



# CONCEPTS OF CRITICAL THINKING ILLUSTRATED VIA HISTORICAL EVENTS

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## **Introduction**

One way in which history is fascinating is that it is possible to explain some concepts by drawing on historical examples. This also applies to the area of critical thinking. There are a vast number of concepts in this field alone. That is another reason why it is useful to offer examples where explanations may be based on both the distant and recent past. In this way, we can avoid a situation where the analysis is unnecessarily abstract and elusive. History is about stories, and everyone has experienced one; many situations may even be familiar to some people and can be recalled accurately if they have witnessed, or been directly involved in, a particular behaviour or style of thinking. So let us consider the different concepts together. It should be added here that there are a huge number of them and the list is gradually expanding, so the selection reflects the fact that some are particularly suitable for explanation through history. The actual definitions of the terms mentioned may differ slightly from each other in various open sources, though their essence ought to be sufficiently clarified and elaborated in the following text.

## **The Importance of Critical Thinking in the Modern Age**

At the beginning it is also worth outlining why critical thinking and its related concepts are so important nowadays. The answer lies chiefly in the fact that humanity has never before in history lived in a world so saturated in easily accessible information. However, the quality and relevance of the messages received fluctuates wildly, meaning that it is not difficult for even an intelligent and well-read person to succumb to and believe the large amount of disinformation and misinformation that surrounds us. This is also why critical thinking is essential if humanity is to have a successful future. A functioning society cannot be built on lies, hatred, mistakes or errors, as proven by numerous totalitarian regimes in the 20th century.

The first concept discussed is prejudice, also known as bias. The term refers to our natural tendency to selectively focus on facts and arguments that chime with our opinion, while ignoring the realities that contradict them. Thus, a bias is an ingrained judgment or opinion that is not based on reliable knowledge but rather on mere opinion or assumption. It is usually based on stereotypes, unjustified generalisations or simplifications of experience. An example

from more distant history might be Napoleon's Egypt campaign in 1798. On 21 October 1798 a violent uprising broke out in Cairo against the French interventionists and was harshly suppressed by Napoleon's commanders. At least 200 soldiers and 10 times as many Egyptian rebels died. Several dozen of the actors in the uprising were also executed in the wave of repression that ensued. A detailed report describing the course and causes of the uprising has been preserved. It shows that many prejudices were present on either side, with both parties failing to respect their own culture and customs. Napoleon himself tried for some time to feign a sly interest in converting the French to Islam. The soldiers openly showed disrespect for many local customs. As a result, the rebellion brought Napoleon's unsuccessful efforts to transform the local feudal system to an end. The illusion of possible peaceful coexistence had been shattered; the people of Egypt were not interested in news from France, much less the ideas of the Great French Revolution! The assassination of the able and talented French general Kléber by a religious fanatic on 14 June 1800 represented a sad and symbolic full stop.

One of many examples from more recent times is the infamous 1994 genocide in Rwanda. At that time prejudice-based genocide occurred when Hutu radicals murdered up to one million Rwandans from the Tutsi ethnic group and moderate Hutus. How could such a thing have happened in the first place, with neighbours who had lived side by side for decades turning against each other and in many cases committing scarcely conceivable brutal violence? Tensions between the aforementioned ethnic groups date back to the colonial period, when the Belgians favoured the Tutsis and granted them a privileged position, sparking greater hostility from the Hutus. After Rwanda gained independence in 1962 the Hutus took power and began, in turn, to systematically discriminate against the Tutsis. The situation escalated after the civil war in 1990, when Tutsis in exile organised themselves into the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and launched an invasion to overthrow the Hutu government. The genocide began on 6 April 1994, when a plane carrying Rwandan President Habyarimana was shot down; this served as a pretext for the widespread slaughter of Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The killings were carried out by government forces as well as by militias and other Hutu extremist groups. The genocide was carefully prepared and accompanied by dehumanising language in which Tutsis were referred to as "cockroaches". The impact of the genocide was disastrous. Rwanda was devastated not only by the loss of human life but also by the destruction of its social and economic fabric. Millions were displaced and many survivors suffered trauma and lost their families. The country had to deal with huge numbers of orphans

and women who had been raped and contracted HIV. After the end of the genocide in July 1994, when the RPF took control of the country, a long and painful process of reconstruction and reconciliation began. The Rwandan genocide also had a profound impact on the international community, highlighting the failure of the UN and other world powers to take preventive action or respond quickly to mass atrocities. The result was a change in the international approach to intervention in humanitarian crises and to the responsibility to protect; this led to the creation of the responsibility to protect (R2P) doctrine, which emphasises the international community's obligation to protect civilians from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. However, we can see today that the UN's response is always influenced by the power interests of individual players in international politics, especially when they have the right of veto on the UN Security Council.

### **The Boomerang Effect: Lessons from Napoleon's Spanish Campaign and Afghanistan**

Another concept of critical thinking explored is the boomerang effect. This is a phenomenon in which encountering an opposing view leads to a reinforcement of the original position and the situation ends with a result that goes against the original actor. Historical examples include Napoleon's Spanish campaign. The pretext was internal political instability and weakness in Spain, originally a long-time ally of Napoleon's; for example at the Battle of Trafalgar in October 1805 it was the allied Franco-Spanish fleet that suffered a significant defeat by the British fleet under Horatio Nelson. In 1808, pressure from the discontented led to the abdication of King Charles IV of Spain and the accession of his son Ferdinand VII. Napoleon took advantage of this situation and placed his brother Joseph Bonaparte on the Spanish throne in 1808, sparking resentment and rebellion among the Spanish people. The consequences of Napoleon's Spanish campaign were negative over the long term. The war led to a significant weakening of the French army, whose elite units were forced to fight on several fronts simultaneously. This contributed to the overall collapse of the Napoleonic Empire. Napoleon fought a war in Spain that he could not win. Sometimes this period is aptly referred to as Napoleon's Vietnam. During the Spanish campaign, the French were never able to concentrate solely on the British contingent operating in the Iberian Peninsula; they also had to face Spanish field armies and irregular units, which made the entire mission even more difficult and effectively the beginning of the end. The outnumbered Portuguese army, with the

aid of the British, was able to regroup. On Spanish territory, as Napoleon saw for himself, small armies were defeated and large armies starved. Spain did suffer heavy losses of men and material, but eventually it managed to gain independence and restore the monarchy under Ferdinand VII. The war also spurred the emergence of guerrilla warfare based on hit-and-run tactics, which had a significant impact on future military conflicts.

A modern-day example of the boomerang effect can be seen to a large extent in the Western intervention in Afghanistan after 2001, which also had negative consequences for Western countries. Conducted with the aim of achieving stability, it actually led to long-term conflict and increased instability. More specifically speaking, the original stated objective was to eliminate terrorist threats and to bring stability to the region; instead, however, it brought about a long-term conflict that which has had a huge cost in terms of financial resources. Above all, it claimed the lives of all involved, civilians and soldiers alike. The intervention has also contributed to further destabilisation of the region, which has led to an increase in extremism and terrorist activities, not only in Afghanistan but also in other parts of the world. The boomerang effect in Afghanistan resulted in the boosting of anti-Western sentiment and the radicalisation of the local population, ultimately making it impossible to achieve the original objectives of the intervention. Local resistance and evolving sentiment in Afghan society led to Western forces increasingly being perceived as occupiers, sparking higher recruitment of new fighters into the ranks of the Taliban and other extremist groups. Moreover, after 20 years of war, the Taliban quickly regained power, despite longstanding support for the Afghan government and army. We are thus seeing further problems that impact global security and political stability.

### **Anecdotal Evidence: Hitler's Orders in WWII and Russia's Annexation of Crimea**

Another concept of critical thinking that comes to mind is anecdotal evidence, which is a factual claim that relies solely on personal observations gathered in a haphazard or unsystematic way. One example of anecdotal evidence dates from WWII, when Adolf Hitler ordered his armies not to retreat at any cost after their defeat at Moscow in 1941 and 1942. This order was based on Hitler's personal belief that a firm stance and refusal to retreat would lead to victory, inspired by his own experience in the trenches of WWI, where similar tactics

had proven successful. Although the move paid immediate dividends on the Eastern Front during this period of the conflict – and the Germans succeeded in halting the advance of Soviet troops at Rzhev and elsewhere – the repetition of this tactic later resulted in several major defeats of German troops. The defeat of Nazi Germany at Stalingrad is a typical example. This order actually ignored the strategic, logistical and tactical realities on the ground and ultimately led to further losses and weakening of the German army on the Eastern Front. The example thus illustrates how anecdotal evidence may be misleading when applied to different situations regardless of different circumstances. Hitler's order not to retreat proved ineffective and damaging as it relied on individual, emotional experience rather than rational analysis of the situation and trust in German commanders. In this case, the anecdotal evidence had serious consequences, because it prevented flexible military decision-making and contributed to the final German defeat on the Eastern Front.

A modern take on anecdotal evidence, connected to numerous ahistorical claims, is also seen in Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. The process was accompanied by proclamations, emphasised in the Russian media in particular, about the broad support of the local population for joining Russia. This included stories of individual residents of Crimea rejoicing at the arrival of Russian troops and celebrating secession from Ukraine. These testimonies were then used to justify the annexation as the will of the people, although they took no account of the wider political, historical and international aspects of the situation and were not backed up by an independent and verifiable internationally monitored referendum. Instead, the secession took place in a situation where Crimea was already under military control by unmarked Russian soldiers, nicknamed "little green men" because of the colour of their uniforms. There is no question that this was trampling on international law and an illegal action. The campaign was accompanied by ahistorical claims that Crimea has always historically belonged to Russia, even though it was not finally acquired by Tsarist Russia until 1783 by Catherine the Great. Moreover, even in the later period it was not a territory with majority ethnic Russians inhabitants. Intense Russification was carried out toward the end of WWII in 1944 following the deportation of the Crimean Tatars, who themselves still consider this event to be genocide. The ethnic and national composition of the Crimean population is still highly diverse to this day. The history of Crimea, like the entire history of mankind, is very complex. However if something is viewed through a purpose-built prism it can serve as a pretext for attacking anyone by anyone. Such an approach can only lead to greater and greater conflict. After all, the current war in Ukraine is a direct consequence of the annexation of

Crimea and the subsequent war, with unacknowledged Russian involvement, in the Donbas. To summarise, anecdotal evidence has the potential to distort reality and support a one-sided and incomplete picture of the overall situation, hence its highly destructive potential.

### **The False Dilemma: Choices in Iraq (2003) and the War in Donbas (2014)**

Another interesting term for analysis using historical examples is the false dilemma – the impression that there are limited options where there are actually more. This is a widespread form of deceit in argumentation. It simplifies a complex problem, providing only an extreme solution. It serves to deceive and manipulate the listener, for example using the slogan “You are either with us or against us!” The false dilemma is frequently found in the discussions around the attack on Iraq in 2003, when the public and the international community were faced with a seemingly simple choice: either support a military invasion of Iraq to get rid of Saddam Hussein and his alleged threat of weapons of mass destruction or face the danger of Iraq becoming a source of terrorism and instability. This argument simplified the situation and overlooked a wide range of possible diplomatic, economic and other non-military solutions that could have been more effective and less destructive to an already unstable region. The false dilemma ignored the complexity of the situation and forced the public to choose between two extremes without considering alternative approaches, such as continued sanctions, increased weapons inspections or intensified diplomatic efforts.

A false dilemma also emerged at the outbreak of the war in Donbas in 2014, when the situation was often simplified to a choice between supporting pro-Russian separatists or supporting the Ukrainian government, which was labelled illegitimate and fascist by Russian propaganda and official Russian information, and especially television channels, following the events of the Maidan Uprising. This framework overlooked a number of other options, such as international mediation or another solution in the form of autonomy for the Donetsk and Luhansk regions within Ukraine, as Crimea with its regional government had until the annexation took place. Naturally these were just some of the possible scenarios. This deliberate dichotomy created strong polarisation and pushed the parties and the public to extreme positions, making it difficult to find compromise or peaceful solutions. Ignoring alternative approaches led to an escalation of the conflict that had devastating effects on the civilian population and the region. The example of the war in the Donbas shows how a false dilemma can escalate up to the point when no compromise is possible.

## **Creative Thinking: From Frederick the Great to Modern Drone Warfare**

A somewhat broader, but for that all the more important, concept is creative thinking, without which critical thinking is impossible. It is the ability to approach and respond creatively to the challenges we face. A historical example of this is Frederick the Great's overwhelming victory at the Battle of Rossbach on 5 November 1757 in the Seven Years' War. There the Prussian monarch demonstrated great leadership qualities and achieved a crushing victory over the much larger Franco-Austrian allied forces. Faced with forces roughly twice as large, Frederick drew on his innovative thinking abilities and quick decision-making. Instead of a traditional frontal attack, he decided to make a surprise manoeuvre, taking advantage of the terrain and hiding his troops behind a hill. This confused the enemy as to his true position and intentions. When the Allied forces began their confident advance – assuming the Prussians would retreat without posing a significant threat – Frederick ordered a rapid outflanking manoeuvre. He then attacked the Allied flank using the firepower of his artillery to hit the whole of the Prussian cavalry, catching the enemy by surprise and sparking chaos in their ranks. This unexpected and innovative manoeuvre led to a crushing victory for the Prussian army, which lost only a small number of men – about 500. In comparison, the massive losses of the coalition forces – 10,000 killed, wounded and captured – stand in incredible contrast. The Allies paid for their rash plan and were utterly crushed in less than an hour and a half. The Battle of Rossbach is a wonderful example of how creative thinking and unconventional tactics can overcome a numerical disadvantage and deliver decisive success.

A contemporary example is the use of drones on the battlefields of recent or still ongoing conflicts. Developed primarily for reconnaissance purposes, drones have been quickly adapted for wider military use, including intelligence, enemy surveillance and direct combat. These technological advances have allowed militaries to conduct precision attacks with minimal risk to their own soldiers, dramatically changing the dynamics of many conflicts. Today there is no conflict in which drones are not employed at all. Drones can operate in difficult to access or dangerous areas and provide a tactical advantage by gathering a wealth of information, enabling the planning and conducting of precision strikes. Examples of specific situations include their effective use in the fight against terrorist groups or in asymmetric conflicts where the traditional deployment of conventional forces may be less effective. Drones allow for rapid response and flexibility, which is essential in ever-changing battlefield conditions. Creative deployment of drones thus not only increases the effectiveness



of military operations, but also saves human lives and significantly reduces the cost of military interventions. A few thousand dollars' worth of drones can destroy millions of dollars' worth of sophisticated technology. This innovation represents a fundamental change in tactics and strategy, much like the innovative approaches of great warlords in the past. The deployment of drones is both a response to technological developments and a precursor to the deployment of autonomous combat drones; progress in the military (and beyond) is never-ending and those who demonstrate greater and more sophisticated creativity possess a significant advantage!

### **Consequences of Actions: Dunkirk Evacuation and the Cuban Missile Crisis**

Thinking about the consequences of actions and decisions is another of the concepts of critical thinking analysed. This is the process of choosing between different options and anticipating the possible consequences of those decisions. One of the many interesting historical examples is Operation Dynamo, also known as the Dunkirk evacuation. Taking place at the turn of June 1940, it was a key event in the opening phase of WWII. Allied forces, mostly British and French troops, were surrounded by German troops in northern France after previous setbacks at the front. The decision to evacuate using all available military and civilian vessels had profound consequences, both military and political. From a military perspective, the evacuation made it possible to save over 338,000 soldiers who would otherwise have been captured or killed. The evacuation released 85% of the encircled Allied troops, at a cost of losing most of their heavy weapons and many vessels. This operation thus saved a significant part of the British Army, which was subsequently able to continue the fight against Nazi Germany. The logistical and organisational challenges posed by the evacuation were immense. Thanks to the coordination of military and civilian vessels, a large number of soldiers were successfully evacuated. Politically, Operation Dynamo had a significant impact on the morale of the Western Allies. Although the evacuation was essentially the result of a military failure, it was perceived as the "miracle of Dunkirk" and became a symbol of courage and solidarity. The act also helped British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in his clear and determined opposition to possible peace negotiations with Nazi Germany, reinforcing general British determination to see the war through to a victorious end. In a broader context, the operation demonstrated the importance of thinking through the consequences of military decisions, not only in the moment of crisis but also with respect to the long-term evolution of

the war, where each decision could affect the future position and capabilities of the parties involved.

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 is also an example of the ability to think through the consequences of one's actions. This was one of the tensest moments of the Cold War and left the world on the brink of nuclear war. The crisis began when the US discovered Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, leading to 13 days of intense tension and negotiations between the US and the USSR, with an exchange of letters and communiqués between the political leaders of the two rival blocs, Kennedy and Khrushchev. The decision of America's President Kennedy to order a naval blockade of Cuba and his emphasis on a diplomatic solution to the conflict had major consequences. This decision prevented a direct military confrontation and made it possible to fulfil the diplomatic efforts that led to an agreement between the US and the USSR on a compromise solution. The Soviets agreed to remove the missiles from Cuba in exchange for an American public pledge not to invade Cuba without direct provocation, and for a secret US agreement to remove its missiles from Turkey reciprocally. Politically and strategically, the Cuban crisis had far-reaching consequences. It showed how close the world had come to nuclear war and highlighted the importance of channels of communication between the great powers. The crisis led to the creation of a hotline between Washington and Moscow, helping to improve communication and prevent major crises of that type in the future. The incident also affected access to nuclear weapons and led to subsequent arms control negotiations, such as the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963. Reflecting on the consequences of decisions during the crisis showed how strategic thinking and patience are crucial in dealing with international conflicts, highlighting the need to seek diplomatic solutions rather than military escalation. This is especially so when there is a chance that weapons of mass destruction with irreversible consequences could be used.

An ongoing process where the thoughtful consideration of the consequences of actions can be demonstrated is the imposition of sanctions on Russia as a result of its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This represents an unprecedented collective example of a non-military response to unprovoked aggression and war of conquest at the international level. The sanctions, imposed by Western states – including the US, the EU and other allies – were designed to weaken the Russian economy and put pressure on the government of President Vladimir Putin to end Russia's military operations in Ukraine. These sanctions included restrictions on Russian banks' access to the international financial system, a ban on the export

of key technologies and raw materials, a freeze on the assets of Russian oligarchs and a travel ban on key regime officials. The consequences of some of these measures were immediate and severe, leading to a sharp fall in the value of the rouble, rising inflation and economic hardship for Russian businesses and citizens. By contrast, other consequences have a longer time horizon. Politically, the imposition of sanctions on Russia has had a broad impact on international relations. It has strengthened unity and cooperation between Western states and NATO, which have come together against a common adversary. This unity is still in place for the time being and the 14<sup>th</sup> and most recent sanctions package was approved, mainly aimed at limiting the circumvention of existing sanctions, in June 2024. The sanctions also sent a clear signal that violations of international law and the territorial integrity of states were unacceptable. However, the sanctions have also had side effects, including economic impact on the countries that imposed them. Global markets have also been hit, particularly in the energy and agricultural sectors. The long-term consequences of the sanctions include Russia's increased isolation on the international stage, while Western countries have had to rethink their energy policies and look for alternative suppliers of raw materials. The international response to Russia's attack on Ukraine highlights how complex the consequences of international sanctions can be, and how important it is to carefully consider the short- and long-term effects on all parties involved. Sanctions alone will not end the war, which continues; however, their effect is demonstrably limiting the Kremlin's ability to fund the war to a level that would lead to a clear Ukrainian defeat.

### **Hypothesis Testing: General Vatutin's Ambush and Soleimani's Targeted Killing**

A closely related concept of critical thinking is hypothesis testing, i.e., weighing up the positive and negative consequences of a possible decision. In the context of partisan war and anti-Soviet resistance, the ambush of General Vatutin is an example that illustrates this concept. Respected and with great strategic capabilities, General Nikolai Vatutin was one of the key Soviet military commanders during WWII and was among the victors at Stalingrad and Kursk. He was most likely ambushed and mortally wounded by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) on 29 February 1944 in western Ukraine. Vatutin decided at his own initiative to move overland through dangerous territory, clearly underestimating reconnaissance in the process. Moreover, the general used only a limited escort with a view to reaching

headquarters at the front as quickly as possible. After being transported from the scene of the conflict, Vatutin died of his wounds in hospital on 15 April 1944. This incident can be seen as a possible targeted effort by the UPA to eliminate high-ranking Soviet commanders, despite the still not fully clarified circumstances of the case and the opaque dynamic situation during this period. This could have helped weaken Soviet control over Ukraine and further strengthen the UPA's position in the struggle for the country's independence. The pluses of this solution included first and foremost a boost to the morale and prestige of the UPA. A successful attack on such a prominent figure as General Vatutin could have encouraged other members of the resistance and gained wider support among the Ukrainian population. Moreover, this act sent a strong signal to the Soviet authorities about the UPA's capabilities and determination. On the other hand, the downsides of this solution included harsh reprisals by Soviet forces, which led to widespread repression and increased military activity against the UPA and the civilian population. This attack may also have served Soviet propaganda, which portrayed the UPA exclusively as dangerous terrorists and nationalist elements, with far-reaching consequences. Testing hypotheses in this context therefore shows how complex the consequences of strategic decisions in guerrilla warfare can be. While the elimination of key enemy leaders may bring short-term tactical advantages and psychological effects, it may also lead to the likes of heavy casualties and increased enemy reprisals. This case highlights the need to carefully consider all possible consequences and risks when planning and executing such actions.

The January 2020 killing of General Qasem Soleimani by the administration of US president Donald Trump represents a significant contemporary example of hypothesis testing, involving the pros and cons of the decision. General Soleimani, who was the commander of the country's elite Quds Force, was considered a key figure in Iran's foreign policy and military operations in the Middle East. The Trump administration decided to carry out a targeted drone strike on Soleimani at Baghdad airport, justified as a precautionary measure to protect American lives and interests from the imminent threat Soleimani was seen as posing. The pluses of this solution included the wiping out of a key leader who was responsible for coordinating Iranian military operations in the region, potentially weakening Iran's ability to conduct strikes and terrorist activities against the US and its allies. With this move, the Trump administration also sent a strong signal that it was willing to take tough and direct action against those it considered a threat. On the other hand, the downside of this decision included the risk of escalating the conflict with Iran, which could have sparked a wider war in the

region. The attack was followed by retaliatory missile attacks by Iran on US bases in Iraq, which further ramped up tensions in the Middle East. The killing of Soleimani also drew international criticism and concerns about violations of international law and Iraqi sovereignty. The move intensified anti-American sentiment. Iranian propaganda stressed the need to rally the Iranian population around its leadership after the loss of a popular and respected general, which may have paradoxically temporarily strengthened the Iranian regime's position. The taking out of Soleimani highlights the complexities and risks associated with decisions on targeted killings in international politics. While they may bring certain tactical advantages and deter adversaries, they can also lead to unpredictable and long-term consequences that can worsen the security situation and international relations.

### **Estimating Potential Risks: Operation Mercury and Conflicts in the Sahel Region**

Another, related critical thinking concept in this category is estimation of potential risks, i.e. the ability to recognise risk scenarios and their possible impacts and consequences. A historical example is Operation Mercury, the German landing on Crete in May–June 1941. What actually happened in the end with regard to the outcome of the operation and its risks? The German operation, which began on May 20, 1941, focused on the rapid conquest of Crete via an airborne operation. The main German architect of the plan to conquer Crete using paratroopers, General Kurt Student, and other commanders had to consider numerous risks, including resistance from British and Greek forces, and the logistical challenges associated with a large-scale landing. Another possibility was an intervention by the Royal Navy. The pluses of this operation included the possibility of a swift and decisive strike that could secure strategically important Crete as a base for further operations in the Mediterranean. The successful execution of the airborne operation could have demonstrated the ability of the German Air Force to conduct complex and risky operations, as well as boosting the morale of the German forces. On the other hand, the downsides and potential risks were considerable. This was the first such large-scale airborne operation in history, which meant that many aspects of the endeavour were new and untested. German planners underestimated the strength and readiness of the defenders on Crete, which led to heavy casualties among the German paratroopers. The Royal Navy was able to successfully block German supply routes, making logistical support for the paratroopers difficult. Although the Germans eventually

conquered Crete and won (though in fact it was a Pyrrhic victory), the losses were so high that Hitler lost confidence in the effectiveness of large airborne landings, which affected other German military plans, for example to eliminate the island of Malta. Operation Mercury demonstrates how critical it is to assess potential risks and be able to identify risk scenarios in the context of military operations. Although planners did identify some risks, many others were underestimated or overlooked, resulting in high casualties and limited long-term strategic advantage. This case also demonstrates the importance of careful planning, flexibility and preparedness for different scenarios to minimise negative impacts and maximise chances of success.

The proliferation of conflicts in the Sahel region, including countries such as Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, is an important contemporary example that requires careful assessment of potential risks and the ability to identify risk scenarios with their potential impacts and consequences. The Sahel region, located on the southern edge of the Sahara desert, faces many security challenges including terrorist groups, ethnic conflicts, political instability and environmental problems. The vast region has also become a hotbed of international rivalry between many foreign actors, from France, which has ties to the region dating back to the colonial period, to Russia. Recognising and assessing risks in this context is crucial for any intervention or peace efforts. Solutions may include international military intervention and support that could help stabilise the situation, strengthen local militaries and prevent the further spread of violence. Such action could help to reduce the influence of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which are destabilising the region and threatening not only the security of the local population but also global security. Support for development projects and humanitarian aid can also help alleviate some of the root causes of conflict, such as poverty and resource scarcity. On the other hand, the downsides and risks of these solutions include the possibility of escalating violence and prolonging conflicts.

International military intervention can be perceived as an occupation and provoke local resistance. This may lead to radicalisation, and in turn strengthen terrorist groups that can take advantage of anti-Western sentiment to recruit new members. Political instability in the region may also make it difficult to coordinate and implement any action effectively. In addition, the complex ethnic and social conditions in the Sahel may mean that well-intentioned interventions could, inadvertently, exacerbate local conflicts. The spread of conflict in the

Sahel highlights the importance of careful assessment of potential risks and the ability to identify risk scenarios when planning and implementing any interventions. A comprehensive and multidimensional approach that takes into account not only military but also political, economic and social factors is essential to achieve long-term stability and security in the region. This example shows how critical it is to balance short-term military needs with long-term development goals and to carefully manage the risks associated with any intervention. The countries of the Sahel are undergoing major changes and the potential for the further spread of conflict is significant for many reasons (economic, religious, demographic, historical, geopolitical). A range of factors must therefore be considered when estimating the risks of further developments.

### **The Halo Effect: General Haig in WWI and Russian Paratroopers at Hostomel**

Concepts such as the halo effect represent a different group of concepts associated with critical thinking, tied to erroneous assumptions about a person or situation. The halo effect is based on simplifying and generalising prejudices – a first impression or one distinctive characteristic influences the overall evaluation of a person or thing. From a historical perspective it can be well illustrated by the example of British General Douglas Haig during WWI. General Haig was the commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) on the Western Front and fought some of the biggest and bloodiest battles of WWI, including the Battle of the Somme and the Third Battle of Ypres. The halo effect is seen here in the fact that Haig's military skills and overall leadership were often judged on the basis of one or more specific events or characteristics, whether positive or negative. After the war, Haig was seen by some as a capable and determined leader who was credited with the eventual victory of the Entente powers. The victory at the Battle of Amiens in 1918, which was a decisive factor in the eventual success of the Allied forces, strengthened his reputation as an able general with strategic talent. Admirers were often willing to overlook high losses and controversial decisions from previous battles for the sake of overall victory. On the other hand, Haig is viewed highly critically by many historians and the public due to the huge loss of life during the battles of the Somme and Passchendaele, where British forces were deployed in repeated frontal attacks against well-fortified German positions with huge losses. These battles led to the view that Haig needlessly sacrificed the lives of his soldiers, overshadowing his later

achievements in the war. The case of General Douglas Haig thus shows how the halo effect can affect the perception and evaluation of important figures. While some actions led to positive perceptions of his abilities, others led to extremely negative evaluations.

An example from the recent past is Russia's defeat at the Hostomel airport near Kyiv. As an elite, well-trained and equipped part of the country's army, Russian paratroopers have always been a feared adversary. However, in the battle for Hostomel, which is a key airport near Kyiv, they did not live up to their reputation for a number of reasons. The encirclement and conquest of the Ukrainian capital was thus unsuccessful for the Russian invasion forces in the spring of 2022. The halo effect played a significant role in the perception of the capabilities of Russian paratroopers. Russian units attempted a quick occupation of the airport using paratroopers to secure a key point for a further advance on the Ukrainian capital. At the start of the operation, the Russian military, and in particular its elite airborne units, were perceived as highly capable and effective. It was expected that a swift and decisive attack by them would lead to the successful capture of the airfield and the establishment of a bridgehead for further operations. These perceptions were based on their previous achievements and reputation within the Russian Armed Forces. However, the failure of the operation at Hostomel significantly affected the perception of the capabilities of the Russian paratroopers. It is also interesting that in the Russo-Ukrainian war they are repeatedly used as ordinary infantry on some sections of the front, which is an example of the incredible waste of elite soldiers, whose training is expensive and very thorough. Ukrainian forces at Hostomel responded quickly and managed to repulse the Russian attack, eventually maintaining the airfield in a state that did not allow further Russian strikes to develop. This failure not only disrupted Russian plans to occupy Kiev rapidly but also caused Russian airborne troops to be perceived as less effective and unable to achieve their objectives despite their reputation. The subsequent losses and logistical problems experienced by Russian forces in the area led to doubts about the overall ability of the Russian military to conduct complex and coordinated operations. The case of the fight for Hostomel shows how important it is in the context of military operations not only to achieve initial goals, but also to maintain long-term effectiveness and the ability to adapt to changing conditions on the battlefield.

### **Fundamental Attribution Error: Marshal Paulus at Stalingrad and the Iranian Plane Downing**



The last concept discussed is fundamental attribution error. This is the tendency to attribute people's behaviour to their personal characteristics rather than to the situations in which they find themselves. Fundamental attribution error, which is the tendency to attribute an individual's behaviour to internal characteristics rather than external circumstances, is usefully illustrated by the role of Friedrich Paulus in the Battle of Stalingrad. General, and later marshal, Paulus was the commander of the German 6th Army, which was deployed in 1942 in an offensive in southern Russia to capture Stalingrad, a key industrial and transport hub on the Volga River. The Battle of Stalingrad became one of the bloodiest and most significant battles of WWII, a true turning point on the Eastern Front. Paulus was, and still is, frequently judged on its outcome. Until the Battle of Stalingrad, Paulus, as a decorated veteran of WWI, was – on the basis of his career to that point – perceived as a capable, organisationally proficient and effective commander. This view was reinforced by the successes of the Wehrmacht on other fronts and a belief in the invincibility of the German army. However, when the situation in Stalingrad changed dramatically and German forces were surrounded by Soviet troops, Paulus's reputation suffered irreversibly. The German public and some of the military leadership blamed him for the failure, overlooking the key external factors that contributed to the defeat. These included depleted supplies, poor logistical support, extreme weather, and, most importantly, the Soviet counteroffensive, which had been carefully planned and executed. Paulus has often been accused of personal failure and lack of decisiveness when he refused to go against Hitler's orders and attempt to break out of the encirclement. However, this criticism has often ignored the fact that Paulus was acting under enormous pressure and within the strict hierarchy of the Third Reich, where disobeying orders was considered treason. The Battle of Stalingrad and the role of Marshal Paulus are thus a good illustration of fundamental attribution error, with the results of the battle often attributed to his personal qualities and decisions without sufficient consideration of complex and adverse external circumstances. This case illustrates the importance of considering the broader context and all the factors that may have influenced their actions and outcomes when evaluating historical events and figures.

A recent example of fundamental attribution error is the downing of a Ukrainian plane in Iran in January 2020, where the behaviour of those involved was attributed to their characteristics rather than to external circumstances. However, let us return to the event itself. On 8 January 2020 the Iranian Revolutionary Guards shot down a Ukraine International Airlines plane,

resulting in the deaths of all 176 people on board. After international pressure and the publication of evidence of the plane's collision with an Iranian air-to-air missile, Iran admitted that the plane was shot down by mistake. All those on board, 82 of whom were Iranian nationals, were killed. The incident took place in the context of heightened tensions between Iran and the US following the killing of the above-mentioned Iranian General Qasem Soleimani by an American drone. Prior to the incident, the Iranian armed forces were – despite the state's international isolation – perceived as a largely disciplined force; even with the legacy of the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s capable of protecting the country from external threats with high commitment. This positive image may have been reinforced primarily by Iranian propaganda and the relative success of the country's military operations in the wider region. Many people believed that Iran's air defences were effective and well organised. After the downing of the plane, public opinion changed rapidly. Many, including representatives of the international community, began to accuse the Iranian armed forces of incompetence and irresponsibility. Critics have claimed that the downing of the plane was the result of inadequate training, poor decision-making and overall unprofessionalism on the part of the Iranian forces. However, these criticisms often overlooked the context in which the incident occurred. Extreme tension and fear of a possible US attack may have led to overreaction and errors in target identification. The fact that the plane was shot down during a period of high tension and imminent fear of military attack points to significant external circumstances that influenced the decision-making of the Iranian forces. This incident illustrates the fundamental attribution error of putting the Iranian Armed Forces' mistakes down to their characteristics and capabilities, without fully acknowledging the complex and stressful external conditions in which they found themselves. This case highlights the need to take into account the circumstances that may influence the decision-making and behaviour of individuals or groups, particularly in crisis situations.

### **Conclusion: Reflections on History and Critical Thinking**

Naturally each person considers his or her life story to be unique. It is not always easy to admit that all kinds of things repeat themselves. So it certainly makes sense to reflect on the situations we experience every day from a different perspective. The list of concepts and examples of them in history outlined in the text is by no means exhaustive. It is a reflection that aims to broaden the horizons of all who are interested. Interpretation is then up to each reader.

# TOMÁŠ ŘEPA

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