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Direzione, Via Bosco degli Arvali 24, 00148 Roma

Contatti: direzione@nam-sigm.org ; virgilio.ilari@gmail.com

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(www.societaitalianastoriamilitare@org)

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Estandart Reyau d'a Cheneralísma, prencipal bandera carlista d'a primera guerra bordada por María Francisca de Braganza em 1833 Royal Standard of the General in Chief, main Carlist flag of the First War embroidered by Maria Francisca de Braganza in 1833). Wikimedia Commons

Science of War, Strategy in Doubt: The Ambiguity of Military Theory in the Age of Reason

By MAURIZIO RECORDATI-KOEN

ABSTRACT. This article challenges the conventional view of Enlightenment military thought as a naïve attempt to turn war into a science governed by timeless laws and mathematical certainty, eliminating chance and human factors. Far from dogmatic rationalists, early modern soldier-writers recognized war's indeterminacy, the tentative nature of their teaching, and its literary character. They emphasized practice over theory, prudence and judgment over doctrine, and acknowledged the decisive role of history and chance. Rather than venerating Greco-Roman models uncritically, they engaged critically with the Art of War tradition and admitted the limits of their own claims. Military science in the Age of Reason thus emerges not as a universal system but as a contested field of knowledge shaped by perspectivism and epistemic fallibilism. The broader significance of this article lies in exposing the ambiguity of early modern discourse on war—at once rationalizing and skeptical, scientific in aspiration, yet profoundly aware of its own limits.

KEYWORDS: MILITARY SCIENCE; STRATEGY; MILITARY HISTORY; MILITARY THEORY; MILITARY TREATISES; CLAUSEWITZ; ENLIGHTENMENT.

Introduction

Contemporary scholarship conventionally portrays Enlightenment military thought as a literature marked by scientistic optimism—a naïve belief that the logic of warfare could be codified into a system of positive rules, grounded in geometry, mechanics, algebra, or logic itself; in short: that it could pose as a hard science. From this perspective, early modern military theory appeared absolute and universal: an objective reflection of laws thought to exist in nature independently of human experience, applicable across time and space. The construction of such a science drew on practical experience, as well as on the study of military history and the Art of War literature. This educational approach rested on the notion that a universal science of war had first been artic-

ulated by Greco-Roman masters, then forgotten, and was now gradually being rediscovered in the modern age.

Such representations, which have wide currency in military studies, often carry an implicit or explicit antirationalist and historicist critique. They suggest that the Enlightenment military thinkers tended to adhere dogmatically to the letter of a timeless (ahistorical) military rationality and revere Greco-Roman models. On the whole, these academic interpretations echo the stereotype about the Age of Reason's "fatuous optimism" and "blind faith in science."¹ But in military studies, this bad rap also owes much to Clausewitz's thundering against his predecessors and his overbearing legacy in the field. Over the last few generations, scholars hailed him as a Promethean, skeptical philosopher—as "the first" to note the failure of earlier attempts at theorizing warfare.² Peter Paret painted him as a dissident defined by his "opposition to recognized authority" and to the common "tendency toward the doctrinaire and the prescriptive."³ In the words of earlier prominent commentators, Clausewitz's "Copernican Revolution" liberated military science from dogmatism, earning him the title of "Schulmeister of the Prussian army," the one who "freed [it] from the artificiality that pervaded military theory."⁴

This article challenges such critiques of the Age of Reason, arguing that they inadvertently infantilize generations of largely overlooked early modern thinkers—many of whom were both seasoned warriors and intellectuals in their own right. I will show that these assessments underestimate their capacity to reflect on the gap between real warfare and its literary-theoretical representations. Contrary to the impression conveyed by their rationalist rhetoric and élan, these soldier-writers did not uncritically embrace the myth of a universal military science. They recurrently asserted the authority of practice over theory and of personal judgment over the letter of doctrine. They recognized the weight of history, cir-

1 Graeme Garrard, "The Enlightenment and Its Enemies," *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, no. 5 (2006): 671, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205282216>.

2 Paul Dragos Aligica, "Efficacy, East and West: François Jullien's Explorations in Strategy," *Comparative Strategy* 26, no. 4 (2007): 326, doi.org/10.1080/01495930701598623.

3 Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton University Press, 1985), 357.

4 Hans Rothfels, "Clausewitz," in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, by Edward Mead Earle (Princeton University Press, 1943), 100; Rudolf Karl Fritz von Caemmerer, *Die Entwicklung der strategischen Wissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert* (Wilhelm Baensch, 1904), 66.

cumstances, chance, and human factors. They often denounced the limitations and flaws of their empirical basis—the “poetic” nature of historiography—and engaged critically with the unavoidable faults of the Art of War tradition. This critical reflection could also be introspective: they often admitted to their inevitable assertiveness, ultimately producing dogmatic teachings tempered by “epistemic fallibilism.”

Finally, the last section draws on Hervé Drévilion’s studies, which show that military science in the Age of Reason evolved within an unstable “regime of truth.” Within this framework, the Art of War was treated as a literary exercise, with theory regarded as fungible, manipulable, and contested—far from universal or absolute. This notion underscores not only the fallibilist outlook of early modern military thought, but also its growing perspectivism.

To be sure, the scientific ambitions and verve of the Art of War literature had grown throughout the Enlightenment, along with the increasing sophistication of its “discursive formations” and its scientific rhetoric. Already in the sixteenth century—a period Frédérique Verrier aptly termed *humanisme militaire*—military thinkers proclaimed their intent “to reduce war to art” (*ridurre la guerra in arte*), a common expression referring to the distillation of rules and precepts into applied doctrine.⁵ The most prominent theorist of the early Age of Reason, Raimondo Montecuccoli (1609–1680), formulated the notion of *Disposizione*, which may be translated as “strategic planning.”⁶ This concept emphasized the importance of *controlling* the dynamic interactions of war, insofar as possible. It recurred throughout the late Enlightenment, as eighteenth-century military treatises increasingly claimed to provide the means to master war intellectually, to work with chance, and to gain the upper hand over the enemy.⁷

5 Frédérique Verrier, *Les Armes De Minerve: L'humanisme Militaire Dans l'Italie Du XVIe Siècle* (Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1997); Mario Savorgnano, *Arte militare terrestre e marittima: secondo la ragione, e l'uso de piu valorosi capitani antichi e moderni* (Gli h[er]edi di Francesco de Franceschi, 1599), Proemio.

6 Raimondo Montecuccoli, *Memorie del General Principe di Montecuccoli che rinfermano una esatta instruzione de i generali ed ufficiali di guerra*. (Girolamo Filoni, 1704), 59–60.

7 Giuseppe Pecis, *Essai sur les qualités et les connoissances nécessaires à un général d'armée: ou dissertation, préliminaire aux campagnes de Jules César dans les Gaules* (Giuseppe Marelli, 1758), xci; Le Roy de Bosroger, *Principes élémentaires de la tactique: ou Nouvelles observations sur l'art militaire* (L. Prault, 1768), 97ff.; Henry Lloyd, *The History of the Late War in Germany between the King of Prussia and the Empress of Germany*

Nonetheless, the aspiration to master the conduct of war through a codified body of knowledge was hardly peculiar to the Age of Reason. In fact, it had represented a central—though not the sole—purpose of Western Art of War literature since Antiquity. As Imma Eramo has observed, Onasander's *Strategikós* (1st century AD) sought to offer a “strategic rationale” (*strategiké phrónesis*), going beyond anecdotal or purely practical instructions.⁸ Montecuccoli's concept of *Disposizione* itself drew from Frontinus's phrase *de custodiendo belli* (1st century AD)—the act of “maintaining the state of war,” that is, establishing and coordinating the proper conduct and administration of warfare with a view to achieving victory.⁹ More to the point, notions such as *taktiké* (*téchne* or *epistéme*), which represented the “applied” bulk of military science, expressed a fundamental need to impose *táxis* (“order”) upon chaos.

Military writers named their codified teachings in diverse terms that can only be imperfectly translated as “science,” “art,” “wisdom,” “principles,” and more—for instance, *epistéme*, *phrónesis*, *téchne*, *scientia*, *disciplina*, *res militaris*, or *prudentia*. However slippery these notions, and however much their meaning shifted over time and across intellectual contexts, the underlying point holds: for nearly two millennia, this literature constituted a cognitive attempt to exert *control* over the dynamics of war through *reliable* and practical knowledge.

Yet, when one thinks of scientism and doctrinarism in the history of military thought, the eighteenth century comes to mind. Jean-Vincent Holeindre identifies Jacques de Puységur's *Art de la guerre par principes et règles* (1748) as an “epistemological breaking point” between the ancient way of strategy, grounded in prudence and cunning, and a modern approach hinging on objective notions, calculus, and scientific method.¹⁰ Much has been made of Enlightenment military theory's bias toward Cartesian rationalism and Newtonian mechanics. The prevailing view is that eighteenth-century military thought was “marked above all by

and *Her Allies* (2nd, Expanded Edition), II (S. Hooper, 1781), xix–xx.

8 Immacolata Eramo, “Precetti per gestire l'imperium. Nota a Onasandro, Strategikos, proemio 1,” *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* (Besançon) 47/2, no. 2 (2021): 239–50, doi.org/10.3917/dha.472.0239.

9 Sextus Julius Frontinus, *The Stratagems, and the Aqueducts of Rome*, ed. Mary B. McElwain, trans. Charles E. Bennett and Clemens Herschel (W. Heinemann, 1925), 23ff.

10 Jean-Vincent Holeindre, *La ruse et la force* (Perrin, 2017), 274; Jacques-François de Puységur, *Art de la guerre par principes et par règles* (Charles Antoine Jombert, 1748).

the desire to remove war from the realm of chance by subjecting it to purely geometric rules and principles.”¹¹ As Antoine Bousquet puts it, “Mechanistic warfare attempted to maintain order and ward off chaos through a pre-programmed and centralized routine, devoid of any capacity for reactivity to the actions of the opposing army.”¹²

This article complicates these interpretations. A close reading of early modern treatises reveals that chance and human factors were already woven into military theory—and at times, quite significantly so. Indeed, these are long-standing motifs in the history of military literature, where the concept of fortune recurrently provides a backdrop for reflections on a commander’s virtues, above all prudence. Some modern authors tried to minimize the effects of chance, while others had little to say on the subject. Yet, contrary to a widespread canard in today’s scholarship, they were not generally in “theoretical denial,” nor did they *aim* to evade chance.¹³ On the contrary, I will show that readers were encouraged to *acknowledge* its role and to work with unpredictable circumstances, just as an ideal commander would. The Art of War literature, therefore, did not typically entertain illusions of complete control over war, *certainly not* on the level of command. And while it advanced models of tactical doctrine, it did not promote—not openly, at least—rigid doctrinarism, nor a mechanical adherence to a program.

The language and aspirations of a large part of eighteenth-century military thought were undoubtedly scientific. However, for all their displays of assertive and enterprising rationalism, early-modern thinkers often reckoned the difficulty of their task and “suspended judgment” when they deemed it necessary. Those who thought it possible to codify a *science de la tactique* by focusing on assumedly measurable kinetic aspects—from battle formations to the “science

11 Arnaud Guinier, “Entre raison calculatrice et aspirations morales: le choc dans la pensée militaire du XVIIIe siècle,” *Actes des congrès nationaux des sociétés historiques et scientifiques* 136, no. 6 (2013): 84–93.

12 Antoine J. Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity*, Critical War Studies (Columbia University Press, 2009), 31.

13 Thomas Waldman, “‘Shadows of Uncertainty’: Clausewitz’s Timeless Analysis of Chance in War,” *Defence Studies* 10, no. 3 (2010): 338; Lawrence Freedman, “The Meaning of Strategy: Part I: The Origins,” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 1 (2017): 92, doi.org/10.15781/T2WH2DX5J; Daniel Moran, “Strategic Theory and the History of War,” in *Strategy in the Contemporary World: An Introduction to Strategic Studies*, ed. John Baylis et al. (Oxford University Press, 2002), 28–29.

of marches”—often admitted to some limits of military knowledge. Ultimately, even the rationalists understood that a “hard” science of generalship was implausible and continued treating the art of command through the age-old binary prism of *prudence* vs. *fortune*.

Eighteenth-century theory typically articulated the art of war on two metaphysical and cognitive levels. The lower level, increasingly identified as “tactics,” was the realm of concrete bodies, instruments, and their mechanics. In it, thinkers treated the doings of the “war machine,” including the unreflective “duties” and the detailed instructions for soldiers, as well as the measurable dimensions regarding the execution of operations—movement, order, time, firepower, and shock. The higher level (the *grandes parties de la guerre*) also involved the immaterial, moral cum intellectual capabilities required for commanding. These parts could hardly be codified as a positive science, from where their characterization as “sublime.” Writers covered them with a filler word like “genius” or “philosophy.” Much like “prudence” in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century “Perfect Captain” allegory, the concepts of sublime or genius plugged a theoretical gap and lack of determinative and predictive power. Other authors happened to capture the wisdom of the commander—the age-old *prudentia ducum*—within general principles but admitted that these were “extremely familiar” (*familiarissime*) in Machiavelli, or “trivial” and “demonstrable without difficulty” in Clausewitz.¹⁴ Either way, the practice of command remained a prudential matter, thus requiring capabilities and education, rather than positive theory and applied instructions.

Today, scholars tend to regard these *parties sublimes* as “unscientific,” applying a modern notion of science that is closer to our model of hard science. Yet the sublime was *integral* to the amalgam of military theory, not an unwelcome residual. This notion seems to be lost on the vast majority of commentators. For early modern military thinkers, no theory of warfare—no science of war—was conceivable without factoring in the imponderabilia of the art of command. Even theorists who employed the topos of the army as a “machine,” such as Henry

14 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Libro della arte della guerra* (Heredi di Philippo Giunta, 1521), Book VII; “Über abstrakte Grundsätze der Strategie” Carl von Clausewitz, *Carl von Clausewitz: Verstreute kleine Schriften*, ed. Werner Hahlweg (Biblio Verlag, 1979), 46–49; see “Unfinished note, presumably written in 1830” Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, with Bernard Brodie (Princeton University Press, 1976), 71.

Lloyd (1718-1783) and Jacques de Guibert (1743-1790), stressed the relevance of the commander's discretion in its actual functioning. Both added a corrective, quite common at the time, to the cliché of the Prussian machine, noting that its effectiveness owed to Frederick II's genius.¹⁵ Lloyd went further, concluding that, in fact, an army *is not* a "pure machine" for it carries the imperfections inherent to any human activity.¹⁶ Military theorists' ordinary assumption was that one could not make sense of warfare without considering how it was governed. Thus, they consistently factored a commander's judgment of given circumstances into their theories of tactical execution. On paper—in normative theory—the applied and supposedly deterministic "systems" regulating the lower parts of war did not override the direction of war, as they were sandwiched between the art of command and real-world contingency.

Enlightenment military science did not treat uncertainty as a non-thing in an entirely rational system; the indeterminacy of war was *not a bug but a feature* that writers accepted, particularly when sketching out the art of command.¹⁷ Despite their rationalist drive and their search for technical precision, military thinkers seldom tried to obtain Cartesian "indubitable truths" by downplaying the role of contingency. The theorization of battle is a case in point: while some authors went to great lengths to apply mathematics to configure battle orders and evolutions, they also understood that the results of engagements were often fortuitous. As Lloyd put it, "It seldom happens that an action is won in consequence of the general's dispositions; and that chance has generally much more influence on the events of battles than human prudence."¹⁸

Like any scientific enterprise, the Art of War tradition relied on an appetite for

15 As Guibert put it, "Today all armies practice it yet only the Prussian take full advantage of it. Why is that so? It is because the Prince [Frederick] leads them himself [...] Put a lever and counterweights in the hands of mediocre mechanics, and they will painfully combine a small static effect; the same means, handled by Archimedes, would produce wonders." Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte de Guibert, *Essai général de tactique* (Libraires Associés, 1772), 194; Lloyd, *The History* (2nd Ed.), II, xxxvii.

16 Lloyd, *The History* (2nd Ed.), II, 3, 69.

17 This assertion contradicts Thomas Waldman's claim that Enlightenment thinkers "were not entirely blind to the existence of chance, rather it was the nature of their theoretical approach that precluded the incorporation of these factors into their systems: a form of 'methodological determinism'." Waldman, *Shadows of Uncertainty*, 337.

18 Lloyd, *The History* (2nd Ed.), II, xix.

knowledge and ambition to understand. Scientists must also entertain a certain hope and faith in the feasibility of their endeavor, yet in military theory, the line separating such a positive attitude from naïve scientism is especially thin. Given the inevitably unbridgeable gap between the normative theory and the practice of strategy, military thinkers have historically failed to fix the logic of war into stable cognitions—save perhaps distilling a handful of enduring intuitive (read: banal) principles—let alone into a truly comprehensive system or a universal science applicable across time and space.

Today, prominent military scholars challenge our faith in the knowability of war and our capability to represent it through mental images and on paper. Some flag the excesses of military scientism and rationalism in strategic studies; some call out the doctrinarism, managerialism, and “engineering mentality” of self-assured practitioners; and some lament the vanity of military commentary—its “verbal and rhetorical pollution,” its abuses of technical jargon, and misuse of theoretical concepts.¹⁹ In sum, an “awakened” strain in military thought cultivates healthy skepticism about the illusions of military discourse and its pretenses to articulate complex dynamics of a war and the inscrutable, protean logic underpinning its direction. From this sobering perspective, the natural approach is to preach and practice “strategy without confidence.”²⁰

Ultimately, the significance of this study does not lie in rediscovering dusty books or long-forgotten authors, nor in rehabilitating the Art of War of the military Enlightenment. Rather, it highlights the ambiguity of military writing, especially in its treatment of strategy—the codification of the art of command and the representation of the direction of war. The uncertainty and assertive claims of strategy, its optimism and skepticism, are central to the discourse on war. Examining the history of military literature in this light helps us reflect on how we imagine and articulate the reality of war, and guards against falling for the illusions embedded in its discourse.

19 Harald Høiback, “The Anatomy of Doctrine and Ways to Keep It Fit,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Routledge, 2016, 196..

20 Richard K. Betts, “Is Strategy an Illusion?,” *International Security* 25, no. 2 (2000): 5–50.

Clausewitzian Thought: A New Intellectual Paradigm?

The Anglophone Strategic Studies community owes Azar Gat the first comprehensive examination of the history of military thought in generations. In his works, he adopts a “horizontal” perspective that locates thinkers of the modern period in their broader intellectual context. This enables his readers to view *On War* as a work embedded in its cultural environment and as the institution of a *new model*. From that vantage point, Gat associates Clausewitz’s distrust of rigid theoretical systems with the influences of his mentor Scharnhorst, Kant’s theory of art, and Friedrich Schleiermacher’s pietism and Moravianism.²¹ Clausewitz aligned military thought with “the forefront of the general theoretical outlook of his time” by insisting on the human dimensions of command; by rejecting artificial rationalism and dead abstractions; by respecting contingency and particularist notions; and by embracing historicism. At bottom, Gat claims that *On War* channeled Romanticism and the German Movement’s polemical responses to the Enlightenment.²²

Such an interpretation stresses discontinuity with past military literature. Gat concedes that Clausewitz’s adoption of a neoclassical theory of art to frame military art and conception of rules and principles of war is similar to that of his predecessors. He also remarks that the theoretical outlook of his inspiring figure, Scharnhorst, was in line with the standard of the military Enlightenment.²³ Yet, he dismisses the influence of the literary tradition from which both Clausewitz and Scharnhorst emerged: “Only a small minority of the principal themes [treated in *On War*] originated within the military field itself. Most were extracted from, and set in motion by, the ideas and ideals of new and powerful cultural trends.”²⁴ Gat ultimately casts the Prussian as the theorist of a “new intellectual paradigm”—essentially reinforcing Clausewitz’s self-stylization as a writer who broke with

21 Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought from the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 195–96.

22 Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 254.

23 Gat aptly notes that when Scharnhorst rejected operational systems that dismissed the role of genius, he did not mean to attack military Enlightenment per se but a recent deviation from it. Scharnhorst maintained the 18th-century division of the art of war into two realms: one “mechanical and susceptible to theoretical study” and the other “circumstantial and dominated by creative genius.” Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 196, cit. p. 165.

24 Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 140.

previous generations of military thinkers. Indeed, when one frames *On War* as a German Romanticist reaction against the rationalist, predominantly French worldview of the 18th century, and when one divorces it from its literary tradition, one would justifiably view it as a cutting-edge and trenchantly argued work.

It is worth noting that such an interpretation largely reflects Gat's historicist rejection of military thought as a fixed set of timeless principles. His "horizontal" gaze over Clausewitz's intellectual landscape leads him to overlook *On War*'s roots and "vertical" depth. In effect, it isolates the book from the tradition from which it emanates, neglecting its historical-literary construction. Further, I will show that Clausewitz worked with language, ideas, discourses, and unsolved epistemological issues that originated and were recurrently renegotiated within the age-old corpus of military literature. Many such elements lie scattered and buried in seldom-read, dusty books. This study offers a close reading and an intertextual analysis of earlier literary works to exhume some foundational elements of Clausewitzian theory. Here, my aim is not to reject but to complicate and complement his "new intellectual paradigm" thesis.

To give a first example: Gat (among others) emphasizes the novelty of Clausewitz's concept of genius, painting it as an expression of the *Sturm und Drang* worldview, which prevailed in Germany at the time.²⁵ While doing so, he also gave short shrift to Gerhard Oestreich's thesis, the idea that Clausewitzian genius is an emanation of the military literature tradition. The latter argued that emphasis on temperament as a quality needed for command traces a Neostoic model of military leadership proposed in Justus Lipsius's *De Constantia* (1583).²⁶ In fact, on closer examination, canonical authors such as Xenophon, Aeneas Tacticus, Onasander, and Leo the Wise have routinely argued that firmness of mind and temperance are key qualities needed to practice generalship, particularly to endure unfortunate contingencies.²⁷ This notion continued to feature as a topos in

25 Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 178.

26 Gerhard Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State*, ed. Brigitta Oestreich and H. G. Koenigsberger, trans. David McLintock (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 88.

27 Xenophon, *Xenophon; Memorabilia; Oeconomicus; Symposium; Apology*, trans. E.C. Marchant and O.J. Todd (Harvard University Press, 1918), III.I.1-11 pp. 168-175, <https://archive.org/details/xenophonmemorabi00xeno/page/168/mode/2up>; Onasander, the author on the first treatise treating the concept of "strategy" wrote, "I believe that we must choose a general, not because of noble birth as priests are chosen, nor because of wealth as the superintendents of the gymnasia, but because he is temperate, self-restrained, vigi-

portrayals of the ideal general throughout the Renaissance and the early modern era, as prudence—the only ‘master key’ to work with contingency—was paired with moral strength. The Clausewitzian concept of genius—a harmonious combination of good judgment and intellectual and temperamental faculties (*Kräfte des Verstandes und des Gemüthes*)—is reminiscent of the late Renaissance figure of *Perfetto Capitano*—a well-rounded literary model of commander. Note also that of all the virtues required and listed under that rubric, writers typically mentioned prudence and judgment coupled with character. For instance, Niccolò Machiavelli used to pair *prudenza* and *animo*, while Lelio Brancaccio (1560–1637) associated *animo intrepido* and *giudicio perfetto*.²⁸ Assuredly, this notion does not invalidate Gat’s thesis of Romanticism’s influences on Clausewitz but rather completes it.

Lastly, Gat highlights a historicist sensitivity as a key indicator of Clausewitz’s innovativeness. Here, the historian focused on the “tension” between military thinkers’ universalist ambition to establish a timeless, unified theory of war and its fluctuating, polymorphous reality. He keenly observes that this conflict played out differently in Enlightenment and Clausewitzian thought. Eighteenth-century theorists, he argues, embraced a “dominating” universal view, suggesting that such inconsistency remained “inherent in their minds.” By contrast, noting that this “latent tension [...] surfaced in 1827,” Gat implies that Clausewitz acknowledged it and ultimately developed a different outlook.²⁹ Furthermore, he suggests that, in Enlightenment authors, universalism clashed with the *realities* of “historical change and circumstantial differences.” In Clausewitz, it conflicted with his “historicist *sense*” and “particularist *notions*”—that is, it clashed with his *understanding* of such realities. Elsewhere, Gat highlights the bold positivist pretensions of late eighteenth-century military literature, arguing that “system

lant, frugal, hardened to labour, alert, free from avarice, etc.” Aeneas Tacticus et al., *Aeneas Tacticus, Asclepiodotus, Onasander*, Reprint (Harvard Univ. Press, 2001); Leo VI the Wise, *The Taktika of Leo VI*, ed. and trans. George T. Dennis (Dumbarton Oaks, 2010), 18ff.

28 Machiavelli pairs *prudenza* (prudence) with *animo* (moral strength). Machiavelli, *Arte della guerra*; Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe* (Venice, 1537); Lelio Brancaccio, *I Carichi Militari* (Joachim Troгнаesius, 1610), 234; for another example, see Raymond de Fourquevaux, *Instructions sur le faict de la guerre*, ed. Guillaume Du Bellay (Michel Vasosan, 1548), 3.

29 Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 47, 251.

makers” advanced models in “definitive and universal terms, largely overriding circumstantial differences.”³⁰ He also singles out Guibert’s ambitions in particular as “characteristic of the period,” noting his “pronounced and conscious intention to create an immortal masterpiece.”³¹

This essay seeks to expand on Gat’s widely accepted interpretation while offering further arguments to illuminate aspects of Enlightenment military thought that the dominant academic view has overlooked. It acknowledges that, in some early modern works, the tension between universalism and historical change was muted or relegated to the background. However, I also show that in several authors, this tension *did* surface. It appeared in explicit acknowledgments that amounted to moments of skeptical discourse, complementing their otherwise scientific approach. Enlightenment military thought, in fact, displayed a pervasive scientism—both at the formal rhetorical level and in its substantive ambitions. (One could even argue the eighteenth-century rationalist discourse was, by and large, “more of the same” scientism that characterized military theory since the sixteenth century—at least, at the formal, linguistic level.) To the point: early modern thinkers spoke the language of “science” and sought to distill universal principles of warfare; yet they *also* expressed doubts about the universality of their teachings. Many authors were neither as categorical nor as confident in military theory as Enlightenment thinkers are often portrayed. It is this stereotyped notion, which has prevailed in recent generations, that I seek to dispel.

30 Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 30.

31 Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 44.

ART DE LA GUERRE, PAR PRINCIPES ET PAR RÈGLES.

OUVRAGE DE M. LE MARÉCHAL

DE PUYSEGUR.

Mis au jour par M. LE MARQUIS DE PUYSEGUR son Fils,
Maréchal des Camps & Armées du Roy.

DEDIÉ AU ROY.

TOME PREMIER.



A PARIS, QUAI DES AUGUSTINS,
Chez CHARLES-ANTOINE JOMBERT, Libraire du Roy pour l'Artillerie
& le Génie, à l'Image Notre-Dame.

M. DCC. XLIX.
AVEC APPROBATION ET PRIVILEGE DU ROY.

Historical Change vs Literary Tradition

Reading a military thinker against the background of their age-old literary tradition is a way to distinguish change and continuity. As the historicist critiques correctly highlight, military theory is a product of a historical context. Military writers sought to meet their audience by attuning their message to the *Geist* and fashions of the time. Their work reflected their intellectual climates, such as Renaissance humanism, Neostoicism, Cartesian rationalism, Newtonianism, Neoclassicism, or Romanticism. From this perspective, Azar Gat highlights the influences of Kant's aesthetics, the *Sturm und Drang*, and Romanticism on Clausewitz's conception of genius and creative individuality. In contrast, Enlightenment thinkers adopted a neoclassicist framework grounded in the artistic standards of Aristotelian *Poetics*, conceiving of genius as the embodiment of abstract and mechanical principles.³² The variety of historical environments also meant that audiences received similar messages differently. For instance, the depictions of the ideal general or military obedience could use similar images and language in the 1590s (e.g., Lipsius) as in the 1650s (Montecuccoli), in the 1740s (Saxe), or in the 1830s (Jomini). Yet those same words and ideas could be understood distinctly, according to military ethos, political ideology, religious sentiment, or intellectual climate of the day—or according to the Wittgensteinian “language game” of any given social situation.

Assuredly, military practice changed too. Even admitting warfare evolved only tentatively, unevenly, and at varying paces, its real-world expressions were more mutable than its slow-evolving representations on paper. Theorists codified practice following consistent patterns, at least insofar as they addressed similar fundamental questions: “How to prepare for war?” “How to enforce discipline?” “How to provide for an army?” “How to direct its movements?” “How to behave after a battle?” Yet their answers were more variable than the questions themselves. Still, the latter set the boundaries within which writers deployed their arguments, lending the literature recurrent, conservative features.

Note that stressing such continuity or slow-paced evolution is *not* to commit to the idea of timeless theory, nor does it entail embracing a scientistic faith in a military Universal Reason. Likewise, it does not encourage the search for con-

32 Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 29, 145ff., 175ff.

stant laws to prove the existence of an objective, positive science of war. In some cases, particularly on the level of command/strategy, some of these ‘truths’ were so obvious as to be treated as trivialities. Otherwise, principles were universal only in military writers’ subjective beliefs, aspirations, or rhetoric. At best, they could receive the plaudits of the public and begin trending in military literature. For example, the numerous attacks against his system also generated a following of advocates of the Chevalier de Folard. All the same, nothing suggested that those purportedly universal principles made for an *established* positive science. The elements of continuity in the Art of War tradition rested more in its *literature*—its texts—than in its dogmatic attempts to postulate applied theories of warfare. Theory-making itself did not absorb only the influences from changing historical contexts but was also anchored to its literary tradition—a sedimentary corpus built on its past and evolving at a glacial pace. In other words, the content of military theories was not autonomous from its formal framing.

Military knowledge was codified for two thousand years through transnational circulation, imitation, and re-elaboration within a Pan-European “Republic of (military) Letters.” Authors interacted on a shared turf, using common tools to answer similar fundamental questions. On a formal level, the Art of War genre was remarkably mimetic and conservative. Its jargon traveled across different eras and linguistic boundaries through translations, transcriptions, compilations, and abridgments of earlier texts. Definitions, their acceptations, and receptions evolved too, but the semantic core of such foundational concepts as “generalship,” the “art of command,” or the “direction of war” captured some long-lasting, “essential” features (so to speak). Moreover, such terms were employed to translate older Greek or Latin words into modern languages, which occasionally changed meanings, but often did not, or did so only minimally. Writers also used similar literary devices, metaphors, anecdotes, and even scornful expressions of their fellow writers (“dogmatic,” “outdated,” “pedantic,” “compiler” [unoriginal], etc.) They drew from a common rhetorical repertoire—e.g., the emphatic notion that the fate of empires hinges on their mastery of military science, the need to establish certain rules as in medicine, the sublimeness of the art of command, or the symbol of Formio to parody the intellectual engaging in military theory.

The argumentative frameworks of modern European military literature followed standards that had lasted for millennia. For example, from Xenophon’s description of *strategiké* throughout the Enlightenment, the literature conven-

tionally treated command through mirrors of the ideal general—including his virtues, skills, and duties. Illustrations of (supposedly) concrete cases of prudent and crafty command—so-called “stratagems”—were drawn from military history, memoirs, or mythology, and sometimes gathered in compendia in the ancient *Stratagemata* tradition. Early modern *theory of campaigns* traced the trio marching-encamping-fighting, first set out in Hellenistic literature. Catalogs of offices and roles within an army echoed Vegetius’s canonical structure of military hierarchy. And so forth.

More revealing of the challenges inherent in military literature are continuities beneath its formal structures, especially the unresolved epistemological problems. Of all its issues, the most essential was the codification of the art of command, for it symbolically encompassed *all* military knowledge, and its teaching represented the Art of War’s *ultimate ambition*. The centrality of command meant that theorists confronted the inescapable challenge of managing war amid contingency—an elusive subject they treated only in passing, precisely because of its impalpable nature.

The Tension Between Universal Reason and Historicism

Azar Gat also appears to overstate the novelty of Clausewitz’s historicist awareness. Here, his interpretation owes to a central theme of his research on this period—the “tension” between early modern thinkers’ universalism and the development of historicism as a corrective to the scientific excesses of the former. On one hand, he stresses that in military literature, “a new attitude to the past” emerged “only at the close of the eighteenth century,” pointing to Dietrich Heinrich von Bülow (1757-1807) and Georg Friedrich Tempelhoff’s (1737-1807) sense of modernity, and Clausewitz’s new historicist sensibility.³³ On the other hand, he, among several other scholars, overemphasizes the Enlightenment military theorists’ reliance on Greco-Roman models. Gat repeatedly mentions their belief in the existence of timeless, universal principles, whose application would have implied overlooking reality’s transformative character.³⁴ On this account, for instance, he charges Jacques François de Puységur (1656-1743) with dis-

33 Azar Gat, “Machiavelli and the Decline of the Classical Notion of the Lessons of History in the Study of War,” *Military Affairs* 52, no. 4 (1988): 205, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1988453>.

34 Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 8, 30.

missing historical change in his use of an argument of Raimondo Montecuccoli (1609-1680). Gat cites the latter's assertion that only the introduction of artillery had altered the conduct of war; beyond that, universal rules of war encompass "the whole of world history from the beginning of things," and "no remarkable military deed [...] cannot be reduced to these instructions."³⁵ From these two writers' perspectives, which he also associates with Machiavelli, Gat concludes trenchantly, "The science and art of war remained the same at all times."³⁶

This characterization oversimplifies Montecuccoli's outlook and does not do justice to it. More curiously, Gat bolsters his case for the novelty of Clausewitz's historicism by citing an excerpt of *On War* that in fact closely echoes an argument previously made by Montecuccoli himself. Both thinkers underscore the instructional value of more recent historical examples for understanding modern warfare, noting that analogies drawn from contemporary or near-contemporary conflicts are more relevant and thus more effective for teaching. Clausewitz wrote:

If we examine the conditions of modern warfare, we shall find that the wars that bear a considerable resemblance to those of the present day [...] Even though many major and minor circumstances have changed considerably, these are close enough to modern warfare to be instructive.³⁷

Compare this with Montecuccoli:

The more recent and relevant examples are, the more instructive they become, as they offer greater analogy and are more suited to modern times, places, and subject matter—such a feasible approach suits the essence of teaching. This is because comparisons are made through similarities, which allow for a better fit in the case and less discrepancy in its application.³⁸

More generally, Gat's interpretation conveys a negative evaluation, highlighting the "unbound optimism" of Enlightenment literature and its underlying scientific ingenuousness.³⁹ His interpretation functions as a historicist critique, which gains further significance when considered alongside his more direct critique of contemporary scholars. Gat explicitly targets those thinkers who objectify mili-

³⁵ Here Montecuccoli is cited in Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 21.

³⁶ Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 34.

³⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, 173.

³⁸ Raimondo Montecuccoli, *Opere di Raimondo Montecuccoli annotate da Ugo Foscolo e corrette, accresciute ed illustrate da Giuseppe Grassi*. (tipografia economica, 1852), 73–74.

³⁹ Azar Gat, *The Clausewitz Myth: Or the Emperor's New Clothes* (Chronos Books, 2024), 9.

tary thought as “a general body of knowledge to be discovered and elaborated,” seeking a universally applicable framework. This, he argues, reflects a “naïve approach”—one that is reminiscent of the Enlightenment military literature.⁴⁰

Such historicist critiques align with a sensible trend among scholars of military thought, which today opposes the tendency in Strategic Studies to treat strategy as a set of timeless and objective principles that can be extracted from the past and applied to the present—often with a certain nonchalance.⁴¹ Any historian worth their salt would agree that ideas, including theories, are historically and culturally contingent, constantly subject to reinterpretation and change. A historicist awareness is a safeguard against facile and misleading comparisons. On the one hand, it resonates with strategy scholars directly engaged with applied research who acknowledge the *practical* necessity of freeing the present from the constraints and misdirections of outdated models. As Bernard Brodie summed up such a concern, “It’s the old that prevents us from recognizing the new.”⁴² On the other hand, historicism can liberate the past from present experience and contain presentist tendencies to universalize contemporary models—for instance, Clausewitz eventually realized he could not take Napoleonic strategy as the gold standard.⁴³

Historicist critiques can also lead to a dead end when paired with a practicalist perspective, as is common in today’s strategic studies and in the applied history that supports the field. If the assumption is that the usefulness of military theory lies solely in supplying ready-made, applied solutions, historical analogies, and norms to follow, then historicism reveals its ephemeral character: once its shelf life has passed, it becomes obsolete. Yet early modern thinkers did not treat theory as *purely* prescriptive or normative. As discussed further, they established norms

40 Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 253–54.

41 In the Anglophone literature, Hew Strachan is probably the scholar who most insisted on this point. See Hew Strachan, “Strategy: Change and Continuity,” in *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Hew Strachan, “The Future of Strategic Studies: Lessons from the Last ‘Golden Age,’” in *New Directions in Strategic Thinking 2.0*, ed. Russell Glenn (ANU Press, 2018), 156ff.; Hew Strachan, “Strategy in Theory; Strategy in Practice,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 2 (2019): 171–90.

42 Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, with RAND Corporation (Princeton University Press, 1959), 391.

43 Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton University Press, 1985), note 3, 153 and note 61 page 152; cited in Thomas Waldman, “Clausewitz and the Study of War,” *Defence Studies* 12, no. 3 (2012): 368.

and prescribed courses of action but did not use Greco-Roman literature merely as a grab-bag for practical instructions and tactical models.⁴⁴ Moreover, a combined practicalist-historicist approach may lead us astray on some accounts. First, by emphasizing the literary tradition's obsolescence, it also discourages the student of strategy from attending to it in any meaningful way. Second, such an approach somehow infantilizes an entire category of soldier-writers by discounting the fact that, as practitioners, they were mostly cognizant of the gap between war on paper and its practice. It exaggerates their submissiveness to classical literature or implies downplaying their attempts at using their hands-on experience *to judge* the literary tradition in which they participated. And third, such a perspective alone has little say about military literature's very *raison d'être*. If the Art of War was mostly outdated and had dubious applied utility, why have military thinkers consistently written military theory grounded in a classical tradition?

The Merit of the Historicist Critique of Early Modern Literature

The historicist critiques that portray early modern thinkers as naïvely followers of a universalist approach call for greater nuance. In reality, antecedents to Clausewitz's historicist outlook had already emerged in earlier military thought. Early modern authors in this line of thought challenged or moderated the most rigidly universalist views and their dogmatic adherence to the ancient art of war. These expressions of historical awareness typically arose around considerations of the practical value of Greco-Roman military teachings, often paired with cynical views regarding the reliability of historiography and historical accounts. For this reason, for example, fifteenth-century soldier-theorist Diomedes Carafa (1407-1487) left the task of unearthing military antiquities to humanist scholars, opting instead to study the warcraft of his contemporary, Francesco Sforza.⁴⁵

Historians of historiography have traced earlier forms of historicism to the Renaissance.⁴⁶ Since at least the second half of the 16th century, not a few writers

44 Virgilio Ilari, "Imitatio, restitutio, utopia: la storia militare antica nel pensiero strategico moderno," in *Guerra e diritto nel mondo greco e romano*, ed. Marta Sordi (Vita e Pensiero, 2001); Marco Formisano, "L'arte Della Guerra e Le Rivoluzioni Militari," in *Quaderno SISM: Future Wars*, ed. Virgilio Ilari (Acies, 2016).

45 Tommaso Persico, *Diomedes Carafa: Uomo Di Stato e Scrittore Del Secolo XV* (Luigi Piero, 1899), 251.

46 George Huppert, "The Renaissance Background of Historicism," *History and Theory* 5,

proved their historical sensibility also in military theory. This should not be too surprising, for as soldier-writers increasingly replaced scholars in this field, its literature needed to maintain a concern for practicality—at least in appearance. As early as 1586, Filippo Pigafetta (1533-1604) demonstrated a clear awareness of the difference between the variety of Greco-Roman tactical arrays (*ordinanze*) that could serve for exercises, mock battles, or military games (*guerra da scherzo*) and real war (*da dovero*), when troops “arranged in battle, would stain their hands with blood.” Further, he reckoned that “the reasoning of the profession [*mestiero*] of arms, whose established rules strongly differed from the customs of modern warfare [...] had fallen into disuse.” Therefore, he found it sensible to “adapt those excellent ancient orders to the finest modern weapons, correcting the errors and wisely adjusting the incongruences.”⁴⁷ For his part, Lazarus von Schwendi noted in his *Kriegs-Discurs* (1593), “Because in many things the old military system does not agree with ours today, we have also found beautiful military instructions and teachings for the benefit of each of our nations in Italian, Spanish and French languages.”⁴⁸ In the mid-seventeenth century, Paul Hay du Chastelet (1619-c.1682) observed that while “some writers on the art of war rely too much on ancient authors, others like *only* modern opinions.”⁴⁹

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the idea that military theory was historically contingent was neither controversial nor seen as incompatible with the search for universal lessons. In fact, universalist ambitions often *coexisted* with a pragmatic sensitivity to historical change—sometimes within the very same treatise. Thus, we should not mistake early modern theorists’ quest for timeless

no. 1 (1966): 48–60.

47 “[L]e forme tutte di schierarsi in ordinanza, e li movimenti militari della Falange Greca, e della Romana Legione; e in quante maniere si mutavano da una forma nell’altra, si esercitavano, tanto per addestrarsi nell’arme, e rendersi pratiche di loro, e indurarsi ne gli stenti della guerra da scherzo, quanto per valersene in campagna, all’horche da dovero, disposte in battaglia, venivano ad insanguinarsi le mani.” Filippo Pigafetta, *Trattato Brieve dello Schierare in Ordinanza gli Eserciti et dell’apparecchiamento della guerra* (Francesco de’ Franceschi Senese, 1586), [Dedication] Alli clarissimi Signori Giacompo Luigi, et Marco Antonio.

48 The citation refers to Hans Levenklau’s foreword. See Lazarus von Schwendi, *Kriegs-Discurs, von Bestellung deß gantzen Kriegswesens unnd von den Kriegsämptern* (Wechel, 1593), iii.

49 Paul Hay du Chastelet, *Traité de la Guerre ou Politique Militaire* (Jean Guignard, 1667), 8.

principles as evidence of blind universalism. Their frequent engagement with the classical tradition did not preclude a critical awareness of warfare's evolving character. Like several Enlightenment authors, Jacques de Guibert eagerly set out to discover scientific principles grounded in universal reason; yet he acknowledged, at the very opening of his *Essai général*, that tactical norms evolved, as exemplified by variations between the Spartan, Theban, and Athenian systems.⁵⁰ Further, he criticized Folard's system for its blind adherence to ancient models and his dismissal of change in "military constitutions, weaponry, customs, and men."⁵¹ Universal principles and historical development coexisted in Montecuccoli's works, too. Gat's portrayal of the Imperial Field Marshal (cited above) discounts other passages in his writings, which demonstrate his attention to evolution. For example, in his posthumously published *Memorie* (1703), he cautioned his readers to apply his teachings consistently with historical context (*la coerenza del passato, per lo presente, col futuro*).⁵² His *Trattato della guerra* was not a definitive catechism but a "living" system, open to the inclusion of new principles, so long as one avoided drawing misguided causal explanations from sloppy historical analogies:

Just as it is an act of profane pride to completely disregard the wisdom of the Ancients, it is equally absurd to adhere strictly to their institutions. One must instead act in accordance with the spirit of their own century and the varying circumstances of their times.⁵³

Such an awareness of the inconstancy of military art was not exceptional in early modern military writing. The seventeenth-century French classical scholar, Claude Saumaise (1588-1653), compared at length the different tactics (*ordinationes*) of Caesar and Scipio. As he wrote:

When explaining Roman military matters, anyone aiming to make a useful and effective effort should not focus on what differs from the current customs of European peoples. Instead, they should first and foremost investigate whether Roman practices themselves ever differed over time.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Guibert, *Essai*, 1–2.

⁵¹ Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte de Guibert, *Défense du système de guerre moderne, ou réfutation complète du système de M. de M ... D ...* (Neuchatel, 1779), 1:17.

⁵² Montecuccoli, *Memorie*, 57–59.

⁵³ Raimondo Montecuccoli, *Le opere di Raimondo Montecuccoli / 1 Trattato della guerra*, ed. Raimondo Luraghi and Andrea Testa (Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 1988), 189.

⁵⁴ Cit. Claude Saumaise, *De re militari romanum liber: Opus posthumum* (Johan Elzevir,

Saumaise was a philologist, not a practitioner, yet other soldier-writers were perfectly equipped to read history critically while using practical military reason. In his treatise dedicated to Cardinal Mazarin, François Gabriel de Pol (17th century) repeatedly emphasized that all nations, from the ancients to his day, “have varied and changed, and sometimes in different times, their orders, forms, and methods of the art and exercise of war” [sic].⁵⁵ On his part, Álvaro Navia Osorio y Vigil, the third Marquis of Santa Cruz de Marcenado (1684-1732), had a keen appreciation of the changing character of war and rejected teleological rigidity, arguing, “It is not reckless to propose new solutions, nor to return to the ancient ones.”⁵⁶

It should also be noted that while most early modern military writers have engaged with and built upon the classics, few were so obsequious as to imitate their models uncritically. Despite its enduring purchase, military scholars have long disputed the “tyranny of the ancients” thesis, and some continue to do so today.⁵⁷ This line of argument is well captured in Walter Kaegi’s remarks on the “influence and perhaps tyranny of Greco-Roman precedents and precepts” on the Western Art of War literature.⁵⁸ Machiavelli is frequently singled out in such critiques, particularly for his well-known preference for a Roman infantry model that downplayed the role of artillery. (The fact that Felix Gilbert may have misunderstood him on this point is another matter.)⁵⁹

In his *Cours élémentaire d’art et histoire militaires* (1826), Jean Rocquancourt noted that the Greco-Roman tyranny thesis had long hovered over early modern military literature. The director of Saint-Cyr military academy objected to this critique and argued that the Renaissance’s “grande restauration militaire”

1657), 1 see also Ch. VII, pp. 71ff.

55 François Gabriel Marie de Pol, *L’art militaire parfait de France comprenant divers traitez concernants les ordres et methodes pour l’entreprise des guerres...* (Jean Prome, 1648), 30.

56 Álvaro de Santa Cruz de Marzenado, *Reflexiones militares* (Simon Langlois, 1730), 11:v.

57 Walter Emil Kaegi, “The Crisis in Military Historiography,” *Armed Forces & Society* 7, no. 2 (1981): 311.

58 Kaegi, “The Crisis in Military Historiography,” 312.

59 See Felix Gilbert, “Machiavelli: The Renaissance of the Art of War,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret et al. (Princeton University Press, 1986), 11–31; for two critiques of Gilbert’s essay, see Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 5–6; and Ilari, “Imitatio, restitutio, utopia,” 306–11.

of ancient texts, “far from being a retrograde movement, on the contrary, accelerated progress, and soon produced modern tactics.”⁶⁰ More recently, Virgilio Ilari has challenged the interpretations of Kaegi and Gilbert, advancing instead the thesis of a humanist “military revolution.” According to Ilari, military humanism functioned as an “ideological purge” of medieval military thought and a decisive break from its imitative tendencies. In this view, humanists replaced *imitatio* with *restitutio*—they engaged ancient history through critical reading in order to “liberate the present” and renew military thinking. Ilari illustrates this process through Machiavelli, arguing that the Florentine’s appeal to the Roman model was not meant as a blueprint, as many critics have claimed, but as a utopia. Machiavelli, he notes, was well aware that without the preconditions for a “national-democratic” army, such a model was unrealistic. Rather, Ilari contends, Machiavelli employed this theoretical construct to lay the foundations for a new republican theory of war and displace the obsolete norms of “ludic chivalric warfare.”⁶¹ In general, the study of ancient history and treatises in light of present concerns did not imply that writers merely intended to offer models to emulate, or that readers turned to these texts solely for analogies.

A non-practicalist approach to military literature—that is, one that did not focus on direct prescriptions for action—emerged well before the early modern era. Byzantine emperor Alexius’s studies of manuals on tactics offer an interesting case in point. In the last book of her *Alexiad*, Anna Komnene (1083–1153) recalled that her father had worked on a battle formation specifically designed to fight the Turks, whose combat style was unique. As Luigi Loreto observes, she made a subtle and yet crucial distinction between the concrete tactics of the fight (*en aletheia*, in reality) and her father’s hitherto purely intellectual study of Aelian’s *Tactics* (*en diphtherais*, in writing). In other words, Alexius’ project was *not* an imitation of an ancient model, for this would not have suited the specificity of Turkish warfare. The tactics on paper served as “an epistemological parameter, an analytical tool” to interpret concrete data. Byzantine strategists embraced the legacy of classical authors despite the significant contrast between their respective eras. Their aim was not necessarily to emulate models or draw concrete

60 *Cours élémentaire d'art et d'histoire militaires, à l'usage des élèves de l'École royale spéciale militaire*, with Jean-Thomas Rocquancourt (Anselin et Pochard, 1826), 14.

61 Ilari, “Imitatio, restitutio, utopia,” 275–313.

instructions for their time but rather to expand upon the existing literature for educational purposes and perhaps to continue that honored tradition.⁶²

Upon closer inspection, claims that early modern writers adhered to a universalist understanding of the practice of war prove misleading in several respects. Chief among them is the tendency to exaggerate these authors' deference to the past and their reverence for the classical canon. The debate on the superiority of classical antiquity over modernity is as old as military humanism itself. Since the 1400s, while most authors viewed the classics with respect—and some genuinely sought to revive their military models—others simply treated them as *examples* and without any sense of inferiority.⁶³ For instance, David Lupher has argued that in Castilian writings on the conquest of Mexico, Hernán Cortés “dethroned” and “superseded” Roman exemplars, effectively “making classical models obsolete.” This literary strategy manipulated classical or pseudo-classical anecdotes to cast the Romans into a posture of “accommodating inferiority,” thereby allowing the conquistadores to be fashioned as “historical actors” and to “usurp the center of the stage.”⁶⁴

Most writers turned to ancient literature not only to offer applicable teachings but also to provide comments and *judgments*. Classical notions often served not as fixed models to imitate, but as ideal-types—lenses through which to better understand the present. Folard preferred Polybius to Caesar because the former wrote “reflections” and “observations” for “meditative” readers, while the latter merely “recounted events.”⁶⁵ As de Pol admonished, one must “correct, amend, and expand” the lessons of both ancient and modern treatises. His conception of the art of war rested on critical inquiry: to object, to question, to debate—“*c'est*

62 Luigi Loreto, “Il Generale e La Biblioteca. La Trattatistica Militare Greca Da Democrito Di Abdera Ad Alessio I Comneno,” in *Lo Spazio Letterario Nella Grecia Antica. Vol. II*, ed. Giuseppe Cambiano et al. (Salerno Editrice, 1995), 564.

63 Aldo A. Settia, *De re militari: pratica e teoria nella guerra medievale* (Viella, 2008), 58. For an example of deference for the classics, see: Giulio Cesare Brancaccio, *Il Brancatio, della vera disciplina, et arte militare sopra i Comentari di Giulio Cesare, da lui ridotti in compendio per commodità de' soldati* (Vittorio Baldini, 1582).

64 David A. Lupher, *Romans in a New World: Classical Models in Sixteenth-Century Spanish America*, History, Languages, and Cultures of the Spanish and Portuguese Worlds (University of Michigan Press, 2003), see Chapter I.

65 Jean Charles de Folard, *Nouvelles découvertes sur la guerre dans une dissertation sur Polybe* (Jean-François Josse, 1724), 33–35.

l'exercice des exercices." He thus promoted "*conférences, et disputes militaires,*" encouraging intellectual confrontation over passive reception.⁶⁶ This critical stance could also take sharper forms. That is the case of Folard, who advocated a return to the pike and the column but was also perfectly ready to trash Aelian (2nd century AD) for his wedge formation.

French eighteenth-century writers frequently criticized their peers for being uninspired "compilers" (*compilateurs*). In truth, since the Renaissance, there had been writers possessing the intellectual equipment to engage with ancient military letters *critically and creatively*. At the turn of the seventeenth century, the Dutch military reforms, which were notably inspired by attentive readers of ancient authors, did not simply imitate the classics. Werner Hahlweg noted that Johann VII Nassau-Siegen (1561-1623) did not produce a mere compilation of ancient military expertise but exerted forms of historical criticism, where technical notions were considered within their historical context and in light of the practical needs of the present.⁶⁷ For instance, William Louis of Nassau-Dillenburg's (1560-1620) system did not slavishly reproduce Aelian's tactics.⁶⁸ The latter described the Macedonian phalanx breaking through enemy lines, whereas the Dutch assigned to his pikemen the role of screening his musketeers.⁶⁹ Early modern authors also tended to discard ancient precepts they deemed impractical in their own time. As Donald Neill clarifies,

The influence of the ancients held sway only where their principles were complemented by the new realities of gunpowder combat (e.g., in the areas of training, discipline, drill); but [...] their writings had little or no impact where their principles were no longer relevant (e.g., in the areas of fortification, siege warfare, the employment of cavalry, and the importance of dispersion on the battlefield).⁷⁰

66 de Pol, *L'art militaire*, 31–34.

67 Werner Hahlweg, "Einleitung," in *Die Heeresreform der Oranier: das Kriegsbuch des Grafen Johann von Nassau-Siegen*, by Johann VII (von) Nassau-Siegen, ed. Werner Hahlweg (Wiesbaden: Historische Kommission für Nassau, 1973), 13ff.

68 Johann VII von Nassau-Siegen, *Die Heeresreform der Oranier: das Kriegsbuch des Grafen Johann von Nassau-Siegen*, ed. Werner Hahlweg, Veröffentlichungen der Historischen Kommission für Nassau (Historische Kommission für Nassau, 1973), 345ff.

69 Olaf van Nimwegen, *The Dutch Army and the Military Revolutions, 1588-1688* (Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 87.

70 Donald A. Neill, "Ancestral Voices: The Influence of the Ancients on the Military Thought of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *The Journal of Military History* 62, no. 3

The work of Therese Schwager built upon Hahlweg's analysis, emphasizing that the Orange-Nassau dynasty "were not only pragmatic interpreters of Lip-sian military theory ... but also carried out independent research and philological studies, which formed the background for their practical experiments."⁷¹ Their theorizing was an open and critical process, which revised and modified Polybius' castrametation system in light of pragmatic considerations. It also integrated the independent interpretation of sources through the studies of scholars such as Francesco Patrizi (1529-1597), Justus Lipsius (1547-1606), Gottschalk Stewech (1557-1588), and Johannes van Meurs (1579-1639), as well as the methods of the scientific revolution – see, for example, the contributions of Flemish engineer and mathematician Simon Stevin (1548-1620).⁷² At the time, the Dutch approach to the classics was rather common in Europe, as several military writers explicitly aimed to square theory with practice, to combine study with experience, to master military art through applied knowledge. Studying the ancient classics also meant filtering the old theories in light of the present.⁷³

The interest in the classics continued to inform the Military Enlightenment literature, and some soldier-writers even grew more proficient in ancient languages and philology, as exemplified by soldier intellectuals such as Karl T. Guischart (1724-1775) and Paul-Gédéon Joly de Maizeroy (1719-1780). Overall, even when authors in the eighteenth century expressed admiration for classical works, and even when we presume this attitude was authentic, they recognized that certain aspects of classical theory were not reliable in practice or in their descriptions. For instance, Leroy de Bosroger (18th century) affirmed the superiority of the Roman system over the French system of his day but could also dismiss Aelian and Vegetius's descriptions as "absurd."⁷⁴ Folard, who made extensive references to

(1998): 487–520, <https://doi.org/10.2307/120435>.

71 Therese Schwager, *Militärtheorie Im Späthumanismus: Kulturtransfer Taktischer Und Strategischer Theorien in Den Niederlanden Und Frankreich (1590-1660)* (Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 160:188.

72 Schwager, *Militärtheorie Im Späthumanismus*, 160:259.

73 Keith Roberts, "The Practical Use of the Classical Texts for Modern War in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Greek Taktika: Ancient Military Writing and Its Heritage Proceedings of the International Conference on Greek "Taktika" Held at the University of Toruń, 7-11 April 2005*, ed. Philip Rance and Nick Sekunda, Akanthina, no. 13 (Foundation for the Development of Gdańsk University, 2017).

74 Le Roy de Bosroger, *Principes élémentaires*, 226ff.

ancient Roman warfare, regarded the latter two theorists as “dogmatic,” considering their teachings sterile and detached from the realities of combat.⁷⁵

Folard’s ambiguous relation to Antiquity and his divisive advocacy for the column, and his celebrity, make him an instructive case. He made it a point to stress:

For I am not such a passionate worshipper of the ancients as to believe that the moderns cannot push their research further in this important part of the science of arms, and think beyond what they have thought. Common sense supported by experience is enough to make us perceive their flaws, which the excellence of their military discipline and their valour had long hidden from us.⁷⁶

Folard also mocked eminent authors who, like himself, drew on ancient literature—targeting Lipsius for his ideas on cavalry deployment and François de la Noue (1531–1591) for his outdated methods. “N’étoit-il pas fou?” (sic), Folard asked of the latter, ridiculing his proposal to deploy cavalry in a single rank, a tactic that had been obsolete for over a century.⁷⁷ Jean Chagniot, who studied Folard in depth, noted that he was never “duped” by the biases of the historiographical tradition and even criticized Livy with notable severity.⁷⁸ Notably, Chagniot also argued that Folard was more flexible than often portrayed, drawing on ancient history *not as a model* but as a source of examples to address the pressing tactical challenges *of his time*. Faced with the stalemate of contemporary warfare—where extended lines two or three ranks deep had become unwieldy and led to indecisive bloodshed—Folard sought to reintroduce mobility and decisiveness to the battlefield.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, several authors accused Folard of the very faults he condemned in others—a recurring pattern in the Art of War tradition. Paolo Mattia Doria (c.1662–1746), for instance, dismissed the Frenchman’s system as “vain and use-

75 Jean Chagniot, “L’apport Des Anciens Dans l’œuvre de Folard,” in *Pensée Stratégique et Humanisme: De La Tactique Des Anciens à l’éthique de La Stratégie*, ed. Bruno Colson and Hervé Coutau-Bégarie (Economica, 2000), 118.

76 Jean Charles de Folard, *Nouvelles découvertes sur la guerre dans une dissertation sur Polybe*, 2nd ed. (François Foppens, 1724), xxvii–xxviii.

77 Folard, *Nouvelles découvertes*, 2nd ed., 127, 133; Jean Charles de Folard, *Histoire de Polybe*, trans. Vincent Thuillier (Aux dépens de la compagnie, 1729), IX, XIX.

78 Chagniot, “L’apport Des Anciens,” 116–18.

79 Jean Chagniot, *Le chevalier de Folard: la stratégie de l’incertitude*, L’art de la guerre (Éd. du Rocher, 1997).

less,” arguing that it failed to match the demands of modern weaponry and reflected a bygone martial ethos. To reinforce his argument, he cited a conversation with an esteemed practitioner, Marshal Johann Matthias von der Schulenburg, who remarked that Folard’s tactics were unworkable in the present age, as contemporary soldiers no longer embodied the virtues of patriotism, glory, and courage. Such arguments were leitmotifs throughout the early modern period.⁸⁰

One may view Folard’s critical comments about ancient military literature as calculated—either to justify his reliance on outdated knowledge or to minimize the appearance of overreliance—but the key point remains: a skeptical counter-discourse questioning the usefulness of the *applied functions* of military literature was already well established. Rejecting a naïve reverence for antiquity was commonplace and perhaps even expected, particularly among readers with direct experience of warfare, who were all too aware that practice outweighed military letters.

A hypothetical author reading military theory from a purely normative-prescriptive standpoint—the way practicalist scholars tend to view the majority of the Art of War literature today—expects theory to develop in tandem with evolving realities. From this applied perspective, early modern military theorists dismissed any “blind respect for our ancestors.” As Giuseppe Pecis (1716–1799) declared, “What our masters taught us is what has stalled our progress.”⁸¹

But for military theory to adapt to changes in military practice, it first had to pose new questions and reinterpret inherited concepts. Its role extended *beyond applied functions*—it also fulfilled cognitive, dialectical, and pedagogical purposes. The modernizer in Pecis, for example, urged the abandonment of outdated ideas in favor of reform and critical thinking: “To be an innovator means destroying prejudices, defying rules, or examining them with a nobility and freedom of spirit.”⁸² Yet innovation did not occur in isolation. New theories required the reinterpretation—or outright demolition—of existing models. Military thinkers could avail themselves of historical examples or existing normative theory to imagine and articulate the transformation, or even replacement, of those concep-

80 See the “Lettera alla memoria di Giacomo Fritziames Stuardo, Duca di Brevick” in Paolo Mattia Doria, *Il Capitano filosofo ... opera divisa in 2 parti* (Angelo Vocola, 1739), n.p.

81 Pecis, *Essai sur les qualités*, LI.

82 Pecis, *Essai sur les qualités*, XXIX.

tual “pictures.” This hermeneutical work produced a new paradigm, which, while imperfect for practical application, sustained the ongoing discourse on war.

Most early modern soldier-writers aspired to be—or at least presented themselves as—practical innovators; yet to varying degrees, they were also critical interpreters of the very tradition they inherited. Few could be classified as pure “practicalists,” just as few would have wished to appear as intellectuals concerned solely with military literature. This should encourage contemporary scholars not to patronize early modern soldier-writers, but instead to recognize that they could be as skeptical and often—as soldier-writers—more pragmatic than today’s observers.

The Stereotype of Military Enlightenment Theory and the Inteterminacy of War

The existing portrayals of eighteenth-century literature appear to confirm the common oversimplified views of the late military Enlightenment, suggesting it was a movement invariably fixated on the ideals of universal reason and infallible science. As Gat puts it, its theoretical outlook was characterized by an “all-embracing uniformity” due to a broad aspiration to develop a systematic, general theory of war.⁸³ Such a vague claim has some merit when considered in broader terms, yet to reiterate, the Enlightenment literature is not exceptional in this regard. Scholars of modern and contemporary warfare often discount ancient and medieval treatises as mere purveyors of direct instructions, pointing to their general non-analytic and unsystematic character.⁸⁴ On the contrary, as mentioned, classical scholars happen to argue that, since Antiquity, much of the Art of War literature entertained a similar ambition, searching for “essential truths” or forms of universal wisdom and articulating them in a coherent, comprehensive *ratio militaris*.⁸⁵ After all, Vegetius’s catalog of general rules represented a consistent,

83 Gat, *Origins of Military Thought*, 139.

84 Moran, “Strategic Theory,” 20.

85 Formisano, “The strategikós of Onasander”; Jeffrey Rop, “Refighting Cunaxa: Xenophon’s Education of Cyrus as a Manual on Military Leadership,” in *Greek and Roman Military Manuals: Genre and History*, ed. James T. Chlup and Conor Whately (London: Routledge, 2020), 153–71; Jonathan Warner, “Vegetius’ *Regulae Bellorum Generales*,” in *Greek and Roman Military Manuals: Genre and History*, ed. James T. Chlup and Conor Whately (London: Routledge, 2020), 199–215; Eramo, “Precetti per gestire l’imperium,” 146.

logical system framing the conduct of a campaign within an elementary “from A to Z” method.

In Gat’s assessment, the uniformity of Enlightenment military science was so stable that “virtually no theoretical challenge compromised the domination of this outlook” from Puysegur to the late 1790s.⁸⁶ Puysegur, however, represents an extreme example of scientism, where practical experience submits to theoretical purity and where the human element matters only insofar as it abides by geometrical and mechanical principles. Such a model can hardly be representative of the military Enlightenment corpus. The famous *querelle des ordres* paints a different picture of French military theory, emphasizing its contested nature rather than presenting the field as uniformly dominated by a universalist outlook. This debate set the advocates of two tactical models against one another—the column vs the line, shock vs firepower—but also two fundamentally different views of science’s power over reality—a cultural relativist and a rationalist one.⁸⁷ On the one hand, François Jean de Mesnil-Durand (1736-1799) and the supporters of the column advocated a *système national* suited to “ardor” and “courage,” or the supposedly peculiar character of the French soldier. The line instead fitted the purportedly phlegmatic nature and discipline of Nordic peoples.⁸⁸ On the other hand, while Guibert also considered national characters, he advocated a modern system that would articulate courage and discipline by imposing transnational principles and a “mythological” universal reason on the French military organization.⁸⁹

In the philosophical lexicon of the time, the term “system” lacked the negative connotations it later acquired among modern military scholars. Epistemologist Étienne de Condillac viewed systems as self-supporting, cohesive cognitive structures composed of maxims, hypotheses, and facts, arranged to clarify one another. Their purpose was to illuminate a broad range of phenomena through a few concise principles.⁹⁰ Systems of military science, however, were more than

86 Cit. Gat, *History of Military Thought*, 30.

87 Hervé Dré villon, *Penser et écrire la guerre: contre Clausewitz, 1780-1837* (Passés-Composés, 2021), 28, 95, and 156.

88 François-Jean de Mesnil-Durand, *Projet d’un ordre françois en Tactique, ou la phalange coupée et doublée, soutenue par le mélange des armes...* (Antoine Boudet, 1755); François-Jean de Mesnil-Durand, *Défense d’un système de guerre national* (n/a, 1779).

89 Dré villon, *Penser et écrire la guerre*, 28, 95, and 156.

90 Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Traité des systèmes, ou l’on en démêle les inconvénients et*

cognitive tools; they also conveyed prescriptive theory intended to guide practitioners in deriving applied solutions, particularly at the tactical and grand-tactical levels.⁹¹

Military Enlightenment is often associated with naïve reverence for Universal Reason, rigid adherence to theoretical dogma, arid “geometrism,” “war by algebra,” mechanical “methodicism,” determinism, and other such characteristics—in short, a mere prelude to the Jominian school that dominated much of the 19th century. As one observer notes,

The Enlightenment theorists’ failure to seriously analyze chance might be characterized as a form of theoretical denial or what today we might term “cognitive dissonance” – the refusal to contemplate that which you cannot reliably explain. Theory would only concern itself with that which was explicable through observable laws. Determined to reduce warfare to a system, they focused on those areas that were most susceptible to precise calculation.⁹²

The “system-maker” serves as a perfect allegory of these stereotypes. Jonathan Abel describes this figure as follows:

[The makers of systems] were prescriptive theorists who applied Enlightenment control measures to extremes, creating elaborate and complicated systems. Most of them focused on the details of tactics, manipulating the hours-long deployment process in subtle ways designed as much to produce geometric figures on the parade ground as to increase proficiency in battle. Almost all of them insisted that their proposals had to be rigidly implemented and followed.⁹³

François Jullien considers the Enlightenment a “vast operation of model making”—a broad attempt to transform the world through the technical application of rational principles.⁹⁴ While this description may suit sciences as a whole, applying it to military science is problematic. War’s inherent indeterminacy, well recognized by military thinkers of the time, resisted such rigid codification. As prac-

les avantages / I (Neaulme, 1749), 1ff.

91 François-Jean de Mesnil-Durand, *Fragments de tactique, ou six Mémoires* (Charles Antoine Jombert, 1774), xxxiii.

92 Waldman, ““Shadows of Uncertainty,”” 338. Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831

93 Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte de Guibert, *Guibert’s General Essay on Tactics*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Abel, *History of Warfare* ; Volume 137 (Brill, 2022), XXI.

94 François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), 4.

tioners, eighteenth-century soldier-writers understood war's elusive nature and recognized the shortcomings of any attempt to systematize it. They were mostly aware that their empirical foundations rested on incomplete personal experience and an even less reliable historiography. Thus, they reckoned the challenges of distilling practice into an infallible system.⁹⁵ Over time, military treatises adopted scientific language, professing an ambition to capture the "secrets" of practice into rational models. Yet, alongside these claims, there also emerged a growing awareness of the limits of reason. Despite their scientific rhetoric, military thinkers expressed reservations about treating warfare as a "definitive" hard science or as a theory that could "override" reality's complexity, as Gat observes. Maurice de Saxe (1696-1750), for instance, argued that war has "no principles and rules."⁹⁶ Antoine de Feuquières (1648-1711) admitted he did not present a true "science of marches" but rather described generic "manners" (*manières*) of marching, which did not rely on "firm rules" (*règles certaines*).⁹⁷ Similarly, Lancelot Turpin de Crissé (1716-1793) acknowledged that in war, "nothing is absolute... nor can one establish a certain theory."⁹⁸ Overall, Enlightenment military writers formulated applied precepts grounded in logical-philosophical and mathematical principles. Yet fully positivist systems—i.e., positively descriptive, normative, and predictive—were not standard. Parts of their models, particularly at the higher levels, could not conform to deterministic causation and one-sided linear thinking.

The inherent indeterminacy of war and perceived limitations of science led to significant uncertainty in military theory's practical application. Clausewitz's predecessors had long postulated ideas reminiscent of *Friktion* using a variety of terms, such as "accidents" or "impediments," and had already acknowledged that war is not a unilateral act. The oft-repeated notion that Enlightenment military thought offered wholly mechanical and unreflective systems that dispensed with chance and human dimension is a canard. Most early modern theorists harbored

95 Lancelot Turpin de Crissé, *Essai sur l'art de la guerre*, 2 vols. (Praault fils aîné et Jombert, 1754), 2.

96 Cit. Hermann-Maurice de Saxe, *Les reveries ou memoires sur l'art de la guerre...* (Pierre Gosse Jr., 1756), 1.

97 Feuquières Antoine de Pas de, *Mémoires de M. le marquis de Feuquières*, 2 vols. (L'Honore et Chatelain, 1741), vol. I, p. 210.

98 Lancelot Turpin de Crissé, *Commentaires sur le Mémoires de Montecuculi...* vol. I (La-combe, 1769), III.

no illusions of achieving complete scientific control over war. As early as the mid-seventeenth century, Montecuccoli elaborated a tripartite theoretical framework to govern war, based on (1) war preparations (*apparecchio*), (2) strategic planning (*disposizione*), and operation on the campaign level (*operazione*). As he had it, the highest level of planning (*disposizione universale*) “concerns warfare holistically [*la Guerra in grosso*], it prescribes the general norm for handling it, and directs it towards a beneficial outcome.” He borrowed the chess metaphor, hinting at the importance of the first moves. However, planning was *not* a way to obliterate contingency. On the contrary, it had to concede to frictions.⁹⁹ A century later, Charles-Joseph, the seventh Prince of Ligne wrote: “There is no servile path to follow. Initial calculations fall apart due to unforeseeable events [*sic*].”¹⁰⁰ At the peak of the military Enlightenment, even authors of more scientific persuasions largely agreed that “Circumstances of time and place almost always disrupt the best-orchestrated systems.”¹⁰¹

Throughout the early modern era, writers had consistently recognized that translating theoretical systems into real plans demanded prudence. The transition from theory to practice required varying degrees of contextual specificity, flexibility in execution, and adherence to prescribed details. In several treatises, the codification of plans typically conveyed cautious, even pessimistic tones. The sixteenth-century military writer Bernardino Rocca (1515-1587) wrote:

The factors that must be considered during the course of war are exceedingly numerous [...] Frequently, the Captain carefully devises a well-reasoned plan [...] only to see it end in miserable failure.¹⁰²

For their part, Enlightenment thinkers commonly stressed the distance between ideal and real war through expressions like warfare “on the field” and “on paper” or “from the cabinet.”¹⁰³ Likewise, the idea that plans rarely survive the

99 Montecuccoli characterized frictions using terms that had gained currency during the age of military humanism, such as “arbitrariness of chance” (*l'arbitrio della fortuna*), “contingencies” (*le congiunture*), and “obstructions” (*gli impedimenti*). Montecuccoli, *Memorie*, III: 56ff, cit. 59.

100 Charles-Joseph Ligne Prince de, *Fantaisies militaires* (Honoré Champion, 1914), 35.

101 Cit. Guibert, *Essai*, 3.

102 Bernardino Rocca, *Imprese, stratagemmi, et errori militari* (Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari, 1566), 16.

103 Feuquières, *Mémoires (1741)*, vol. I, p. 83; Turpin de Crissé, *Essai*, 2–3; Lloyd, *The History (2nd Ed.)*, II, xix–xx; Guibert, *Défense du système de guerre*, 1:76.

first contact with the enemy had been commonplace for centuries before Moltke codified it. As Turpin de Crissé put it, “The deepest meditations and the most carefully devised solutions can be upended by a single move from the enemy.”¹⁰⁴ Like most eighteenth-century theorists, he had read Montecuccoli who, as early as the mid-seventeenth century, introduced Aristotle’s notion of “passive power,” or the capacity of something to be acted upon and receive change.¹⁰⁵ This latter idea seemingly foreshadowed the Clausewitzian notion that war is not directed at a passive and yielding matter but at “an animate object that reacts.”¹⁰⁶

The literature consistently acknowledged that the conduct of war was ultimately a *human* endeavor shaped by the decisions of a general. Most authors maintained—at least professedly—a pragmatic approach, viewing generalship as a matter of prudence rather than technical expertise, relying on talents, intuition, expediency, temperament, and other qualities. They generally did not replace capable command with doctrine and scripts. At the level of *la stratégique*, Maïzeroy emphasized that “the conduct of war and operations comes entirely from a general’s mind.”¹⁰⁷ Therefore, he “did not pretend at all to provide models to follow word by word [but] to develop reasoning, and let ideas bloom and expand.”¹⁰⁸ Enlightenment normative theory involved the Greco-Roman functions subsumed to the art of command (*strategiké* or *ars imperatoria*) and the direction of war (*oikonomía polémou* or *gestio* and *administratio belli*), whereby the commander (*imperator*) governed war from a position of *absolute authority*. The notion that a virtuous general must choose, adapt, combine, or devise impromptu solutions was fully assumed. Command (strategy) required varying degrees of “judgment” and “genius,” words commonly featured in military treatises throughout the early modern era—that is, long before Clausewitz highlighted the importance of a general’s *Urtheil* and *Genie*.

104 Turpin de Crissé, *Essai*, 133–34.

105 Montecuccoli, *Opere*, 129; see also Le Roy de Bosroger, *Principes élémentaires*, 98.

106 Clausewitz, *On War*, 149.

107 Paul-Gédéon Joly de Maïzeroy, *Théorie de la guerre: où l’on expose la constitution et formation de l’infanterie et de la cavalerie...* (aux dépens de la Société, 1777), 336.

108 Joly de Maïzeroy, *Théorie de la guerre*, 302.

The Public Sphere and the Instability of Enlightenment Military Theory

Notwithstanding such a pragmatic outlook, the word *faiseur de systèmes* acquired derogatory connotations and became a punching bag in polemical arguments. Theorists began to use it to criticize those they viewed as dogmatic. As soldier-writers recognized the limitations of literature in shaping reality, they began using the term to blast those authors they considered pedantic or overly ambitious in dispensing recipes. For instance, Saxe took issue with the “presumptuousness” of some system-makers who promoted their “opinions” as “infallible,” regardless of real-world experience.¹⁰⁹ Guibert similarly disparaged Folard and Puységur, among other *faiseurs de systèmes*, for their reliance on false or outdated principles, their lackluster, uninspiring ideas, and the “aridity” of their style. He specifically reproached Folard for his rigid, dogmatic approach, denouncing his theory as a panacea (“a pill for every ill”) that disregarded the places, circumstances, and arms involved.¹¹⁰

Ironically, though not unexpectedly, a few generations earlier, Folard’s introduction to his *Histoire de Polybe* contained arguments, expressed in similar wording, that mirrored those of his critic. He, too, attacked his predecessors for their “false” ideas, lack of originality, and “aridity and dryness,” and he, too, refused to adopt their tidy method and parsimonious rhetoric. Furthermore, while Guibert had accused Folard of selling a one-size-fits-all prescription, the latter aimed to expand the range of tactical choices. He proposed several ways of ordering troops, depending on the circumstances, and included different options, even for a single type of terrain. He claimed he did not seek to impose a rigid dogma but to present his ideas in no specific order, inviting the reader to pick only those they liked. Overall, Folard intended to go down in the history of military thought as a maverick (“a libertine”) who revolutionized French tactics and discarded outdated traditions, rather than as a preacher.¹¹¹ Decades later, Mesnil-Durand came to Folard’s defense, claiming that the issue was not with the notion of a *system* per se, as all military organizations have one. Rather, Folard and his advocates challenged the *système établi*—a system that was deeply “entrenched” within the

109 Hermann-Maurice de Saxe, *Esprit des loix de la tactique du maréchal de Saxe...*, with Zacharie Pazzi de Bonneville (Pierre Gosse Jr., 1762), 70.

110 Guibert, *Essai*, 4–6, 218–19.

111 Folard, *Histoire de Polybe*, i–x.



Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, Mausoleum of the Maréchal de Saxe's (1753-76).

In the Protestant Church of St Thomas, Strasbourg
(Photo Chabe01 CC SA 4.0 Int. Wikimedia Commons)

French army, founded on “blind,” unreflective, and prejudiced routines.¹¹²

These apparent contradictions encourage the reader to approach both the critical and self-promoting claims with skepticism. It is also worth questioning the recurrent expressions of modesty and defensive declarations that accompanied scientific ambitions. Azar Gat rightly points out the disingenuousness of Saxe’s humility, especially when, in the conclusion of his *Rêveries* (“Daydreams”), he claimed to have written the work in just thirteen nights to alleviate his struggles with illness and fever, asking the reader’s indulgence for its lack of structure, coherence, and polish.¹¹³ After all, self-effacing and apologetic expressions had long been a staple of military treatises, ever since soldier-writers took up the art of war. Guibert opened his ambitious *Essai* in a register that oscillated between assertiveness and defensiveness. Like Saxe, he described his work as “observations written and gathered hastily.”¹¹⁴ In essence, such statements may have carried an element of hypocrisy, presenting a contrived, ritual modesty that contrasted with the scientific aims and scientific rhetoric of the treatises in which they appeared.

Similarly, the harsh criticisms directed at the *faiseurs de systèmes* should not be accepted at face value, as the term could reflect the cynicism or the bitterness of the accuser just as much as the dogmatism of the accused. Like all caricatures, the figure of the rigid system-maker—a target of Clausewitz and a trope that endures today—contained elements of truth. Yet, over time, such accusations became as formulaic as they were justified. Anti-dogmatic stances became cliché and often served to discredit a rival’s system while simultaneously promoting one’s own.

Nonetheless, absolute cynicism about the sincerity of such expressions may be misleading, as defensive statements and criticisms may also reflect genuine reservations about military theory’s ability to explain and shape reality. The formulation of military science was *inherently* difficult, as recognized by nearly all Enlightenment authors, and the challenge of developing a complete, practical system was even greater still. Guibert appeared sincere in tempering his scientific

112 Mesnil-Durand, *Fragments de tactique*, i–xxxvi, cit. xiii.

113 Hermann-Maurice de Saxe, *Mes rêveries, ouvrage posthume de Maurice, comte de Saxe, ... (suivi des Réflexions sur la propagation de l’espèce humaine) augmenté d’une histoire abrégée de sa vie, et de différentes pièces qui y ont rapport, par Monsieur l’abbé Pérau*, 2 vols. (Arkstee et Merkus, 1757), vol. II, 151.

114 Guibert, *Essai*, CLVIII.

tic enthusiasm when he acknowledged the challenges of constructing a universal theory of war. He admitted that he could not guarantee the success of his endeavor and openly warned the public of his awareness of its challenges.¹¹⁵ Other authors similarly adopted skeptical or defensive tones and owned the excesses of their ambitions. Folard, for example, opened his visionary study by recognizing the “boldness” of his enterprise, adding the following disclaimer:

I am well aware that, more than anyone, I ought to justify myself to the reader for any errors I may have made. It is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid many mistakes in a work of such great detail and scope. [...] But what use would it be to waste my time on vain excuses?¹¹⁶

In a similarly defensive and yet candid vein, Giuseppe Palmieri (1721-1793) argued: “To aspire to a perfect theory of war [is] a great act of temerity.” Yet, he continued, “If the existing rules fail to provide sufficient clarity or determination, it is both commendable and necessary to search for better ones elsewhere.”¹¹⁷

More importantly, the statements above reveal a broad awareness that, despite their definitive tone and their fascination with Universal Reason, military writers navigated a “regime of truth” marked by uncertainty. The expansion of military printing in the sixteenth century transformed the Art of War literature into an arena increasingly populated by competing voices treading on insecure grounds. As Johann Jacob von Wallhausen (1580-1627) noted in his *Corpus Militare* (1617),

Today, all the stratagems and all sorts of new inventions are regulated according to one’s opinion, and so many other different opinions and moods. Each one seeks to bring something new to the discipline of war according to his taste and liking. How, then, can all these notions be codified in precepts and rules based on certain foundations?¹¹⁸

Hervé Drévilion has recently highlighted the “paradox” of the military Enlightenment literature, an arena where writers invoked Universal Reason to challenge one another while recognizing the doxastic nature of their work. Latour de Foissac lamented the “abundant flow of polemical writings,” the “purely speculative opinions,” and the “obscurity and ergotism” that plagued military science,

¹¹⁵ Guibert, *Essai*, 7.

¹¹⁶ Folard, *Histoire de Polybe*, iv.

¹¹⁷ Giuseppe Palmieri, *Riflessioni critiche sull’arte della guerra*, I (Stamperia Simoniana, 1761), 24.

¹¹⁸ Johann Jacob von Wallhausen, *Corpus militare, darinnen das heutige Kriegswesen in einer perfecten und absoluten idea begriffen und vorgestellt wirdt...* (by the Author, 1617), ix.

noting that the art of war had become so “busy fighting itself that it stopped its own progress.”¹¹⁹ Military theory rested on unstable epistemic foundations, its validity relying as much on literary composition as empirical evidence and rigorous logic. While military theorists championed the use of reason, they also competed as writers, striving to “convince and seduce” their readers.¹²⁰ Thus, for instance, when the engineer Jean Claude Le Michaud d’Arçon (1733-1780) debated Guibert in the *querelle des ordres*, he cast himself as a “hard” scientist, guided by pure logical and mathematical reasoning. After losing the debate, he lamented that the audience rewarded assertiveness and dogmatism more than reflection and skepticism.¹²¹ As he put it, the language of reason—by which he meant, *his own* arguments—was powerless against the “impetus of [Guibert’s] skilled and passionate eloquence,” as their discussion on tactics had ultimately “degenerated into a literary quarrel.”¹²²

Guibert, for his part, attacked Folard—the standard-bearer of the “Column” camp—by leveling similar accusations of “seducing the crowd” (*il agissoit sur l’opinion de la foule*).¹²³ Yet he, too, repeatedly courted public acclaim, declaring: “This is no longer merely an obscure polemic between writers on tactics. The question has been brought into the open. [...] I will lay all the pieces of this great trial before the eyes of the public.”¹²⁴ Contrary to Le Michaud’s portrayal of him, Guibert asserted his own criteria for epistemological validation while systematically discrediting those of his opponents. On the one hand, he invoked as “arbiters and judges” the French and foreign armies—competent peers who grasped “the simple truth” (*du simple et du vrai*) of warfare. On the other hand, in traditional fashion, he dismissed “those big, superfluous volumes of geometry and metaphysics,” deriding pedantic *compilateurs* like Folard and the overly methodical engineers such as Mesnil-Durand and Le Michaud d’Arçon.¹²⁵

119 Cit. François Philippe de Latour-Foissac, *Traité théorie-pratique élémentaire de la guerre des retranchements* (Levrault, 1789), 28, 34.

120 Cit. Drévilion, *Penser et écrire la guerre*, 10, 86.

121 Jean-Claude-Éléonore Le Michaud d’Arçon, *Correspondance sur l’art de la guerre: Entre un colonel de dragons & un capitaine d’infanterie* (Fantet, 1774), 4–5.

122 Jean-Claude-Éléonore Le Michaud d’Arçon, *Défense d’un système de guerre national...* (n/a, 1779), 5.

123 Guibert, *Défense du système de guerre*, 1:33 [sic].

124 Guibert, *Défense du système de guerre*, 1:1–2; see also: Guibert, *Essai*, CLIX.

125 Guibert, *Défense du système de guerre*, 1:1–6; Guibert had already attacked the methodi-

German military thinkers were equally aware of the rhapsodic nature of existing theoretical paradigms. As Otto August Rühle von Lilienstern (1780-1847) observed, the composition of military systems was highly subjective. Their boundaries and internal structure—or how principles and observations were “stitched together” (in Greek, *rháptein*)—depended entirely on the writer’s scientific purposes.¹²⁶ Further Clausewitz underscored this point in more critical terms: military theories were “rhapsodies [...] arranged in a defective manner, with principles and rules being drawn from insufficient bases, and with inconsequential views often being presented as if they were essential.”¹²⁷

Writing about warfare meant engaging with a tradition where the contest of ideas was the norm. Matteo Scalfati (18th century) argued that a key purpose of military science was to assess the work of other writers.¹²⁸ Ligne put it more succinctly: in military theory, it was easier to find “what is bad” in others’ work than “what is better.”¹²⁹ Writers jostled for prominence, elbowing their competitors and posing as conquerors of new theoretical frontiers.¹³⁰ Yet, given the contentious nature of their field, they likely recognized that even the most well-conceived system would eventually be surpassed—or discarded—by a more forceful competitor. Saxe wrote, “I hope my ideas may inspire better ones in those more skilled than I.”¹³¹ Similarly, Guibert addressed his fellow theorists, anticipating their criticisms and inviting future, “more capable” thinkers to either challenge his study or draw inspiration from it.¹³² There is reason to believe this was not just

cism of engineers in his *Essai*. See Guibert, *Essai*, XCIV.

126 Johann Jacob Otto August Rühle von Lilienstern, *Handbuch für den Offizier: zur Belehrung im Frieden und zum Gebrauch im Felde*, 2 vols. (G. Reimer, 1817), vol. II, 110–111.

127 See “Ueber den Zustand der Theorie” in Carl von Clausewitz, *Schriften—Aufsätze—Studien—Briefe*, ed. Werner Hahlweg (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 25; cited in Antulio J. Echevarria II, “Clausewitz: Philosopher of War or Military Scientist?,” *Army History*, no. 70 (2009): 23.

128 Matteo Scalfati, *Progetto di una nuova scienza militare* (Stamperia Simoniana, 1768), 7–8.

129 Charles-Joseph Ligne Prince de, *Préjugés militaires (Fantaisies militaires)*, 2 vols. (Kra-
lovelhota, 1780), Aii.

130 Harald Hoiback, “Military Operations,” in *Handbook of Military Sciences*, ed. Anders McDonald Sookermy (Springer International Publishing, 2021), 11–12.

131 Saxe, *Esprit des loix*, 70.

132 Guibert, *Essai*, 15, CLX.

false modesty but *also* a recognition of the inevitably unstable nature of military theory.

In summary, the inherent implausibility of a unified theory of warfare, the impossibility of codifying military prudence in a non-trivial way, and the competitive nature of the field made it unlikely that military writers ever saw their teaching as dominating and definitive. The fragility of their epistemic foundations and methods was widely recognized and openly debated. While some, driven by a scientific outlook, pursued the ideal of a “science for all times, all places, and all arms,” they likely understood that this vision was unfeasible, offering at best ephemeral insights.¹³³ Thus, contrary to the existing academic consensus, scientific optimism could not dominate the discourse on war; instead, it coexisted with skepticism, pragmatism, and perspectivism. De facto, military thinkers’ general approach was “epistemic fallibilism” or a pragmatic recognition that errors in military theory are inevitable. Whereas some absolute truths were deemed unattainable, an optimistic belief in progress through reason and, above all, through *study and education*, permeated the scientific discourse.

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¹³³ Guibert, *Essai*, 15.

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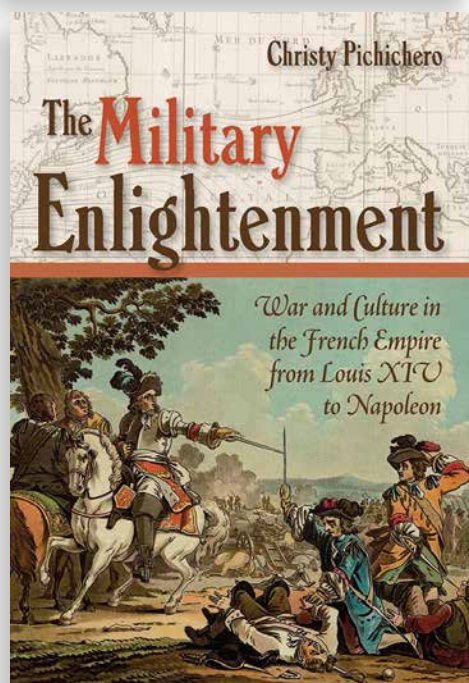
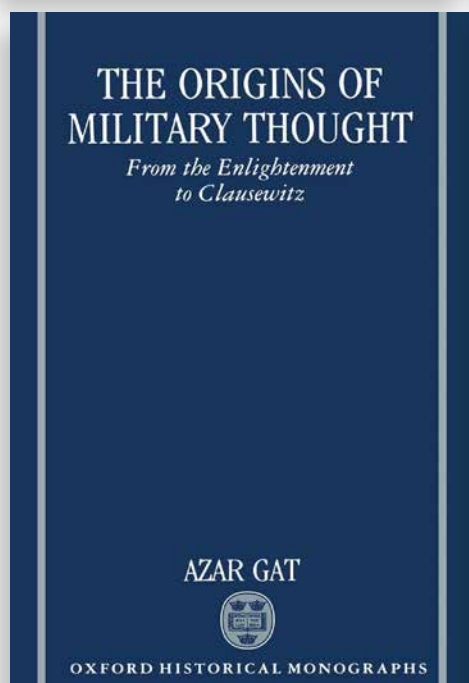
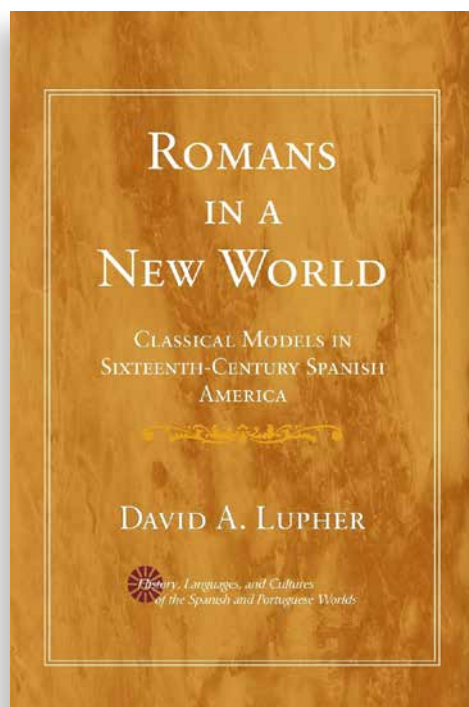
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