

Harald Pöcher

THE MILITARY SCIENTIFIC WORK OF MIKLÓS ZRÍNYI (1620–1664) FOR TODAY’S CAPTAINS OF INDUSTRY, OR THE KNOWLEDGE OF MIKLÓS ZRÍNYI FOR TODAY’S CIVILIAN EXECUTIVES

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ABSTRACT: Success in the business world is an art form that only a few can master. Armed with the knowledge of classical military thinkers – in the specific case of this essay, the knowledge of Miklós Zrínyi (1620–1664) – you can gain a competitive advantage using classic wisdom. The ancient principles of war are reinterpreted for the modern captains of industry and businesspersons.

KEYWORDS: Miklós Zrínyi, military science, strategy and tactics, leadership skills, requirements of modern business life

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harald Pöcher is an Honorary University Professor (NUPS), Dr. habil., Major General (ret.) Austrian Armed Forces, harald0305@yahoo.co.jp (ORCID: 0000-0002-5147-739X).

INTRODUCTION

For decades, economists have been studying ancient military science books, which contain invaluable information on topics such as strategy, leadership, organization, competition, cooperation, reconnaissance, and deception. The military science works by the Chinese Sun Tzu (771–256 BC) “The Art of War” and the Prussian¹ Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) “On War” have so far proven to be particularly fruitful. Less or not at all known by the community of economists is the Hungarian national hero Miklós Zrínyi (1620–1664), who also wrote military scientific works² that are ideally suited for such a consideration. Miklós Zrínyi is unique in his military scientific work, as he had no knowledge of Sun Tzu’s military scientific work during his lifetime, as it became popular in Europe only

¹ The first modern German state was founded in 1871.

² Among his major works as a military scientist are “Vitéz hadnagy” (Valiant Lieutenant), “Mátyás király életéről való elmékedések” (Reflections on the Life of King Matthias), “Ne bántsd a magyart! Az török áfium ellen való orvosság” (A Remedy for the Turkish Opium or the Antidote to the Peace between the Turks and the Hungarians), “Névtelen level (mely Montecuccoli ellen intézett hatásos irat)” (Anonymous letter) and “Tábori kis tracta” (A Short Treatise on the Army). Thanks to the research work of Professor Major General József Padányi and the translation of the works into English in 2021, the works of Miklós Zrínyi are accessible to a wider audience. (Author’s note: It is sad that in the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy, there was no one to translate the work into other languages. In 2024, the author translated and edited the works of Miklós Zrínyi into German. Pöcher 2024.)

centuries later³. He could only build on the literature available at the time, which was not available at the same level of detail as can be found in the works of Zrínyi. It is therefore in the nature of things to subject the military scientific works of Zrínyi to an in-depth examination of whether the principles of strategy and leadership, which are undisputed among economists today, are already reflected in the works of Zrínyi. Miklós Zrínyi was a statesman, a prudent steward of his lands, an entrepreneurial genius, a general, a poet, and last but not least, a military scientist.⁴

Almost 30 years ago, the author read the research results of Donald G. Krause, published under the title “The Art of War for Executives: Ancient Knowledge for Today’s Business Professionals”.⁵ In this book, Krause analysed parallels between Sun Tzu’s wisdom and the requirements for new management principles. Today, several scholars reference the works of the younger classics of military science: Clausewitz, for example, Mintzberg,⁶ Ahlstrand, and Lampel, in “Strategy Safari: A Guided Tour through the Wilds of Strategic Management” (New York: The Free Press, 1998).

The relevance of the essay, which is published in the military journal *Hungarian Defence Review*, is simple to explain. The journal will be read not only by soldiers but also by civilians. Companies that are excellent on the market are led by managers who must have theoretical knowledge in addition to the *Coup d’œil*.⁷ As one part of leadership, the knowledge of military science is helpful in enabling company management even better. The following essay is intended as a first thought-provoking impulse for further research, especially undertaken by students of the faculty of Military Science and Officer Training of the Ludovika University of Public Service in Budapest.

ORGANIZATION AND LEADERSHIP AS BASIC HUMAN NEEDS

Since prehistoric times, human beings have desired to manage their everyday life in special forms of organization and through leaders. The form of organization and the behaviour of the leaders often decided on the demise or continued existence of civilizations. While for thousands of years, the military seemed to dominate the civilian sector, the

³ The first English translation of “The Art of War” is more than a hundred years old. Captain E. F. Calthrop published the first English translation in 1905.

⁴ His tireless efforts to raise enough money to finance his constant military campaigns against the Ottomans by exporting cattle via the Adriatic ports should be emphasized here; and his military genius, blessed with the so-called *Coup d’œil* when he attacked and destroyed the bridge of Esek, must also be mentioned here. In doing so, he cut off the supply route of the Ottoman troops, which was not insignificant for the subsequent victory of the imperial troops at the Battle of Saint Gotthard (1664).
Krause 1995.

⁵ Professor Henry Mintzberg is a Canadian academic and author on business and management.

⁷ In the past, for example, the company founders Ábrahám Ganz and Manfréd Baron Weiss of Csepel had this *Coup d’œil* or Bill Gates in the present has this *Coup d’œil*. In the conceptual world of economists, the “*Coup d’œil*” is called “hunch of the decision maker”. Many business decisions are taken not just on the basis of data and analysis, but using the intuition or hunch of the decision maker. Intuition refers to the use of “gut feeling” to make decisions rather than rely on a more scientific approach using data and other quantitative evidence, supported by logical, rational decision-making models.

military and also the knowledge of it increasingly receded into the background from the middle of the 20th century onwards. The knowledge of the military and its application thus disappeared from the centre of interest.

Since almost all areas that focus on the military seem to have disappeared from the agenda of the majority of democratic states; the civilian economy, the behaviour of their leaders, and the military obviously do not like to be compared, which is also illustrated by the small number of scientific papers published on the subject worldwide. Although the term “civil-military relations” is used, it does not reflect the intention of the essay. The term “civil-military relations” describes the relationship between military organizations and civil society, military organizations and other government agencies, and leaders and the military. The objective of the essay rather is to work out what military organizations and military leaders have in common with business organizations and their managers.

As I mentioned above, human beings have had the desire to manage their everyday life in special forms of organization and through leaders. These principles “manage life in special forms of organizations and through leaders” are best practiced in the military. It is therefore not only expedient, but it should also be self-evident that the achievements of the military are also accepted by the civilian side. The following chapter gives an insight into how the knowledge of Miklós Zrínyi can be used today for the benefit of the civilian side.

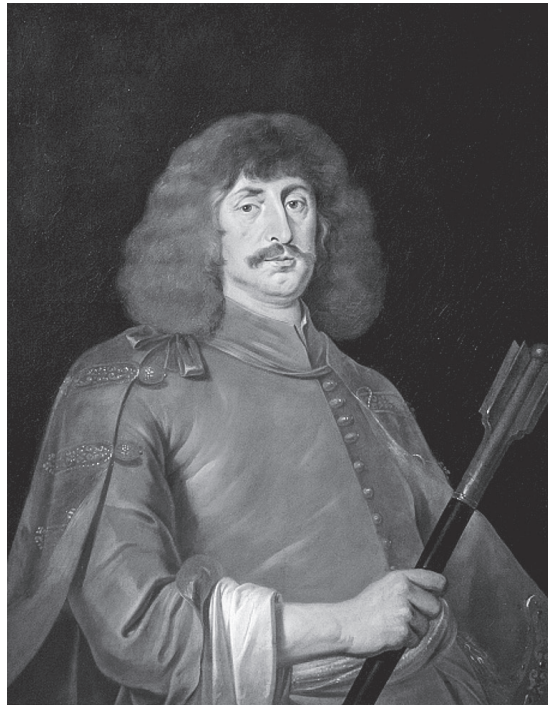


Figure 1 *Portrait of Nikola VII Zrinski (Miklós Zrínyi) by Jan Thomas van Yperen, (Lobkowitz Collections, Lobkowitz Palace, Prague)*



Figure 2 *Field research at Zrínyi Castle (from left to right: Mayor of Belezna Lajos Jancsecz, Major General Prof. Dr. Padányi with a metal detector and the author with a shovel and excavated rifle bullets in his left hand) (Photo by the author)*

STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL PRINCIPLES IN THE MILITARY SCIENTIFIC WORKS OF MIKLÓS ZRÍNYI

Wars, like laws of nature, are part of human existence. This may well be one of the reasons why warfare has always been dealt with not only theoretically but also in the practical conduct of wars, not least because of their vital significance for a given people. If one analyses the classics of military science today, including, in addition to those already mentioned above, the works by the Roman Caesars and the Russian Suvorov, there are similarities as to the factors that make up successful warfare. At the forefront of this is the leadership competence of the commander-in-chief, followed by other factors such as information, preparation, organization, communication, motivation, and execution. Now, if in a war the commander-in-chief has the greater competitive advantage, commits fewer mistakes than his competitor, and also has the necessary luck, he can win the war.

Military formations, regardless of size, should function as a “natural organization”, meaning they are purpose-centred, information-centric, collect information for decision-making, and are highly flexible, responding quickly and efficiently to changes. In economics today, it is common knowledge that a “natural organization” must reconcile strategic and tactical principles⁸ in order to function. For the purpose of the essay, it is advisable to use the strategic and tactical principles that Krause lists in his book. These principles can also be found in some old and modern textbooks of business economics.⁹ A list of the literature is omitted here for reasons of space. In the case of strategic principles, we distinguish between commitment (all persons in a company must pull together), observation (always observing the environment guarantees success), and preparation (solid preparation, long before a measure actually takes effect, guarantees success). In tactical goals, assessment (ongoing assessment of the situation), adaptation (adaptation to the current situation as soon as a measure has been set in motion), leverage (ongoing control of measures), deception (concealment of true intentions), timing (chronological sequence of measures), and pace (speed of measures) are distinguished. Due to the space available for this essay, a more detailed explanation of these principles will be dispensed with.

In search of these principles, probably the largest source in which one can easily find what one is looking for is the work “Vitéz hadnagy” (Valiant Lieutenant). It is not only a work of prose literature – written in Hungarian language which was high for the time – but also a military treatise. The work consists of three parts and two short introductions for easier understanding of the following texts.

The first part consists of six discourses. Zrínyi took as a model the Italian translation of “Le Ministre d’État, avec le véritable usage de la politique moderne” by Jean de Silhon, a secretary of Cardinal Richelieu. The six discourses are entitled: 1. Military science is greatly supported by learning. 2. A military man must be laborious, indefatigable, and careful. 3. No regulations can be made for military profession as for other trades, and clever warfighting consists mostly of the ability of the leader to change things the way as time and opportunity require. Italians say: diversificare. 4. A military leader must always focus on the end state of his intention and adjust all his actions to the implementation of his plan. 5. One must be able to defeat his enemy and exploit the victory. One must choose the right time for warfighting. And this would be the right time to wage a war against the Ottomans

⁸ Krause 1995, 4–30.

⁹ Mintzberg et al. 1998, and Schwanfelder 2004.

and retake all that had been lost. 6. A man at war is nothing without fortune. And what fortune should be.

The second part consists of aphorisms, essentially 128 passages, to Tacitus. The third part, which was never finished and was titled “Conclusions” by Zrínyi, consists of 52 reflections on military themes. For the third part, he took as a model “Il novissimo passatempo politico, istorico, et economico” (The Recent Past, Politics, History, and Economy) by Eugenio Raimondo, written in Venice in 1639. This essay is not intended to be a detailed review of the work, but some of its essential statements are to be presented. As in many of his works, Zrínyi also uses parables in his Valiant Lieutenant’s discourses, aphorisms, and conclusions to illustrate the qualities of a brave military leader. For example, he compares a brave general to a watchmaker. Like the watchmaker, a military leader who wants to succeed has to put all the pieces together in accordance with a precise blueprint so that the entire movement runs smoothly. For Zrínyi, a military leader is the soul of the army; he must be eloquent and alert and set a good example. However, no skill is enough unless a military leader has the necessary fortune. A brave military leader, Zrínyi believes, based on the knowledge that he is well prepared to fulfil his task, wishes only fortune from God and nothing else. This was also Zrínyi’s motto: “Sors bona, nihil aliud!”

But the principles can also be found in other works of military science, explained on the basis of historical examples, for example in “Reflections on the Life of King Matthias”, and “A Remedy for the Turkish Opium or the Antidote to the Peace between the Turks and the Hungarians”.

Due to the limited space available for the essay, only a few examples are given in the next section. Most of the strategic and tactical principles can be found in the chapter “Conclusions” of the work “Valiant Lieutenant”, and there are also valuable interpretations of these principles in other works.

Strategic principles in Miklós Zrínyi’s works

Commitment

In his work “A Remedy for the Turkish Opium or the Antidote to the Peace between the Turks and the Hungarians”, Zrínyi writes: “Almighty God, this is a terrible shame! Are we Hungarians? We Hungarians? We must not call ourselves Hungarians if we do not recapture Várad, if we lose Transylvania, we must even stop warfighting as it is now or never.”¹⁰ With these words, he wants to motivate the Hungarians to think of their strength again and set in motion a process that serves to drive the Ottomans out of the country again. Or, in the conclusion to “Valiant Lieutenant”, in point four he writes: “One of the responsibilities of a good leader is to implant necessity to fight in the hearts of his soldiers, for there is no more powerful weapon in the world than necessity”.

Observation

Zrínyi writes about observation in his works in several parts, including in “Valiant Lieutenant” under point 13 “Local knowledge. Experience”. For today’s managers, it is crucial that they have a good insight into the market.

¹⁰ Miklós Zrínyi and His Works on Military Science 2021.

Preparation

Details of the planning for an army can be found in the work “A Short Treatise on the Army” and also in some parts of the “Valiant Lieutenant” explaining strategic and tactical preparations. Furthermore, preparation includes the training of the soldiers and dealing with historical examples of the history of war.

Tactical principles in Miklós Zrínyi’s works

Assessment

In the Fourth Discourse of his work “Valiant Lieutenant”, Zrínyi writes: “The conclusion of my entire discourse is that a clever military leader should consider the end state of his intention and use means and methods which will certainly assist him achieve his goal and reserve more resources than necessary so that no shortage should be faced but have some remaining funds”. By this, he means the Military Situation Assessment. The use of spies plays an important role in Zrínyi’s military scientific work, especially in determining the activities of the enemy. He dedicates chapter 5 of “Valiant Lieutenant” to this problem.

Adaptation

Among other things, in his work “Valiant Lieutenant”, Miklós Zrínyi discusses adaptation in the Fourth Discourse “A military leader must always focus on the end state of his intention and adjust all his actions to the implementation of his plan”.

Leverage

A skilled military leader appears suddenly where the competition must rush to defend against him. He occupies places where the competition least expects to find him. Without going into further detail here, Zrínyi mentions in several descriptions the importance of the commander’s right choice of place in order to be able to control the battle in the best possible way. In today’s business, the place of the manager no longer has the same importance as the place of the commander had in the time of Zrínyi.

Deception

In his work “Valiant Lieutenant” under point 76 “...and you need to apply deception when your enemy tries to trick you”, Miklós Zrínyi discusses what we call today deception. In today’s business, managers are also responsible for deception measures.

Timing and Pace

In the Fifth Discourse of his work “Valiant Lieutenant”, the following title can be found: “One must be able to defeat his enemy and exploit the victory. One must choose the right time for warfighting. And this would be the right time to wage a war against the Ottomans and retake all that had been lost.” For managers of today, it matters a lot when they make their decisions.

Summary Considerations

The rules of conduct of a conventional battle developed by Zrínyi can also be applied to today’s battles in daily economic life. Knowing the work of Miklós Zrínyi in detail – the

author has translated the military work of Miklós Zrínyi into German –, it is possible to derive ten principles that a captain of industry or a business manager should observe and apply in order to be successful.

Learn to fight and compete but never lose emotional control

The competition is part of everyday life. However, competition should not become an end in itself as it becomes risky and costly. Likewise, one must not be guided by one's feelings. Emotions must always be controlled. Competing properly also requires a solid education and training.

Lead others into battle

Like Sun Tzu, Zrínyi teaches us that leadership alone determines success in competition. Confucius, who lived in the same era as Sun Tzu, said that leadership comes from seven characteristics: self-discipline, purpose, accomplishment, responsibility, knowledge, “leadership”, and example. Many of the great persons in history had these seven characteristics, for example, Alexander the Great, Jesus Christ, or Bill Gates.

Act prudently, effectively, and efficiently. Proper planning leads to success

All competitive advantage is based on effective planning, but also on effective and efficient execution. Planning is important but actions are the source of success. In other words, winners do the right things at the right moment.

Know all the influencing factors and stick to the facts; whenever possible, rely on first-hand knowledge

For a successful entrepreneur today, it is of utmost importance to interpret all available (especially first-hand knowledge and information) data correctly. In every life situation, however, there are also uncertainties that cannot be eliminated by information. It is therefore always necessary to evaluate these uncertainties before taking action. Espionage may be a criminal offense, but in the business world it is a part of information gathering, and it is therefore to be classified as a legitimate means to reach success.

Expect the worst, and have the resources to counter any setback

It is important to consider carefully the meaning of the movement and tactics of the competitor. Therefore, expect the worst in order to succeed. Already when preparing for the competition, you should consider that the decisive factor is not how many resources you have available, what matters is that you focus the resources on the weak point. And you should always keep reserves for all cases you might fall behind.

Determine exactly the time and speed when you act

Both on the battlefield and in economic life, leaders often have the wish for quick victories. Therefore, the most important success factors are time and speed when you act. To win, do things the simple way whenever you can. Reality shows that more often than not, complexity just breeds more overhead. The development of complex strategies and tactics wastes time, exhausts resources, and in the end, never works well. The economic success of many successful enterprises shows that time, speed, and innovation are the keys to staying ahead. Mostly, all these enterprises do simple things well.

Destroy the bridges

Motivation and commitment are the keys to leadership. Successful managers always commit their employees to the end purpose of their actions and drive their employees to success. In the process, such leaders must also destroy all bridges that have already been crossed. In order to be able to achieve all goals, it is important to give employees clearly defined goals and never mention anything about possible failure.



Figure 3 Miklós and Péter Zrínyi, burning of the bridge at Eszék; Hungarian National Museum

Just do it better than your competitor does, act innovatively and cooperatively.

Innovation is the one weapon that makes you invincible

Sun Tzu already says that in war there are only two types of tactics: expected and unexpected. Smart leaders use both at the right time. Zrínyi does not make this distinction directly, but there are similarities to this distinction in his remarks. Innovative, efficient tactics do not have to be complicated or difficult to execute. Successful total quality management programs have shown how useful it can be to improve one's own strategies just a little bit at a time. Many examples from the business world have shown that those entrepreneurs who have spurred their employees on to innovative ideas have almost inexhaustible resources at their disposal in the competitive situation. An important factor in any organization is communication. Employees who are informed about the purpose of the company and the current processes will work more cooperatively and promote the purpose of the organization.

Train hard

Training has always been the essential element in getting people to pull together. Good training leads to common understandings and perceptions. Common understandings are essential for clear communication. Effective training keeps your employees informed and promotes group comfort and stability. Especially in today's fast-paced times, training, re-training, and further education are even more important than in the days of Miklós Zrínyi.

Leave everyone in the dark

The best strategies are those that cannot be seen through by competitors. As long as a strategy remains secret, it cannot be thwarted. This gives a huge advantage. After all, the less your competitor can predict what you are after, the stronger you are. Therefore, if the competitor has to deploy their limited resources on several fronts, it will be weakened along the entire front line. The best competitive strategies have no form. They are so subtle that neither the competitors nor the employees can discern them.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For years, universities and think tanks have been studying the writings of ancient military scientists in order to obtain valuable advice on topics such as leadership skills, strategies, organization, competition, and cooperation. With the knowledge of these ingenious predecessors, one can mentally better adapt to the requirements of modern business life and also assert oneself better.

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