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Martijn van der Burg, *Napoleonic Governance in the Netherlands and Northwest Germany: Conquest, Incorporation, and Integration*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. \$59.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9783030666576; Open Access (eb). ISSN 9783030666583.

Review by Nicola P. Todorov, Université de Guyane.

More than thirty years ago, Stuart Woolf published his book *Napoleon's Integration of Europe*, commonly considered to have been ground-breaking for what has been coined the “New Napoleonic history.”[1] In contrast to the abundant historical literature devoted to the life of Napoleon and that of his family and to the numerous narratives of battles and military campaigns, Woolf focused on the actors of Napoleonic empire-building. According to Woolf, many French officials sent out to administer incorporated territories were convinced that they were the driving force behind modernization. The French administrators struggled ruthlessly to make the administration in the occupied territories uniform and to shape their societies on the model of the post-revolutionary French one.

Martijn van der Burg applies the concept of integration to what he calls the “northern periphery” of the French Empire, the Netherlands and the so-called Hanseatic departments, which, as far as Napoleonic empire building is concerned, have remained understudied. Incorporated nearly at same time, in the year 1810, they belonged to the French Empire for approximately three years. In line with these historiographical trends Van der Burg aims at exploring “the ways in which Napoleon and his imperial agents tried to integrate the present-day Netherlands and Northwest Germany into the French Empire by replacing local institutions and traditional governing practices with French ones” (p. 3). In agreement with Woolf, Van der Burg, acknowledges that Napoleonic officials often had to compromise, and hence to accept limits to obtain “collaboration.”

To explore this dynamic interplay between Napoleonic empire-builders and local societies, the author has carefully studied the secondary literature, published sources, and a limited selection of archival material, such as correspondence between officials (regional and local), formal reports, memoranda, newspapers, and memoirs. Given the fragmentation of German source material, the analysis of the German departments is relatively more dependent on secondary literature and published source material than that of the Dutch departments (p 16). By proposing a comparative and transregional approach to Napoleonic governance in the Netherlands and Northwest Germany, this study certainly fills a gap in the Dutch-German body of scholarly literature. It also allows a wider international audience not fluent in Dutch and German access to research published in these languages.

The author carefully delineates the area under study by providing maps of the administrative divisions. After defining the key concepts of his study—conquest, incorporation, and integration—he provides a historiographical overview that underlines the difficulties of such a transregional and even transnational comparative approach. He divides his book into five chapters, addressing the North before conquest, conquest and incorporation, the work of the intermediary bodies of governance (the *gouvernements généraux*), the prefects appointed during the time these territories belonged to the French Empire, the subprefects, and a conclusion.

The author underlines the fundamentally different political experiences of the Dutch Republic and the northwestern German territories before they came under the influence of French Revolutionary policy and later their incorporation into the Napoleonic Empire. The Dutch Republic had been a powerful federal state since the beginning of the seventeenth century, undergone an endogenous revolutionary process during the 1780s, and seen its domestic policy influenced by the French since the outbreak of the Revolution before becoming a Napoleonic client state governed by Napoleon's brother Louis in 1806. The situation was quite different in the German territories. Much less politicized than the Netherlands, Northwest Germany remained politically fragmented before Napoleon decided to incorporate it into his Empire in 1810. Political thinking and activity flourished mainly in the Hanseatic towns of Hamburg, Bremen, and Lübeck. Moreover, even if Hamburg's merchants felt close to France's *Girondins* and the city's craftsmen more to the *Montagnards*, nobody in Northern Germany attempted to put the principles of the French Revolution into practice (p. 30). Van der Burg writes that most of Northwest Germany had experienced a degree of enlightened absolutism, but the relatively small Prussian territories later incorporated into Napoleon's Empire were largely administered by collegiate bodies whose organization differed from the French monocratic system.

In his chapter "Conquest and Incorporation," the author describes how the territories of the present-day Netherlands and Northwest Germany were seized by French troops and subsequently incorporated by imperial decree. While the French government orchestrated coups d'état in the Batavian Republic like that in 1801, Napoleon initially left some autonomy to the Dutch. As for Germany, Van der Burg recalls how Germany's political map was redrawn under France's influence by the *Reichsdeputationshauptschluss* (1803). The renewal of war with Britain in 1803 led the French immediately to occupy the electorate of Hanover, whose Prince-electoral was the King of Britain.

The chapter devoted to the intermediary bodies of governance begins with an interesting overview of previous experiences with provisional administrative entities during the Napoleonic era which were thought to facilitate the integration of newly incorporated territories into the French Empire. Normally, these regional entities encompassing several departments were thought to be temporary, but in the case of the *Gouvernement de Hollande* supervised by the former Third Consul Lebrun, arch-treasurer of the Empire, and the Hanseatic Departments supervised by marshal Davout, they did not disappear until Napoleon's defeat. Reluctant to accept the task the emperor wanted to entrust to him, Lebrun was not the incarnation of the ruthless Napoleonic empire-builder. As for Davout, according to a French official, the marshal lived "like a prince," though, of course, Davout was a prince, Duke of Auerstaedt from 1808, promoted Prince of Eckmühl after the Wagram campaign against Austria (1809). Both governors were assisted by professional civil administrators, though Lebrun favored a milder approach than his counterpart in Germany.

In his chapter “Prefects—tools of integration” he states that some *landrosts*, the Kingdom of Holland’s equivalent of the French prefects, were maintained in their positions, but sometimes employed in a different department. Above all, in the strategically important northerly coastal departments, administrators born in the South Netherlands were often appointed as prefects. In Northwest Germany prefects were more often born in France and Belgium and had served throughout the Empire. This difference appears even more pronounced in his study of the subprefects. His chapter “Subprefects regional tools of integration?” includes a very valuable prosopographical study of the sixty-six individuals employed as subprefects in the Dutch and the Hanseatic departments with information on their origin, age, and career. The recruitment of the subprefects appointed in the Dutch departments was more local, and only in 1812 and 1813 were some of these subprefects replaced by administrators born in the territories of what the author calls “old” France and present-day Belgium, the latter of which had undergone the integration process since 1795.

Indeed, before their incorporation into the Empire, the Dutch territories had formed a client state ruled by Napoleon’s brother Louis for more than four years. Even if it was not meant to be a model for other polities like Napoleon’s kingdom of Westphalia (created in 1807), the Dutch kingdom under Louis did experience a reform policy. Louis initiated the codification of civil law and established a uniform subnational administration, aligning Dutch traditions with French-like institutions and governance practices. He struggled, not always successfully, to replace the more collegiate Dutch administration by the more monocratic Napoleonic system.

In the more urbanized west of the Netherlands, subprefects without aristocratic origins dominated, while in the more rural east the regional nobility administered in the manner of the pre-revolutionary landed gentry, sometimes from their country houses instead of their offices in the district capitals. This recruitment practice shows both the achievements and the limitations of Napoleonic governance in a client state. Van der Burg sees the subprefect as an official who had to balance local interests and the requirements of the central government.

Thirty percent of the subprefects appointed in the Dutch territory were born in “old” France and present-day Belgium. The appointment of “Belgians” demonstrates their successful integration into the imperial system. King Louis’ former *kwartierdrosts* were appointed subprefects in the Dutch departments of the Empire and not sent outside to administer newly incorporated northwestern German territories. The maps showing their circulation reveal two distinct clusters for the prefects appointed in the Netherlands and Northwest Germany. The appointment of more subprefects from outside the kingdom of Holland towards the end of the Empire, as well as the geographical patterns of their careers, demonstrates that the impetus to enforce French legislation intensified over time.

Apart from the very short-lived incorporation of the remaining electorate of Hanover into the kingdom of Westphalia in 1810, only small parts of the Hanseatic departments had experienced Napoleonic governance by a client state: the Northern part of the grand duchy of Berg and a part of the Westphalian Weserdepartment around Osnabrück. Few administrators with Napoleonic governance practice were available there, and many more officials born in France and earlier annexed territories were appointed.

Van der Burg concludes that integration remained incomplete. Traditionally, he says, the relative success or failure of integration was explained by the cultural or geographical distance from the

imperial core, the duration of Napoleonic rule, and reform policy. The German territories on the left bank of the Rhine thus experienced nearly twenty years of French rule and almost fifteen years of revolutionary and Napoleonic legislation, while most of the German north experienced less than three. Van der Burg suggests that an additional factor in the difficulty of integrating the North resulted from the lack of both coordination between the different actors and a clear integration plan, as well as the internal rivalries between French administrations and intermediate bodies. This is perhaps debatable. Napoleon often encouraged rivalry among different administrations, a practice witnessed by contemporary administrators, and it would perhaps not have been in the interest of the central government to encourage the formation of large regional blocks in this Dutch-Northwest German periphery. It should be recalled that the creation of relatively small administrative units such as the departments in 1790, compared to the average size of the former *Ancien Regime* provinces, was an important tool of French centralization.

Given the short time these territories belonged to the French Empire, an unachieved process of integration was hardly surprising, and the brevity of their inclusion would perhaps be explanation enough. Van der Burg's approach and his conclusions, however, raise methodological questions. Even if Napoleonic administrators had an empirical understanding of the degree of integration, and disagreed about the degree of integration achieved, it must be asked whether the degree of integration may be assessed alone by studying the "tools" of integration. Can the success or failure in the implementation of Napoleonic governance be evaluated simply by the actions of professional administrators from the governor-general to the subprefects and their diverging impressions of the degree of otherness and their opinions of the ways to achieve integration, without assessing the involvement of the population?

As the author acknowledges, the empire's ability to raise huge armies is presented as a measure of its success or failure. Thus, the rebellions against the French Gendarmerie, especially because of military conscription, were relatively numerous both in the incorporated Dutch and northwestern German territories, whereas in territories incorporated earlier, resistance to conscription tended to lessen over time.[2] Nevertheless, even prefects like Petit de Beauverger, pessimistic about the population's willingness to cooperate, recognized that "taxation and conscription encountered few problems" (p. 115). Moreover, the "blood tax" required by Napoleon, above all for the French Navy, was certainly higher than in other territories.

The degree of integration into the Napoleonic system has led Michael Broers to distinguish between an inner Empire (the imperial core), intermediate zones, and an outer empire, the periphery. The delimitations of these types of territories might be refined in the light of new research and new evidence such as that provided in the book under review. In his second edition of *Europe under Napoleon*, Broers published a map including the Netherlands in the inner Empire and justified this choice by the early and relatively easy introduction there of French Laws, whereas the neighboring German Northwest, where the new regime was radically introduced as a block, was placed in the outer Empire.[3] Hence, one might wonder whether beyond the judgment of incomplete integration and internal diversity from district to district, there were regional differences in the degree of integration between both areas. Were the Netherlands, initially more politicized and then administered by mainly "smooth" Dutch subprefects, more or better integrated into the Napoleonic system than the German North, where young and zealous French subprefects worked to implement harshly French laws and institutions?

Van der Burg sees the maintenance or rejection of the Napoleonic heritage in governance by the successor states as an indicator of the acceptance or not of integration. The revolutionary and Napoleonic period played an important role in Dutch nation building, and the French legacy was better maintained there than it was in Northwest Germany. In Hamburg, pre-Napoleonic conservatism once again dominated, but there was a minority who wanted to “preserve the best of Napoleonic governance” (p. 156). But what was this “best”? Having extensively written about Louis’ and Napoleon’s reform policy in the Netherlands, Van der Burg does not tell us much in this book about the social issues that were at stake in implementing Napoleonic governance. For instance, what precisely was already adapted to Dutch customs in Louis’ hybrid *Code civil*? If the subprefect had to balance between local interests and the requirements of the central government, as Van der Burg argues, it would have been interesting to know how the Dutch local subprefects from the gentry behaved when faced with enforcing the legislation on seignorial duties, fiscal equity, or even conscription that withdrew manpower from agriculture.

The study of the actors of integration rarely goes below the district level, that of the subprefects. But there were administrators closer to the ground: the mayors of the communes. Analyzing administration at the communal level would, I think, offer additional insight into the nature of local “collaboration” and the limits that Napoleonic empire-builders had to accept. The lack of such analysis might of course be due to the rarity of research on communal administration, but Antoinette Joulia’s work provides some evidence, and an article by John Dunne shows that in the annexed territories, the central government adapted the size of the basic units without suppressing administration on the village level. In his study of the mayors of the Bouches-du-Weser, Dunne notes a stabilization of the communal mayors at the end of the Empire [4].

More generally, a more systematic reflection on the choice of the area under scrutiny would be helpful. There have been previous projects of comparative research like *Monarchy in Turmoil. Rulers, Courts and Politics in The Netherlands and Germany, C.1780 – C.1820*. [5] While the Dutch and Hanseatic departments shared a common duration of incorporation into the French Empire and a certain geographic and linguistic proximity, the author could have said more about the geopolitical aims of quasi-simultaneous incorporation. We learn that the kingdom of Holland was incorporated because “Napoleon was growing frustrated with the military weakness of Louis’ army and continuing illegal trade with England” (p. 54). As for Northwest Germany, its annexation “marked a new phase in Napoleon’s enforcement of the Continental blockade” (p. 57) and his foreign minister “Champagny pointed at possible economic benefits of canalization, also to avoid the British fleet in the North Sea” (p. 61). The year 1810 was indeed a year of a thorough change in Napoleon’s policy. The northern parts of the electorate of Hanover had been a *pays reserve* until that time, and their incorporation into the kingdom of Westphalia had been subject to a future peace with England as stipulated by the secret articles of the treaty of Tilsit with Russia (1807). But on 14 January 1810, Napoleon concluded a treaty with Westphalia ceding those parts of Hanover. Then, in August 1810, Napoleon summoned his brother Jerome to withdraw his troops from the North Sea coast and canceled the treaty in October. The control of this Northern “periphery” was of high strategic importance in Napoleon’s eyes, and strategic aims can help explain the lack of a clear integration plan as well as the military exploitation by conscription that hampered the acceptance of the Napoleonic system.

All in all, Van der Burg provides a clearly structured analysis of Napoleonic governance in the Netherlands but also shows the paths for future research in this area.



## NOTES

[1] Stuart Woolf, *Napoleon's integration of Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

[2] See Aurélien Lignereux, *Servir Napoléon. Policiers et gendarmes dans les départements annexés (1796-1814)* (Paris : Champs Vallon, 2013), p. 275-293.

[3] Michael Broers, *Europe under Napoleon* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014), p. 196.

[4] See Antoinette Joulia, "Les institutions administratives des départements hanséatiques", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, vol.17 N°3, Juillet-septembre 1970. La France à l'époque napoléonienne. pp. 880-892; John Dunne, "L'Empire au village : les pratiques et le personnel de l'administration communale dans l'Europe napoléonienne," in Jean-Clément Martin, ed., *Napoléon et l'Europe* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2002), p. 45-54.

[5] <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research/research-projects/humanities/monarchy-in-turmoil#tab-1>

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