

Alexander Mikaberidze, *The Napoleonic Wars: A Global History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 936 pp.

Despite calls — emerging already in the 1990s — for the replacement of nation-centric perspectives in Napoleonic studies with pan-European ones, scholars have remained mainly overwhelmingly faithful to the former. Even rarer are studies that go beyond Europe in their reflections. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the Napoleonic era had to wait a long time for the publication of the first significant monograph analysing its course and consequences from a broader, global perspective. This difficult task was taken on by a Georgian historian from Louisiana State University, Alexander Mikaberidze.

Although Mikaberidze was fascinated with the Napoleonic period from an early age, there was initially no indication that his life would be associated with academia. While studying law at the University of Tbilisi, he simultaneously worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia. In the end, however, his childhood fascination won. Mikaberidze decided to continue his career at one of the most thriving academic centres of French studies: Florida State University.

Having defended his doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of Professor Donald D. Howard, Mikaberidze focused on the study of military history. His studies have been translated into several foreign languages bringing him several awards, including the Polish Golden Bee award for the Napoleonic Book

of the Year. However, if his previous works made him known mainly to scholars of military history, his book *The Napoleonic Wars: A Global History*, published by Oxford University Press in 2020, should bring him recognition on a much broader scale.

As the author himself stresses in the preface to his monograph, the Napoleonic wars were not the first conflict in history that became global. Unlike in previous periods, however, these wars left their mark on world history on a scale never before imagined. Consequently, as Mikaberidze puts it, 'Napoleon indirectly became the architect of independent South America, reshaped the Middle East, strengthened British imperial ambitions, and contributed to the rise of American power' (p. XI). Understanding this phenomenon has been hampered by a lack of studies which would focus on local narratives and histories (p. XV). A desire to fill this research gap was Mikaberidze's main motivation to prepare the study under review.

The ambitious goals set by the author are reflected in the book's unusual size. Its nearly 1,000 pages are grouped into 24 chronological-geographical chapters, which trace the political and military history of the period from the pre-revolutionary times to the Congress of Vienna. The monograph is based on an impressive number of studies and sources from many European archives, including those in Sweden, Spain, and Russia, written mainly in English, French, Russian, and, to a lesser extent, Spanish and German.

Although the book focuses on events in Europe for the most part, the author does not analyse the various phenomena solely from the French perspective. The English and the Russian viewpoints appear just as frequently. Significantly, in describing Europe's history Mikaberidze devotes much attention to regions so often overlooked in Napoleonic historiography, such as Scandinavia, the Balkans, or Eastern Europe. In addition, there are also chapters devoted to the Americas, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire, as well as references to the history of the Arabian Peninsula, Africa, and the Indian Ocean basin. Although this is not a rule, in most cases, the chapters begin with an introduction to the internal situation of a given country or region prior to 1789. Then the author usually analyses the military, internal, economic, and political reforms carried out in a particular region in the beginning of the nineteenth century. This clear structure helps readers who do not necessarily specialize in the history of such regions as the Caribbean or Indochina to find their way around the book.

Worthy of note and praise is the scope of Mikaberidze's reflections: this is the first study on the period written with such geographical breadth. Nonetheless, those who assume that the book will provide them with only a factual insight into the general history of the nineteenth century, will be pleasantly disappointed. Even if sometimes a bit too factual and detailed, the study leads to some original observations concerning the Napoleonic era in both its European and global dimensions.

For example, the author demonstrates that the French plan for the invasion of British India, often presented as a quixotic episode, was taken very seriously at

the time by Britons and Frenchmen alike. Such conclusions can be reached by a simultaneous analyse of the British diplomatic efforts in Oman, Afghanistan, and Persia, whose ultimate goal was to secure the 'jewel in Britain's crown' against an expected French invasion. Another interesting conclusion formulated thanks to the global perspective embraced, is that even before June 1812, Napoleonic France was in a hopeless situation in its rivalry with Britain. The latter, having dissuaded French allies such as Persia, and having stripped France of its overseas colonies, consolidated its supremacy, shattering the French dreams of becoming a global superpower.

Abandoning a Franco-centric viewpoint allows us to see the analysed events from the perspective of other great powers. Particularly interesting seems to be the Russian one, at which Mikaberidze excels. The author presents Russia's policy towards Europe, the Caucasus and even towards Latin America. In doing so, he successfully tries to challenge the common belief that the ambitions and horizons of the nineteenth-century Russian elites did not go beyond the Asian steppes.

On the other hand, the multiplicity of the themes covered in the book made it sometimes hard to follow. Moreover, it seems worth asking whether the long introduction to the French Revolution or the description of the events in France, Spain and Great Britain — which takes up nearly half the book — was really necessary. While it is understandable that the author wants to present a complete picture of the period, it seems that more interesting than a factual summary of the well-studied political history of Western countries would have been to ponder more on the impact of the Napoleonic era on these countries' colonial policies and their relations with the less-studied regions.

Unfortunately, the partial abandonment of the Western research perspective has not set the author free from the charms of Anglo-Saxon historiography. Sometimes, when formulating theories concerning the functioning of the Napoleonic empire in Europe, it seems that he embraces too easily some old British concepts, which do not work well in the Eastern European context. Unverified assumptions lead to questionable conclusions, which, repeated uncritically by other authors, perpetuate a simplistic picture of the Napoleonic era.

For example, when Mikaberidze touches upon the Polish question, one may have an impression that he uncritically draws on several Anglo-Saxon studies and repeats both, their conclusions and references. Following them, and referring readers to some outdated analyses when an English-language monograph on the Duchy of Warsaw has been available for several years (Jarosław Czubaty, *The Duchy of Warsaw, 1807–1815: A Napoleonic Outpost in Central Europe*, 2017) shows that the author did not necessarily apply the required dose of criticism when selecting the literature. And while it is easy for a Polish reader to spot these shortcomings in the case of the Duchy of Warsaw, it can be a problematic task in the case of regions of which we know very little.

These minor shortcomings, so inevitable in books of such a scope, do not make it any less worth reading. Nonetheless, I am far from sharing the opinion

that after the publication of Alexander Mikaberidze's book Napoleonic scholars can finally intellectually retire. Quite the reverse. Overcoming old patterns of thinking about the Napoleonic era as an event relevant only to Western Europe, the book opens brand new chapter in the Napoleonic studies.

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