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What Military Experience Did Saint-Just Have?



There's actually not much to say about Saint-Just's early military experience, because he didn't really have any beyond his stint in the National Guard. No formal training, no time in the regular army, no combat before 1793. Unlike many of his generation, he didn't volunteer and wasn't especially drawn to soldiering. Politics was his focus.

His real impact came later, as a representative on mission. That part is well documented. So in this answer, I'll touch briefly on the early years, then focus on what he did between 1793 and 1794, when he started telling generals and municipal administrators what to do.

Early Involvement and National Guard (Pre-1793)

Saint-Just's only early association with the army was genealogical: his father had been a cavalry officer, served for 25 years, and received the cross of Saint-Louis ⁽¹⁾. But Louis-Antoine himself was a child when his father died, and there's no indication that he aspired to a military career. He received no structured military education, no training, and no commission in the royal army. His first direct command was when he was elected colonel of the Blérancourt National Guard ⁽²⁾ on 3 June 1790, an office he held for just over two years.

It's important to note that Saint-Just's initial election as head of the local chapter of the National Guard had less to do with competence than with political alignment and useful ties. His sister was engaged to Emmanuel Decaisne, the new head of the Guard, and the local elite had recently been displaced by a more radical, anti-seigneurial faction of which Saint-Just was a part. The original 1790 leadership, tied to the notary Gellé and his conservative allies, was swept aside in a renewal of municipal posts on 31 January. Gellé was ousted; Louis Honoré (a close friend of Saint-Just) became mayor; Decaisne took over the Guard. Louise-Marie Saint-Just would marry Decaisne soon after. So yes... a touch of classic nepotism.

That's not to say he wasn't good at it. He was.

This is how one of his principal modern biographers, Bernard Vinot, describes this period in his life:

“For over two years, Saint-Just trained in leading a force of two hundred men. He reflected deeply on authority and tested the rigours of discipline. He issued fines to several militiamen for negligence and ordered the penalties to be posted publicly ‘at the crossroads of Blérancourt’. Even then, he believed in the exemplary and educational value of punishment, enforcing the law as a means to shape public conscience.” ⁽³⁾

Service in the Guard was voluntary, and as he didn't hold any fixed occupation (read: he was very much unemployed) at the time, he had more than enough time to immerse himself in all sorts of local activities. He represented his district at the Fête de la Fédération ⁽⁴⁾ in Paris on 14 July 1790, where he swore fidelity to the Nation, the Law, and the King. In June 1791, he led a detachment of the National Guard to Soissons, sent there to receive King Louis XVI following his arrest at Varennes. By February 1792, after a reorganisation, he was only elected “commander in second” of the Blérancourt militia, with two local farmers chosen as joint commanders.

Entry into National Military Affairs (Early 1793)

On a national level, Saint-Just's real involvement in military affairs began with his appointment to the War Committee ⁽⁵⁾ in October 1792. This marked a shift from his purely legislative role to one more directly concerned with the structure and functioning of the army, though it is worth noting that at this point he still had no practical military experience and only a few years of local National Guard involvement to his name.

A week after the King's execution, on 28 January 1793, he delivered a significant speech to the

Convention titled *On the Attributions of the Minister of War*. The focus was logistical: he denounced the War Ministry's chronic disorganisation, the lack of oversight on military contracts, and the dangerously low reserves of arms and munitions.

Then, on 11 February 1793, with England, Spain, and Holland now openly at war with France, Saint-Just returned to the rostrum to deliver his *Speech on the Reorganisation of the Army*. This was more ambitious. He advocated for the amalgamation of line troops and volunteers into demi-brigades, asserting that "the unity of the Republic requires the unity of the army". He also defended the principle of electing officers by the rank and file, but with important caveats. He supported internal elections within each corps but insisted they be suspended near the front to avoid factionalism or mutiny.

These two speeches, alongside his growing role in the War Committee, gave him a reputation, at least in Paris, as a rising authority on military affairs. In reality, the reputation far exceeded the experience. He had never seen a battlefield. He had never served in the regular army. His only direct command had been a few dozen militiamen in Blérancourt. What he did possess, however, was a sharp understanding of institutional dysfunction, a talent for problem-solving, and an extraordinary force of energy. That alone was enough to make him an exceptional representative on mission.

Missions as Representative on Mission (March 1793-June 1794)

Saint-Just's most consequential military work came from his time as a representative of the people to the armies. This role, more than anything else, secured his reputation during his lifetime. According to Vinot, he spent 146 days on mission in Year II

What were representatives on mission?

Representatives on mission (représentants en mission) were deputies from the National Convention, sent out to the provinces and the front by the Committee of Public Safety, armed with near-absolute powers to enforce the will of the central government. That was the theory. In practice, what they enforced depended largely on temperament, literacy, and personal taste.

They were, all at once, administrators, political overseers, economic planners, and judges. The revolutionary government relied on them to project its presence across a country at war with itself and with Europe.

At heart, their task was surveillance. They embodied legislative power extending its reach over the executive. That meant watching the generals, policing local administrations, and leaning on public officials to ensure revolutionary decrees weren't simply shelved or quietly ignored.

While they rarely held military command, their impact on the war was considerable. They were responsible for making sure soldiers had food, boots, weapons, and some vague reason to get shot at by the combined armies of Europe. They were expected to boost morale, stir up patriotism, and assess whether the army was on the verge of collapse.

They also carried judicial authority. They could set up ad hoc tribunals, launch investigations, and

deliver summary justice. Arrests could be ordered on the spot. Generals, administrators, and ordinary civilians were all fair game. As usual, some handled this part of the job with more... enthusiasm than others.

Aisne and Ardennes (March 1793)

Saint-Just's first mission as a representative of the people began on 9 March 1793, when the Convention appointed him, along with Jean-Louis Deville ⁽⁶⁾, to organise the levy of 300,000 men in the departments of Aisne and Ardennes. His powers included forming troop contingents, securing strongholds, requisitioning arms, clothing, and horses, holding local authorities to account, and arresting administrators deemed suspect. The mission lasted barely ten days. He returned to Paris to denounce War Minister Beurnonville ⁽⁷⁾, accusing him of treason due to the chaos in military administration.

This is how 19th century historian Jules Michelet chose to describe the episode:

"Saint-Just appeared, not as a representative, but as a king, as a god. Armed with immense powers over two armies, five departments, he found himself even greater by his high and proud nature. In his writings, his words, in his smallest acts, everything burst forth the hero, the great man of the future" ⁽⁸⁾.

Cancelled Mission to the Eure and Somme (June 1793)

On 17 June 1793, the Committee of Public Safety appointed Saint-Just to a mission in the Eure and Somme departments, tasked with addressing the growing Federalist revolt ⁽⁹⁾ in the region. He was to be accompanied by Robert Lindet ⁽¹⁰⁾. Before they could leave, however, a delegation from Normandy appeared before the Convention to declare the departments' loyalty to the Republic. The decree was promptly rescinded and the mission cancelled.

Aisne, Oise, and Somme (July 1793)

A second, very brief mission followed on 18 July 1793, when the Committee of Public Safety sent Saint-Just to the Aisne, Oise, and Somme departments "to fulfil an object of public interest." What that object was remains unclear. In fact, whether the mission even took place is still debated by modern historians, since he was back in Paris by 30 July. If he was away for twelve days, no one knows exactly what he did during them. He left no notes and made no speeches. Whatever it was, he was exceptionally discreet about it.

Army of the Rhine (October–December 1793)

In October 1793, Saint-Just and his colleague Philippe Le Bas ⁽¹¹⁾ arrived in Alsace to find the situation close to collapse. The Army of the Rhine had been routed at Wissembourg, leaving the region exposed to invasion by Prussian and Austrian forces. Strasbourg, a city of strategic importance, now stood under threat. Politically, things were just as precarious. The local population, largely German-speaking, was regarded in Paris with suspicion. The region was seen as a breeding ground for federalism and royalist

sympathies. The army itself was demoralised, ill-supplied, and disintegrating.

Saint-Just and Le Bas were sent to deal with the mess. And they did. Exceptionally well.

One of Saint-Just's key achievements was restoring morale and a will to fight. He earned the troops' respect by visiting forward positions, placing himself in danger, and refusing to hide behind rank. He also helped morale in simpler ways. By staring down a Prussian envoy and telling him: "The French Republic accepts nothing from its enemies and only answers with lead."⁽¹²⁾

Still, Saint-Just knew that motivation was not enough. He and Le Bas launched an aggressive requisition campaign to resolve the army's logistical crisis. Orders went out for food, fodder, horses, and 10,000 pairs of shoes, all to be taken from Strasbourg's aristocrats. Two thousand beds were seized from the homes of the wealthy to serve the wounded.

The most dramatic measure was a forced loan of nine million livres⁽¹³⁾, levied on Strasbourg's richest citizens, payable within twenty-four hours in hard currency. The funds were carefully allocated: six million for army wages, one million for the city's defences, and two million for the poor.

Discipline was imposed with equal energy. Saint-Just transformed the military tribunals into special revolutionary commissions, giving them sweeping powers over both soldiers and civilians. Juries were frequently removed in capital cases. Executions were carried out on the spot for disorder and insubordination. Officers were shot for striking their men or attending the theatre while the enemy attacked. Civil administrators were held personally accountable for failures in supply. He took steps to assist wounded soldiers and their families, showing a deep concern for their welfare.

In short, a pattern began to emerge. Saint-Just was the advocate of the common soldier, and the nightmare of any officer or bureaucrat who tried to exploit him.

Though he did not take direct command of operations, Saint-Just supervised, advised, and prodded generals such as Pichegru⁽¹⁴⁾ and Hoche⁽¹⁵⁾. He saw his role as seconding their efforts. That did not mean he always agreed with them. Hoche, for one, refused to share his offensive plans.

He was also quick to reward merit. Captains Donnadieu⁽¹⁶⁾, Huet⁽¹⁷⁾, and Augier⁽¹⁸⁾ were promoted, and Sergeant Jean-Adam Mayer⁽¹⁹⁾ was elevated directly to general of division.

In an attempt to bring the region into line politically, he also turned his attention, less commendably, to its cultural identity. Strasbourg's German character was seen as a threat to national unity. In a bilingual proclamation, the citizens were *invited to abandon German ways, since their hearts are French*⁽²⁰⁾.

When Saint-Just and Le Bas left, they left behind something very different from what they had found. The Army of the Rhine had been transformed from a disaster waiting to happen into a functioning, disciplined force. Their intervention led directly to the relief of Landau and the expulsion of enemy troops from Alsace.

Army of the North (January–June 1794)

Saint-Just's most famous missions were his last three, all conducted with the Army of the North. This

was France's most critical front against the European coalition. It was here, more than anywhere else, that the fate of the nascent Republic would be decided. His repeated deployments from January to June 1794 served one overriding aim: to prepare and execute the spring offensive that would finally secure France's borders.

Spoiler: like in Alsace, he did his job rather well.

First Northern Mission (22 January – 13 February 1794 / Pluviôse an II)

The first northern mission, undertaken with Philippe Le Bas, was an inspection and reorganisation tour after the dismissal of General Jourdan ⁽²¹⁾. Their task was to prepare the Army of the North for the spring campaign by reasserting discipline across key military zones. From 22 January to 13 February, they moved through strategic points including Lille, Maubeuge, and Bouchain.

They approached the mission with enthusiasm. In Saint-Pol, the entire local surveillance committee was imprisoned over a procedural lapse. At Maubeuge, they uncovered a plot to hand the town over to enemy forces. The response was swift. The Jacobin club was purged, and one conspirator, Antoine Rondeau, was tried by military commission and executed on the spot.

This incident directly led to the very controversial decree of 16 Pluviôse (4 February), which ordered the arrest of all former nobles in the frontier departments of Pas-de-Calais, Nord, Somme, and Aisne. The language of the decree was sweeping. By "all former nobles", it meant exactly that... women, children, distant cousins, the lot. Or at least that was how some local administrators chose to interpret it.

Enforcement was so erratic that by 19 February, Carnot ⁽²²⁾ and Saint-Just had to step in to clarify. They limited the decree to former nobles who had actually held titles. In short, the decree applied only to the head of the family and his heir. So if the Marquis of X had a first-born son styled as the Comte de X, the law would apply to them, not to the marquis's wife, daughters, or younger children.

In Guise, Saint-Just issued another decree, this time aimed at what he called the "inertia of the administrators of the armies." He imposed a new system of accountability with firm deadlines and explicit penalties for failure. The mission ended early when Saint-Just was recalled to Paris to help manage the political crisis posed by the Hébertists ⁽²³⁾.

Second Northern Mission (29 April – 31 May 1794 / Floréal an II)

The second northern mission was launched after the fall of Landrecies, which had left morale collapsing and the army without clear direction. From 29 April to 31 May, Saint-Just and Le Bas were sent to the Sambre front to restore order and revive the campaign.

This time, unlike in Alsace where he stepped on quite a few toes, Saint-Just adopted a more cooperative approach. He worked closely with fellow representatives on mission, including Pierre Mathurin Gillet,

Adrien Duquesnoy, and Louis-Bernard Guyton. “*I send my warm regards to my dear colleagues Gillet and Duquesnoy,*” adds Saint-Just at the bottom of his letter to Jourdan, on the 27th of May.

Despite repeated failures to cross the Sambre, Saint-Just kept pushing. During one retreat, he ordered the destruction of the abbeys of Lobbes and Aulne to stop their supplies falling into enemy hands. The monks were not impressed.

The mission was cut short once more when he was urgently recalled to Paris at the end of May, following assassination attempts on Robespierre and Collot d’Herbois and the escalation of political tensions within the Convention.

Third Northern Mission (10 June – 28 June 1794 / Prairial–Messidor an II)

The third and final northern mission marked the decisive phase of the campaign. Saint-Just returned to the front alone, without Le Bas, to oversee the final military effort that would culminate in one of the Republic’s most significant victories. Arriving around 12 June, he remained with the army until its triumph at Fleurus on 26 June.

This time, his presence was not only welcomed, it was requested. Another colleague, Antoine Levasseur⁽²⁴⁾ wrote while he was in Paris: “*Your presence, my dear colleague, is very necessary here. Come as soon as possible, and it will be a valuable reinforcement.*” Later, on the 12th of June, Guyton and Gillet informed the Committee: “*Our colleague Saint-Just arrived this evening. His presence greatly adds to the satisfaction we feel on this day.*”

By this point, the army had been consolidated under the command of General Jourdan. In a pivotal letter dated 14 June, Saint-Just outlined the limits of the representatives’ role, stating: “We supervise the administrations, the obedience of the chiefs, the resources; you have only to conquer.”

That did not mean he stayed behind in some cosy château sipping claret. On the contrary, he was at the vanguard. Saint-Just relentlessly drove the army forward, personally overseeing the siege of Charleroi. On 25 June, when the Austrian garrison offered to negotiate, he famously rejected the overture with the words: “*It is not paper, but the place, that I demand of you.*”⁽²⁵⁾ Charleroi surrendered unconditionally the same day.

The following morning, 26 June (8 Messidor), the French army won the Battle of Fleurus. This victory decisively secured Belgium for the Republic and stabilised its northern frontier. Having accomplished his mission, Saint-Just returned to Paris on 28 June, exactly one month before his death.

In conclusion

I hope this answered your question. Saint-Just didn’t come to war as a soldier, but as a political operator with extraordinary energy. He learned fast and acted decisively. He never held military command, but his role in shaping, disciplining, and motivating the armies of the Republic was real, measurable, and often extraordinary. One of his colleagues, writing from Strasbourg, probably put it best:

“It was high time that Saint-Just came to this wretched army [...]. What a first-rate bastard this boy is. His collection of decrees will undoubtedly be one of the finest historical monuments of the Revolution.”⁽²⁶⁾

Sources:

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- 1 Royal military order for commissioned officers, created by Louis XIV in 1693 to reward long or distinguished service. Abolished in 1792. In Saint-Just's case, the order came with the title of squire.
- 2 The National Guard was a citizen militia formed in July 1789 under Lafayette to keep order and defend the Revolution. Organised locally, wearing the tricolour cockade. Absorbed and restructured multiple times; effectively replaced by conscription armies during the Revolutionary Wars.
- 3 The original text in french from Saint-Just by Bernard Vinot: Pendant plus de deux ans, Saint-Just s'exerce au commandement de deux cents hommes, médite sur l'autorité, expérimente les exigences de la discipline. Il fait condamner plusieurs miliciens à des amendes pour négligence et afficher les sanctions « publiquement au carrefour de Blérancourt ». Il croit déjà à la valeur exemplaire et pédagogique de la répression et punit au nom de la loi pour créer une conscience publique.
- 4 Fête de la Fédération was a national celebration on 14 July 1790 on the Champ-de-Mars, Paris, marking constitutional unity between king, nation, and citizens. Replicated across France.
- 5 The War Committee (Le Comité de la Guerre) of the National Convention, one of its standing committees overseeing military administration and legislation in 1792–1793. Day-to-day operations also ran through the Ministry of War; from July 1793 the Committee of Public Safety increasingly directed strategy.
- 6 Jean-Louis Deville (1757-1834) was a deputy of the Marne to the National Convention. Sent on mission several times in 1793, including with Saint-Just to the Aisne and Ardennes on 9 March to accelerate the levée en masse. Later sat in the Council of Five Hundred and served as a forestry sub-inspector under the Consulate. Exiled under the 12 January 1816 law against regicides who supported the Hundred Days.
- 7 Pierre Riel, marquis de Beurnonville (1752–1821). Career officer who backed 1789 reforms, then served as Minister of War from January to April 1793. After Dumouriez's defeats, the Convention sent him to arrest the general; Dumouriez handed him to the Austrians on 3 April. Exchanged in late 1795. Commanded under the Directory, then served Napoleon as ambassador to Berlin and Madrid. Made a peer under the Restoration.
- 8 The quote in french: « Saint-Just apparut [à Strasbourg] non comme un représentant, mais comme un roi, comme un dieu. Armé de pouvoirs immenses sur deux armées, cinq départements, il se trouva plus grand encore par sa haute et fière nature. Dans ses écrits, ses paroles, dans ses moindres actes, en tout éclatait le héros, le grand homme d'avenir, mais nullement de la grandeur qui convient aux républiques. »
- 9 Summer–autumn 1793 provincial uprisings against Paris, led by departmental authorities in cities such as Lyon, Marseille, Bordeaux, and Caen. Pro-Convention in principle, but hostile to central control.
- 10 Robert Lindet (1746-1825) was a deputy to the Convention from the Eure, member of the Committee of Public Safety from September 1793, in charge mainly of subsistence and food supply. After Thermidor, sat in the Five Hundred, withdrew under the Empire, and reappeared briefly in 1815.
- 11 Philippe Le Bas was a deputy from the Pas-de-Calais, a close friend of Saint-Just, and the husband of Élisabeth Duplay, whose family rented a room to Robespierre. He died by suicide on 9 Thermidor Year II (27 July 1794).
- 12 In french: “ La République française ne reçoit de ses ennemis et ne leur envoie que du plomb ”

- 13 9 million livres in 1793 is around 94 million euros today
- 14 Jean-Charles Pichegru (1761–1804) former schoolmaster (one of his students was Napoleon) who ended up commanding the Army of the North. His 1794–1795 campaign broke the Austrians in Flanders and carried the army into the Dutch Republic. Drifted into royalist plotting by 1796–1797, was unmasked at the time of 18 Fructidor, deported to Cayenne, escaped, re-entered France, and died in the Temple prison in 1804, officially by suicide.
- 15 Lazare Hoche (1768–1797) was the son of a Versailles stableman, enlisted at fifteen, promoted général de division by age twenty-five by Saint-Just. Drove the Austrians from the Wissembourg lines in December 1793. Arrested in spring 1794, released after Thermidor. Sent to pacify the Vendée, where he mixed amnesties with reprisals and crushed the Chouannerie. Led the failed Irish expedition to Bantry Bay in 1796. Died of pneumonia at Wetzlar in 1797, aged twenty-nine. Seen as a rival to Bonaparte.
- 16 Jean-François Donnadieu (1762–1830) was a career officer who served in the Revolutionary armies on the Rhine and in Italy. Rose after Year II and became a general of division under the Empire. Known later for hard service in Catalonia and the siege of Barcelona, which overshadows his relatively obscure Year II record. He continued to serve under the Restoration.
- 17 Édouard Huet (1751–1819) Born and died at Bourges. Entered the Bourges National Guard on 8 July 1789, then was elected lieutenant-colonel of the 2nd Battalion of Volunteers of the Cher on 27 August 1792. Garrisoned at Bitche, he fought the Austrians on 17 November 1793, after which the Convention declared the battalion had “bien mérité de la patrie.” Promoted provisional général de brigade by the representatives on mission Saint-Just and Le Bas on 29 November 1793. General Moreaux judged him a “zealous patriot” of “mediocre talent,” and he was réformé on 3 July 1794. Returned to service as chef de bataillon in the 29e demi-brigade d’infanterie on 12 May 1796, then became capitaine de gendarmerie at Bourges on 3 March 1798. Retired on 1 November 1801. Died 26 July 1819.
- 18 Jean-Baptiste Augier (1769–1819) son of a royal legal professor, he volunteered in July 1792 in the 1st Battalion of Volunteers of the Cher, promoted to captain a month later. Rose swiftly during the levée en masse and was made général de brigade on 21 January 1794, aged twenty-five. Assigned to the Army of the Ardennes, where he took part in the siege of Bitche, was severely wounded by shellfire, and lost part of a limb. Réformé in June 1795. Continued to serve in garrison and administrative roles under the Directory and Empire, including command of Königsberg in 1812. Elected député of the Cher to the Corps législatif in 1813. Made baron under the Restoration. Died in Bourges on 3 September 1819.
- 19 Jean-Adam Mayer- born in Bergzabern (in what is now Germany). Entered service in 1768 with the Swiss Guards. Later became mayor of Bergzabern. In the Revolution, appointed chef de bataillon by mission representatives in the Army of the Rhine under Saint-Just and Le Bas. Promoted général de brigade 28 January 1794, then général de division 5 May 1794 with the Army of the Ardennes. On 7 August took command of the right wing of the Army of Sambre-et-Meuse. Briefly commanded Valenciennes. Removed from active duty in August 1794.
- 20 The proclamation was issued in Strasbourg on 25 Brumaire an II (15 November 1793) « Les citoyennes de Strasbourg sont invitées de quitter les modes allemandes puisque leurs cœurs sont français... »
- 21 Jean-Baptiste Jourdan (1762–1833): rose from sergeant to commander of the Army of the North. His victory at Fleurus on 26 June 1794, secured Belgium for the Republic and stabilised the northern front. Later commanded the Army of Sambre-et-Meuse, became a Marshal in 1804, authored the 1798 conscription law that bears his name, and ended as a peer under the Restoration.

- 22 Lazare Carnot (1753–1823): Engineer, deputy, and the Committee of Public Safety’s most effective organiser from August 1793. He pushed mass levies, standardised formations, enforced merit promotion, and coordinated movements across fronts with a technician’s patience. After Thermidor he served in the Directory, fell in 1797, returned briefly under Napoleon, and finished in exile.
- 23 Hébertists – political Faction clustered around Jacques-René Hébert and his paper, *Le Père Duchesne*. Dominant in the Paris Commune and sections in late 1793, they pushed dechristianisation, price control maximalism, and permanent popular mobilisation. Their attempt to pressure the Convention failed; the leaders were arrested and guillotined in March 1794.
- 24 Antoine-Charles-Louis de Levasseur, dit Levasseur de la Sarthe (1764–1839) was a deputy for the Sarthe, Montagnard, and representative on mission to the western ports and armies. Energetic in purging Federalist authorities, stabilising naval supply, and forcing grain movements in 1793–1794. An engaged committee-man on maritime questions, later fell with the radical left after Prairial Year III, survived, and published detailed memoirs that remain a valuable, but partisan source.
- 25 « Ce n’est pas du papier, mais la place que je vous demande »
- 26 From a letter from Gateau to Daubigny the 27 brumaire from Strasbourg : *Il était temps que Saint-Just vînt auprès de cette malheureuse armée [...]. Quel maître-bougre que ce garçon-là ! La collection de ses arrêtés sera sans contredit un des plus beaux monuments historiques de la Révolution* (TN: “Maître-bougre” is a coarse term but not exactly an insult in this case. I chose to translate it as “first-rate bastard”)

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