

Alexander Grab. *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xiii + 249 pp. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-333-68274-6.



Reviewed by James McIntyre

Published on H-War (April, 2004)

Napoleon Bonaparte stands out as one of history's most famous, often infamous, personalities. He has earned numerous titles that explore both his military exploits and his personality. In fact, the author credits him with inspiring over 220,000 publications (p. ix). Rarely, however, has the searchlight of history probed into Napoleon Bonaparte's effect on the European continent beyond the purely military realm. Napoleon's exploits in transforming Europe and setting it on the path of modernization seldom receive scholarly attention. It is precisely this gap that Alexander Grab seeks to fill with his work.

Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe is a work of compilation; thus Grab utilizes mainly secondary sources in order to make the case that Napoleon's policies had a profound and lasting impact upon Europe. It is this case that the author argues most convincingly, although after making some specifications. The penetration of the changes wrought by Napoleon's conquest is in direct proportion to the length of time the region in question was under French control. By the same token, the author uses a set of criteria as

measuring sticks for the amount of change generated by Napoleon.

In their essentials, these changes relate to the rationalization and centralization of the apparatus of state such as occurred during the Revolutionary period in France. By the same token, the removal of the feudal system stands as one of the hallmarks of change, though Grab notes that this was often more in law than real. Likewise, the author sees that the adoption of the Code Napoleon or Civil Code in the various areas served as a measure of Napoleonic impact.

Once he has set out the criteria, Grab uses them to analyze the amount of influence Napoleonic domination exerted on the state structures of various European nations. These include Belgium, Switzerland, the German States, Italy, Poland, Spain, Portugal, and the Illyrian Provinces (roughly the modern-day Balkans). Not surprisingly, the depth of impact falls in almost direct proportion to the longevity of French control in the various regions under examination. Thus, Belgium was much more deeply affected than, say, Portugal. Interestingly, there seems to be little

connection between the level of support Napoleon enjoyed in an area and the impact of his policies. Poland, for example, an area that supported the emperor even to the bitter end at Waterloo, showed little permanent change due to his policies, although the author does credit him with awakening Polish nationalism.

As already noted, *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe* is very much a work of compilation. It does not, therefore, contain any new research concerning the topic. Likewise, though Grab decries the long-standing bias for works in English and French in the historiography of the Napoleonic Period, he falls victim to this self-same trap. There are no works in any other languages in the bibliography. While it would be exceptional for a scholar to have a command of all the languages of Europe, it would not be too much to ask that a broader set of works be employed. For example, while Grab's previous work has focused on the Italian effects of Bonaparte's rule, there are no Italian-language sources listed in the bibliography. This being said, the bibliography is a solid listing of the major works on the Napoleonic period. Moreover, it contains a wide range of the most recent works on the subject. It will, therefore, serve as a good place for the student to launch any undergraduate level research project.

While the military exploits of Napoleon are not the primary focus of his study, they will come under a certain level of scrutiny in any work dealing with his period. It is in this area that Grab's book is weakest. While he utilizes all of the chief secondary sources referred to in any bibliography of Napoleon's military endeavors, he neglects some of the more important recent scholarship, such as Rory Muir's *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon*. By the same token, Grab's brief descriptions of the military exploits of Napoleon are clear and correct, surprisingly so for a book that does not hold these as their chief focus.

Finally, *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe* will certainly find a niche on the reading lists of graduate and perhaps undergraduate courses covering the French Revolution and Empire. It adds a new level of understanding about the profound changes wrought by Napoleon's armies as they traversed the length and breadth of Europe. Likewise, it discloses a different face of the man himself, one that is often obscured in the smoke of the battlefields for which he usually receives attention. While it is not the last word on the effects of Napoleon's reign in Europe, it is perhaps the first general examination of the period from this perspective. The book may serve to open up new avenues of study for undergrads intrigued by the period. It will undoubtedly provide them with a clear and concise guide to a wide, and often neglected, field of work.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: James McIntyre. Review of Grab, Alexander. *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2004.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9228>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.