The conceit of “everyday history” is that it is the normal that is important rather than the exceptional. In social history it is linked with a view from below that is not always very helpful. In military history, to the extent that it has been tried, it seems to me an unquestionably valuable tool. War focuses human attention. We know far more about it than about any comparable historic activity. It attracts journalists, giving us a remarkable day-by-day account unmatched for any other human activity except courting. And as more orthodox everyday historians have argued, there is much to learn. The Eighteenth Century account emphasizes “stealing a march” on the adversary by “manoeuvre.” Contemporary generals put so much weight on this measure of success that they often avoided battle entirely if they were behind a march. However, beginning in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, this came to be condemned as cowardice and a failure of imagination. Military historians are always prone to being social critics. It certainly was not British historian Correlli Barnett who invented the idea of the “audit of war,” of war as a measure of a society’s fitness and even right to exist, and for the national-liberal social critic, history has a direction. Dodging “decisive battle” was a symptom of fear. And no insightful general could be unaware that he would win or lose depending not on military circumstances, but on whether or not he was on the side of history. The artful dodging of “manoeuvres” is as much a symbol of obsolete politics as ballet companies in an age of rock.

This is probably not the mainstream of practical military history, and it will certainly not stand scrutiny as the model of a serious professional’s practice. What matters here is indicated by the French spelling of the word “manoeuvre” that we still sometimes use up in the Canadas. “Manoeuvre” is not ballet. It is work of the hand. Armies won marches by their everyday practice, by cutting hay, digging, surveying, and with carpentry. Successful generalship was successful management of existing resources, above all of skills. And as it drew on existing skillsets it gave them back in a positive feedback relationship.
I propose to understand that process as an economy of knowledge, but that may be contentious. It suffices to say that Central European warfare in the eighteenth century needs to be understood in terms of the everyday practice of war.\(^1\)

The thesis on which this chapter is based was originally written to answer a claim in the history of science, that there was a “Scientific Revolution” in the late 1600s that came to an end sometime around 1700. Various explanations have been proposed. The literature, and its implications for all kinds of social praxis, is enormous. That said, the approach found little support from wiser advisors, and a new focus emerged. I write here about the skills of the everyday of war, their continuous acquisition by new recruits, and I suggest the possible social implications. Hopefully, it will lead to a clearer understanding of both the praxis of war and of the transformation of European society during the long eighteenth century.

If it also suggests a revision of our conventional understanding of the social dimensions of the Scientific Revolution, well, you cannot blame a boy for trying.

I: “The Generation of 1683:” The Prosopography of Military Skill

We know a great deal more about generals than about common soldiers. We even have a prosopographic study of the French general officer corps by André Corvisier. Corvisier’s work is quite valuable. It tells us quite a bit about France, as well as about French generals. However, it is not clear that his conclusions can be extended to Central Europe. If it can, we can also put new questions to the study, ones unique to Central Europe. Particularly, to the extent that generals are technocrats, we can hope to use it to understand whether or not Central Europe did lag Western in technological development. That might be interesting in its own right. The journalistic consensus in English in the years before 1914 was that the Habsburgs were peculiarly anti-progress, and one still encounters this thesis in the historiography. From here it is a short road to arguing that the Habsburg officer corps lacked “progressive” skills; and to the extent that this lack was made up, that it was made up by Protestant western Francophones. It has also

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