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Entering the *École militaire*: Proofs of nobility and the example of the girls' school at Saint-Cyr

The heading 'Établissements Utiles' in the book *L'esprit de Monsieur de Voltaire* lists only one institution: the *École royale militaire*, established in Paris in 1751 to prepare the sons of the provincial nobility for military careers.² The short entry reads, 'The establishment of Saint-Cyr will be surpassed by that which Louis XV has just created to raise 500 *gentilsbommes*; but far from obscuring the memory of Saint-Cyr, it will help to better remember it. It is the art of doing good which has been perfected.'³ Such comparisons between the *École militaire* and Madame de Maintenon's charitable school for the daughters of the nobility, founded in 1686 (officially the *Maison royale de Saint-Louis* at Saint-Cyr), have often been made, first by contemporaries and subsequently by historians of the *École militaire*.⁴ It is easy to see why, when one considers their numerous parallels, be it architectural grandeur, charitable intent, or the reinforcement of links between France's nobility and royal power.

One aspect they shared however has not received much critical attention, namely their system of noble proofs for candidates seeking admission. This is surprising considering the

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² This article is partly based on material from chapter two of my thesis on the *École militaire*, 'Institutional Imperatives: Control and Change in the Ecole Royale Militaire, 1750-1788', PhD diss. University of York, forthcoming.

³ Voltaire, *L'esprit de Monsieur de Voltaire* (London: 1759), p. 201.

⁴ Jean-Baptiste Pâris de Meyzieu, *Lettre d'un ancien lieutenant-colonel français à M*** sur l'École royale militaire* (London: 1755), pp. 22-23. He took the assignment of the goods and revenues of the abbey of Saint Denis to Saint-Cyr as a positive example for the *École militaire*, itself later granted the revenues of the abbeys of Saint-Jean de Laon and Liessies-en-Hainaut; Samuel Gibiat, *Hiérarchies Sociales & Ennoblement: Les commissaires des guerres de la Maison du roi au XVIIIe siècle*, École des Chartes (Paris: 2006), p. 26. Robert Laulan and Frederick Artz both mention Saint-Cyr's inspiration for the Madame de Pompadour, the first in 'La fondation de l'École militaire et Madame de Pompadour', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, t. 21, no. 2 (Apr.-Jul. 1974), 285, 293, 294 and 297, the latter in 'L'éducation technique en France au XVIIIe siècle (1700-1789)', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, t. 13, no. 35, Nouv. Ser. t. 7 (Oct. -Dec., 1938), 387.

detailed scrutiny those proofs have generated in individual studies of the schools. They might reasonably have been expected to stimulate more comparative studies than is the case (Daniel Porquet's thesis on the provincial *école militaire* of Pontlevoy and Valérie Piétri's article on noble proofs in *ancien régime* Provence being among the few studies to compare both directly), especially given the *École militaire*'s role as a template for the Ségur decree of 1781.⁵ Its requirement that candidates prove four degrees of patrilineal noble descent seems little different from Saint-Cyr's similar requirement between 1686 and 1745, or the 1781 decree's apparent exclusion of those unable to prove four generations of nobility. In fact, analyses of noble proofs by scholars such as Jay M. Smith or Janis Langins can imply a misleading homogeneity regarding the requirements of the schools and the military.⁶ It is the place that the *École militaire*'s system of proofs held in the enactment of different sorts of nobiliary exclusivism during the *ancien régime* that this paper thus seeks to examine. Specifically, the *École militaire*'s relationship with Saint-Cyr, a comparison with other sorts of noble proofs, and a consideration of the limited exceptions it allowed, will ideally permit a more nuanced understanding of its constitution as an entirely noble institution.

That the Ségur decree, the best-known exclusionary measure indebted to the *École militaire*, has been the subject of numerous studies is unremarkable given its perceived role in the developments of the pre-Revolution and a purported noble reaction. The decree mandated that all new *sous-lieutenants* in the line regiments of the army prove either that they had four degrees of patrilineal noble descent, or that they were sons of officers who were chevaliers of St. Louis, a

⁵ 'L'École royale militaire de Pontlevoy: Bénédictins de Saint-Maur et boursiers du roi, 1776-1793', thèse de doctorat d'histoire moderne, Université Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2011, 159-160. This is a prosopography of the military students at Pontlevoy as well as a monograph on its institutional development. Pontlevoy was one of 12 *écoles militaires* established by the comte de Saint-Germain in 1776 and requiring the same system of noble proofs as the Paris school (they were Dole, Auxerre, Sorèze, Tiron, Rebais, Beaumont-en-Auge, Brienne-le-Château, Vendôme, Effiat, Tournon, and Pont-à-Mousson). The Jesuit college of La Flèche, which became an *école militaire* in 1764 (until 1776) following the order's expulsion in 1762, also had the same entry requirements as the *École militaire* in Paris. See also Valérie Piétri, 'Bonne renommée ou actes authentiques: la noblesse doit faire ses preuves (Provence, XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles)', *Genèses*, n° 74 (March 2009/1), 5-24, (p. 10, p. 16).

⁶ Jay M. Smith, *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 141. Smith mentions Saint-Cyr's original requirement of proof of four degrees of nobility but not subsequent modifications. Langins also asserts that the Ségur decree's requirements were applied 'without exception'. Janis Langins, 'The *Ecole Polytechnique* and the French Revolution: Merit, Militarization, and Mathematics', *Lull*, 13 (1990), 91-105 (p. 93).

military order awarded for bravery or long service.⁷ This exclusivism was taken as an inherent aspect of an ‘aristocratic reaction’ prior to David Bien’s paradigm-shifting article of 1974 on the Ségur decree; Bien’s article demonstrated that instead of seeking to exclude the bourgeoisie from the army, it instead targeted for exclusion the recently ennobled (or *anoblis*) in an effort to constitute the officer corps as a caste of nobles by reducing the role of money and unmilitary influence; by applying the *École militaire*’s proofs in the army, reformers continued the trend of professionalization through exclusion not of *roturiers* (a term which referred to the quality of being non-noble, be it persons or property) but of unsuitable candidates, both non-noble and noble.⁸

The *École militaire*’s requirements of proofs of nobility were only one of three elements setting the social conditions for matriculation.⁹ The other two were proofs of impoverishment and an account of the military career of the candidate’s father in terms of a differentiated table of military service.¹⁰ These additional requirements were an important factor distinguishing it from other institutions which required proofs of nobility, such as the *Collège Mazarin* or the pages of the royal stables.¹¹ The table of eight classes gave preference to the orphans of officers killed in the field, forced to retire due to wounds, or children in the care of their widowed mothers. The

⁷ These were the line regiments of French infantry, cavalry, dragoons, chevau-légers, and chasseurs à cheval. The most significant exception allowed men from the ranks to be commissioned as *officiers de fortune*. The content of the ‘Ségur decree’, which consisted of the measures ‘Ordre du Roi...’ and ‘Décision du Roi’, both of 22 May 1781, can be found in the *Recueil des Édits... concernant l’École royale militaire*, T I (Paris, 1782), p. 169 and L.N.H. Chérin, *Abrégé Chronologique d’Édits...* (Paris, 1788), p. 402 respectively; Georges Six, ‘Fallait-il quatre quartiers de noblesse pour être officier à la fin de l’ancien régime?’, *Revue d’histoire moderne* T. 1^e, No. 19 (Jan.-Feb. 1929), 47-56 (pp. 48-49).

⁸ David Bien, ‘La réaction aristocratique avant 1789: l’exemple de l’armée’, *Annales ESC*, 29 (1974) 23-48 and 505-534; he further developed those themes in ‘The army in the French Enlightenment: Reform, Reaction, and Revolution’, *Past Present*, 85 (1979), 68-98. Roger Chartier exemplifies the earlier interpretation which viewed noble proofs as reactionary in his comments on their adoption by the military engineering school at Mézières in 1777: ‘Les décisions de 1777 et 1781 sont sans conteste des signes de réaction aristocratique et contribuent à borner plus strictement le champ du recrutement de l’école [...]’. Roger Chartier, ‘Mézières et son recrutement scolaire’, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, t. 20 no. 3 (Jul.-Sep. 1973), p. 365. For more analysis in the same vein as Bien, see Gilbert Bodinier, *Les gardes du corps de Louis XVI: étude institutionnelle, sociale et politique: dictionnaire biographique* (SHAT: Editions Mémoire & documents, 2005), pp. 35-41.

⁹ It had no strict academic conditions for entry.

¹⁰ See articles XIII and XVI, ‘Édit du Roi’, 22 January 1751, SHD Y^a 145, 7-8, 9.

¹¹ The *collège Mazarin*, founded for the education of 60 noblemen in 1688, required proofs of nobility from 1720 onwards; Marie-Madeleine Compère’s ‘Collèges de l’Université de Paris’, in *Dictionnaire de l’Ancien Régime: Royaume de France, XVI^e-XVIII^e siècle*, 285. On the pages’ system of proofs, especially the change from a requirement to prove four degrees to one proving noble ancestry dating to 1550, see Smith, pp. 150-153, pp. 216-217.

fifth class was the first that was open to the children of officers currently serving, and only the final class admitted those who had neither a father nor any ancestors with military records, if their indigence required the king's aid. The basic requisites for candidates, then, were the loss or retirement of a father in military service, the impoverishment of their family, and proven noble ancestry.¹² The school's founders believed that such proofs would help rehabilitate the military nobility by the moral and material aid it provided to their families. The lack of access to a suitable education was not an obstacle that the bourgeois faced, unlike many nobles.¹³ Reformers believed the twin curses of military service were excessive luxury and excessive deprivation, which each contributed to ignorance, a lack of discipline, and lax morals. All this contributed to the undermining of the nobility's military position by opportunistic commoners.¹⁴

Concerns about the sacrificing of the military nobility's interest to that of parvenus was based on real ministerial policies. An example of such usurpation was the request by the Minister of War for affluent bourgeois to fill officer vacancies on the outbreak of the War of the Polish Succession in 1734. Though such recourse to the services of the bourgeoisie was not unheard of at the end of long wars, when the nobility and its resources were exhausted, the observer who cited that example considered it particularly scandalous that such a measure should have taken place at the beginning, and not the end, of a war.¹⁵ He also stated that France was too well-stocked with nobles to ever lack sufficient candidates for the officer corps, but that structural and social obstacles emasculated both the nobility and the military. By excluding those without

¹² Articles XIII, XIV, and XVI, 'Édit du Roi Portant création d'une École royale militaire', Versailles, 22 January 1751, 7-9 in SHD Y^a 145.

¹³ Francois-Hugues Pepin du Montet, *Requête au Roy...* (Paris 1752), p. 4.

¹⁴ 'Il arrive [...] que des gens de moindre naissance obtiennent les grades militaires'. Anonymous, *Essay sur le Service Militaire, pour l'instruction d'un jeune Seigneur Francois* (Paris, 1754), pp. 151-152; another author commented in a footnote that some estimated that less than half of the infantry's officer corps consisted of *gentilshommes*. To him, that point countered the argument that the low intake of children in the first four classes by the school up to November 1753 was simply the result of a high amount of unmarried officers, instead of being due to a lack of nobility in the army. *Réflexions sur l'École royale militaire* (n.p., n.d), pp. 5-6.

¹⁵ For more on this practice, see André Corvisier 'Aux approches de l'Édit de Ségur: le cas du sieur de Mongautier, 1779', in *L'Actualité de l'histoire*, No. 22, Questions militaires (Feb. 1958), pp. 10-11; Anonymous, *Réflexions sur l'École Royale Militaire*, pp. 3-4: 'La nécessité où le Ministre de la guerre se trouva [...], après vingt années de paix, de faire inviter les enfans de la Bourgeoisie opulente à prendre ces emplois, en est [...] preuve'. This measure was taken after the drafting of 600 *cadets-gentilshommes* at Metz in 1733.

the necessary social and moral qualities, and aiding those whose rightful place in the king's service had been denied by circumstance, the *École militaire* would help contribute to the reestablishment of the natural order of society. Where its two principal antecedents, Louvois' companies of *cadets-gentilshommes* extant from 1682-1696 and LeBlanc's revival of the same in 1726-1733, had failed through lax enforcement of their social criteria for admission, the *École militaire* should become a byword for the rigid application of its rules.¹⁶ In the reformers' minds, the exclusion of the *privilégiés* was not the imposition of one sort of favouritism over another, namely that of nobles over commoners, but a contribution to the rebalancing of both civil and military society.¹⁷

The reformers' aim was to professionalize the officer corps via the rehabilitation of the provincial nobility at the expense of the opulent. For instance, Jean-Girard de Cessac's ideas on recruitment for the army, especially recruitment from military families, echoed those of the founders of the *École militaire*. His measures would have excluded court nobles to the benefit of "maisons militaires" and the state.¹⁸ However, as research into both Saint-Cyr and the *École militaire* has suggested, the students' families were often not as deprived as the statutes might appear to have required. Carolyn C. Lougee's analysis of Saint-Cyr's inaugural class of 1686 has shown that 92.4 per cent of the girls' fathers 'possessed landed resources and/or the capital requisite for military service'; Porquet shows that the vast majority of the students at Pontlevoy

¹⁶ Louvois' companies, though in principle open only to *gentilshommes*, admitted bourgeois cadets and even artisans. R.F. Croal, 'The Idea of the *École Spéciale Militaire* and the Founding of Saint-Cyr', PhD diss. University of Arizona, 1970, p. 72; a principal cause of the companies' disbandment in 1733 was their having accepted candidates using counterfeit proofs of nobility. SHD, 1 MR 1781, no. 19, 'Projet pour un nouvel établissement de Cadets gentilshommes,' [1742], 5 in Smith, 217. The official reason for their disbandment was that due to the issuing of commissions to most of the cadets, the company was no longer necessary in wartime. *Ordonnance du roy pour licencier la Compagnie de Gentilshommes entretenüe à la Citadelle de Metz*, 22 December 1733, 3, SHD Y^a 145.

¹⁷ *Réflexions*, p. 12: 'C'est par elle (l'École militaire) que les choses [...] rentreront dans leur ordre naturel. Elle repeuplera insensiblement notre Militaire de Noblesse, et elle en écartera [...] ceux qui ne sont pas faits pour cet Etat [...] toutes les fonctions civiles en seront mieux remplies'.

¹⁸ David Bien, *Caste, Class and Profession in Old Regime France: the French Army and the Ségur Reform of 1781*, ed. by Guy Rowlands (St. Andrews: University of St. Andrews, 2010), p. 88. This is the English edition of Bien's *Annales* articles on the Ségur decree.

belonged to the ‘noblesse moyenne’, that is enjoying revenues of 500 – 4,000 livres per annum.¹⁹ He also demonstrates the existence of fraternal networks which placed numerous family members both in Saint-Cyr and various *écoles militaires* which, if not monopolizing the places available, greatly limited the distribution of places meant to reach as many provincial noble families as possible.²⁰ 27 per cent of the families who applied for places in an *école militaire* had already furnished the necessary noble proofs for admittance to Saint-Cyr.²¹ In Saint-Cyr itself in the eighteenth century, over 40 per cent of students had familial connections of some sort with other *demoiselles* there.²²

Without a more precise socio-economic analysis of the assets and incomes of the families of the 3,155 *demoiselles* at Saint-Cyr 1686-1790 (when noble proofs were abolished) or the 1,419 students of the *École militaire* and La Flèche 1753-1776 (plus 558 for Paris alone until 1787), it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions on how closely the regulations on poverty were followed.²³ As Rafe Blaufarb points out, ‘the requirement that applicants’ fathers had served tended to exclude noble families “so poor that it is not possible to recruit officers from them.”’²⁴ The comte d’Argenson, Minister of War 1743-1757, wrote to the intendant of Guyenne, the marquis de Tourny, in 1754 that the king never intended ‘an absolute privation of all goods [...] but an indigence relative to their birth, and to the expense of their education.’²⁵ In the event, it was affluence which both Saint-Cyr and the *École militaire* proscribed, not poverty that they insisted

¹⁹ Carolyn C. Lougee, ‘Noblesse, Domesticity, and Social Reform: The Education of Girls by Fénelon and Saint-Cyr’, *History of Education Quarterly*, 14 (1974), 87-113, (p. 101).

²⁰ Porquet, pp. 199-201.

²¹ Gaëtan d’Aviau de Ternay, *Les gentilshommes élèves de l’École royale militaire de Louis XV, 1753-1775 Dictionnaire Biographique* (Paris: P. Du Puy, 2010), p. 13.

²² Dominique Picco, ‘Origines Géographiques des Demoiselles de Saint-Cyr (1686-1793)’ in Chantal Grell and Arnaud Ramière de Fortanier, dir., *L’éducation des jeunes filles nobles en Europe, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2004), 107-126, (p. 116).

²³ *Arrêt du Conseil d’État du Roi...* (Paris, 26 March 1790); These figures are from Picco for Saint-Cyr and de Ternay for the *écoles militaires*. The total number of students in the *École militaire*, the provincial *écoles militaires*, and the cadets-gentilshommes 1776-1792 is not certain, but numbered in the thousands. In 1781, for instance, the number of *élèves pensionnaires* in the *écoles militaires* was 1,133. SHD Y^a 157.

²⁴ SHD 1 M 1706, Carcado, ‘Sous-officiers d’élite’ Mémoire sur l’organisation des sous-officiers (20 March 1754) in Rafe Blaufarb, *The French Army, 1750-1820: Careers, Talent, Merit* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 22.

²⁵ Lettre écrite par d’Argenson à M. de Tourny, 7 May 1754, AN MM 678, 24.

upon. If there were students who were admitted despite being better off than the average, this is likely to be due to the greater difficulty of accurately determining candidates' fortunes, something which was not the case with verifying their noble genealogies.

Joseph Pâris-Duverney, the founder of the *École militaire*, explained the practical rationale for the requirement of four degrees in a letter to the abbé de Bernis in 1753.²⁶ Bernis had commented on the difficulty for noble families of gathering the necessary documents to prove four quarterings of nobility, which he erroneously thought was the *École militaire's* admission requirement (quarterings took a mother's as well as a father's noble status into account).²⁷ Bernis's theory of nobility was that 'birth, though a chimera in the eyes of the *Philosophe*, is all the same a reality *vis-à-vis* the Prince and society'. He considered it unfortunate that a noble family, at pains to unearth its titles, should risk losing its lustre and status as a result.²⁸ In his reply, Pâris-Duverney clarified that four quarterings of nobility were not necessary for admission, only four degrees, but otherwise agreed entirely with Bernis's view. He then added: 'you understand that four generations are often the work of such a short span of time, that we are obliged, in that case, to go back at least to the point where all suspicion of usurpation is cleared.'²⁹

This was a statement which clearly echoed the official motivation for the *recherche de la noblesse* under Louis XIV, who stated in his *Mémoires* that he saw in the nobility 'an infinite number of usurpers, either without a title or with a title acquired by money and without service.'³⁰ As M.L. Bush has shown, the *recherche* led to substantial reductions in certain noble populations, for instance in Brittany where the nobility 'was reduced by thirty-eight per cent'; tempering the decimation, in fact cancelling the effects of any reduction, was the fact that the

²⁶ Bernis served as Minister of Foreign Affairs 1757-1758 and was made cardinal in 1758.

²⁷ Piétri, pp. 5-6, pp. 8-9, p. 11.

²⁸ L'Abbé de Bernis à M. du Verney, 10 November 1753, in *Correspondance du Cardinal de Bernis, ministre D'état, avec M. Paris-du-Verney, conseiller D'état, depuis 1752 jusqu'en 1769, précédée d'une notice historique* (London, 1790), pp.80-81.

²⁹ Réponse de M. du Verney, 5 December 1753 in *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁰ Louis XIV, *Mémoires* (1978), p. 36 in Smith, p. 137.

recherche ‘was accompanied and followed by an extremely high rate of ennoblement’ due to the fiscal advantages of venality for the crown.³¹ It was the effects of such an influx of non-noble influence into the ranks of the second estate that Pâris-Duverney and his allies sought to counter. Their conception of the nobility was that ‘every gentleman is noble, but not every noble is a gentleman. The Prince makes nobles, but blood makes gentlemen.’³² The legal reality, however, was that all that was required to convert moneyed commoners into both nobles and gentlemen was time; hence the *École militaire*’s additional requirements of proofs of impoverishment and the table of classes giving preference to military orphans. In the event, the processes of ennoblement and requirement of statutory proofs of nobility had a long history, and the *École militaire*’s requirements of four proofs of nobility had ample precedent in law and custom.

Examples of the requirement of proof of four degrees of noble descent in a wide variety of contexts can be traced to the Middle Ages. Commoners who purchased a noble *fief* were liable to pay a fee known as the *franc-fief* for up to four generations after the purchase.³³ In several countries it was possible to assume nobility by ‘living nobly’, that is, abandoning trade and industry and living off the revenues of the land or ennobling office; in Spain, nobility could be claimed ‘through a family’s capacity to enjoy exemption from direct taxation for three generations.’³⁴ In early modern France, the *noblesse de race* was defined as that which counted four generations of nobility or more, and were thus entitled to be addressed as *gentilhomme* (or

³¹ Michael L. Bush, *Rich Noble, Poor Noble* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 26-27.

³² *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, 3^e édition, t. 2, s.v. ‘Noble’. The second definition given is: ‘Il se prend quelquefois [...] pour celui qui est noble par Lettres et non de race. *Toute Gentilhomme est noble, mais tout noble n’est pas Gentilhomme. Le Prince fait des nobles, mais le sang fait des Gentilshommes.*’ (Emphasis original)

³³ ‘Terme de féodalité. Domaine noble, relevant du seigneur d’un autre domaine, concédé sous condition de foi et hommage et assujéti à certains services et à certaines redevances’. < <http://litre.reverso.net/dictionnaire-francais/definition/fief> >; Franklin L. Ford, *Robe and Sword: The Regrouping of the French Aristocracy after Louis XIV* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 28.

³⁴ Bush, p.19. In Castile, ‘a distinction of esteem was made between *hidalgua de privilegio* and *hidalgua de sangre*. The former converted to the latter in three generations. The recognized superiority of the one over the other resembled the related distinction between the French *noblesse de race* and the *anoblis*, with the vital difference that it was not ensconced in differences of privilege and was therefore informal’. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

gentleman), to be represented in the noble chambers of the *états généraux*, and to serve in certain offices of state.³⁵ France, moreover, was not the only state where restrictions were imposed on the ennobled. In Poland, ‘a royal act of ennoblement [...] had to [be] followed [by three generations of nobility] before the ennobled family was entitled to the full range of noble privileges’ after 1641.³⁶

In France, the best known precedent for the *École militaire* is Saint-Cyr. It originally required proofs of four degrees of patrilineal noble descent for admission, with preference given to the daughters of officers fallen on the field of battle; after 1694, a certificate of poverty was required, and after 1745, candidates had to prove 140 years of noble descent.³⁷ The *École militaire* itself moved in the opposite direction. Proof of 100 years of noble descent from prospective applicants was proposed, a rule identical to the requirement for admission to the élite corps of *Chevaux-légers de la garde* of the *Maison du roi*, the royal bodyguard.³⁸ In the end, the requirement of four degrees was adopted, a rule which could be taken as a reasonable compromise for the sake of practicality; for as Pâris-Duverney commented in his letter to Bernis, ‘where would we be if we demanded [noble] antecedents in the manner of the pages [...]; for to be admitted there proof of nobility from 1550 is required.’³⁹ His concern with weeding out usurpers would thus appear to be satisfied by evidence of a century of noble filiation.⁴⁰

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.34.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.18.

³⁷ *Preuves de Noblesse des Filles Demoiselles Recües dans la Maison de S^t. Louis Fondée a S^t. Cîr par le Roi au mois de Juin de l’an 1686 Et Formée par les soins et par la Conduite de Madame de Maintenon*; Lougee, p. 101; *Mémoire pour servir aux personnes qui désireront obtenir des places pour des demoiselles, dans la Royale Maison de Saint-Louis a Saint-Cyr-Lez-Versailles* (Paris, 1745).

³⁸ Edgard Boutaric, *Institutions militaires de la France avant les armées permanentes, suivies d’un aperçu des principaux changements survenus jusqu’à nos jours dans la formation de l’armée* (Paris, 1863), p. 419.

³⁹ ‘Projet d’Edit’ 12 May 1750, AN K 149 N^o 11, 17. The shift to a requirement of four degrees came in a later undated *mémoire*; AN K 149 N^o 37, 8; Réponse de M. du Verney, 5 December 1753 in *Correspondance du Cardinal de Bernis, ministre D’état, avec M. Paris-du-Verney, conseiller D’état, depuis 1752 jusqu’en 1769, précédée d’une notice historique* (London, 1790), p. 84.

⁴⁰ Both Smith and Arlette Jouanna consider 100 years of nobility to have been equivalent to four degrees of nobility, that is 25 years as equal to one degree; Porquet, comparing Saint-Cyr’s original 4 degrees to the *École militaire*’s, says they were *de facto* 5 degrees as they did not count the postulant as the military schools did. Smith, p. 217; Arlette

The requirement for admission to Saint-Cyr and the pages, which measured lineage in years, was a type of noble proof called ‘*séculaire*’. The requirement to prove four degrees of nobility was labelled as ‘*graduella*’, while that covering ennoblement over a period of time, as in the three-generation rule *patre et avo consulibus*, where each generation had to fulfil certain criteria in order to attain ennoblement, was described as ‘*dativé*’.⁴¹ The *École des cadets-gentilshommes* in Lunéville, founded in 1737, was another antecedent to the *École militaire* requiring four degrees of nobility from prospective students, while the *Hôtel des gentilshommes* in Rennes, established in 1748 for impoverished nobles and inspired by Saint-Cyr, required 100 years of noble ancestry.⁴² On the other hand, requirements for access to bodies as diverse as the *Parlement* at Rennes in 1678 or the *Gardes du corps* of the *Maison du roi* in 1702 demonstrate the practical importance of the criteria of socio-economic conditions as opposed to statutory noble exclusivism. The *Parlement* stipulated that ‘no president, counsellor, or advocate will be herein received who is not of noble extraction or advantageous condition’, while the *Gardes du corps* allowed the recruitment of ‘sons of good bourgeois living nobly’.⁴³ Cases such as these were especially prevalent when there was a shortfall in noble recruits. Such apparent social inclusiveness, while sometimes serving to

Jouanna, ‘Preuves de noblesse’, in *Dictionnaire de l’Ancien Régime: Royaume de France, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle*, 1,013; Porquet, p. 159.

⁴¹ Nicolas Viton de Saint-Allais, ‘Preuves’, in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de la noblesse de France* (Paris, 1816), p. 329. The precise definition of *patre et avo consulibus* is ‘il faut que le père et le fils aient rempli successivement un office noble pendant chacun vingt ans, ou qu’ils soient décédés revêtus de leur office, pour transmettre la noblesse aux petits-enfants du premier qui a été ennobli’, in ‘Degré de Noblesse’, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, Tome 10ème (Genève, 1777), pp. 571-572.

⁴² Stéphane Geoffray, *Répertoire des procès-verbaux des preuves de la noblesse des jeunes gentilshommes admis aux Écoles royales militaires, 1751-1792* (Paris, 1894), pp. vii-viii; Olivier Chaline, ‘Familles parlementaires, familles dévotes, Rennes au XVIII^e siècle’ *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l’Ouest*, 114-1 (2007), 2-34 (p.19). Its founder, the priest François-Joseph de Kergu, also founded a school for noble girls, the *Hôtel des Demoiselles*; Léon Hennet, *Les Compagnies de Cadets-Gentilshommes et les Écoles militaires* (Paris: 1889), p. 35. It stipulated ‘100 ans de noblesse et 3 partages nobles. Deux gentilshommes de chaque évêché et les évêques diocésains vérifiaient les preuves’, the whole process supervised by the *États de Bretagne*.

⁴³ *Registres secrets*, in Ford, 74; After 1775, those unable to provide proofs of nobility had to prove their status as a *gentilhomme* with a certificate signed by four other *gentilshommes*, including one currently serving in the company. *Ordonnance du 15 décembre 1775* in Louis Tuetey, *Les officiers sous l’Ancien Régime, Nobles et Roturiers* (Paris, 1908), p. 121.

preserve the predominantly noble flavour of said institutions, was rather based on the access that money could buy, whether the candidate was noble or not.⁴⁴

Of these antecedents, the most significant is that of Saint-Cyr due to its influence on the establishment of the *École militaire*; it was the only institution which, in addition to imposing proofs of nobility as a requirement for admission, also required evidence of impoverishment. As Pâris-Duverney put it in another letter to Bernis, Saint-Cyr's proofs of poverty had originally been criticized for fear that they would repulse the nobility. In the event, the opposite happened, for even the high nobility claimed poverty in order to have their daughters admitted, while the coarse regulation dress of brown wool became an improbable sign of vanity and pride.⁴⁵ Its military vocation was referred to in various documents throughout the history of Saint-Cyr, from the first volume of the *Preuves de Noblesse des Filles Demoiselles* of 1686, to the revised statutes of admission in 1777 specifically emphasizing its continuing intent to provide support to the military nobility.⁴⁶ Though the Letters Patent of March 1718 described Saint-Cyr's utility as simply demonstrating 'the succour that this establishment procures the French nobility [...] for the free instruction and education of 250 girls of noble extraction [...], particularly those whose fathers have consumed an element of their goods in our service', the link between the military service of the girl's father and admission was substantially reinforced in mid-century: the Letters Patent of June 1763 added to the usual proofs the requirement that the postulant demonstrate that her father or grandfather had served at least 10 years in the royal troops, or that they had

⁴⁴ Ford's source, Saulnier de la Pinelais in *Gens du roy*, 46, says that the *Parlement* had but three bourgeois recruits after 1671 while Labourdette sees a decline in the number of *roturiers* in the company from 23.3% during the period 1719-1745 to 11.9% for 1759-1775 for a body numbering 251 men (excluding officers). Jean-François Labourdette, 'La Compagnie des Gardes du Corps du roi au XVIIIe Siècle - Recrutement et Carrières', in *Histoire, économie et société* 3^e année, n^o.1 (1984), 95-122, (p. 103).

⁴⁵ Réponse de M. Du Verney, 3 Mars 1753 in *Correspondance du Cardinal de Bernis, ministre D'état, avec M. Paris-du-Verney, conseiller D'état, depuis 1752 jusqu'en 1769, précédée d'une notice historique* (London, 1790), p. 31.

⁴⁶ *Preuves de Noblesse des Filles Demoiselles Recües dans la Maison de S^t. Louis Fondée a S^t. Cir par le Roi au mois de Juin de l'an 1686 Et Formée par les soins et par la Conduite de Madame de Maintenon; Déclaration du Roi, pour l'admission des Demoiselles nobles de Corse, la Maison royale de Saint-Louis à Saint-Cyr* (Versailles, 13 April 1777).

died in the service or retired due to their wounds.⁴⁷ This measure made Saint-Cyr the exclusive preserve of the provincial, military nobility to a degree unmatched elsewhere except the *École militaire*.⁴⁸

The military vocation of Saint-Cyr, moreover, did not originate simply with its Letters Patent of June 1686, but in the companies of cadets set up by Louvois in 1682. This link is presented in a legal document entitled *Résultat*, of 1754, which argued that ‘the establishment of the *maison de St. Cyr* was naught but the imitation’ of Louvois’s companies.⁴⁹ The author’s grounds for drawing a direct institutional connection in this manner between two quite distinct initiatives was taken from a passage in the Letters Patent, where the companies’ goal of ‘cultivating in them (the cadets) the seeds of courage and honour given to them by birth’ was to be seconded at Saint-Cyr, ‘because we have not considered it [...] less useful to see to the education of girls of noble extraction [...]’.⁵⁰ This sort of justification was of a kind with the arguments which sought to aid the benighted nobility not only for the concrete benefits which would be derived by the state, but also to cultivate the sort of qualities thought to be particular to that category of nobility. Thus, the Letters Patent of March 1718 listed the benefits of the girls’ education as being not only the relief provided to their families, but also ‘the good example spread in our provinces by the girls educated in this holy house (Saint-Cyr had become a convent in 1692, though the girls themselves did not take vows), having learnt to maintain the honour of their birth and their sex through a solid virtue, contributing much, either to the happiness of the families where they enter through marriage, or to the edification of the monasteries where they

⁴⁷ *Lettres Patentes de confirmation d’Etablissement de la Maison de Saint-Louis, établie à Saint-Cyr* (Paris, March 1718), p. 6; ‘Mémoire pour servir d’instruction aux personnes qui désireront obtenir des Places pour des Demoiselles dans la Royale Maison de Saint-Louis, à Saint-Cyr-lès-Versailles’, [n.d.] in Louis-Antoine Caraccioli, *La vie de madame de Maintenon, Institutrice de la Royale Maison de Saint-Cyr* (Paris, 1782), p. 513.

⁴⁸ The second and fourth classes admitted the sons of officers retired after 30 years of service alongside those who had died of natural causes. The Bonaparte children were inscribed in the sixth class, which comprised those whose fathers had retired due to old age, their infirmities, or any other legitimate cause. 24 December 1776, SHD Y^a 146.

⁴⁹ *Résultat*, 12 Novembre 1754, AN MM 678, 62.

⁵⁰ *Résultat*, 12 Novembre 1754, AN MM 678, 62.

carry out the profession of *religieuse*.⁵¹ The language the *Résultat* used to describe the perceived benefits of Saint-Cyr on the one hand and the *École militaire* on the other, though less prosaic, is that of the traditional description of the sexual hierarchy and the division of labour in the society of the *ancien régime*:

‘In one (Saint-Cyr) is the merit of former officers that Louis XIV rewarded even in their daughters, incapable of serving the state if it were not by producing citizens born of a virtuous blood, or in drawing the blessing of heaven upon the kingdom through their fervent prayers[;] and in the other Louis XV created an establishment whose object is to form good officers through an informed and virtuous education[,] in order to render their courage more enlightened, prudent, solid, and useful to the state.’⁵²

Despite Saint-Cyr’s conversion to a convent, the author of the *Résultat* insisted that the language of the bull issued to that effect by Innocent XII did not change the school’s nature, at least with regards to education. He even quoted the Bull to make his point that the girls should ‘in time profit from the felicitous increase of virtue, strength, and character by which the noble damsels, who have been easily animated to tenderness, might be affected to incline themselves to virtue, strength, etc.’⁵³ In his mind, the origin, motives, and effect of its establishment were essentially the same as those of the *École militaire*.⁵⁴ The moral quality of the education that both establishments imparted to students of a particular stock was what distinguished them from all other schools.

Given the perceived importance attached to the moral qualities which the schools’ social exclusivism were meant to foster, it is of interest to consider some examples of the limited

⁵¹ *Lettres Patentes de confirmation d’Etablissement de la Maison de Saint-Louis, établie à Saint-Cyr* (Paris March 1718), p. 3.

⁵² *Résultat*, 12 Novembre 1754, AN MM 678, 62.

⁵³ *Ibid.* The Bull was quoted in its original Latin : ‘feliciora virtutum incrementa quibus nobiles puellæ quarum teneros animare facile est ad virtutem flectere, in dies proficerent.’ (Translation carried out with thanks to Trevor Russell Smith, University of Leeds).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* ‘[Saint-Cyr] n’a cependant été dans son origine aussi bien que dans Son motif et n’est dans Son effet qu’une établissement de la même nature que celui dont il s’agit ainsi.’

exceptions both schools made to their admission criteria. Probably the most notable example at Saint-Cyr was with regards to Corsican postulants. A 1777 regulation on their admission stipulated that they were allowed to use the noble proofs which were customary in Corsica, instead of the regulations for the rest of France, as a measure to prevent undue cost and difficulty in Corsican candidates' admission.⁵⁵ In contrast, the Irish were denied the formal exemption they requested for the *École militaire*. In July 1756, Lord Clare wrote to d'Argenson requesting that the children of Irish officers born in France be granted admission. He suggested that the Irish be allowed to provide proofs of nobility in accordance with British usage; these were *preuves testimoniales* (testimonial proofs) and were acceptable in Clairambault's heraldic court for the admission of chevaliers of foreign orders.⁵⁶ D'Argenson replied that though he did not wish to indispose the Irish, he could not grant them an exemption which could then be claimed by other resident foreigners.

It was common practise for foreign nobles who were naturalized to also request letters acknowledging their nobility. These were granted or refused according to the proofs provided, and d'Argenson suggested that the Irish take recourse of that measure. He also revealed the socio-political and legal standing that the *École militaire* claimed for itself, by virtue of the institutional rank it shared with other noble corporations. D'Argenson held that if the Irish were admitted to the *École militaire* with a *preuve testimoniale*, that alone would not be enough to serve as proof of nobility. Their admission would be seen by Saint-Cyr, the pages, cathedrals' noble chapters, and the provincial estates as a concession granted for their education, and not as a recognition of nobility. Their posterity would consequently not be admitted to those bodies, as the usual proofs would still be required by such institutions.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Déclaration du Roi, pour l'admission des Demoiselles nobles de Corse...* (Versailles, 13 April 1777).

⁵⁶ Lettre écrite de Bergues par Milord Clare, a M le C^e. d'Argenson, 27 July 1756, AN MM 678, 78-79.

⁵⁷ Lettre écrite par ... d'Argenson, a Milord Clare, 31 August 1756, AN MM 678, 79.

Despite that apparent rebuff, Irish children (and those of other *gentilshommes* of foreign extraction) were in fact admissible to the *École militaire*. Jean O'Connor, captain of the Irish regiment of Roth, had his two sons accepted to the school. Pâris-Duverney himself acknowledged that the Irish could not furnish the proofs required of French nobles due to the upheavals they had undergone in exile, and O'Connor could only present a very old genealogy in English.⁵⁸ Happily, that expedient proved acceptable, and O'Connor's sons Charles Alexis and Armand Hippolyte Lambert were accepted in 1757 and 1760 respectively on the strength of their genealogy, which dated to Henry II's expedition to Ireland in 1169. Their sister in turn postulated for admission to Saint-Cyr in 1760.⁵⁹

There were several other cases of exceptions being granted to the stipulated criteria of four degrees of nobility, relative impoverishment, or belonging to a military family. The admission of the son of Marshal Löwendahl in 1756 by direct royal order dispensed with the need to prove nobility, as the Löwendahls descended from the kings of Denmark; it was also the first significant breach of the requirement of being without means.⁶⁰ In 1777, an officer le Gier's services allowed his son to be dispensed from needing to prove the fourth degree of nobility for admission, a highly unusual concession.⁶¹ Foreign nobles in turn continued to be accepted, often with concessions to the legal customs of their natal territory. Though such concessions were not necessary for the 11 students from Lorraine admitted up to 1764, as the school in Lunéville

⁵⁸ Bibliothèque nationale Nouveau d'Hozier 103, dossier 2063, in Patrick Clarke de Dromantin, *Les Réfugiés Jacobites dans la France du XVIII^e siècle: L'exode de toute une noblesse pour cause de religion* (Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2005), p. 71.

⁵⁹ This concession appears to be one limited to the O'Connors; other Irish candidates to the *écoles militaires* provided the proofs recommended by d'Argenson: Thomas Arthur Edmond de Lee was granted a certificate by d'Hozier on 21 September 1772 due to the *lettres de reconnaissance de noblesse* granted his father in 1768, while Guillaume-Victoire Bourke was admitted in 1781 thanks to his father having obtained an *arrêt de maintenue de noblesse* from the *Conseil du roi* following verification by Chérin. B.N.N. d'H. 206 dossier 4637, B.N.N. d'H. 62, arrêt du conseil d'État du roi du 25 novembre 1780, in *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁶⁰ Lettre écrite par M^e le Comte d'Argenson à Pâris-Duverney, 10 February 1756, AN MM 678, 48. Löwendahl, of course, was of foreign extraction, and if he had been admitted in the normal course of events, would likely have been counted as belonging to the seventh class in the order of admissions.

⁶¹ The nature of the services is unfortunately not explained. 19 October 1777, SHD Y^a 146. The same file lists three other candidates rejected for only having three degrees of nobility (de Legier 20 April 1777, La Touche de Flatigné 12 August 1777, and Glasigné 19 July 1778), while many more were rejected as candidates for places in the *cadets-gentilshommes* for lacking noble origins. 29 August 1779, SHD Y^a 146.

(1737-1766) itself required four degrees for admission, a Swiss candidate called de Guerules was instructed to provide a certificate from the magistrate of the canton of Basel attesting that de Guerules and his ancestors had always lived nobly.⁶²

Saint-Germain's *cadets-gentilshommes*, who also required four degrees of patrilineal nobility like the *écoles militaires* after their establishment in 1776, created a significant exception of their own for German candidates. This rule was perhaps the most significant legal exception for proofs of nobility for bodies which adopted the *École militaire's* proofs. It allowed candidates for places in the German regiments who were born outside of France to have their nobility verified by a certificate backed by four *gentilshommes* legalized by the President of the Reichskammergericht or the syndic of the district where their name was registered.⁶³ The only other similar broad-based exception was that which allowed sons of staff officers or of captains who were chevaliers of St. Louis to be admitted without needing to prove their nobility; candidates in that category were to add to their baptismal record an attestation of their fathers' service for admission.⁶⁴ The exceptions and alternatives to the entry requirements for the *École militaire*, limited as they were, thus never came to constitute a class of exceptions such as that open to the sons of chevaliers of St. Louis or the possibilities of advancement for non-noble *officiers de fortune* after the adoption of the 1781 decree.

The picture that emerges from this overview of noble proofs is that of the importance of *gentilshommes* both as a social segment and as an idealized category which, by means of the pedagogical experiments represented by Saint-Cyr and the *École militaire* would contribute to the renewal of their class and the nation. Emblematic of their influence is the number of other

⁶² SHD Y^a 159. Founded by Louis XV's father in law Stanislas Leszczynski, Polish subjects were also admissible at Lunéville; Certificates were provided with the help of the French ambassador to Switzerland. 20 April 1777 and 27 May 1777, SHD Y^a 146.

⁶³ Article 6, Réflexions sur l'Ordonnance du 25 Mars 1776, SHD Y^a 149. Cadets from Alsace and German Lorraine were permitted to join German regiments by furnishing proofs of nobility in the manner of French *gentilshommes*.

⁶⁴ Article 7, Ordonnance 25 March 1776, SHD Y^a 149, 5.

scholastic institutes they inspired, such as the *Maison royale de l'Enfant-Jésus* in Paris and the *pensionnat de Luçon* for Saint-Cyr, or the blind poet Pfeffel's military school in Colmar of 1773 for the *École militaire*; indeed, its rule of four degrees was adopted even by non-military institutions such as the *Collèges d'Autun* and *de Maître Gervais*.⁶⁵ Looking beyond the noble proofs which sought to aid the rehabilitation of provincial nobles in such institutional settings, Saint-Cyr and the *École militaire* were probably as similar as two single-sex schools with vastly different career prospects for their students could be in that time period. Only further study can determine any consonance in the desired moral outcomes of their educational programmes, how well-founded criticism of both institutions was, or the actual economic assistance that their education represented for the students' families.⁶⁶ Whatever one may think of their overall utility, however, or of the philosophy of noble exclusivism, it is beyond doubt that their noble proofs were successful in their primary purpose, that of excluding parvenus and privileging the offspring of *gentilshommes*.

⁶⁵ Dominique Picco, 'Saint-Cyr, un modèle éducatif?' in Bernard Bodinier, Martine Gest, Marie-Françoise Lemonnier-Delpy, and Paul Pasteur, dir., *Genre et Éducation: Former, Se Former, Être Formée au Féminin* (Rouen: Publication des universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2009), 337-351, (p. 350); George Livet, 'Esprit militaire et société provinciale sous l'Ancien Régime. Le cas d'une province frontrière: l'Alsace', ed. by Jean Pavlevski, *Le Soldat, La Stratégie, La Mort* (Paris: Ed. Économica, 1989), pp. 221-236; *Recueil de Toutes les Délibérations Importantes Prises depuis 1763 par le Bureau d'Administration du Collège de Louis-le-Grand et des Collèges y Réunis* (Paris, 1781), p. 338 and p. 609.

⁶⁶ The marquis d'Argenson, the Minister of War's brother, opined that 'Saint-Cyr is good for nothing, producing only prudes [...] who enrage their husbands' when comparing it to the *École militaire*, while Migonneau wrote that the *École militaire* produced 'very few truly distinguished and useful subjects'. Marquis d'Argenson, *Journal et Mémoires...* (Paris, 1864), 19 December 1750, p. 345; M. Migonneau, *Considérations Intéressantes sur Les Affaires Présentes Par M.****. (London, 1788), pp. 165-166.

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