

**David Gates.** *The Napoleonic Wars 1803-1815*. New York: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1997. xiii + 304 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-340-61447-1.



**Reviewed by** Owen Connelly

**Published on** H-France (February, 1999)

David Gates has written a very serviceable cursory history of Napoleon's wars as emperor, 1803-1815. He does not deal with Bonaparte's early campaigns (1796-1800), of which the First Italian (1796) established his reputation. His book covers the war at sea and the campaigns of Ulm-Austerlitz (1805), Jena-Friedland (1806-07), Spain and Portugal (1808-1813), Wagram (1809), Russia (1812), Germany (1813), France (1814) and Waterloo (1815). Moreover, he puts the campaigns in international perspective, and very well, considering space limitations. He works the peace settlements and territorial exchanges into the military narrative, and supplies separate chapters on Prussian and other national reforms to combat Napoleon and "Trade Patterns and Resource Constraints," treating largely British, French, and American problems caused by Napoleon.

It will not bother the general reader, but will interest specialists, that Dr. Gates holds that Napoleon always had a plan--to annihilate the enemy army (p. 3). True, except that to destroy the enemy is *not a plan*, but an intention, objective, or purpose. He also stresses that Napoleon had firm

strategic plans in all campaigns. Gates is right that he used the drill-field tactics of the Old Regime and Revolution, and let his generals (who knew their troops best) decide which formation they would use (p. 5). But Napoleon told them where to strike and when, based on the enemy's dispositions and mistakes. Gates quotes the military theorist and historian Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) on the "intractability" of war, and the role of chance in it (p. 4), but in contradiction denies that improvisation plays a part in war fighting. Toward the end of the book, he is very respectful of Antoine de Jomini (1779-1869), who served (then deserted) Napoleon and in his *Souvenirs* reduced the Emperor's strategic-tactical system to neat formulae. Gates again rejects Clausewitz, who dwelt on the "unpredictability of war, and... nebulous factors like morale...." (p. 274). Napoleon, in exile on St. Helena, saw Jomini's early work. In part, his response was: "Generals are beaten who follow the principles they have been taught. There are too many diverse elements in war" (Gaspard Gourgaud, *Journal de St. Helena* 2 vols. [Paris, 1889], II, p. 339).

Dr. Gates' accounts of the campaigns belie his generalizations. For example, he asserts that Napoleon's capture of the Austrian General Karl Mack von Leiberich and his army at Ulm (1805) resulted from a pre-planned envelopment (p. 23). A glance at the *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier* will show that the emperor drove his army furiously past Ulm, and across the Danube--to the south bank--then discovered that Mack was behind him--on the north bank--at Ulm. He had to order much of his army back across the Danube--the corps of Marshals Michel Ney, Jean Lannes, and Joachim Murat--in order to trap the Austrian. Napoleon improvised. In 1806 Napoleon used the *battalion carre* (square of corps) against the Prussians--as Gates notes (p. 55)--to enable him to maneuver in any direction. Gates describes this campaign very well, going into impressive detail on the battle of Jena. However, again, he follows Napoleon's many changes of plan (pp. 56-59), but somehow considers that a grand design was followed.

For the Russian campaign, he revives the moldy thesis that the Tsar used systematic delaying tactics to lure Napoleon deep into Russia, beyond his ability to supply himself (p. 204). The truth is simpler: the Russians retreated and Napoleon had to follow if he hoped to destroy their army before winter came. He miscalculated, which is why the retreat was so terrible. The author has Napoleon wheeling on Vilna to envelop Russian forces (p. 207), one of many improvised manoeuvres he attributes to the French Emperor. In short, Gates' narrative of the campaigns describes how Napoleon improvised at every turn. Waterloo is of course an exception; Napoleon had no choice but to attack frontally.

The book has many errors, but most of them trivial. For example, an artillery barrage (pp. 7-8) with cannon whose maximum range was 1,000 yards (915 meters) could only deliver preparatory fire, not cover infantry and cavalry attacks or deliver counter-battery fire. Many mistakes may be

excused because Dr. Gates is perhaps preoccupied with studying the current world military situation as deputy director, Centre for Defence and International Security Studies at Lancaster University. In 20th century fashion, he envisions 400,000 troops facing Napoleon in 1805, arrayed from the "Adriatic to the Baltic" (p. 19). Allied armies, like Napoleon's, were too small to cover such a front--if there had been any "fronts."

Gates clings throughout to the idea that Britain and the European powers went to conscription to match Napoleon's numbers (pp. 164, 374). Not true. France's opponents fought with armies recruited like those of the Old Regime. Austria did have a few thousand *Landwehr* (National Guardsmen, part-time soldiers) in 1809, but not thereafter; Prussia had a few volunteers in 1814 and 1815, but no conscripts.

The author has written a fine, generally valid book, all the same. Thus I do not understand why he chose to begin it defensively (pp. 3-4) in referring to my *Blundering to Glory* (Wilmington, DE, new ed. 1999), and ending it (p. 294), by dismissing David Chandler's *Campaigns of Napoleon* (London & New York, 1966), a standard work, based on the study by F.L. Petre (an authority on Napoleonic warfare in the early 1900s), whom he also denigrates. Chandler hardly needs defending. As to *Blundering to Glory*, Gates appears not to have read the book. The thesis is not that Napoleon depended on luck, but that he was an improviser of genius. On St. Helena he said that the mark of a great general is the "courage to improvise", and he put himself among such commanders. (Emmanuel de Las Cases, *Memorial*, 5 Dec. 1815).

Napoleon knew that warriors who cannot improvise are "dead". Staff men may chaff at this, but it is so, even today. In war, logistical and personnel planning are vital. Operations--in theory and practice--should be left to fighters. Gates' prime deficiency as a military historian is that he

does not appreciate the vital importance of personal leadership in war--in this case, Napoleon's.

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**Citation:** Owen Connelly. Review of Gates, David. *The Napoleonic Wars 1803-1815*. H-France, H-Net Reviews. February, 1999.

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