As we have seen, realizing Vauban’s efficient attack required surmounting a number of hurdles. Military engineers in the War of the Spanish Succession were stretched thin across sprawling theaters, their numbers masking their widely-varying quality. Even the most skilled engineer had difficulty managing independent-minded cogs of the clockwork siege. These sources of friction could be minimized if the chief engineer could win the trust of or receive authority over the commanding general and his approach commanders, but such wide-ranging authority was rarely granted after Vauban and Coehoorn left the scene. Contrary to the assumption held by the scholarship on the late-seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries—that Vauban’s method of attack served as the paradigm for most besiegers—there was a fundamental rift within the military community over the nature of the attack. Military engineers criticized the many sources of siege inefficiency, and general officers in turn savagely criticized their engineers for incompetence. Inquiring more deeply to resolve these competing claims, we find that the widespread complaints about the incompetence of the engineers were based on a poor understanding of Vauban’s precepts, while the many specific complaints do not stand up to detailed scrutiny.

1. Ignoring and Criticizing the Engineers

Vauban’s reputation, as impressive as it appears today, did not overawe many generals of his day. Though the Vauban-centric literature does not pay much attention to the details of his offensive method during its formation, it does recognize that at the end of his career his ideas were challenged by several French commanders who either criticized or rejected out of hand his proposals. The King may have valued his judgment, but this did not convince his generals in the field to blindly implement the projects they were sent.¹

¹ Lecomte provides the best account of this in his Les ingénieurs militaires en France
In Germany in 1703, Villars ignored Vauban’s proposal when attacking Strasbourg’s Fort Kehl; he succeeded against the advice of the majority of the engineers present. Encamped before Landau later that year, Camille d’Hostun, maréchal Tallard chose an artillery officer’s proposal over that of Vauban. At the Mediterranean port of Nice in 1705, Berwick also refused Vauban’s siege plan and went on to capture the town by a different approach. Pressured to accept Vauban’s recommendations, head-strong La Feuillade made a point of reminding his father-in-law Chamillart that Vauban considered Nice unassailable where Berwick attacked it, yet the town only held out for twenty-seven days. The blue-blood continued to insist on his independence when besieging Turin: he flatly rejected Vauban’s proposals and refused to relent even after the great engineer publicly criticized its conduct. Most other commanders relied not on their elevated lineage, but on the plausible argument against long-distance meddling: “those who see from close up are to be believed over those who see from far away.”

Nor did Vauban’s reputation protect those who were entrusted to carry on his legacy. A few criticized the engineers for not living up to Vauban’s standards. Antoine de Pas, marquis de Feuquières and Lieutenant-General of Louis’ armies, for example, denounced the