

“BREVET TO THE SCAFFOLD OR TO GLORY”: THE HIGH COMMAND OF THE FRENCH ARMY AND REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT, 1792-1794

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Nothing in the early military career of Thomas-Alexandre-Davy de la Pailleterie could predict any drastic turns. Born in 1762 on the isle of Saint-Domingo, he enlisted as a trooper in *la Reine* Dragoons in 1786. When the Revolution broke out in 1789 Alexander Dumas (a name he adopted) was still a private and only in February of 1792 got promoted to the first non-commission rank of a *brigadier*.¹ Now France entered the war, an army was desperate for experienced officers, especially in the cavalry, and soon his life has changed. Offered a second-lieutenancy in the newly created semi-autonomous *Légion franche des Américains et du Midi* by Colonel Joseph Boulogne de St. George, *brigadier* Dumas almost took it, if not for the counter offer of a lieutenant's position coming from the headquarters of the *Hussards de la Liberté*, which was also aggressively recruiting officers. Thus, on 2 September 1792 he was commissioned lieutenant of the *Hussards* but not for long; in two weeks Colonel St.-George, still interested, offered him the higher rank of a lieutenant-colonel and second in command in "his" unit. Not thinking twice, Dumas accepted this excellent opportunity and on 15 September 1792 the former *brigadier* became a superior officer. His *Légion* (converted to the 13th *Chasseur à Cheval* Regiment) fought in *l'armée du Nord* with distinction and Dumas was promoted to the rank of *général de brigade* on 30 July 1793.² Such

¹ Georges Six, *Dictionnaire biographique des généraux & amiraux français de la Révolution et de l'Empire, 1792-1814* (Paris, 1934), vol. I, 394.

² John G. Gallaher, *General Alexander Dumas* (Chicago, 1997), 19-25. Edouard Desbrière et Maurice Sautai. *La cavalerie*

a spectacular transformation from *brigadier* to a general officer in less than a year would never have happened if not for the changes demanded by the French Revolution.

The historical problems of the French army, its revolutionary reorganization and development of the command structure call for more attention among "the social historians of military history" who are looking for a true representation of what warfare signified to the individuals who were caught up in it. As noted in Denis Woronoff's monograph on the First Republic, "beyond the narrative of battles and the naming of military units there is a need for an analysis of a military society: of the formation and development of the *esprit du corps*, of the changes in hierarchical relationships, financial situation and actual combat experience of the commanding cadres."³ The pioneering work of George Six, the subsequent researches of Jean-Paul Bertaud, Samuel F. Scott and more recently, Howard G. Brown and Paddy Griffith⁴ tried answering most of these and other

pendant la Révolution du 14 juillet 1789 au 26 juin 1794 (Paris, 1907), 140-42.

³ Denis Woronoff, *The Thermidorean regime and the Directory, 1794-99*. Transl. by Julian Jackson (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 8.

⁴ Georges Six, *Les généraux de la Révolution et de l'Empire* (Bordas, 1947); Jean-Paul Bertaud, *La Révolution armée* (Paris, 1978); Samuel F. Scott, *The Response of the Royal Army to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1978); Howard G. Brown, "Politics, professionalism and the fate of army generals after Thermidor", *French Historical Studies*, vol 19, No. 1 (Spring 1995); Paddy Griffith, *The Art of War of Revolutionary France. 1789-1802* (London, 1998).

questions using, mainly, a quantitative approach. Most emphasis was placed on the transitional period, that is, from the last years of the *Ancien Régime* to the establishment of the National Convention, which put a heavy hand on the high command. In the following essay I will argue that changes that occurred in composition of the general officers' corps during 1792-94 were aimed more towards its professionalization rather than necessity of the government to obtain the political obedience over the commanding cadres, although it changed perception of the French revolutionaries towards the army as government institution.

Thanks to the decisive actions of the National Convention, by the spring of 1793 the strength of the French armed forces defending the young Republic reached an enormous number⁵, which should have created a favorable condition in the course of a war, despite the unexpected defeats in Belgium and Holland. But because the armed forces increased so greatly, the question of the commanding cadres became one of paramount importance. If the necessary number of the company grade officers could be obtained by the means of promotions and election of the most distinguished and experienced NCOs, for general officers in line and staffs the situation was quite different.

The high commanding officers of the old Royal army openly passed over to the enemy camp. Already by mid-August 1792 a pamphlet printed in Paris named five *lieutenants-généraux* and twenty *maréchaux-de camps* (including the famous Lafayette and Alexandre de Lameth) who had abandoned their positions in various armies and emigrated.⁶ But the most alarming incident occurred on 1 April 1793 at Lille, when the commander of *l'armée du Nord*, Charles-Francois Dumouriez, arrested the people's representatives led by the war minister

⁵ Armée de Terre. Legislation. "Extrait du report de Dubois-Crancé sur l'organisation de l'armée", *Journal Militaire*, March 1793, 100-105. In his report, Dubois-Crancé speaks of 800,000 men, but it is obviously the "paper" number, as in reality it was much lower.

⁶ *Etat de officiers généraux et de leurs aides-de-camp deserteurs ou émigrés* (Paris, de l'imprimerie nationale executive du Louvre); BNF, dossiers *Gallica*.

Pierre de Beurnonville and turned them over to the enemy.⁷ After an unsuccessful attempt to raise his soldiers against the Republic, he crossed over to the Austrian lines accompanied by his senior commanding officers.

This treasonous act signaled a stepping-stone for the sufficient changes of the cadre and personnel implemented by the revolutionary government. Many former nobles (by cumulative decrees of 19-23 June 1790 noble titles and prerogatives were abolished), even of the most aristocratic decent, differentiated their opinion towards the Revolution and on the first stage supported various social and political changes. However, when the revolutionary changes urged by the Jacobins took their radical aim (legislation against *émigrés* 9 November 1791, laws of hostages in the late summer 1792, to name but a few) the old military nobility, voluntarily or not, turned out at the camp of the counter-revolution. Needles to mention, most of them belonged to the total of 1,159 high-ranking officers who were listed in the armed forces of France on the eve of the Revolution.⁸

Out of the eleven *maréchaux de France*, five were dukes, four were marquis, one a prince and one a count. Only nine of the 196 *lieutenants-généraux* were non-nobles; of 770 *maréchaux-de-camps* only 136 were not titled. Finally, of 182 brigadiers (the rank was officially suppressed on 17 May 1788) the most were of a noble descent.⁹ Although the monopoly of the court aristocracy over the grades of colonel and general officer was maintained,

⁷ Interesting to note, that Lieutenant-colonel Alexander Dumas and his chasseurs escorted peoples' representatives almost to Dumouriez's headquarter at St.-Amand, where they were relieved of duties. For more on this see Gallaher, *General Alexander Dumas*, 24-25.

⁸ Albert Duruy, *L'Armée Royale en 1789* (Paris, 1888), 83-84. In Paul Boiteau's *État de la France en 1789* (Paris, 1861), 228, the number given is 1,195, but it does not add up when counted separately by rank.

⁹ Duruy, *L'Armée Royale en 1789*, 83-84. Note that brigadier was not really a general officers' rank, but rather an administrative position; he led brigaded regiments and was assigned special duties, when needed. According to the *Conseil de la Guerre*, they were considered no more than *colonels-commandants*.

longer service was required of these nobles before promotion to colonel; a regulation of 17 April 1760 had distinguished the nobility presented at court from other nobles and none, but the *noblesse présentée* could advanced beyond the grade of colonel.¹⁰ The Regulation of 1781, which was calling for the “four quarters of nobility”, extended certain privileges on *roturiers* from the military families¹¹ but, nonetheless, produced a negative impact on the pride of aristocracy, which further divided the Second Estate.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the high command of the French army become more and more apathetical or discontented as the Revolution progressed. Although sufficient number of them (especially those of the older age) remained inactive or prematurely retired, many of those who still active were not eager to support the Revolutionary cause. Patriots watched them closely; in one of many pamphlets created these days, they published a list of forty-five general officers, including two *maréchaux de France* (Augustine de Mailli and Philippe de Ségur) supplied with the short characteristics for each – from the “soft” *aristocrate actif (endetté, radoteur* and the like) to the harsh ones, such as *aristocrate enterré* or even *comme un Diable*.¹² The menace of foreign intervention called for the regeneration of the army and demanded putting in charge a strong leadership, which for now should also be politically corrected.

The genesis of the highest command of the French army reflects, in a certain way, social changes brought by the Revolution. Thus, on 26 August 1790, the National Assembly set limits on the number of general officers and decided, that there would be no more than four *généraux d’armée*, thirty *lieutenants-généraux* and sixty *maréchaux-de-*

¹⁰ Scott, *The Response of the Royal Army*, 22.

¹¹ Rafe Blaufarb, *The French Army 1750-1820* (Manchester, 2002), 34-35 provides an explicit discussion on this and other related issues.

¹² *Liste des officiers aristocrates de terre et de mer... avec le caractère particulier de leur aristocratie*, n/d. BNF, dossiers Gallica.

camp.¹³ For the first time, this document also outlined an exact pay for subsequent appointments from top to the bottom. Previously, the financial situation and welfare of the high command of the Royal army depended mainly on the whim of a monarch, e.g., when a general officer executed a specific task, for which he was given certain grants and benefits from the crown. Also, before the Revolution, there were 116 general officers (including eight *lieutenants-généraux*) who, although listed in the rosters, did not receive any compensation at all.¹⁴ Of course, the differentiation in pay, according to the titles and ranks played a major role and sums received by a military élite could reach an astronomical level and produce enough jealousy.¹⁵ But from now on the situation was settled and general officers received a fixed monetary compensation according to their respective ranks.

To assist in their tasks, the National Assembly decreed a formation of the *l’état-major* of the army in the autumn of 1790.¹⁶ It created positions of the *adjudants-généraux*, thirty senior officers on staff duty from the most experienced colonels (numbering 17) and lieutenant-colonels (13), chosen by the king. But more over, the decree sought to resolve the eternal problem of career advancement (namely, much disputed two-track advancement for titled and provincial nobility¹⁷), which was left as a legacy from the period of the *Ancien Régime*.

¹³ “Etat général du nombre d’individus de chaque grade qui doivent composer l’armée... du 26 août 1790”, *Journal Militaire*, 1792 (part 4, supplement), 299.

¹⁴ Claude C. Sturgill, “L’argent pour les généraux (1768-1789)”, *Le soldat, la stratégie, la mort*, ed. André Corvisier (Paris, 1989), 246-47.

¹⁵ Note also, that according to Sturgill’s research, out of France’s total military expenses, less than 10 per cent were dedicated to general officers’ compensation, *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁶ “Décret concernant la formation de l’état-major de l’armée. – Du 5 octobre 1790 (Sanct. Le 29)”, *Journal Militaire*, 1790 (vol. 1), 280-81.

¹⁷ Blaufarb, *The French Army*, 40-44, where the author argues that “two-track advancement actually reserved most of the functional positions for the middling military nobility, expected to pursue their career in the slow track”.

The most recent system of advancement was outlined in the ordinance on 17 March 1788 and concerned the hierarchy of all military employments.¹⁸ Members of the *Comité Militaire* (which replaced *Conseil de la guerre* in October 1789) working on the legislations realized that the lieutenant-colonels of the army, who were mainly provincial nobility could be discontent, because an ordinance of 1788 would have allowed these officers to become *maréchaux-de-camp* after twenty years' service without first advancing to the rank of colonel. Yet the decree of advancement adopted by the Assembly in September 1790 applied the principles of seniority and placed behind all of the colonels (and later on, all lieutenant-colonels) in competition for the rank of general officer, or offered immediate retirement with promotion to the rank of *maréchal-de-camp* with a pension.¹⁹ Thus, office of *adjudants-généraux*, as an interim position, could provide a solution to keep most prominent (or lucky?) officers afloat, while attracting them at the same time with a further opportunity to become general officer.

After the complete reorganization of the army decreed on 1 January 1791, the government actively continued to employ surplus of its high-ranking personnel for the staff duties.²⁰ For example, appointed *adjudants-généraux* on 1 August 1791, the Irish noble Isidore Lynch and Colonel Jacques-François Menou both made quite a career out of it. By decree of the First Consul Bonaparte on 16 July 1800 they were converted to *adjudants-commandants* (and was carried on since then)²¹.

¹⁸ Duruy, *L'Armée Royale en 1789*, 85.

¹⁹ More on this in Samuel Covington, *The Comité Militaire and the legislative reform of the French army, 1789-91* (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, 1976), 180-81.

²⁰ "Règlement sur la formation, les appointments et la solde de l'infanterie française. – 1 Janvier 1791", *Journal Militaire*, 1791 (vol. 2), 59-69. Regulation fixed only one colonel and two lieutenant-colonels (one per bataillon) for each infantry regiment. The same applied for cavalry, dragoons, hussars and *chasseurs à cheval*. Ibid., 70-102.

²¹ "Arrêté qui détermine des changements dans les dénominations de divers grades et emplois. – Du 27 messidor an 8", as cited in H. Berriat *Législation Militaire* (Alexandrie, 1812) vol. II, 3.

Following the new system of advancement, sixteen new general officers were promoted on 4 June 1791, of whom twelve were *maréchaux-de-camp*. In September, twelve more were commissioned, including two *lieutenants-généraux*. On 30 August 1792, the staff grew to 190 general officers, through the addition of eight new *lieutenants-généraux*, sixteen *maréchaux-de-camp* and seven *adjudants-généraux*, for a total of 50 *lieutenants-généraux* and 100 *maréchaux-de-camp* and 40 *adjudants-généraux*.²² The last and probably largest round of *généraux* promotions on the basis of seniority alone took place on 20 February 1793 when their number grew to 195 general officers.²³

Four of Napoleon's future marshalate had been general officers in 1792 and most of them had previous combat experience, despite the notion that they did not.²⁴ Namely, Alexander Berthier (*maréchal de camp* on 22 May 1792) had seen a battlefield at Yorktown while with the expeditionary corps of Rochambeau's in 1781; François-Christophe Kellerman (9 March 1788) fought in Germany in 1758-62 and later in Poland in 1771; Polish Prince Joseph Poniatowski (1789) fought the Turks and Russians in 1788-92; and only Emmanuel de Grouchy (7 September 1792) did not see any actions, but nonetheless learned his military trade first in the *Maison du Roi* and then as the Lieutenant-colonel of 12th *Chasseur à cheval* Regiment.

But the revolutionary government was less convinced that seniority alone should qualify officers for the highest rank. The drastic changes, which swept away all previous debates and unfinished projects, appeared after the famous decree of army reorganization adopted in late

²² Édouard Detaille et Jules Richard, *L'Armée Française*, Anières-sur-Seine, 1885-89. Reprint by Waxtel & Hasenauer, transl. by Maureen C. Reinertsen (New York, 1992), 5.

²³ *Procès verbal l'Assemblée Nationale* (vol. 25 Août-5 Septembre 1792), 66; Brown, "Politics, professionalism...", 137; Scott, *The Response of the Royal Army*, 199-202 give different number.

²⁴ See, e.g., Griffith, *The Art of War*, 124-25, where the author counts twenty-seven *maréchaux d'Empire* instead of existed twenty-six.

February 1793.²⁵ Section II of that decree dealt with the mode of advancement for the entire officer corps. Adapted by the decree, the ranks of *lieutenants-généraux* and *maréchaux-de-camp* now were given names more logical and appropriate to their functions: *général de division* and *général de brigade*. It further stipulated that only one-third of the vacancies should be filled out on the basis of seniority, while the nomination of other two-thirds should be left to the discretion of the War Ministry (chapters XII and XIII). Chapter XIV of the same Section II specified that the *généraux en chef* “could not have anything but a temporary commission; they shall be chosen by the executive counsel from the *généraux de division* upon further ratification by the National Assembly.” This was in agreement with the earlier expression of the former National Guard officer, Louis Saint-Just, when he specified that while “an election of the unit commanders is the civil duty of a soldier, at the same time the election of general officers is a right of all the citizens.”²⁶

Further, the creation of the office of *représentans du peuple aux armées* (hereafter, representatives on mission) in early April 1793 by the Committee of Public Safety gave these officials almost unparalleled power to interfere in the military affairs and the formation of commanding cadres according to their own judgment. They were supposed to execute the utmost vigilant “surveillance over performance of agents sent by the executive counsel, and a conduct of general officers and soldiers of the army, as well.”²⁷ Especially, it did concern the social background of general officers in the new republican armies, which underwent serious changes.

Thus, while on 20 April 1792 the French army listed 153 general officers of whom eighteen were

²⁵ “Décret relatif à l’organisation de l’armée, et aux pensions de retraite et traitemes de tout militaire, de quelque dgade qu’il soit. – Du 21 février 1793”, *Journal Militaire*, 1793 (vol. 6), 137-148, which was part of a set of decrees legislated between 21 and 25 February of the same year.

²⁶ Albert Soboul, *La Première République* (Paris, 1968), 135.

²⁷ “Décret qui déclare qu’il aura constamment des commissaires près armées. – Du 9 avril 1793”, *Journal Militaire* 1793 (vol. 6, part I), 242-43.

of non-noble descent, on January 1793 the number of *roturiers* increased to sixty-three out of nearly 200 *lieutenants-généraux* and *maréchaux-de-camp*. Finally, after much of Jacobin purges, on 1 January 1794, armies of the French Republic listed only sixty-two of the former nobility versus 275 representatives of the Third Estate²⁸ (these figures look more convincing and comprehensive if taking down separately). Thus, for example, *l’armée du Nord* on 1 April 1793, that is at the moment of Dumouriez treason, consisted of thirty-seven general officers of whom all but four (like Jacques Ferrand, who started his career as a private in 1765) were representatives of the former nobility, including the *prince du sang* Chartres-Egalité.²⁹ Majority of them were promoted in September-October of 1792 and in March 1793 from the former provincial nobility, bringing their experience and skill to the new era of military operations. Further, using the same *l’armée du Nord* on 19 April 1794 as an example, the situation had changed diametrically: now, out of thirty active general officers only six were representatives of the former nobility, while the rest came from the bourgeois families (including Jean-Victor Moreau), were promoted from the ranks or came from the various volunteer formations.³⁰

Therefore, even if the social status of the high officers was changing, it is safe to assume that former nobles did not disappear in their entirety from the armed forces despite political pressure. However, yielding to the demands of the patriots the Convention, on 5 April 1793, decreed that the further promotions of general officers and staff officers in the army of more than 40,000 could be awarded only to those not belonging the estate of

²⁸ Georges Six, *Les généraux de la Révolution et de l’Empire* (reprint, Bordas, 1947), 25.

²⁹ “État et repartition par armée, des officiers généraux employés les armées française avec la dates des grades. – Du 1 avril 1793”, *Journal Militaire*, 1793 (vol. 6, part I), 228-29.

³⁰ The data on all general officers were drawn from Six’s *Dictionnaire Biographique des généraux* and verified upon a biography of each individual, where available. Additional information was obtained using indispensable orders of battles of revolutionary armies for various periods from the *Nafziger Collection*.

former nobles.³¹ But it also was clearly understood that the army could not just get rid of old specialists although this might satisfy somebody's political agenda. The debates went further when, on 31 May 1793, the members of the Commune of Paris presented a petition to the Convention in which they demanded the retirement (*le licenciement*) all nobles occupying the high ranks in the armies of the Republic. However, in the outcome of the revolutionary enthusiasm that followed, on 5 June 1793, the Convention declared that it would be "unjust to exclude from administration some priests who got married and nobles, who performed well their revolutionary duties for the *Patrie*."³²

Because of this, at the beginning of 1794, there were more than sixty general officers from the former nobility. Among the others, the ranks included the famous François-Christophe Kellermann (of the "robe" nobility) and several other future *maréchaux* of the First Empire, such as Louis-Nicholas Davout (tracing his roots from the thirteenth century), Catherine-Dominique Pérignon, Jacques-Etienne-Joseph-Alexandre Macdonald and even Napoléon Bonaparte himself, promoted temporary to the temporary grade of *général de brigade* in December 1793 by the representatives on mission Augustine Robespierre and Christophe Saliceti and officially confirmed in his rank on 6 February 1794.³³

However, the republican government, while keeping *les ci-devant nobles* on the high steps of hierarchal ladder in the army, kept them on a short leash. It also should be noted that many, who were supposedly nobles on the eve of the Revolution, in the 1790s preferred not to advertise their illustrious background when it was no longer politically advisable.³⁴ For example, Jean-Mathieu Philibert Sérurier, after being first promoted to colonel, was

³¹ August-Philippe Herlaut, "La républicanisation des états-majors et des cadres de l'armée pendant la Révolution", *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 14 (1937), 388.

³² *Ibid.*, 390-91.

³³ For more details on social and military background see Appendix 1.

³⁴ Griffith, *The art of war*, 107.

suddenly arrested and deprived of his rank for suspected royalist sympathies. Asking to be admitted as a simple volunteer, he was reinstated by the representatives on mission and soon promoted to the general officer's rank.³⁵ Another former noble, Macdonald, was suddenly promoted to the *général de brigade* (26 August 1793) a rank that he held temporarily for several months in *l'armée du Nord*. When a decree was published ordering all former nobles to move from the frontiers, a young general officer (Macdonald was just twenty-eight), ought to have resigned himself. But representatives on mission, mentioning his conduct with the praise, informed Macdonald that by virtue of their plenary powers they required his service. Fearing ostracism, or even worse – in the case of a possible misfortune so common in war – Macdonald asked for a document in writing but was refused. Thinking to tend the resignation, he was warned that if in such a case he might be a subject for a prosecution. "I had no choice but to submit, so I reminded where I was in spite of the twofold odds," later wrote this future Napoleon's commander.³⁶

Situations like this hit, probably, not only his nerve for the hammer of the republican "justice" bit upon the army staffs and headquarters with a severe persistence. Promotion to general officer rank was soon called "brevet to the scaffold."³⁷ If during the last decades of the Ancien Régime there were only eleven instances of cassation of general officers while a suspension did not apply at all, that for 1793 there were fifty-nine destitutions and 275 suspensions and in 1794 fifty-four and seventy-seven, respectively.³⁸

All together, for the period from 1792 to 1803 there were 421 suspensions and 182 destitutions from general officer rank. Specifically, it applies for the period between 6 April 1793 (Dumouriez's

³⁵ *Napoleon's Marshals*, David Chandler, ed. (New York, 1987), 443.

³⁶ *Recollections of Marshal Macdonald, duke of Tarentum*. Camille Rousset, ed., transl. by Stephen L. Simeon (London, 1892), I, 168-69.

³⁷ Général Weygand, *Histoire de l'armée française* (de l'Académie Française, 1953), 212.

³⁸ Six, *Les généraux de la Révolution*, 203, 213-16.

treason) and 27 July 1794 (the fall of the Robespierre) with the ninety-eight destitutions and hundreds of suspensions.³⁹ The others were less fortunate: for example, Adam Philippe de Custine, who at various times in 1792 and 1793 had commanded five different armies of the Republic and had always disdained what he considered to be political interference in military matters, was recalled to Paris where he was subsequently suspended, arrested, tried and executed on 28 August 1793.⁴⁰ Consequences of the Lafayette and Dumouriez's treason were now dealt without regard to the previous merits; negligence or inability to perform tasks became considered as a proof of absence of the trustworthiness and republican zeal. In May 1793, the National Convention decreed that all officers promoted by Dumouriez since February should furnish a *certificate de civisme*, which supposed to be approved by the Ministry of War.⁴¹ This measurement was the beginning of not only a professional but political control over the armed forces, as well. The speeches of Saint-Just, who intently followed all military affairs, abounded with the sentences that "we will praise our general officers only at the end of war."

The revolutionary government tried to employ any feasible methods to prevent further unpredictable turnout in the army and, at the same time, to achieve a maximum control over its high command. One of the measures implemented was reorganization of the War Ministry under Jean-Baptiste-Nicholas Bouchotte (from 5 April 1793 to 20 April 1794). Partly, this appears as a response of the government to Dumouriez's treason, the military crisis and the political triumph of the revolutionary radicals, which gave the executive office the right to appoint general officers at will.⁴² But equally important, it was designed to strengthen position of the National Convention by

³⁹ Ibid, 203, 217

⁴⁰ Samuel F. Scott, *From Yorktown to Valmy* (University Press of Colorado, 1998), 179.

⁴¹ "Décret concernant les officiers nommés par le général Dumouriez. – Du 14 mai 1793", *Journal Militaire*, 1793 (vol. 6, part I), 338.

⁴² As discussed in Brown, "Politics, professionalism...", 136-37.

further professionalizing France's armed forces, thus directing them away from the possible political interference.

Taking from its predecessor, Beurnonville, the War Ministry administration was divided by six divisions.⁴³ The 5th division (subdivided in six bureaus) under orders of a certain François, a former judge of the Tribunal in Lille, was put in charge of general officers' personnel, general correspondence and distributions of military laws, among other matters. The 6th division (ten bureaus) under Xavier Audouin, a *commissaire de guerre*, was responsible for all further promotions and nominations of general officers, staff officers and company grade officers for all branches of service. The 5th and 6th divisions together numbered 150 employees, or one-third of the total 453 manpower working at the War Ministry.⁴⁴

Once in power, the radicals revised their policy towards the officer corps and specifically, the high command. In July 1793, Bouchotte was instructed to make appointments without regard to the existing laws of advancement, but rather based on the political and social background of true revolutionaries⁴⁵. Suspensions, cassations, destitutions – along with appointments and unexpected promotions, and sometimes all together – exchanged each other in a uniquely fast pace. During the period 1793-94 in the army forty-three promotions to the general officers' rank directly from the captains and/or lieutenants were noted. At the same time persecution of the "politically unstable" and "suspects" rose dramatically, leading to lethal results. Thus, in 1793, thirty-one general officers were brought to trial, while in 1794 it was already sixty-one. Over fifty general officers and army commanders ended their careers, sometimes very illustrious, under the guillotine.⁴⁶ Many decrees issued at that time

⁴³ "Administration, avril 1793", *Journal Militaire* (1793, vol. 6, part I), 259-60.

⁴⁴ Ibid., More details on organizing of War Ministry could be found in August-Philippe Herlaut, *Le Colonel Bouchotte Ministre de la guerre en l'an 2*. (Paris, 1946), 70-80.

⁴⁵ Brown, "Politics, professionalism...", 137.

⁴⁶ Six, *Les généraux de la Révolution*, 114, 228-29.

called for the “prompt judgment” and rightful performance of a revolutionary Tribunal.⁴⁷

Note that the Terror installed was no longer a spontaneous reaction of the masses, but a judicial and administrative institution set up by the Convention and its subsequent committees. The central repressive apparatus had been in place since March 1793, because the Revolutionary Tribunal was created at that time. But the activity of this Tribunal had been restricted until September, even though its character was already in evidence, by allowing judges to choose only between acquittal and the execution.⁴⁸

However, during the Bouchotte’s tenure as minister of war there were not only show trials and purges of the commanding cadres. It was an obvious progression towards the most updated reorganization and “modernization” of the army and its general officers’ corps. If previously there were many deserving *généraux* who did not have a chance to show their true skills under the monarchy, so they would soon find an opportunity under the Revolution.⁴⁹ However, although many general officers had a solid record, their professional skills could be constituted more by a length of service, rather than actual combat experience.⁵⁰ Generally, while speaking of professionalism, the entire complex of components could be taken into consideration, such as: ability for military service, regularity of compensation, knowledge of the theory and practice of war, opportunity for advancement and new mentality.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., “Décret qui rapporte celui qui ordonnoit que les généraux ne seroient traduits en jugemens qu’en vertu d’un décret d’accusation, et renvoie le général Houchard devant le tribunal révolutionnaire. – 24 novembre 1793”, *Journal Militaire*, 1793/94 (vol. 8), 102.

⁴⁸ François Furet, *Revolutionary France: 1770-1880*, transl. by Antonia Nevill (Hachette, 1988), 138.

⁴⁹ Griffith, *The Art of War*, 113. Note, that out of general officers that took an active part in Rochambeau’s expedition to the North America, the most recent military conflict involving sufficient amount of troops, none but a few (e.g., Custine) is seen on the active list with the outbreak of the war in 1792.

⁵⁰ As put in Scott, *The Response of the Royal Army*, 200-01; Brown, “Politics, professionalism...”, where the author suggests that “long military careers... meant combat experience”, 135.

As noted, if during the last decade of *Ancien Régime* the representatives of the high command considered army service as semi-autonomous service (although regular, it was limited in the peace time), since the early years of the Revolution it had become permanent in both peace and war time. It also corresponds with the payment; if before it was a sort of a regular but varied depending on the particular assignment, mission, or more likely, the king’s favoritism, so now it became staidly fixed according to rank without regard to the previous experience, social status or party affiliation.

Construction of the new French revolutionary armed forces, especially after the proposed amalgamation, required a professional approach from all levels of the military hierarchy to implement such an enormous undertaking. Along with mechanical process of fusing volunteer bataillons with the cadres of the old regular army came an understanding that performance could be successful if, together with discipline and revolutionary enthusiasm, it would bring up a strong military organization. The government already started this process earlier by issuing first, in the sense of a modern word, instructions and regulations, such as *Instruction provisoire sur le campement de l’infanterie* (1 March 1792), *Règlement concernant le service intérieur la police et la discipline* (24 June 1792) and other documents destined to deal with the everyday military life. During the period 1793-94 the Ministry of War issued more than 200 various orders, admonitions and recommendations to be sent to general officers and their staffs covering practically all aspects of military affairs, from dealing with enemy prisoners to the presence of the women in camps, uniforms, the number of horses for each rank and many other matters.⁵¹ Special requirements were placed upon general officers to assist representatives on mission with *embrigadement* of the troops, furnishing horses for the revived cavalry, preparing artillery parks

⁵¹ Information is absorbed from the *Journal Militaire* for the period covering 1793 and 1794.

and the like.⁵² On the other hand, the increased amount of paperwork (directives were sent off by all divisions of the War Ministry expecting answers) created additional pressure for the cadres, while enabling the government to exercise a better control over the high command. Needless to say that to keep up with pace of a new system of warfare along with the ability to survive in the period of the radical political changes could only ablest, successful and “politically correct” general officers.

Taking into their hands the order of promotion, while practically eliminating the system of advancement by seniority, the revolutionary government did not hesitate much. The real power, especially on the frontier, was concentrated in the hands of representatives on mission, who used it to create a high command both politically obedient and professionally suitable, without regard to the former/recent social status.

Thus, for example, out of number of general officers serving in *l'armée du Nord* in April 1794, the eight were provisionally nominated by representatives on mission, including three former nobles (namely, Claude-Ignace-François Michaud, Philibert-Guillaume Duhèsme and Jean-Baptiste Dumonceau); on the other hand, two who were suspended, came from a more than humble background. Another thing is that *l'armée du Nord* had in its ranks none of those *généraux* who were with the same army a year before. A majority of new general officers had been created in the spring-fall 1793 (only one, André Poncet, was already a *maréchal de camp* in 1792) and most of them came from a long professional military background, or had served in battalions of volunteers since the beginning of the war.⁵³ They were the exact component of the trained and experienced officers as well as essentially

⁵² See, e.g., general directive of the war minister prepared to be sent to the various *commandants en chefs* of the armies of the Republic to provide assistance with horses for the cavalry. *Journal Militaire*, 1793/74 (vol. 8), 185-86.

⁵³ Blaufarb, *The French Army*, 105; the numbers are taken from the *Nafziger Collection* and cross-referenced with Six, *Les généraux de la Révolution*.

intelligent and educated middle class people whom the Revolution – and later, the First Empire – would hammer into general officers and above (by the June 1794 the number of future *maréchaux de l'Empire* who were serving as general officers in various armies of the Republic reached seventeen).⁵⁴

At the same time, further professionalization of the general officers' corps was interrupted by the reign of Terror when political loyalty and reliability often took precedence over the criteria for military command.⁵⁵ By the beginning of December 1793 the Committee of Public Safety summarized its position in the following comments for its general officers:

*At the Free State, the military power should be restricted at most; it is just a passive lever, which is moved by a common will. Généraux, the time of disobedience has passed...*⁵⁶

It also touched all aspects of promotion and the system of advancement. War minister Bouchotte, following the leftist wing of the Jacobins was, nonetheless, tolerated to the existence of experienced general officers who had once belonged to the noble Estate. Thus, for example, the newly created army of *le Sambe-et-Meuse* in the end of June – beginning of July of 1794 (that is, in aftermath of the decisive victory of Fleurus) still had three such general officers: *généraux de division* Jacques-Maurice Hatry, Anne-Charles-Basset Montaigu, and *général de brigade* Jean-Joseph Ange d'Hautpoul.⁵⁷ On the other hand, Bouchotte, being himself of a professional military background, would probably attend without a fervent admiration some soldiers' petitions in which, like the one written by the artillerymen of *l'armée des Pyrénées*, there were demands “to suspend all

⁵⁴ Quantitative details of the future marshalate are provided in the table at the end (Appendix 1).

⁵⁵ Brown, “Politics, professionalism...”, 135-36.

⁵⁶ Soboul, *La Première République*, 135.

⁵⁷ Order of battle is taken from Todd Fisher, “The Battle of Fleurus, 26 June 1794”, *Empires, Eagles & Lions* 7 (July/August 1994), 17-18, and information derived from Six, *Dictionnaire biographique des généraux*.

general officers and replace them with good patriots, such as our captain."⁵⁸

However, Bouchotte was inexorable in regards to all suspicious, disobedient or insufficiently loyal general officers, and the condemned ones took their unfortunate toll. Further, the Jacobin minister, with the certain degree of boldness (sometimes quite inexplicit to the people of the military background) moved people up the ladder of hierarchy. This tendency and practice was disputed with the certain degree of worries in the letter of Jean-Ernest Kreig, a commandant of the Metz fortress:

*As long as I will see at the head of the troops people who all previously worked for a living as handicraftsmen, merchants or small businessmen I will mourn over the Republican armies... Your method of advancement, citizen minister, should not be as such, or the Republic will end to exist. My heart is bleeding when I see old drunkards, incapable, endowed by all deficiencies, which emerged from all the pigsties, from all the social vices and who rose up in the ranks within the armies of the Republic. How do you expect that soldiers will have a confidence in such commanders..?*⁵⁹

Kreig's apprehensions were not totally baseless; thanks to Bouchotte, among newly promoted general officers were people such Franoise Suzamicq. After serving nearly fourteen years as an NCO, he retired, but came back when the Revolution broke out and was elected captain of the 1st volunteer *bataillon* of Basses-Pyrénées. Promoted to the rank of the *chef de bataillon*, on 4 October 1793, on the very next day, Bouchotte suddenly made Suzamicq *général de brigade* despite the protests of the representatives on mission; he carried his brevet for several months only to be destituted for a total incompetence in April 1794.⁶⁰ Another example was *général de brigade* Henri Latour, who was arrested for violation of the avant-postes line, for "drinking and singing along with the grenadiers and falling asleep together with the butchers of the army."⁶¹

⁵⁸ Herlaut, "La républicanisation des états-majors..." 389.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 396.

⁶⁰ Six, *Les généraux de la Révolution*, 108.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

But, of course, neither Suzamicq nor Latour represented a typical image of the new general officer in the French republican armies. Along with the precocious promotions and undeserved advancements, partly plausible for the period of the Jacobin dictatorship, there was a constellation of many true talents, which could not be found in any other armies of that period. There were the famous: Hoche, Marceau, Deseaix, Pichegru, Massena, Bonaparte, Lecourbe, Moreau, Joubert and many others. Generally, these commanders of the Republic were relatively new people to the high posts, but they relied upon the strong cohort of the more senior general officers and their educational, training and military experience, who mainly arose from the ranks of the former king's army and now truly embodied the motto of "the careers open to talent".

The practice was the best criterion to prove a theoretical conception and politics of the Revolutionary government forming new commanding cadres was realized in the midst of the military operations. The new commanders of 1793-94 were the men who broke the old cordon strategy of European warfare with quite a new attitude aiming for swift marches, smart maneuvering and furious attacks multiplied by the revolutionary enthusiasm and personal example. At the beginning of September 1793 the Anglo-Hanoverian army was beaten at Hondshoote, which freed Dunkirk from enemy pressure. In October the battle of Wattignies freed Maubeuge from the Austrian army. The Sardinians were driven out of Savoy and the Spanish withdrew across the Pyrenees.⁶² Subsequent victories at Tourcoing, Fleurus and in many others large and small combats and battles, successful sieges of fortress and cities, redressing situation practically on all fronts would not have been possible without the newly organized armies led by the talented commanding cadres. At the same time the army, being under close supervision and directing its efforts exclusively towards the military operations, was not yet ready to interfere in politics.

⁶² Furet, *Revolutionary France*, 138.

Prevalence in the fronts the most disciplined, knowledgeable and experienced men, totally changing their mentality toward the military trade as a profession *par excellence*, along with the loyalty to the government played an important role and cemented success even during the worst days of Terror.

These general officers fought “with such a persistence, which considers that nothing is done when at least something is left to do; with such a selflessness, which only could be stopped by a death... They were giving a battle as it should be the most decisive one, they were making an effort, as it should be the very final one”, - so wrote an *émigré* officier, the one who was fighting against the republicans under the Prince de Condé.⁶³

The armies that stopped the foreign intervention and brought a new sense of the Revolutionary warfare throughout the Europe were commanded mainly by professionally prepared men who had acquired their military experience under the *Ancien Régime* or since the outbreak of the war and enjoyed rapid promotion after 1792. But it also should be noted that the new general officers' cadres were created during a relatively short period of time under rather difficult internal and external circumstances that produced imbalance and mistakes, which in most cases were carried on too far. But despite all this, during the period of 1792-94 the high command on certain frontiers of the Republic was recreated practically anew. The new commanders, whose social strata, system of hierarchy and mentalities became more professional and bore all credentials of the most advanced system proven on the battlefields, dismissed the old king's general officer corps. Such changes in the pedigree of the commanding cadres on this stage of the Revolution corresponded to the general reconstruction of the army, which appeared in the period of the social transformation being experienced by the French society at large. Just as in the case of a “freshman” general officer like Alexander Dumas and many

others, the phenomenon of the French Revolution was best utilized in employment of its human material based on professional background and integrity, which served well along with a continuity in opportunity for advancement for its most professional and committed representatives.

⁶³ Anon. *Zamechania o franzyzskoi armii poslednego vremeni c 1792 po 1808* [Notes on the French army of the last period, namely from 1792 to 1808] (St.-Petersburg, 1808), 8.

Table 1. The future Napoleon's marshalate in the era of the Revolution

Name (year of birth)	Known background	Beginning of a career	Achieved general officer's rank on	Years of service/age	Commission when/where
Augereau (1757 -	Son of a valet	Soldat 1774	23 Dec 1793*	19 /36 y.o.	Legion 1792
Bernadotte (1763 -	Petty bourgeois	Soldat 1780	29 June 1794*	14 /31 y.o.	Replac. 1791
Berthier (1753 -	Son of ennobled	Lieutenant 1772	22 May 1792*	20 /39 y.o.	Regular
Bessières (1768 -	Petty bourgeois	Chasseur 1792	18 July 1800	8 /32 y.o.	Nom. 1793
Brune (1763 -	Nobility of robe	Capitaine NG 1789	18 August 1793*	4 /30 y.o.	NG vol 1791
Davout (1770 -	Old nobility	Sous-lieutenant 1788	25 July 1793*	5 /23 y.o.	Regular
Saint-Cyr (1764 -	Rich bourgeois	Volunteer 1792	5 June 1794*	2 /30 y.o.	NG vol. 1792
Grouchy (1766 -	Old nobility	Lieutenant 1780	7 Sept 1792*	12 /28 y.o.	Regular
Jourdan (1762 -	Petty bourgeois	Soldat 1778	27 May 1793*	15 /31 y.o.	NG vol. 1791
Kellerman (1735 -	Nobility of robe	Soldat 1752	9 March 1788*	36 /53 y.o.	Regular 1756
Lannes (1769 -	Of agriculture	Soldat NG 1792	9 Sept 1796	4 /24 y.o.	NG vol. 1792
Lefebvre (1755 -	Of agriculture	Soldat 1773	3 Sept 1793*	20 /38 y.o.	Replac. 1792
Macdonald (1765 -	Old nobility	Legion Irland. 1784	26 Aug 1793*	19 /28 y.o.	Regular 1785
Marmont (1774 -	Old nobility	Sous-lieutenant 1790	10 June 1798	8 /24 y.o.	Militia 1790
Massena (1758 -	Petty bourgeois	Soldat 1775	22 Aug 1793*	18 /35 y.o.	NG vol. 1791
Moncey (1754 -	Nobility	Soldat 1769	18 Feb 1794*	25 /40 y.o.	Regular 1779
Morthier (1768 -	Rich bourgeois	In NG 1789-91	23 Feb 1799	10 /31 y.o.	NG vol. 1791
Murat (1767 -	Petty bourgeois	Chasseur 1787	10 May 1796	9 /29 y.o.	Free co., 1792
Ney (1769 -	Petty bourgeois	Hussar 1787	1 Aug 1796	9 /25 y.o.	Senior. 1792
Oudinot (1767 -	Petty bourgeois	Soldat 1784	12 April 1799	15 /27 y.o.	NG vol. 1791
Perignon (1754 -	Old nobility	Sous-lieutenant 1780	18 Sept 1793*	13 /39 y.o.	Militia 1780
Poniatowski (1763	Polish Prince	Service since 1788	1789*	1 /26 y.o.	By blood
Serurier (1742 -	Nobility	Lieutenant 1755	25 June 1793*	38 /51 y.o.	Militia 1755
Soult (1769 -	Petty bourgeois	Soldat 1785	11 Oct 1794	9 /25 y.o.	NG vol, 1792
Suchet (1770 -	Rich bourgeois	Sous-lieutenant 1791	23 March 1798	7 /28 y.o.	NG vol. 1792
Victor (1764 -	Petty bourgeois	Tambour of art. 1781	20 Dec 1793*	12/29 y.o.	NG vol. 1792

Note that for the period from April 1792 to June 94, which is the focus of this study, there were seventeen general officers in the armies of the Republic who in the future would become *maréchaux d'Empire*. As seen from the chart (marked with the *), their average age, years of active service and social background was diverse, including:

- a) seven bourgeoisie or rich/petty owners
- b) eight petty or rich nobles or ennobled
- c) a hereditary prince (Poniatowski)
- d) a son of valet (Augereau)

With few exceptions, such as in cases of Saint-Cyr and Poniatowski, most of them served in the regular Royal army and their advancement was pretty steady for the given time period, although not always adequately corresponding to their average age and/or social background.