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Author(s): Dallas D. Irvine

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# THE FRENCH AND PRUSSIAN STAFF SYSTEMS BEFORE 1870

*By Dallas D. Irvine*

THE primary cause of the French military collapse in 1870 was previous reliance upon a vicious system for the education, promotion, and assignment of officers. This system was unable to suffocate all intellectual progress in the army, although it was marvelously suited for that purpose. But it was almost completely effective in excluding the army's brain power from the staff and high command. To the resulting lack of intelligence at the top can be ascribed all the inexcusable defects of French military policy.

While something similar may be said in the case of other great national failures in war, this was an extreme example. Moreover, it was the fate of the French system to be pitted against another which was a supreme example of military wisdom. Viewed in the light of the Prussian system, that of the French furnishes in its folly an incomparable lesson for all time.

By 1870 the Prussian chief of general staff occupied a position independent of the minister of war and, indeed, of the ministry in its entirety, being responsible only to the king. Since he was also prospectively the real commander-in-chief of the Prussian forces in any war, his position was an extraordinary strong one which has rarely been duplicated in other countries. Particularly important was the fact that the position was lasting, for this insured a long-time continuity of direction which, in countries with more democratic forms of government, has not been easily attained. Moltke himself was titular chief of the general staff for almost thirty-one years, and the position was held by only seven men for the period from 1821 to 1914.<sup>1</sup>

The "Great General Staff" which worked under the immediate direction of the chief of general staff at Berlin underwent many changes of organization during the course of its history. In the period immediately before and after the Franco-Prussian War, however, it was organized in three numbered sections, four named sections, and a central office for the administration not only of the Great General Staff but the general staff establishment as a whole. The named sections were charged with more or less technical functions, while each of the numbered sections was in a sense a little general staff by itself for a particular "theater of war." The First Section occupied itself with countries north and east of Germany, including Austria; the Second Section with Germany itself, Switzerland, and Italy; the Third Section with countries to the west. This organization was one dictated by the peculiar conformation of Prussia and her position on the European map, with major powers on three sides and a variegated assortment of small states in her very bosom. It was not generally copied. It was also distinctly a peace-time organization,

<sup>1</sup> Eugène Stoffel, *Rapports militaires écrits de Berlin, 1866-1870* (Paris, 1871), 39 f., 42-44; Paul Bronsart von Schellendorf, *The Duties of the General Staff* (London, 1905), 27-29.

for the part of the Great General Staff which took the field with the king in 1870 was organized in three numbered sections for operations, communications, and intelligence respectively, with a "quartermaster-general" exercising general supervision as deputy of the chief of staff.

The four named sections of the Great General Staff were: the Military Historical Section, the Geographical-Statistical Section, the Topographical Section, and the Railway Section. A trigonometric section had already been segregated as the Triangulation Bureau and was shortly to be united with the topographical section and a cartographical section under a special Chief of the National Survey subordinate to the chief of staff. These particular sections were engaged in completing the map of Germany then in progress and, though reckoned officially to the Great General Staff, may be regarded, after 1875, as no longer constituting part of the capital staff proper, the work in which they were engaged being analogous to that of the Geological Survey in the United States or the Ordnance Survey in the United Kingdom. They are of interest here chiefly as they recall the earlier devotion of the general staff to cartographical activity in particular.<sup>2</sup>

The Military Historical Section, as its name implies, was charged with the compiling of official histories of earlier campaigns and such other historical studies as might be deemed of value, as well as with the keeping of the War Archive. The Geographical-Statistical Section was charged with providing maps and exhaustive geographical accounts of all foreign countries and with keeping them up to date. Lastly, but not least, the Railway Section was charged with the study of railways at home and abroad, supervision of civil construction so far as military considerations were involved, arrangement of troop transports in time of peace, the training of officers for railway staff duties, the preparation of the time-tables for the concentration of the army at the outbreak of war, and the management of traffic on home lines in time of war.<sup>3</sup>

For the handling of the railways in case of war an extensive organization was provided in addition to the Railway Section. In time of peace there was a Central Commission upon which the various interests concerned were represented and which was charged with considering ways and means of securing effective handling. It acted through an executive commission composed of an officer and a railway official. Similar commissions, each composed of an officer and a railway official, with subordinates, existed for each important "line" and division, with headquarters at an appropriate station. In time of peace these cooperated with

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<sup>2</sup> See my article on "The Origin of Capital Staffs," *Journal of Modern History*, X (1938), 169 ff.

<sup>3</sup> The foregoing exposition is based upon: August von Witzleben, *Heerwesen und Infanteriedienst der königlich preussischen Armee* (8th ed.; Berlin, 1864), 35 f.; Stoffel, 40-42; Ferdinand Baron Lüdinghausen gen. Wolff, *Organisation und Dienst der Kriegsmacht des deutschen Reiches* (2 vols.; Berlin, 1872), I, 98 f.; A. Froelich, *Die Verwaltung des deutschen Heeres* (2 vols.; Berlin, 1875), I, 292 f.; James M. Grierson, *The Armed Strength of the German Empire* (2nd ed., 2 vols.; London, 1888), I, 236-41, 298; Bronsart, 31-37.

the Railway Section in working out the local details of railway transport plans, and in time of war the military representative became the "commandant" of the line or division. In time of war higher special authorities were also provided. In the war of 1870-71 each field army had an inspector general of communications under whom a director of field railways exercised complete control over the army's own railway communication line through the proper line and district commandants.

This system for the control of railways was based upon two principles of utmost importance: first, the removal of the railways from the arbitrary jurisdiction of the lesser military commanders and the centering of control in the hands of a special hierarchy responsible only to the high command; second, the constitution of the operating commissions in every case of the appropriate railway official and a military officer trained in railway duties, so that both military needs and the proper functioning of the railways as such would be taken into sufficient consideration. By these means the smooth running of the complex and delicate railway system was safeguarded as it could not be in any other way. Upon this foundation all the exact arrangements for the immediate mobilization and concentration of a nation-in-arms heavily rested, for without complete reliability of execution through railway transport such plans for fast action on an enormous scale would have been infinitely worse than useless.<sup>4</sup>

Such, in outline, was the organization of the Great General Staff and the railway staff which served as its auxiliary. There were also, of course, the general staffs at corps and divisional headquarters, each engaged with the details of assigned parts in the national plan of action. Far more important than mere organization, however, was the level of ability of the staff personnel. This naturally depended, in considerable part, upon the quality of education and training provided, and here the key institution was the *Kriegsacademie*, or War College, from the graduates of which the general staff was almost entirely recruited. This was an institution for formal military education corresponding to the professional schools of the universities and intended to provide an officer with a thorough knowledge and understanding of the art of war in all its higher, as well as its lower, branches. Though the institution was not placed under direct control of the general staff until 1872, it was from the beginning the nursery of that staff.<sup>5</sup>

A training program carried on within the Great General Staff was intended to build, upon the basis of the knowledge acquired in the *Kriegsacademie*, a real skill in the performance of staff duties and in the higher conduct of war. To this end the program consisted in part of the actual exercise of staff duties in various sections of the Great General Staff and in part of the formal study of the conduct

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<sup>4</sup> Froelich, I, 113-22, 141-9; II, 541-8; Grierson, I, 299 f., 324-7; Edwin A. Pratt, *The Rise of Rail Power in War and Conquest, 1833-1914* (London, 1915), 103-21; Jean Colin, *The Transformations of War* (London, 1913), 317 f.

<sup>5</sup> Froelich, I, 293-6; Bronsart, 45-48; "L'académie de guerre de Berlin," *Revue militaire de l'étranger*, I (1872), 116-9, 122-3.

of war by the case method, the only method by which it is possible to develop intellectual skill of a very high order. This case method was partly applied in the study of historical examples, but it received its highest application in hypothetical tactical exercises or war-games (*Kriegsspiele*), staff rides or journeys, and the large-scale autumn maneuvers—the first being conducted upon the map, the second upon the ground, and the third upon the ground with troops. It was by these means that actual war was closely simulated and a degree of skill developed which the French had not believed possible in an army that had not known a major war from 1815 to 1864.<sup>6</sup>

As important as this educational program proved to be, it was secondary in importance to a feature of the Prussian military system upon which most other elements of its superiority ultimately rested, namely, the system of advancement to and within the general staff. It is manifestly important to develop to the fullest the capabilities of officers who may be called upon to exercise the functions of higher command in war, but in the last analysis it is of far greater importance to insure that the officers selected for the exercise of those functions are the ones of greatest intellectual capacity in all the army. If there is any one element in the Prussian military system which serves to explain the relative efficiency of the army under Moltke, it is to be found in a method of selecting and advancing staff officers which was admirably designed to concentrate the best brain power of the army where it could do the most good. As might be surmised, this method, like the effective exploitation of rail power, was mainly a product of the genius of Moltke.<sup>7</sup>

The sifting process began with the admissions to the *Kriegsacademie*, which were by competitive examination and careful selection from among candidates having at least three years service as officers and usually considerably more. Out of an average of 120-150 or more candidates only 40 (somewhat later, 50) were granted admission. At the end of the three years course these officers were returned to regimental duty, but after about a year 12 (later 20) of the best—less than half the class—were called up and attached for from one to two years to the Great General Staff at Berlin, where they received training in the functions of various sections as well as more formal instruction from the chief of staff, who kept them under close observation. Sometimes officers of promise who had not entered the *Kriegsacademie* were also called up for this probationary period. At the end all were returned to regimental duty, whence, after a short time, those selected for appointment to the general staff were again called up and commissioned captains ahead of their time.

After about two years of general staff service, usually at the headquarters of a corps or division, these captains were again returned to service with troops, with loss of status as general staff officers. After a further two years, however, those

<sup>6</sup> Grierson, II, 162-4; "Voyages d'études," *Journal des sciences militaires*, 10<sup>e</sup> sér., V (1900), 439-51.

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Bigge, *Feldmarschall Graf Moltke* (2 vols.; Munich, 1901), II, 37 f.

who had lived up to expectations were reappointed to the general staff with the grade of major, some seven or eight years ahead of other officers who had been commissioned originally at about the same time. Similarly, before receiving each later promotion, each officer had to return to the command of troops for at least one year, and if he had not proven satisfactory as a staff officer he could always be culled out at this time by simply not recalling him to the general staff. From this repeated return to service with troops, however, there was exempted a certain proportion of the officers of the Great General Staff who, for their highly specialized and distinguished scientific attainments, were indispensable to the best functioning of that organ and the training of staff personnel there. These officers were carried indefinitely, therefore, upon a special "subsidiary establishment" of the staff. The general system was thus not allowed to prevent the retention of necessary specialists.<sup>8</sup>

The significant features of this system were as follows: first, the rapid advancement and great likelihood of attaining high rank furnished a powerful incentive for the best officers to seek the arduous career of the staff officer; second, the staff officers were drawn from the best material in the whole army, with opportunity open to all younger officers; third, the repeated return of the officers to command of troops, besides insuring that they did not lose their sense of realities, allowed the elimination of deadwood at every stage and kept the staff officers under the constant necessity of giving the very best that was in them; fourth, the large number of officers who had received advanced training but who had been returned temporarily or indefinitely to service with troops furnished not only a great reservoir from which competent staff officers could be drawn in case of war-time expansion but an intellectual haven for the whole army in time of peace; fifth, the higher ranks of the staff were filled with relatively young and vigorous men from whom relatively young and vigorous generals could be drawn. In combination with the Prussian practise of reposing great power in the hands of the younger chiefs of staff, the system was far superior to any other that has ever been devised for the mobilization of military brain power.

If the system of selection which has just been described was, through the general staff of the army, the foundation of Prussian military greatness in these times, reliance upon an almost opposite system was the quicksand which underlay the military structure of France and the principal cause of her undoing in 1870, for France was not lacking in machinery homologous to that of the Prussian staff system—not excluding a rudimentary capital staff.

Under the old régime the French system of staff-and-command had been unequalled in all Europe. According to the scheme of war-time organization laid down by Louvois, the chief of staff of an army was the *maréchal-général des logis*, or quartermaster-general. Second to him, if not entirely subordinate, was a *major-général (de l'infanterie)*, later to usurp the first place, and quartermasters-general of the cavalry. There might also be a *major-général* of the dragoons. Each of

<sup>8</sup> Stoffel, 115-24; Wolff, I, 70; Bronsart, 32, 36 f.; Grierson, I, 237; II, 15, 48-52.

these officers had one or more deputies or aides and such other assistance as might be necessary. High social rank not being an indispensable qualification, the principal staff offices were particularly open to talent, so that numerous instances are found of able chiefs of staff contributing largely to the accomplishments of army commanders, the most notable instance being that of Bourcet, chief of staff to Maillebois and De Broglie.<sup>9</sup>

These staff offices were supposed to exist only in time of war, for only in time of war was there any organization above the regiment, but in the case of the *maréchaux-généraux des logis* there was a growing tendency in the eighteenth century to maintain such employments for special purposes in time of peace. After 1783 there was also a regular establishment of staff officers below general rank. This was the *corps de l'état-major de l'armée* under the Marquis d'Aguesseau, in which the highest grade was that of *aide-major-général*.

Something similar took place in the case of the special staff of *ingénieurs géographes*, the beginnings of which are particularly associated with the name of Vauban. These geographical engineers, unlike the regular officers of the army, were supposed to be men of scientific attainments, or what passed for scientific attainments at that time. They were charged particularly with mapping and reconnaissance but were also employed for the direction of marches and encampments. The advantage of having a body of such specialists in an age of inadequate maps is obvious. Regular military status for the *ingénieurs géographes* dates from 1716.<sup>10</sup>

The crown upon the old French staff system was a true capital staff or "great general staff" organized by Lieutenant-General Pierre Bourcet in 1766 and eventually designated as the *service d'état-major des logis des armées*. In its organization the most important principles which later governed the "metabolism" of Moltke's staff were anticipated. Particular care was given to sifting for the highest available ability, not only in the initial selection but by means of several stages of probationary work, upon which examinations were given. A poor showing in these might mean return to the line. Special pay and advancement attracted ability and furnished a strong incentive to the officers on trial. The officers specialized upon particular portions of the frontiers, to which they would be assigned in case of war. Most interesting, however, is the fact that the higher training was by a thoroughgoing application of the case method in drawing up and working out all the details of plans to meet supposed concrete situations on ground with which the officer had made himself thoroughly familiar.<sup>11</sup>

Bourcet's capital staff was abolished in 1771, after the fall of the Choiseul ministry, but reconstituted in 1783 as the *corps d'état-major de l'armée* already

<sup>9</sup> Léon Hennet, *Régards en arrière; études d'histoire militaire sur le XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: l'état-major* (Paris, 1911), 23, 146-74; Charles Thoumas, *Les transformations de l'armée française* (2 vols.; Paris, 1887), I, 187-91.

<sup>10</sup> Hennet, 189-91; *Le spectateur militaire*, 4<sup>e</sup> sér., XXXVI (1874), 57-87; Henri Berthaut, *Les ingénieurs géographes militaires, 1624-1831* (2 vols.; Paris, 1902), I, 6, 13, 15 f., 17-116 *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> Hennet, 23-41, 52-56, 61 f., 66-71, 95-122.

mentioned. On the whole the French system of staff-and-command was far in advance of the Prussian in the later decades of the old régime. In fact, the French were at this time far in advance of other countries in most things military, above all in their comprehension of the current development of the art of war. It is a period which glitters with distinguished military thinkers and doers if the dazzling light of the subsequent Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars is screened off—Saxe, Bourcet, Guibert, the Du Teil, De Broglie, Gribeauval, Montalembert, St. Germain, etc. From this high state of advancement the Revolution brought a retrogression in many ways which was not made up until the nineteenth century was nearly run.<sup>12</sup>

The spirit of progress and innovation with which the Revolution began led in 1790-91 to the adoption of a new and not injudicious scheme for staff service providing for *adjudants-généraux* and periodic return to command of troops. The political turmoil and desperate wars which shortly followed, however, were not favorable to its proper application and development. Under the existing conditions war had to be a matter of makeshifts, and success turned many of these makeshifts into habits that were to prove pernicious in the long run. Of particularly important consequence was the way in which officers rose to high command.<sup>13</sup>

Promotion by merit is practically unavoidable in the case of any long, hard war, but in the Revolutionary Wars the necessity was made extreme by the insufficiency of competent officers of higher rank as the result of emigration, political purgings, and the great expansion of the army. Higher commanders had to be hurriedly selected from the lower ranks, therefore, on the basis of ability demonstrated, or prestige acquired, in the actual conduct of war. Success was the great criterion. The men who were successful, however, were those who were able to get along without efficient staffs—who acted largely as their own staffs. For capable staff officers were mostly lacking, not only because of the deficiency of trained officers but because the abler men available were needed for command. The commanders thus learned to perform for themselves all the more important functions of command without assistance other than from clerks and gallopers, relying mainly upon their own innate ability rather than upon conscious and systematic method.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-145; Spenser Wilkinson, *The French Army before Napoleon* (Oxford, 1915), 72-98; Jean Colin, *L'éducation militaire de Napoléon* (Paris, 1900), 32-103.

<sup>13</sup> Decrees of Oct. 5 and Nov. 18, 1790; *Journal militaire* (Paris, 1790-1842), 28 f., 353-55; Instruction of June 1, 1791; *ibid.*, 1791, 2<sup>e</sup> partie, pp. 386-9; Thoumas, I, 191-201; Eugène Riff, *Histoire de l'ex-corps d'état-major* (Paris, 1881), 8-13.

<sup>14</sup> Decrees of Sept. 23 and Nov. 18, 1790; *Journal militaire*, 1790, pp. 260-5, 268-75, 353-5; Decree of Aug. 1, 1791; *ibid.*, 1791, 2<sup>e</sup> partie, pp. 376-9; Decrees of Apr. 10 and Nov. 8, 1792; *ibid.*, 1792, 1<sup>er</sup> partie, pp. 201-3; 2<sup>e</sup> partie, pp. 538 f.; Decree of Feb. 21, 1793; *ibid.*, 1793, 1<sup>er</sup> partie, pp. 141-4; Law of 1<sup>er</sup> Thermidor An II (July 19, 1794); *ibid.*, An II, 2<sup>e</sup> partie, pp. 855 f.; Law of 14<sup>e</sup> Germinal An III (Apr. 3, 1795); *ibid.*, An III, 2<sup>e</sup> partie, pp. 791-806; Law of 15<sup>e</sup> Vendémiaire An IV (Oct. 7, 1795); *ibid.*, An IV, 1<sup>er</sup> partie, p. 65; Constitution of 22<sup>e</sup> Frimaire An VII (Dec. 13, 1799); Jean B. Duvergier *et al.* (ed.), *Collection complète des lois . . .* (30 vols. and annual vol.; Paris, 1834 *et seq.*), XII, 20-30 (art. 41);



This state of affairs once established, it tended to remain fixed, for it accorded with the engrossing tendencies of strong and able characters and was crowned with a record of brilliant achievement, while trained staff officers were still unprovided. An unfortunate conception of command as the function of a single individual and of generalship as an unteachable individual gift or acquisition was the result—a conception which continued to dominate in the French service down through the Franco-Prussian War, particularly as it was quite suited to the primitive type of warfare in Algeria which served as the principal school of the French army. It was more or less sufficient, also, for the various small-scale wars and expeditions against backward powers or peoples in which the French engaged in the period 1815-1870, and the total result was that no *need* was felt for highly organized division of labor in exercising the functions of command. For assisting in the exercise of those functions, therefore, the staff of a higher commander continued to be made up of clerks and dispatch riders, secretaries and companions, masquerading under the names of staff officer, chief of staff, and aide-de-camp—with perhaps a topographical officer and attached officers of artillery and engineers in time of war.<sup>15</sup>

Since the duties of such functionaries were more physical than intellectual, more personal than military, special qualifications were not absolutely requisite, and during Revolutionary and Napoleonic times the positions were filled very largely by mediocre or incompetent favorites. The evil of this was impressed upon the methodical mind of Marshal Gouvin Saint-Cyr, especially as such favoritism threatened to go beyond all bounds of reason under the Restoration, so that when he became minister of war for the second time, in 1817, he set about to insure the competence of staff officers by establishing a distinct *corps d'état-major* (1818) which was to be composed only of specially trained officers and from which all staff officers, even aides-de-camp, were to be drawn. Since he was concerned primarily with eliminating incompetent favorites, it was natural for him to make this a closed corps and to provide for its proper training in a special school, the *Ecole d'application d'état-major* at Paris. For the accomplishment of his purpose, this was a system well conceived, but it should be noticed that his purpose was the remedying of a crying abuse rather than the providing of a system of sifting out and exploiting to the utmost the best brains in the army.<sup>16</sup>

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Thoumas, I, 416-20; René Tournès, "Le G. Q. G. de Napoléon Ier," *Revue de Paris*, May 1, 1921, p. 152 f.; Jules Lewal, *Etudes de guerre: partie organique* (Paris, 1873), 13; Ramsay W. Phipps, *The Armies of the First French Republic* (3 vols.; London, 1926-35), I, 11-29.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas J. Thackeray, *The Military Organization and Administration of France* (2 vols.; London, 1856), I, 27-9; Hugues Jarras, *Souvenirs du général Jarras* (Paris, 1892), pp. vi f., 366-8; Max Szczepanski, *Napoleon III und sein Heer* (Heidelberg, 1913), 77; Thoumas, I, 206; V. D., "Guerre de 1870," *Le spectateur militaire*, XXIII (1871), 70 f.; Max Jähns, *Das französische Heer von der grossen Revolution bis zur Gegenwart* (Leipzig, 1873), 434-8; André Vauchelle, *Cours d'administration militaire* (4th ed., 3 vols.; Paris, 1861), III, 20-22; Lewal, 6 f., 10 f.

<sup>16</sup> Riff, 8 f.; Thoumas, I, 198-201; Ordinance of May 6, 1818; *Journal militaire*, 1818, 1<sup>er</sup> semestre, 357-64.

The Restoration, however, was a period of a good deal of military wisdom in France, for there were too many men who had perceived at first hand the evils of the military system under Napoleon. In almost every department of military affairs measures of great promise were adopted. It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1826 the staff system was altered for the better. In the first place, all graduates of the staff school were now sent to regimental duty and the necessary staff officers were selected on a competitive basis from among those who had there attained the grade of captain. Staff captains, moreover, upon being promoted from that grade, were required to serve in the line again before they could receive a second promotion. Particularly promising, however, was the establishment of a *comité consultatif d'état-major* which was charged with assigning exercises to staff officers, with classifying the officers according to the merit of these *travaux*, and in general with looking after the better instruction of the corps.<sup>17</sup>

The promise of this law of 1826 was made illusory by measures of the miserable July Monarchy. In 1831 the corps of *ingénieurs géographes* was assimilated to the staff corps with the evil result that the latter was diverted from its more proper duties to continuation of work upon the exact and detailed map of France begun in 1817. This work upon *la carte*, with its extra pay and seasons of drafting in Paris, was for a long time considered a sinecure very much to be desired, and its relatively mechanical nature bred intellectual sloth of the worst kind. Moreover, the magnitude of this great project was such as to consume an altogether undue proportion of the staff's energies.<sup>18</sup>

The July Monarchy also threw itself into the Algerian adventure, with the result that the French army acquired an unfortunate orientation upon the experiences of primitive colonial warfare. The melodrama and petty glories of this warfare, and the possibilities of advancement for actions of *éclat*, absorbed the attention of those staff officers too dynamic to relish cartographical labors. But of worst effect were the provisions of a new staff law passed in 1833, a law whose basic arrangements remained in effect down to the Franco-Prussian War. Though an examining board was preserved by this law and *travaux* still prescribed, the graduates of the staff school were once more appointed permanently to staff service. Two-thirds of the promotions to the grades of lieutenant and captain, and one-half of those to the next higher grade, were to be by seniority, the small remainder of promotions in the corps being left to selection, which was supposed to be based in part, at least, on the classification of the officers made by the examining board each year. Exchanges with officers of other arms were to be allowed, but in practise these rarely took place, and in 1838 the privilege was withdrawn as far as the staff corps was concerned, so that the corps became a tightly closed one.

<sup>17</sup> Ordinance of Dec. 10, 1826; *ibid.*, 1826, 2<sup>e</sup> semestre, pp. 606-12; Lewal, 13; A. M. Delavoye, "The French Staff," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, XXXV (1891), 1128.

<sup>18</sup> Riff, 44-51; Gabriel Chamberet, "La carte de France et les autres travaux du Dépôt de la guerre," *Revue contemporaine*, XXIX (1856), 169-81; Théodore Fix, *Souvenirs d'un officier d'état-major, 1846-1870* (Paris, 1898), 223-5.

The only process of selection for the corps, therefore, was the competitive examination for entrance to the staff school, and this came at a time when the aspirants were immature, candidacy being open only to the student second-lieutenants of St.-Cyr, the second lieutenants of the army, and a few students of the *Ecole polytechnique*.<sup>19</sup>

The training provided in the school was of quite different order than that given in the *Kriegsacademie*, as is indicated by the difference in names. The course lasted only two years, was addressed to more immature and less experienced students, and was intended to train them in the routine and semi-mechanical duties of the French staff officer rather than to prepare them for the exercise of all the higher intellectual functions of command. The great pride of the school was its training in draughting—the making of maps and beautiful if fantastic plans of fortifications. At the end of the course the young officers were sent to service with troops of several different arms for some four or five years—the first and only service with troops they were ever required to perform. Subsequently they served as staff officers and aides-de-camp until they were retired or attained general rank with appropriate command. The needs of the staff service, however, required many captains, about one-third as many *chefs d'escadron*, and few officers of higher rank. Since promotion was only within the corps, mostly by seniority and otherwise by favor or opportunity for distinguished conduct under fire, advancement was slow—exceedingly slow—in the rule. This put a damper on ambition, while security of position encouraged laziness, so that the system fostered intellectual lethargy about as well as any that could have been devised. The staff officer who studied his profession was a rare exception—hadn't one's studies been completed in the school, and wasn't the art of higher command after all a matter of individual genius and momentary inspiration? As for the *travaux* supposed to be assigned, these amounted to nothing more than the preparation of a map of some area accompanied by a descriptive memoir—a copy-book exercise of little intellectual value and bearing principally upon the cartographical and geographical work of the staff.<sup>20</sup>

No effort was made to train officers in the higher conduct of war by systematic exercises of any sort, let alone those employing the case methods of the Prussians.

<sup>19</sup> Jähns, 326-32; Vauchelle, I, 20-23; Ordinance of Feb. 23, 1833, *Journal militaire officiel* (édition refondue, 14 vols, and index; Paris 1872), II, 184-91; Ordinance of Mar. 16, 1838; *ibid.*, II, 374 (art. 56).

<sup>20</sup> Ordinance of May 6, 1818; *loc. cit.*, p. 362 (art. 36); Law of Apr. 14, 1832; *Journal militaire officiel* (éd. refondue), II, 25-28 (arts. 12-14, 19); Ordinances of Feb. 23, 1833, and Mar. 16, 1838; *ibid.*, II, 184-91; III, 359-461 (arts. 33, 40, 43, 133); Decree of Apr. 12, 1852; *ibid.*, V, 376; Instruction of July 15, 1853; *ibid.*, V, 637-42; undated instruction reproduced in Victor Saussine, *Dictionnaire de législation et d'administration militaires* (3 vols.; Paris, 1867-70), I, 1152-4, 1168-75 [art. 3: "Si une aptitude spéciale le porte vers les sciences, c'est principalement à la géodésie et ses applications qu'il doit consacrer ses études."]; Thoumas, I, 202 f.; Vauchelle, I, 136-41; Riff, 119-21; Jähns, 418-29; Szczepanski, 96 f.; Stoffel, 27; Lewal, 14; Louis Trochu, *Oeuvres Posthumes* (2 vols.; Tours, 1896), II, 228 f.

There were no war games, no staff rides, no real maneuvers of larger units—the seasonal camps such as that of Châlons having only a minor training value in spite of the pride that was taken in them. Even the study of military history was discouraged by the regulation forbidding officers to publish any writings whatever without special permission from the minister of war. This was given, if at all, only after submission of their manuscripts to a rigorous censorship which cut out anything that might appear to reflect in any way upon the existing system. It is hardly a matter for wonder, therefore, that the French military mind was not as progressive in this period as the German; the wonder is that it was not more stupid than it was, for in spite of the system there was still some creditable military thought in France.<sup>21</sup>

The Second Empire continued the staff system of the July Monarchy while further ensuring eventual disaster by fostering the legend of French military superiority. Only at the very end, after the terrible portent of Sadowa had somewhat shaken French complacency, were some poor measures of reform allowed to be projected by Marshal Niel. One of his last accomplishments was a decree establishing the principle that more second lieutenants of the army should thereafter be admitted to the staff school than would be required for staff service after graduation. Those not needed were to be sent back to their regiments with the designation of *adjoints d'état-major* after having served for two years with another arm. Exchanges were to be allowed in the lower grades between these officers and regular officers of the staff corps, so that staff officers who found staff duties distasteful could transfer to the line. In time of war the *adjoints* could be called upon for staff service, the body of such officers thus constituting a staff reserve. At the same time it was expected that the dissemination of such officers in the line in time of peace would raise the very low educational level there and stimulate a taste for study. This was a progressive scheme on the whole but one which required a good many years to be of much effect. As it was, Niel's successor administered chloroform, almost before the scheme could be given any application, by reducing the number of admissions to the staff school—which Niel had materially raised for 1870—to less than what it had been before!<sup>22</sup>

In the *Dépôt de la guerre* the French had an organ homologous to the Prussian Great General Staff. Originating as a war archive in the seventeenth century, with which a collateral map archive had been conjoined in the eighteenth century, this organ had been intelligently organized by the Restoration as the headquarters of the staff corps. But the evils which afflicted that corps as a whole were magnified in their effect upon the *Dépôt*, depriving it of intellectual substance and deteriorating its earlier organic complexion. In the later years of the Second Empire it was organized in two *bureaux*, with a special conservator for the archives and library

<sup>21</sup> Jähns, 429-33; Fix, 229, 245; Circulars of July 17, 1835, and Feb. 26, 1841; *Journal militaire officiel* (éd. refondue), II, 741; IV, 7; Ministerial note of May 3, 1853; *ibid.*, v, 582; Edouard Guillon, *Nos écrivains militaires* (2 vols.; Paris, 1898-99), II, 275-357.

<sup>22</sup> Report and decree of July 19, 1869, in Saussine, I, 1142-6; Riff, 200.

(Camille Rousset). The First Bureau was charged with cartography; the Second Bureau with historical work, the collection of military information, and the maintenance of the central map files.<sup>23</sup>

Marshal Niel successfully endeavored to revivify the Dépôt by drawing into it the abler officers of the staff corps under General Hugues Jarras and focussed its fresh energies upon intensive study of the Prussian enemy. Between 1867 and 1870 it made truly extraordinary progress in the exercise of capital staff functions, but time was too short for its influence to make any appreciable headway against the obstinate benightedness of the French army and government, particularly since it continued to be an auxiliary organ not accorded by either enactment or custom the function of participating regularly in the determination of military questions. Its work at this time took effect mainly after the catastrophe, when it enabled the Dépôt to develop rapidly and produce the modern French staff system.<sup>24</sup>

The evils of the old system of staff-and-command were manifested in 1870 in the tragic helplessness of the regular military hierarchy in the face of the Germans. Criticism of the French officers for their ineffectiveness in the opening campaigns of this war, however, would be largely misdirected, for with some exceptions they did the best they knew how and very bravely. The cause of their difficulties was insufficient preparation for war of the proper sort in time of peace, particularly intellectual preparation. For failing to provide for proper preparation the military authorities of many years had been especially to blame, yet their neglect was in turn due mainly to the fact that they were themselves products of a system which did not provide for the continual sifting out, higher education, and maximum exploitation of the best brains of the army. Normally this circle would have been broken by the insight or enlightenment of exceptional individuals, but this escape was practically shut off by internal political considerations affecting the army and by the narcotic effect of the unconscious and hence almost unassailable belief that command was unavoidably the function of a single individual and a matter of esoteric inspiration rather than skill perfected through formal training. This state of affairs, it should be emphasized, was the result of the accidents of earlier circumstances and not of any innate deficiency of mind, as the brilliance of French military thought in other times and other respects amply shows.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Vallongue, "Notice historique sur le Dépôt général de la guerre," *Mémorial topographique et militaire* (7 vols.; Paris, 1803-10), II, 1-41; D. Huguenin, "Les archives anciennes du Dépôt de la guerre," *Le spectateur militaire*, 4<sup>e</sup> sér., XXII (1870), 5-40; "Le Dépôt de la guerre et les ingénieurs géographes," *ibid.*, XXV (1874), 57-88, 205-30; Chamberet, 169-81; Regulation of Jan. 31, 1822; *Journal militaire*, 1822, 1<sup>er</sup> semestre pp. 144 f.; *Annuaire militaire de l'Empire française*, 1866, pp. 12 f.

<sup>24</sup> Jarras, 1-75; Fix, 236-46; Rapport de la sous-commission chargée de rechercher les améliorations qu'il serait possible de réaliser en ce qui concerne l'armée, n. d.; in *La nouvelle revue*, Feb. 1, 1912, p. 296; Fix, *Souvenirs d'un officier d'état-major*, 1870-1894 (Paris, 1899), 105-29.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Bugeaud to Louis Philippe, June 3, 1846; *Memoirs of Marshal Bugeaud, 1784-1849* (2 vols.; London, 1884), II, 321 n.; Thoumas, I, 203; Lewal, 5-7; Barthélemy Palat, *Histoire de la guerre de 1870-1871* (7 vols.; Paris, 1901-08), II, 68 f.