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excerpt

EDITED BY KONRAD HUMMLER AND ALBERTO MINGARDI

EUROPE, SWITZERLAND AND THE FUTURE OF FREEDOM

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF TITO TETTAMANTI

Go Tell the Spartans, Stranger Passing by,
That Here, Obedient to Their Laws, We Lie

The famous epigram of laconic brevity¹ that provides the title of this chapter – attributed to the Greek poet Simonides and cited by the Greek historian Herodotus in his *Histories* in which he describes the Greco-Persian Wars (499 BC to 449 BC) – is engraved on a monumental stone and placed on the hill of the last stand of the doomed Spartans in the battle of Thermopylae (480 BC).² It is commonly believed to reflect the basic notion of military discipline and obedience to military commands.³

The Greeks stopped the invading Persians at the mountain pass of “The Hot Gates,” the only road available to the large Persian Army, in late summer 480 BC and fought a battle lasting three days. On the second day of battle a local resident betrayed the Greeks by showing the Persians a small path leading into the rear of the Greek lines and allowing an out-flanking movement. Leonidas, the Spartan king in command of the Greek forces, realising the danger sent the bulk of his troops back and fought with 300 Spartans and similar contingents of Thespians and Thebans to the last man. The last stand

1. Ioannis Ziogas, “Sparse Spartan Verse: Filling Gaps in the Thermopylae Epigram,” *Ramus*, Vol. 43, No. 2, November 9th, 2014.

2. There are numerous translations of the epigram. Famous is Friedrich Schiller’s version (from his poem “Der Spaziergang”) “*Wanderer kommst Du nach Sparta, verkündige dorten, Du habest / Uns hier liegen gesehen, wie das Gesetz es befahl.*”

3. Ziogas, “Sparse Spartan Verse.”

of the Spartans is the symbol of courage, devotion, discipline and obedience to orders in a hopeless situation.

The logic behind the defence of the Thermopylae pass and Leonidas' decision to fight – and along with it the interpretation of the epigram – has been the subject of much debate. One reasonable explanation is a rearguard action in order to gain time so as to allow the Greeks to retreat safely from the overwhelming Persian force. But the Simonides' epigram also suggests that Spartans as a rule never retreated, and were committed – by law and/or custom – to fight to the last for the defence and honour of Sparta: Thermopylae as an inspirational example of heroism, the reward of which is eternal glory and immortality.⁴

Titus Livius, the Roman historian, recalls in his monumental history of Rome *Ab Urbe Condita Libri* incidents involving questions of military discipline and obedience. At the battle of Trifanum 338 BC against the Latins the Roman commander, consul Titus Manlius Torquatus, sent his own son, Titus Manlius, with a squadron of cavalry off on a reconnaissance with the express order to avoid a fighting engagement. They soon met enemy cavalry whose leader challenged the consul's son to a duel. The consul's son accepted, defeated his opponent and killed him. Consul Titus Manlius Torquatus, despite acknowledging his son's courage and example, reacted to his son's insubordination by having him executed for the sake of discipline.⁵ Titus Livius adds that the "Commands of Manlius," orders by which Manlius enforced discipline and which were known for their brutality and severity, strengthened obedience, discipline and the sense of responsibility in the Roman Army, laying the foundations for its successes.

This incident, however, has to be viewed in a larger context. Titus Manlius Torquatus also had a severe and cruel father, Lucius Manlius, who banished his son for no apparent offence, except some difficulty and hesitancy in speech, from the City, his home and friends, and condemned him to some sort of forced labour instead of helping him overcome the infirmity. Nevertheless, Titus Manlius remained loyal to his father Lu-

4. Anuschka Albertz, *Exemplarisches Heldentum* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2006), p. 33 ff., and Ziogas, "Sparse Spartan Verse."

5. Titus Livius, *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*, Book VIII, Ch. 7 and 8.

cius who was charged and tried for his ruthlessness by which he had levied troops as dictator: Titus threatened, the blank dagger poised, the tribune who had brought his father to trial and forced him to drop the charges against his father Lucius. This deed of filial loyalty made Titus Manlius famous and won him widespread recognition.⁶

Titus Manlius proved his exceptional courage again in 361 BC during an expedition against the Gauls when a big and strong Gaul challenged the Romans to single combat. Titus Manlius volunteered to accept the challenge but under the condition that his superior ordered him to fight; he added that he would never fight without order, even certain of victory. Titus Manlius defeated his opponent, killed him and took as a spoil the Gaul's torque, neck ring, earning him the nickname Torquatus.⁷ The Gauls (after this) were so impressed that they left the battlefield without fighting.

The parallelism to the younger Titus Manlius's successful duel against a Latin twenty years later at the battle of Trifanum is striking. Livius certainly wanted to stress the differences of both cases in order to justify the decision of the elder Manlius to punish his disobedient son. But is observance of orders or disregard of them essential in judging similar cases with similar, successful outcome? Was it necessary to apply the ultimate penalty when Manlius the younger repeated his father's exploit to please him, even out of pure vanity? Was Titus Manlius Torquatus perhaps punishing his son because he felt challenged by him and feared serious competition from him as he once competed with his own father Lucius (Manlius), emulating Kronos, father of Zeus, who swallowed all his newborn sons in fear of being dethroned one day?⁸ We know that entrepreneurs – especially with strong personalities – tend to hold possible successors at bay or even deny them any role in their business out of fear of being overshadowed or overthrown sooner or later.⁹

6. Titus Livius, Book VII, Ch. 3 to 5.

7. Titus Livius, Book VII, Ch. 9 and 10.

8. According to legend Zeus survived and succeeded his father because his mother concealed Zeus from Kronos and deceived him with a stone in napkins that Kronos took as the baby and immediately swallowed.

9. See "Der Kronos-Komplex," by Georges Bindschedler and Pascal Rub, available on www.gullotti.ch.

Livius was certainly aware of these questions and offers us one more obviously parallel story to the ones above, which happened between the former two in 349 BC. It is all the more remarkable because it honours a Roman personality who displayed a command style very different to that of Titus Manlius Torquatus but was as courageous as him. "According to legend, prior to one battle a gigantic Gallic warrior challenged any Roman to single combat, and Marcus Valerius, who asked for and gained the consul's permission, accepted. As they approached each other, a raven settled on Valerius' helmet and it distracted the enemy's attention by flying at his face, allowing Valerius to kill him. The two armies then fought, resulting in the Gallic forces being comprehensively routed and ending in a decisive Roman victory."¹⁰ The incident earned Marcus Valerius the surname of Corvus or Corvinus. He became known for his human and considerate as well as exemplary leadership style.¹¹

This leadership style secured him the confidence of the troops and made him the perfect choice to deal with the mutiny of the Roman Army and the rebellion of towns around Rome in 342 BC. Corvus was appointed dictator and succeeded in reaching an agreement and the passage of laws ending the rebellion.¹²

Livius's discussion of leadership, command and obedience, however, does not end there. At the battle of Imbrinium 325 BC during the second Samnite's war Quintus Fabius Maximus Rullianus, commander of the cavalry, exploited an opportunity for action and attacked the enemy in defiance of the strict order of his commander, the dictator Papirius, absent in order to consult the auspices. Quintus Fabius carried the day but only after several heavy charges, a relevant but ambivalent detail insinuating that – in the beginning – victory was by no means guaranteed and Papirius's order eventually well-founded and simultaneously also enhancing the achievement of Quintus Fabius. Livius speculates whether Quintus Fabius was motivated to attack by youthful high spirits, vanity or ambition and

10. http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcus_Valerius_Corvus. Titus Livius, Book VII, Ch. 26.

11. Titus Livius, Book VII, Ch. 32 and 33.

12. Titus Livius, Book VII, Ch. 38 through 42.

remembers that the victory was not reported to his immediate superior, but to the Senate so that Quintus Fabius would be recognized and honoured as the victorious commander and not his superior, the dictator Papirius. Evidently, as a consequence of the disregard of his order, Papirius invoked the precedent of the Manlius case and sought capital punishment for Quintus Fabius. But after Quintus Fabius and his father fell at the dictator's knees in an attempt to appeal to his mercy and by doing so acknowledging guilt Papirius pardoned Quintus Fabius, pointing out that he retained his guilt but at the same time rewarding his ability to bow to lawful authority.¹³

Interesting are Livius's following comments. He tells us of the legate Marcus Valerius, Marcus Valerius Corvus (Corvinus) mentioned earlier,¹⁴ who was as much afraid of Papirius's severity, who was then his superior, as of the enemy and was, therefore, constantly concerned to avoid mistakes, leading to his inaction and passivity exposing as a result his soldiers to unnecessary peril. So, Papirius's dictatorial and authoritative style of command lost him the support of his army. Livius even reports that the men were deliberately undermining the dictator's tactics in order to deny him the honour and credit of a victory – implying that the independent action and somewhat egotistical behaviour of Quintus Fabius at Imbrinum was no exception and probably understandable. Papirius, finally realizing the ineffectiveness of his leadership style, gradually moderated it by showing more empathy towards his soldiers thus gaining back her hearts and finally triumphing over the Samnites.¹⁵

The German poet Heinrich v. Kleist (1777 – 1811), who also had a short career in the Prussian Army and retired with the rank of lieutenant, wrote the drama "Prinz Friedrich von Homburg" which depicts the battle of Fehrbellin in June 1475 between the Swedes commanded by Count Waldemar von Wrangel and the victorious Prussian troops of the Great Elector, Frederick William. In this battle the Prussians won a victory over part of the retreating Swedish Army. The Swedes were retreating through the small village of Fehrbellin using

13. Titus Livius, Book VIII, Ch. 30 to 35.

14. http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcus_Valerius_Corvus.

15. Titus Livius, Book VIII, Ch. 35 and 36.

its bridge across the Rhyn River when the Prussian cavalry commanded by Prince Frederick of Hessen-Homburg turned their right flank¹⁶. According to Frederick the Great's account of the battle the Prince of Homburg was leading the advance guard following an order to reconnoitre only and to refrain from attacking the enemy. The mission of an advance guard in general is reconnaissance, attacks serve only to probe and determine the enemy's strength. The Prince ignored the order in the heat of the moment and let himself be dragged into battle. The Prince's boldness almost turned into disaster had it not been for the Great Elector's appropriate intervention that redressed the situation and saved the day. The Great Elector, after the battle, pardoned the Prince on the grounds that he was instrumental in his glorious victory, although the Prince, according to the strict laws of warfare, would have forfeited his life.¹⁷ Livius follows in the logic of this argument when he cites Quintus Fabius the elder who in defence of his son remarked that no general had ever been sentenced to capital punishment for defeat and, therefore, should not be punished in victory.¹⁸

Kleist based his drama on this popular but historically inaccurate account of insubordination. In his play the Prince is distracted when the orders are issued to the commanders gathered at the council of war, dreaming of his love for the niece of the Great Elector, Natalie, and overhearing his orders for the day. He leads his cavalry, on the Prussian left wing, into battle prematurely and has to be saved by the Great Elector's intervention with the main body of the army. Unfortunately the uncoordinated engagement of the Prince's cavalry also frustrates the flanking movement by the Prussian right wing. As in Frederick the Great's account the Great Elector finally pardons the Prince, but only after the Prince honestly accepts his guilt and also his fate and by doing so convincing the Great Elector that he has ultimately realised the gravity of his insubordination. Both Frederick the Great and Kleist apparently knew the exemplary cases of Titus Manlius and Quintus Fabius. Legally speaking, however, Kleist's Prince von Homburg is not disobe-

16. http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schlacht_bei_Fehrbellin.

17. Bernd Hamacher (ed.), *Erläuterungen und Dokumente: Heinrich von Kleist – Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1979), pp. 58-61.

18. Titus Livius, Book VIII, Ch. 33.

dient, at least not willingly, only negligently because, blinded by his love affair, he is not aware of his orders. Interestingly Kleist also attributes some guilt to the Great Elector when count Hohenzollern towards the end of the play suggests that the behaviour of the Elector might have played a role in the Prince von Homburgs neglect of orders: leading, commanding, managing are interactions between hierarchical levels and influencing each other.

A similar event at the outset of the war of the Fourth Coalition against Napoleon – and certainly known to Kleist who was eventually inspired by it – later lent the background to a drama by the German poet Fritz von Unruh (1885-1970), who also had a career as officer.¹⁹ The Prussian Prince Louis Ferdinand led an army corps as advance guard and accepted battle at Saalfeld on October 10th, 1806, although his orders were possibly mistakable or ambiguous, and the meaning of a mission of an advance guard in general would have advised to the contrary. The French troops of Marshal Lannes, superior in number, overwhelmed and routed him. The French quartermaster Guindet killed Louis Ferdinand while the latter was rallying his troops. The death of the Prussian Prince was a serious blow to the Prussians and foreshadowed the subsequent defeats at Jena and Auerstaedt. Louis Ferdinand's defeat is attributed by contemporary observers to disregard of orders, lack of experience and his impetuous as well as fearless personality on one side²⁰ and to the ambiguity and belated clarifications of his orders by a specialist of Napoleonic warfare.²¹

To sum up let us draw some conclusions. Obedience is never absolute or a value in itself, even if the epigram of Simonides suggests it. For the Spartans at Thermopylae there were probably sensible reasons beyond the laws of discipline to stand and fight to the last. Simonides only says that Leonidas fulfilled his duty and has to be kept in honourable memory for just that. Of course, the situation may have been hopeless

19. Fritz von Unruh, *Louis Ferdinand Prinz von Preussen: ein Drama* (Berlin: Reiß, 1913).

20. Hamacher (ed.), *Erläuterungen und Dokumente: Heinrich von Kleist – Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*, pp. 92-99.

21. David Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* [1966] (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1998), pp. 470-471.

from the outset but whether the Spartan's sacrifice was vain, a failure or success could only be assessed later. In a comparable situation at Stalingrad 1943 the German commander Friedrich Paulus asked himself: *does the fact that his troops are in a position that is hopeless, or threatens to become so, give a Commander the right to refuse to obey orders?*²² The military context requires a high degree of reliability making, as a rule, compliance to orders a necessity and an essential part of military professionalism and at the same time limiting the room for independent decisions.

In any case, the outcome, success or failure, plays an important role in assessing decisions of a leader, whether he was following orders or taking independent action. Quintus Fabius and the Prince of Homburg both disregarded orders and helped gain a decisive success, rewarding them with a pardon. Titus Manlius and Prince Louis Ferdinand also neglected orders and either gained an insignificant success only or experienced failure, which earned them capital punishment or death on the battlefield and a questionable reputation in the aftermath. Qualification of leadership decisions depends on their results.

Inspired by Titus Livius, Niccolò Machiavelli in his *Discourses on Livy*, analysed the two different and opposite methods of leadership described in *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*, the severe and tyrannical commanding style of Titus Manlius Torquatus on the one hand and the more human, gentle, kind, considerate and exemplary method of Marcus Valerius Corvus on the other. Machiavelli comes to the conclusion that both methods have their merits in securing the obedience of subordinates and success and favours the conduct of Manlius in a republic for its lack of corruptibility and the style of Valerius Corvus in a prince because it is more consistent with the character of this kind of government, its legitimacy being based on the love of the people and subordinates for their prince.²³ Only an exemplary and magnanimous leadership secures acceptability of princely commands.²⁴ Machiavelli, however, insinuates that

22. Walter Goerlitz, *Paulus and Stalingrad* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), p. 283 ff.

23. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, Ch. XXII.

24. See Machiavelli, footnote 24, Ch. XXIII, where Machiavelli compares the lead-

the prior strict implementation of discipline by Manlius only made Valerius Corvus's leadership a successful one. Further, he does not comment on the fact stressed by Livius that, as shown by the reaction of Valerius Corvus to Papirius's harsh dictatorial style, respect for the commander and fear of him sometimes lie closely beneath each other and that fear results in passivity, inaction or even insubordination whereas only a more considerate and human method creates the command climate crucial for a prosperous relationship between a superior and subordinates.²⁵

A liberal modern approach to management and leadership doubtless favours the style of Valerius Corvus. It contains the seed of a modern command understanding promoting personal initiative by granting autonomy and accepting independence of mind. It is not only by mere accident that the Prussian army, influenced by Frederick the Great's enlightened notion of humanity, society and state, developed the command culture known as "Auftragstaktik" (mission-type tactics) based on human reason and the individual judgement of all ranks in a (military) hierarchy. *Auftragstaktik* is a command method that defines a mission and leaves the widest possible room for the subordinates in executing the mission and attaining its goals. It requires the subordinate's readiness to think critically and independently and to act and take initiatives within a common basic understanding laid down in a doctrine as well in the intentions of the superior and the scope of the mission.

As a rule, however, the autonomy granted by mission-type command does not allow for deviation from the mission or disregard of specific orders except under the conditions that the situation has evolved rendering original orders obsolete, there is urgency to act and no connection to the superior. None of the historical cases described above seems to justify the independent action taken²⁶.

ership of both Manlius and Valerius with a third leading Roman personality, Marcus Furius Camillus (446-365 BC) banished from Rome for injustice and misappropriation of war booty.

25. Ulrich Zwyygart, *How Much Obedience Does An Officer Need* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1993), Amazon Kindle edition, position 702.

26. One of the founders of the liberal political magazine *Schweizer Monat*, Fritz Rieter, jurist and career officer in the Swiss Army, analysed in an article published 1953 the

Mission-type command resembles to some extent *management by objectives or management by results* (MbO) in civilian and business contexts. MbO, however, is a participative management method based on measurable goals agreed upon by management and employees. Room for personal initiative and freedom in execution is limited. No common doctrine is required as a basis and the intentions of the superior leader alone are insufficient and need to be formalized as measurable goals.

Nevertheless, mission-type management culture complements ideally more formalized and measurable management methods and helps to develop independent and entrepreneurial employees. But there are tendencies today that endanger management by goal-setting and measuring results as well as mission-type command culture. On the one hand technological developments make it possible to control subordinates closely, on the other growing risk aversion of the modern developed western society undermines entrepreneurship and desire to take decisions assuming responsibility for it.

problem of acting against orders. As a liberal officer Rieter took a special interest in the question whether and to what extent independence of judgement has its place in the rigid and stringent hierarchical order of the military. Fritz Rieter, *Handeln wider Befehl* (Zürich: Neujahrsblatt der Feuerwerker-Gesellschaft, 1953).

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