



BOOK REVIEW - Robert B. Bruce et al. *Fighting Techniques of the Napoleonic Age 1792-1815: Equipment, Combat, Skills and Tactics*

Silvio Činć

Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb

scinc@hrstud.hr

Book review

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This book, published in 2008, covers the development of military tactics and weapons, as well as their implementation in the context of conflicts from 1792 to 1815. The work was created due to the collaboration of experts specialized in the study of European military history of the 18th and 19th centuries. It is appropriate to point out Robert B. Bruce, a former professor of military history in the USA, Michael F. Pavkovic, an expert in military navy and Napoleonic wars, and Frederick Schneid, who produced this book with their expertise and knowledge with the help of several other authors.

The book is 252 pages long, and it is divided into 5 chapters. These are: *The Role of Infantry*, *Mounted Warfare*, *Command and Control*, *Artillery and Siege Warfare* and *Naval Warfare*. At the very end of the book there is a list of bibliography (*Select Bibliography*), sources of illustrations that appear in the book and an index.

Content

The first chapter, *The Role of Infantry*, deals with the changes in infantry units from 1792 to 1815 and serves as an introduction to the content of the book. The French Revolution, in addition to the revolution among the people, marks a turning point in the way of warfare. The army was gradually reorganized, the dynamics of warfare changed, military theories were developed, and the old military formations were replaced by new ones due to their inefficiency. At the time of the outbreak of the revolution, the French army was in great trouble due to a poor internal organization with limited possibilities for advancement. It had around 180,000 soldiers, while earlier in the 18th century, that figure was at



around 300,000. By 1793, many people were mobilized, but a change of the existing situation on the field was necessary. The French infantry was divided into smaller divisions reinforced on the flanks, and their action on the battlefield was accompanied by the active support of advanced cavalry and artillery. Smaller formations enabled better communication on the battlefield, dynamism and flexibility, and because of this they soon became popular. Napoleon, motivated by the successful reorganization of the infantry, decided to modernize other branches of the French army as well. His opponents, surprised by the enthusiasm and professionalism of the newly formed army, initiated the modernization of their respective armies by introducing tactics and formations that became the basis of military action later in the 19th century.

The second chapter, *Mounted Warfare*, presents the development of cavalry in European armies from 1792 to 1815. Although cavalry was considered an essential striking force of European armies in the 18th century, its ranks were most often joined by wealthy aristocrats who could finance the survival of cavalry units. Only after the end of the French Revolution did Napoleon turn it into the most modern cavalry in Europe. He connected it with other parts of the army, and it formed smaller structures that were functional on the battlefield. Despite the fact that the French cavalry was the best in Europe, its opponents also had specialized units prepared for conflicts with it. Napoleon entrusted the command of the cavalry to Marshal Joachim Murat, who utilized its full battlefield potential. In the early stages of the Napoleonic Wars, cavalry operated on the battlefield in combination with infantry and artillery in compact and rigid formations, but soon began to perform independent tasks consisting of inspecting the terrain and obtaining information. Because of its destructive power in the final stages of almost every conflict, Napoleon used it as a decisive element in battles, recognizing the psychological effect of cavalry breakthrough and breaking the opposing lines. Thanks to Napoleon's military genius combined with new military doctrines, the cavalry had the opportunity to be dynamic and it played a major role in the conflicts of the Napoleonic Wars. It was at that time that its structures and striking power were at their peak, but due to the accelerated weapon development, its destructive power began to decline.

The third chapter, *Command and Control*, describes the changes in the internal structure of the leading European military powers. In the



armies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were branches reserved exclusively for the richest aristocracy, but due to the reduction in their number during the French Revolution, soldiers had the possibility of advancing faster in the ranks of the army. At that time, its structure changed significantly, and it gradually moved from the traditional to a divisional system, the basic task of which was to increase the mobility of units in the field. Unlike the traditional one, which considered the army to be one large structure, the divisional system began to combine units from different ranks of the army, forming smaller and more diverse units that were easier to manage in the field, as well as it was easier to determine their scope of action. This change proved to be successful after the victory at Fleurus in 1794, and a further reorganization of the existing divisions was started. The French army was divided into a larger number of military garrisons, smaller units that were more mobile, dynamic, and logistically easier to maintain. Each unit was accompanied by artillery and cavalry, all of which were interconnected, as discussed in the previous chapter. These changes enabled the French to win major battles and ensure their supremacy over the other forces of the anti-French coalition, whose reforms were not as successful. The Allies nevertheless studied French tactics well and learned from their defeats how to properly coordinate their forces on the field, which conditioned their later coordinated successes in anti-Napoleonic actions such as the Battle of Leipzig and Waterloo.

The fourth chapter, *Artillery and Siege Warfare*, focuses on the evolution of artillery in European armies. Many great military names understood the importance of using artillery as an important element of successful warfare from early times. In the second half of the 18th century, a desire to modernize artillery appeared in France, and novelties were introduced, such as modern types of cannons, as well as changes in their diameter and weight, in accordance with new military doctrines and philosophies that were being improved almost daily. These changes are better known as the Gribeauval system, and they represented the creation of the most modern and efficient artillery system in Europe. The tolerance for factory errors during the production of cannon parts was lowered, and cannons of excellent quality were produced. The Allied artillery could also match the French, at least in the technical part, in which the Prussian artillery units particularly excelled. What made the French artillery better than the one of the Allies



one was the use of quality personnel and bureaucracy, particularly a new way of warfare and military tactics, as well as the quality of manufactured parts and high morale. Other European armies of that time had problems with motivation, morale and coordination, with the logistical component often failing. Artillery was used in the early stages of the Napoleonic Wars as a static element aimed at attacking infantry units, but its potential and ability to influence the situation on the battlefield was soon obvious. The French also had experience in defence against artillery, as they successfully repulsed enemy artillery on several occasions during the siege of French forts.

The last chapter, *Naval Warfare*, is dedicated to European navies during the Napoleonic Wars. By far the best navy of the time was the British one. Well-armed ships, professional staff and continuous training of crews and navigation and communication systems ensured its superiority. With the conquests after the French Revolution, Napoleon came into possession of many vessels of conquered foreign powers and supplemented his fleet with Spanish, Venetian, Danish and Dutch ships that needed to be properly integrated into the existing, but insufficiently well-organized navy. The British used the tactic of vertically breaking the enemy's shipping lines to cut off communications and disorient the enemy force. This way, under the leadership of Horatio Nelson, they secured victories at Abukir in 1798 and at Trafalgar in 1805, and apart from Egypt, they were engaged in conflicts with the Americans in North America. Napoleon, aware of the supremacy of the British navy, withdrew a large number of ships from European waters and began to plan his activities in the Indian Ocean. There were no significant technological changes in the navies of this period as in the land army, but this soon changed with the arrival of technological innovations in the 19th century.

Conclusion

The significance of the book in modern historiography undoubtedly needs to be mentioned in more detail. In European history, the Napoleonic Wars represent a significant series of events in both political and military terms. The way armies function and their transformation into structures consisting of specialized units with predetermined tasks and methods of operation, were most intense in the last stages of



the French Revolution and with the arrival of Napoleon in a position of power. Although the specialization of military units has been present since the very beginning of the active use of the military in the history of mankind, they were seen in history as large structures, and military doctrine was developed accordingly. It was not until the Greeks and the Romans understood the potential of better coordinated smaller structures on the battlefield. In the middle of the 18th century, due to both the nature of the times and previous conflicts (War of the Spanish Succession 1701-1714, War of the Austrian Succession 1740-1748, Seven Years' War 1756-1763), the idea of restructuring and complete reformation of the French army revived among the French military theorists.

In the introductory segments of the book, the authors briefly mention the structures and military doctrine of European armies, the problems of military structures and the development of philosophy and military doctrine in the French ranks. Furthermore, they briefly explain how the goal of these undertakings was to improve the then traditional army organized according to the *ancien régime*. By isolating and commenting on French military theorists of the 18th century, such as Guibert and his work *Réglement du 1er Août 1791*, which represents the basis of the reconstruction of the French army, the authors lay the foundations for the further content of the book. In a way, it represents an interesting approach to the research of military history and its presentation in a modern and accessible way.

It was decided to shape a complicated content and a complex topic in an interesting way and adapt them to all interested readers, regardless of their prior knowledge of the topic presented. The text is enriched with some professional expressions, which should not be problematic for the average reader considering the additions the authors decided to enrich the book with. It includes detailed and rich illustrations and depictions of members of branches of various European armies in all phases of the Napoleonic wars. In the same way, the evolution of military weapons and different pieces of equipment is presented in accordance with actual findings and records.

Furthermore, although this book was designed to acquaint the reader with the basic information and dynamics of the Napoleonic Wars, its main task is focused on an expert presentation of the development of military tactics and changes in the armies of the Napoleonic Wars, and the largest part of the book is dedicated to this. Complex repre-



sentations of the structures of military ranks and tactics on the battlefield undoubtedly make a high-quality part of the book. Although represented in a smaller number, these graphics represent a transition to another, more professional domain of the book, from which even knowledgeable readers can complete their knowledge on this topic.

By far the best and the most complex part of the book is represented by the mapped representations of the most famous battles of the Napoleonic wars (Battle of Rivoli, Battle of Auerstädt, Battle of Maida, Battle of Waterloo, Battle of Eylau, Battle at Somosierre, Battle of Borodino, Battle of Quatre Bras, Battle of Fleurus, Battle of Austerlitz, Battle of Wagram, Battle of Leipzig, Battle at Friedland, Battle of Lützen, Battle of Bayadoz, Siege of Hamburg, Battle of Abukir, Battle of Trafalgar, Battle of Reunion, Battle of the Lake Erie). This significantly improves the quality of the content, and this segment is the best presented part of this book. With graphics of battles that are accompanied by comments on details such as weather conditions, terrain, information on weapons and the structure of military units that indicate their progress and evolution, this book qualitatively complemented the textual content and rounded off the issues presented in the introduction.

Although published in 2008, by presenting an extensive topic in several layers, intended at the same time for a wider, but also more knowledgeable audience, this book, despite the dynamic changes of modern historiography, represents a significant contribution to the study of the period of the Napoleonic Wars. It would be possible to complain to the authors only about the narrowed selection of base bibliography that was used to write this book, the quality of which would unquestionably be better if its content were expanded with a few more published editions. In conclusion, this book represents quality reading both for the writing of any professional work related to the topic of military history and technology of the Napoleonic wars, as well as for understanding the basic context and fluidity of the development of military tactics and doctrine of the period presented.