifts.

Our Mission-Oriented Command philosophy seeks timely decision-making, and the synchronisation of the tactical functions present in combat is of particular interest. It is imperative to recognize that by cultivating awareness of these technological advancements, approaching them as opportunities and enablers, decision-makers and their advisory teams can enhance their analysis and comprehension of the prevailing circumstances.

However, should these technologies be considered as having a disruptive nature, it can be argued that there is an implicit acceptance of the risks involved in their use.

The potential absence of familiarity with novel materials introduces an element of uncertainty, which must be integrated into the culture to encourage the exploration of new

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<sup>2</sup> STEPHEN GROVE, Andrew, "Embracing Strategic Inflection Points: Lessons from Only the Paranoid Survive".

applications of emerging technologies.

For instance, Ukraine's utilization of artificial intelligence for target management has been identified as a means to enhance the efficacy of long-range fire and artillery, which was a breakthrough and allowed better integration of fire with manoeuvre. Intelligence cycles are also affected, at least in the collection and analysis phase, but in the early days there was a risk of paralysis due to information overload and our natural difficulty in making decisions.

Since the Second World War, Russia's employment of firepower has undergone limited doctrinal evolution, though there have been notable advancements in weaponry capabilities. However, the persistent utilization of massed forces has not yielded the anticipated outcomes.

In contrast, Ukraine has demonstrated an innovative approach through the integration of diverse technologies, facilitated by external support<sup>3</sup>. A distinctive feature of these advanced military capabilities is the technical expertise they demand, which in turn shapes the profile of the military and facilitates Mission-Oriented Command. This underscores the pivotal role of the human factor in shaping technological outcomes in warfare.

With a perspective of using technology for the benefit of operations, by taking greater risks but, at the same time, by enabling people both in terms of training and innovation, the Ukrainian forces are demonstrating a superior approach to this pillar of Mission-Oriented Command, but this is not sufficient in itself; it is essential to ensure that the use of these advances in operations is fully synchronized and adds to the war as a whole and does not remain as isolated actions.

### **Command action driver**

Command action is defined as the process of executing actions in a proactive manner, and avoids being overly reactive by promoting the initiative that Mission Oriented Command is all about.

A pivotal factor in the success of the initial Ukrainian response was the responsiveness exhibited, which was underpinned by a clearly defined purpose, rather than capitulation.

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<sup>3</sup> URBAN, Andrew, "Zelensky: The Unlikely Ukrainian Hero Who Defied Putin and United the World", Deusto, 2022.

The adoption of a disciplined initiative enabled the execution of actions without the need for exhaustive and focused orders, thereby ensuring a robust defensive posture and the capacity to repel the enemy at all levels and in all domains. This approach was exemplified by manoeuvre, firing or decision cycles.

This is associated with another characteristic of Mission Oriented Command related to the disseminated purpose, emphasizing the imperative for clarity and widespread dissemination of command intent. In addition, Ukrainian forces have been able to modify a threat-adapted command post structure with a reduction of their electromagnetic signature as a way to hinder enemy actions with their drones or Russian intelligence itself.

Since the onset of hostilities, Ukraine has exhibited a command and control system characterized by permanently mobile posts and the capacity for collaborative operations, thereby enhancing the synchronization of tactical functions, as previously outlined. To illustrate this, consider the composition of a Ukrainian battalion command post, which consists of seven military personnel who perform their duties twice daily<sup>4</sup>.

The Ukrainian success in adapting their methods to the situation or even moving away from procedures based on Soviet military doctrine has allowed them to reflect Mission Oriented Command principles such as effective denationalization facilitated by their command and control system, both technically and tactically. This denationalization is aligned by disciplined initiative, which allows action without continuous orders that facilitate and promote action. The key to their success is that they are guided by a clear, diffused purpose that facilitates agile responses in reacting to the enemy. This advantageous position on the part of the Ukrainian forces is a key factor in the analysis.

This aspect combines disciplined initiative with a clear and defined purpose, enabling expeditious decision-making, and this is promoted more on the Ukrainian side and is a departure from the Russian system characterised more by its Soviet origin, which has not facilitated the empowerment of leaders and which does not allow them to decide without specific orders at all times.

### **Doctrinal driver**

The doctrinal framework constitutes the common framework of thought for the planning

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<sup>4</sup> NAGL, John A., "Lessons from Ukraine for the future force", USAWC Press, 2024.

and development of operations, representing an additional element that can impede or facilitate change. It encompasses the principles of force employment and the categories of operations to be executed.

A significant portion of the Ukrainian military possessed prior knowledge of Russian doctrines and procedures, stemming from their training in previous decades which exhibited a distinct Soviet military influence. This training was augmented by knowledge of Western methods but gave them a certain advantage in decision-making as they were able to sense how their enemy might act. The importance of knowing the adversary's doctrine is becoming relevant and serves as a further illustration of the necessity to understand the adversary in all aspects.

But not only that, the importance of doctrine and the normative framework lies in enabling a common understanding that facilitates collaboration in the execution of operations. Max Boot draws attention to the rigidity exhibited by the Russian military, noting that they “act by the book”, meaning that they rarely deviate from established protocols or guidelines<sup>5</sup>.

In the context of Ukrainian military doctrine, General Valery Zaluzhny, the head of the armed forces, pursued a policy of collaboration with the Alliance, thereby facilitating the training of Ukrainian commanders to Western standards. This initiative resulted in a paradigm shift among Ukrainian commanders by providing them greater agility in decision-making processes. As it turned out, these aspects of the Mission-Oriented Command were catching on even though they were not included in Ukrainian doctrine. Among the actions Zaluzhny<sup>6</sup> chose, he sought a need to develop an open mind and to promote delegation for the benefit of timely decisions, which is in line with the philosophy of this type of leadership.

This approach stands in stark contrast to the sentiments expressed by Oleksiy Melynk, a Ukrainian Air Force officer with a background in Soviet training, who articulated the mentality of Russian officers as follows<sup>7</sup>: ‘For a Russian officer, the risk of being punished is more relevant than the risk of losing his men or even being discharged’, and skipping doctrine in any situation is difficult for them.

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<sup>5</sup> Max Boot, «Opinion: Russia Is Fighting by the Book. The Problem Is, It's the Wrong Book» Washington Post (website), November 2, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> <https://facts.net/history/people/30-facts-about-valery-zaluzhny/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/9618df65-3551-4d52-ad79-494db908d53b>

The doctrinal framework conditions the conduct of operations and even the exercise of command, and just as when TRADOC was born it sought to reorient military thinking and doctrine, which the Ukrainians did, but the Russians did not.

### **Cohesion driver**

Cohesion and confidence-building are integral components of Mission-Oriented Command with multinational exercises playing a pivotal role in this regard. These exercises, which have become increasingly prevalent in Western armies, offer numerous advantages, including enhanced synchronisation of tactical functions and optimised management of the operational environment. The evolution of NATO exercises has also contributed to this development, as operations are conducted through the dissemination of methodologies, information, procedures, and other relevant materials. This approach has been identified as a significant catalyst for fostering cohesion and enhancing interoperability, a capability that has been a persistent objective in military operations.

The significance of effective information management in military operations has long been recognized. The concept of sharing essential products that facilitate decision-making by allies is a critical aspect of this. The sharing of these products, in addition to fostering trust, has been shown to enhance the efficiency of decision-making processes. The Russian forces' deployment of large units in an ad-hoc manner was a strategic decision predicated on the assumption of a swift campaign. The lack of cohesion among numerous battalion-type units hinders this comprehension and the implementation of mission-type orders, necessitating detailed and centralised directives, which in turn impedes the application of Mission Oriented Command. Within the paradigm of Mission Oriented Command, the utilisation of mission-type orders is explicitly emphasised, representing a progression that is conducive to enhanced understanding and the advancement of shared knowledge.

The absence of trust constitutes the primary dysfunction within the teams, a phenomenon that stands in contrast to the practices employed by the Russian forces. This is an issue that requires organic development, as the increased use of sensor technology and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) is leading to unprecedented levels of tactical transparency. In such a scenario, the full extent of the opposing forces' capabilities is known, and the element of surprise is greatly diminished. This has resulted in a reduction in the size of units, as well as an increase in dispersion at the tactical level. Consequently,



it is imperative to have confidence in order to enhance the ability to work in small units far from others.

### **Population driver**

The facilitation of relationships between leaders or decision-makers is also a factor considered relevant to the implementation of Mission Oriented Command.

If the technological factor was relevant, there is the particularity that a large number of these devices are operated by civilian personnel or companies. This is a war in which the population and society, both in the country itself and in the international environment, are more than a relevant actor due to their direct or indirect influence in different fields.

Commercial satellites that provide information or ensure connectivity despite the use of electronic warfare by the Russians, or the targeted use of social networks, which are fostering a kind of information community that facilitates the work of the military and contributes a great deal to Ukrainian intelligence, are examples that can also be related to the human relations aspect promoted by the Mission Oriented Command.

These novel or divergent aspects, which have gained significant traction, wield considerable influence on morale. This civilian environment has witnessed the emergence of digital applications that facilitate the dissemination of air alerts and allow for the reporting of enemy movements<sup>8</sup>. It is a distinct form of warfare in which the civilian population has been able to be engaged in one way or another. Ukraine has been able to innovate by facilitating this form of participation, not only by providing information but also by hindering Russian action with digital attacks<sup>9</sup> promoted by Ukrainian hackers and by interfering with Russian networks.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Eitan Shamir, author of the seminal work 'Transforming Command', a comprehensive reference on this type of command, observes that<sup>10</sup>: '... Mission-type command is not a procedure, it's a culture.... It is based primarily on trust and also on clear communication'. The Ukrainian case is producing changes in the character of warfare or reflecting the practicality of changes that were seen to be coming such as the need to adopt Mission

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<sup>8</sup> <https://therecord.media/uk-ncf-more-embedded-policing-gen-sir-jim-hockenhull-interview>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-60781082>

<sup>10</sup> SHAMIR, Eitan, "Transforming Command", Stanford Security Studies, 2011.

Oriented Command for current scenarios. While the ‘nature of war’ itself may not be considered to have undergone a fundamental change, the acknowledgement that war is not a static concept because of the constant need for new definitions or updates as it evolves helps us to better prepare our forces and evolve in the right direction.

Despite the fact that the Ukrainians are implementing the philosophy of this form of command with greater efficacy than the Russians, this may not be sufficient to ensure victory, particularly given the significant disparity in available resources and the potential for high levels of casualties. However, it should be noted that a combination of factors may influence the final outcome, including the implementation of Mission-Oriented Command, which could potentially accelerate the onset of defeat. In 2012, the Atlantic Alliance's decision to enhance the training of the Ukrainian military and to enroll Ukrainian personnel in educational programs signaled its recognition of the importance of knowledge and methodology sharing<sup>11</sup>, including the adoption of the command style that would become a reality in subsequent conflicts. The European Union Military Assistance Mission in Support of Ukraine (EUMAM)<sup>12</sup> is being conducted in accordance with this renewed spirit of collaboration and training. This international initiative focuses on training and education, leadership development, and field practices to promote the Mission-Oriented Command style.

In order for this philosophy to flourish, it must demonstrate its practicality in the context of contemporary conflicts. To this end, there is a necessity to persist in the testing, training and preparation of our forces, whilst also cultivating a willingness to accept the potential for errors.

The Ukrainian forces have demonstrated a capacity to adopt a mission-oriented command, a capability that has emerged as a distinguishing factor in their approach when contrasted with that of their Russian adversaries. This potential represents a crucial element that may contribute to their eventual triumph.

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<sup>11</sup> Boguslaw Pacek and Mariusz Solis, “Suggestions and Recommendations Stemming from the Hybrid Warfare in Ukraine for Military Education Reform and NATO DEEP Programs (Brussels: Defence Education Enhancement Programme, 2017), 46–47.

<sup>12</sup> <https://emad.defensa.gob.es/operaciones/operaciones-nacionales/80-OTRAS-OPERACIONES/81-UAMAM-UCRANIA/index.html>