

Officer Disobedience in Military Organizations across Epochs and Cultures

Bonn, 9-11 September 2026

In modern thinking, ‘disobedience’ is often defined in ethical terms: as defiance of legitimate authority, which is to be condemned; or conversely as resistance to illegitimate power or illegal orders, which is regarded as morally laudable. In military settings past and present, obedience has been not only praised but conventionally regarded as a crucial military virtue. Scholars who research its absence usually look at collective disciplinary breakdown such as mutiny, or acts of individual non-compliance such as desertion: in the majority of cases, their focus has been on insubordination in the ranks.

Individual elite disobedience in military organizations is only rarely studied and almost never treated as conceptually distinct.¹ However, disobedience in the higher echelons of military organizations can have (and has had) serious consequences, including battlefield defeats, the derailment of peace negotiations, and the incitement of military coups, mutinies or rebellion.²

Non-compliant officers may act from a wide variety of motives, ranging from altruistic drivers – such as wishing to protect the lives of soldiers and/or civilians – through tactical considerations, or political or personal solidarity, to sheer ambition, self-interest or rivalry. Factors outside the military often influence a decision not to comply with orders, such as when an officer is caught between competing dependencies to familial or social networks, or conflicting loyalties to abstract values such as honour, compassion or decency.³

Reactions to officer disobedience vary widely across different societies and temporalities, from outright condemnation and punishment to retrospective approval, especially in cases where the unapproved action proved successful. Some modern militaries favour an approach known as ‘disciplined disobedience’, whereby officers use their own moral compass to reflect on orders rather than implementing them without thinking, in what has been described as ‘a wider and more critical sense of both loyalty and obedience in the service of justice and the common good.’⁴

This makes the topic of officer (dis)obedience uniquely relevant both to historical research and to our contemporary world, and research into its past and present (across epochs, regions and cultures) an urgent desideratum. We seek to establish **individual elite disobedience in military organizations as a discrete phenomenon and the object of a new field of research**, and invite historians (all time periods and geographies), sociologists and other scholars to share their

¹ With the exception of a small number of well-known cases such as the Wehrmacht officers who conspired to assassinate Adolf Hitler in July 1944, or Hugh Thompson Jr., the officer who defied orders in trying to stop the American massacre at My Lai in Vietnam in 1968.

² Eric Hundman, The diversity of disobedience in military organizations, in *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6/4 (2021), 1-18.

³ Eric Hundman and Sarah Parkinson, Rogues, degenerates, and heroes: Disobedience as politics in military organizations, in *European Journal of International Relations* 25/3 (2019): 645-71, 650.

⁴ Pauline Shanks Kaurin, *On obedience. Contrasting philosophies for the military, citizenry and community*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press 2020: 13-4.

research at a **transdisciplinary workshop at the University of Bonn on 9-11 September 2026**.

We welcome paper proposals on topics that may include, but are not restricted to:

- Disobedience and politics: political reasons behind acts of officer insubordination; their political ramifications; how to define the boundary between officer disobedience and an (attempted) coup.
- Motivations for acts of officer disobedience: an officer's conviction that they understand the tactical situation better than their superiors; doubts about the legality and/or legitimacy of orders; a desire to distinguish oneself by deviating from orders; the belief that an order is inappropriate for one's rank or honour; opportunism; rivalry; conflicting loyalties to other (military or civilian) groups or individuals; or even rule-breaking as an expression of power in the pursuit of influence.
- The historical situatedness of definitions of dis/obedience: how did the changing nature of military organizations influence expectations of officer compliance? How did the chain of command evolve? What form did instructions to officers have to have to be perceived as valid orders? What impact (if any) did the 17th to 19th-century European practice of selling and buying officer's commissions have on military (in)discipline?
- Disobedience and military leadership: What conditions favoured a breakdown in officer discipline? Which kinds of behaviour by senior officers could provoke insubordination by their junior officers? To what extent were discussions about orders allowed or even encouraged?

Please send your paper or panel proposal **by 15 August 2025** to Imogen Herrad (Bonn) iherrad@uni-bonn.de or Patrick Schmidt (Rostock) patrick.schmidt@uni-rostock.de

Each proposal should include:

- the author's name, affiliation and email address
- an abstract of no more than 300 words
- a short biography of no more than 150 words

The conference language will be English, but papers may be presented in other languages. Papers should not exceed 30 minutes, and will be followed by 20 minutes of discussion.

Please note that funding has not yet been confirmed.