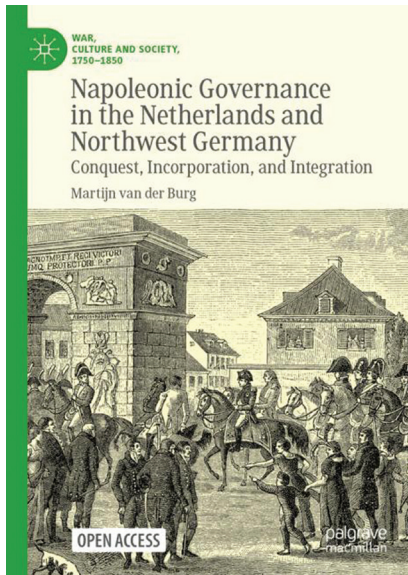


Review

Martijn van der Burg, *Napoleonic Governance in the Netherlands and Northwest Germany. Conquest, Incorporation, and Integration*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2021, 165 pp. ISBN 9783030666576.



In this work, Martijn van der Burg analyses the integration of the Netherlands and north-west Germany within the Napoleonic Empire. The political and administrative integration of Europe under the First Empire is a relatively recent subject in Napoleonic historiography. For a very long time, Emperor Napoleon's personality and his military feats have dominated historians' agendas. The historiography of the revolutionary and Napoleonic ages has moreover been strongly influenced by nationalistic discourses. On the one hand, French studies of the Napoleonic administration and political personnel have usually focused on the Empire's centre, relegating the other territories to the periphery. On the other hand, historians of the conquered or annexed territories showed little interest in the administrative ins and outs of a regime they often perceived as a foreign occu-

pation. Working within a strict national frame of reference, they generally stressed the negative impact (such as occupation, war, and conscription) of French rule.

These discourses have not been conducive to the kind of transregional approach necessary to understand a genuinely trans-European subject like the governance and integration of the Napoleonic Empire. The relevance of such an approach for our own age is obvious, now that questions about the limits of European integration and the tensions between European centralisation on the one hand, and national identities on the other, are back on the table. Understanding the dynamics of the Napoleonic empire building is all the more critical given its lasting historical influence. For many regions in Europe, French rule was their first encounter with a modern system of governance. Despite its short duration, the Napoleonic period generally constitutes a hard break in these regions' political and administrative histories. Despite the omnipresence of traditionalist discourses after the Empire's

disintegration, many Restoration rulers understood the advantages of a centralised state system and decided to keep it in place.

The historiographical tide started to turn with Stuart Woolf's *Napoleonic Integration of Europe* in 1991, followed by Michael Broers's *Europe under Napoleon* in 1996. Important contributions have since been made by Geoffrey Ellis, Isser Woloch, Michael Rowe, and Alexander Garb, among others. In France, too, the imperial perspective has gained traction. Annie Jourdan, Aurélien Lignereux, and Pierre Horn have contributed to taking seriously the political and cultural diversity of the Empire. The most interesting contributions have often focused on specific regions – the late Katherine Aaslestad's work on Hamburg is exemplary. With his book, Van der Burg adds an important new chapter to this growing body of literature. The merit of his work lies in the choice for a comparative perspective: he has studied how two peripheral and relatively late additions to the Empire have been incorporated and integrated.

Van der Burg's book is concise and systematic. After providing an excellent overview of recent historiography in the introduction, the second chapter sketches the political and administrative situation of the German and Dutch regions before their annexation to France. Chapter three discusses the various stages of conquest and integration. It is a complicated story involving many changes of government, redistribution of land, and changing boundaries. In the fourth chapter, Van der Burg looks at an essential administrative echelon that has not received enough scholarly attention: the various intermediate bodies of governance that accompanied the territories' integration, including the *Gouvernement général* in Amsterdam and the *Commission de gouvernement* in Hamburg. The last two chapters focus on the political personnel involved in governing the newly incorporated departments. Chapter five highlights the pivotal figures of the prefects, which Stuart Woolf has nicknamed Napoleon's 'tools of conquest'. In the final chapter, Van der Burg studies the subprefects, an interesting and varied group of civil servants, which are less well-known than the prefects. Throughout the book, Van der Burg systematically compares the situation in the Dutch departments (on which he is best informed) with their German counterparts.

The book is by and large descriptive since many administrative and political processes need to be detailed to tell the story. Van der Burg focuses on administrative and institutional history, which lends a certain dryness to his narrative; the personal views of the actors involved are only rarely cited. The most innovative and stimulating parts of the book are undoubtedly the chapters about the intermediary bodies of government, the prefects, and subprefects. In these chapters Van der Burg is able to show how the implementation of Napoleonic governance worked on the ground: it was the result of a constant negotiation between instructions from the central government and local circumstances. With their own personal experiences and working styles, individual actors had a considerable influence on the outcome of that negotiation.

Most importantly, Van der Burg convincingly shows that to a considerable extent, imperial policies were adapted to local traditions. This is a crucial point, as the tension between unity and diversity is one of the key questions in recent historiography about the First Empire. Napoleonic governance has traditionally been understood as an aggressive, top-down attempt at centralisation and uniformity, regardless of existing structures and

traditions. Whereas uniformity was undoubtedly Napoleon's ideal, the margins for more tailored approaches prove to have been considerable. For example, territorial divisions in Germany and administrative structures in the Dutch departments were allowed to deviate from the general pattern, out of (strategic) respect for local sensibilities. Given these significant insights, it is a pity that Van der Burg leaves little room for a more cultural approach. Case studies by Annie Jourdan, Armin Owzar, and Alan Forrest amongst others have demonstrated the diversity of discursive and representational strategies practised throughout the Empire. The inclusion of these findings would only have strengthened Van der Burg's point.

Another significant insight of the book is the diversity of governance approaches practised throughout the Empire. The Dutch and German spheres functioned entirely separately from each other, without any level of mutual collaboration. Very different styles of governance were present in both regions. These findings beg the question of where the nerve centre of Napoleonic integration was situated. Interestingly, Van der Burg suggests that an overarching plan for the integration of the Empire was not available. Various administrative levels rivalled with one another for influence, the different French ministries did not work together, and the system was prone to a certain level of chaos. Even so, the integration process can be called reasonably successful when measured by factors such as military conscription and adherence to the law.

Given the book's many strengths, it is a pity that the text is riddled with linguistic errors. Van der Burg's clear and concise style warrants praise, but the editing process has remained sadly substandard. It is only one of many recent instances that makes one wonder about the priorities of large academic publishers when it comes to quality control. However, this remark should not deter the reader from buying and reading this excellent piece of scholarship. Van der Burg superbly demonstrates the advantages of a systematic transregional approach and considerably enriches our knowledge about the governance and integration of Napoleon's Empire. Apart from being a valuable addition to Dutch and German historiography, the book is, therefore, a must-read for scholars of Napoleonic Europe.

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