



## Part of daring and recklessness in decision making in May 1940: what lessons for design and management

Earth Thought Notebooks

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**Napoleon praised generals who were lucky. As such, he would no doubt have held Guderian in high esteem, who testified in 1940 that fortune does indeed smile on the bold.**

The study of the Sedan breakthrough was a reminder of how daring the Germans were, and how helpless the French were. The French were well planned, but in their conduct they accumulated decisions that went against the grain, even against their own plans. As timid as History judged them to be, they also took risks that led to disaster.

In this respect, boldness is commonly characterized as the courageous but calculated taking of a risk. It is contrasted with timidity, which is considered pusillanimous, and recklessness, which is reckless and brave. However, while the fog of war may lift, there are always unknowns in the equation that point to a gamble. Guderian's maneuver is proof of this: what is audacity, if not successful recklessness? The historian recognizes in enterprising leaders bold minds when they win, and condemns their recklessness if they fail. The soldier explains this by the principles of war, respect for which would be like a guarantee of victory. These have the merit of providing a framework for analysis and for developing methods of decision making, but they limit criticism to the space-time framework of the battle.

Now the various decisions taken in the Ardennes in 1940 reveal, beyond the men, the staffs and the context, two opposing systems of warfare. It is precisely the organisation of these systems that explains why the Germans seemed to systematically take advantage of situations, unlike the French. Also, since it is a question of drawing lessons for decision-making in contemporary operations, this article will identify what allowed the Wehrmacht to have the right decision-makers at the right times, in the right places.

Indeed, the Battle of France was lost long before May 1940. The implementation of subsidiarity by the Weimar army made it possible to generate a resilient and constantly reactive Wehrmacht, animated by a true freedom of action, and of thought, in its own bosom. It thus produced creative leaders who not only demonstrated tactical

opportunism but also technical opportunism, to the benefit of overall manoeuvring.

The 1940 campaign marked the victory of audacity over passivity. But it remains contextualized. It is not so much the decision making itself that explains "how", but rather the "how". the Germans won, but how an institution managed to ensure that the right decision-makers prevailed in all circumstances. Thus, it is in the organization of command, which by its very nature was developed over a long period of time, that lessons for today emerge.

**Lhe Battle of France, the victory of audacity over passivity, could just as well have been the symbol of unconsciousness.**

We note that the boldness of the Manstein plan and the superior morale of its fighters made it possible to defeat the French who were unable to move. But if the Germans had not changed their plans after the Allies had seized it, their offensive would have corresponded to the response imagined by Gamelin: the phoney war would undoubtedly have had a less sad outcome. So much seems random and short, in view of the cases studied during the EHT, the path that leads from triumph to defeat.

In fact, two camps of equal weight are opposed to each other. On both sides, experienced staffs, mastering the methods of planning and conduct, innervate hybrid forces that combine conscript troops and seasoned units. Strengths and weaknesses of equipment are compensated for by doctrines that optimise them: the French are not very mobile and neglect signals, but this does not go against a defensive doctrine where everything is supposed to be coordinated in advance; the Germans, inclined towards the offensive, are more vulnerable, but have mobile equipment and equipped with signals, capable of improvising collectively.

Two schools of command flow logically from these postures. The French one, by order, was highly centralised. The German, by objective, cultivates initiative and relies on the discernment of leaders in contact. The end justifying the means, the means only make sense according to the end. Condemned in many ways (violation of Belgium, infiltration of bogus French liaison officers), this quasi-utilitarian pragmatism nevertheless favours decision-making: war is not a choreography to be repeated, but a matter of common sense and adaptation. The daring manoeuvre of Lieutenant-Colonel Balk, who groups his machine guns into a single unit to attack the heights of Sedan against the advice of his deputy, constitutes a departure from the doctrine, and also a success: that of experience, of the right knowledge of the means, and of character.

**LTactical lessons learned in hindsight are often difficult to resist the desire to "institutionalize genius"...**

They sometimes take a categorical form to elevate what is contextual to a general scope. It is therefore necessary to look for the real structural causes, which are more organizational.

To draw inspiration from Guderian in planning and conducting commitments that are absolutely dissimilar today is a challenge. If only because of the relationship to death, which would condemn his daring as criminal temerity. The fact remains that he has become a role model for those who look for a factor of success in the initiative that creates surprise.

In fact, a distinction must be made between the impetus given by a decision-maker at a specific moment and the effectiveness of a system as a whole. The year 1940 disqualified French military leaders by inexorably condemning the doctrine of the time, reputed to be fixed, in Douaumont, unlike that of the Wehrmacht, which according to Freyser was "mythical". But if General Gamelin had respected his pre-war plan to the letter, no adventure in the Ardennes or towards Breda would have thwarted him by breaking his defensive logic. Neither doctrine nor means were lacking to the French, but a command structure organized to face the unexpected. They were not prepared to absorb the chaos they caused in part by precipitating contact. A centralized culture of authority, close to management, encouraged the command to administer with maximum method and minimum delegation. The Germans had a divergent understanding of leadership, not to order contingency, but to take advantage of it by connecting it to the collective goal. Here we can contrast the attitude of the French unit commander abandoning the Mouzève bridge while the enemy was trailing him, and the hand of Warrant Officer Kortals who reduced one by one the French bunkers flanking the Meuse. The first had no awareness of what was at stake for lack of being informed, the second knew his leader's intentions.

## **The lessons of Sedan's breakthrough therefore concern decisions of the long time**

They will be fruitful if they inspire a subsidiarity which will relay the action of leaders capable of transforming the hazards of war into opportunity.

The art of German subsidiarity has manifested itself in the sharing of information, which has generated a collective culture of opportunism. This is even more necessary today, in the age of hyper-information. Decentralisation of implementation makes it possible to speed up decision-making that is as appropriate to the context as possible. This contributes to the responsiveness of the organization. General Petraeus, who made known to all his IMs on his facebook page the broad outlines of his vision so that they would act of their own accord in the spirit of the surge, called this "the operationalization of the strategic corporal".

The second lesson concerns human resources, in particular the selection and training of decision-makers. It responds to a dialectic that must combine

leadership and management. Given that total confidence in the tools of leadership and planning, close to those of management, is excluded, it is necessary to identify minds capable of making decisions despite the friction of operations, strong enough to impose themselves downwards as well as upwards. The exercise is difficult because the profile sought is not similar depending on the circumstances. An organization must therefore identify and classify these potentials upstream in order to train them and entrust them with the reins if necessary. The French government tried to do this too late by recalling Weygand and entrusting de Gaulle with the 4th DCr.

In terms of planning and management, this balance is reflected in a dialogue between the chief and his staff, where the role of the experts, who know the exact possibilities of their function, should make it possible to make use of all the tools available, even if in an unconventional way, such as Balk in Sedan. At the tactical level, the patentees must seek to balance the position of the chief by seeking confrontation (of ideas), and not by trying to satisfy his natural tendencies by manoeuvres that "suit him".

## **The problem posed finally refers more to the theory of organizations than to a good**

**mastery of the operative or tactical art..**

The EHT in Sedan illustrated to what extent subsidiarity, inspiring creativity, generating speed and cementing coherence, contributed to the German victory, much more than formal respect for doctrine or the chain of command.

The leader in contact must be able to deviate from it by using his means according to what his situational intelligence and the collective effect sought, but also his culture and some imagination. But it is not enough to bring out the right decision-makers. The structure must be adapted, through genuine subsidiarity, to the implementation of their decisions.

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