

Alexander Mikaberidze is the author of *The Russian Officer Corps in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, 1792-1815* (ISBN 1-932714-02-2; 820 biographies, 440 b&w portraits, 38 charts, tables, and graphs, 534 pages, hardcover, dust jacket, 7 x 10). The book contains more than 800 biographical sketches of Russian officers and is based upon years of research in a variety of Russian and European archives. Mikaberidze sat down recently with Sarah Stephan of Savas Beatie LLC to share his passion for the Napoleonic period and what he hopes readers will gain from his work.

Q: What draws you to Napoleon and this particular period in Russian history?

A: For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated with Napoleon's personality. The first two books I read on Napoleon, by Eugene Tarle and Albert Manfred were so well written, I found myself immersed in a new world. I grew up in Georgia (formerly part of the Soviet Union) which was torn by civil wars. I searched for books written in Georgian, my native language, but only found one: Napoleon's memoirs. Because of this, I started working on a book in Georgian that described Napoleon's rise to power.

Q: How did your research lead to writing *The Russian Officer Corps*?

A: During research for my first book, I met scholars at Tbilisi State University in Georgia who were also interested in Napoleon. In 1999, a group of us established the Napoleonic Society of Georgia and conducted a few seminars. The next year, we even convened an International Napoleonic Congress in Georgia! Although my first degree was in international law and I served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Georgia, my interest in Napoleon soon changed my life.

Q: How so?

A: While presenting a paper at Napoleonic Congress in Israel, I met two people who were students at the Institute on Napoleon and the French Revolution at Florida State University. At the time I was living in Georgia with a salary of \$17 and never imagined actually moving to Florida, but in 2000, I received a full scholarship to study at the Institute from the director, Professor Donald D. Horward. It was a dream come true for me.

Q: I can imagine it was! Can you describe for our readers your experience moving to the United States?

A: Well, I arrived in Florida on August 15, 2000, Napoleon's 231st birthday!

Q: That sounds like a good start!

A: Yes. It was a decisive move that not only led to me writing *The Russian Officer Corps*, but also impacted my entire life. Thanks to Horward's invitation, I met my wife in the United States. Studying the Napoleonic period at the Institute was a great experience, in part because of the work I did with other students. We held Napoleon seminars where

we discussed every aspect of Napoleonic Europe in great detail. My decision to write *The Russian Officer Corps* emerged out of these discussions.

Q: The book contains biographical sketches of some 800 Russian officers who commanded troops in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Has this type of book ever been written before?

A: Surprisingly, no. The book is long overdue. Two centuries have passed since this time period and the names of the Russian officers, who constantly fought Napoleon, are still largely unknown. If most people are asked about Russian generals of the Napoleonic Wars, they might recall Kutuzov's name or perhaps Bagration, but that's about it. Many more officers served and faced the best European army led by one of the best commanders. Yet, there weren't any books on Russian officers comparable to George Six's *Dictionary of French Generals*. I hope my book will be the first step in filling this gap.

Q: This is a magnificent reference work. What was the most interesting part for you—researching it or writing it?

A: I have to say the highlight for me was researching this study. It was fascinating to trace an officer's personality from the start of his service to the end and see his successes or his failures. I was also fortunate enough to find portraits of many officers. Instead of just seeing an officer's name, readers can see (in many cases) his face and imagine him living, riding, fighting, commanding. It makes history more alive and vivid.

Q: Was writing it difficult?

A: With some 800 entries in the dictionary, the most challenging part was keeping track of so many Russian officers! I had to check facts for each, analyze the information to verify the tables, and finally combine all this into a readable fashion.

Q: Will people who study Napoleon's campaigns other than his 1812 invasion of Russia find this book useful?

A: Anyone interested in European history between 1792 and 1815 will find this book useful. Russia was involved in virtually all the wars fought against France between 1799 and 1815. In addition, Russia waged expansion wars in Finland, the Danubian Principalities, and Caucasus. Many officers described in the dictionary served in all these conflicts. Peter Bagration fought the French from 1805 to 1807, served in Finland from 1808 to 1809, fought the Turks for the next two years, and again served against Napoleon in 1812. Another general, Matvei Platov, served in two Russo-Turkish Wars (1769-1771), an aborted expedition to India from 1800 to 1801, and two campaigns against Napoleon, the first from 1806 to 1807 and the second from 1812 to 1814.

Q: Although the title of the book centers on the critical years 1792 to 1815, does the dictionary include information about these officers from other parts of their lives?

A: Yes, it also covers officer's careers at least two decades following the Napoleonic Wars. Ivan Paskevich went on to become a field marshal and one of the most influential men in the Russian empire, while Alexander Chernishev served as the Minister of War from 1832 to 1852.

Q: This may be an unfair question, but do you have a favorite officer you enjoyed researching?

A: Well, my favorite has to be Peter Bagration. I wrote a dissertation on him at the Institute, so he feels like a member of my family by now! [Alex's dissertation will soon be published as *Lion of the Russian Army: Life and Career of General Peter Bagration*.] As for the others, some do stick in my mind. Alexander Albrecht survived horrible injuries at Austerlitz, Peter Dolgorukov achieved immense power by the age of 25, and Barclay de Tolly persevered through many ordeals during the 1812 Campaign.

Q: Speaking of Bagration and Barclay de Tolly, your accounts of these men--and your Introduction--discusses in detail their difference of opinion during the 1812 Campaign . . .

A: Yes, they are very interesting men. I greatly enjoyed researching the passionate strategic arguments that took place among officers led by Bagration and Barclay. It was a remarkable archival journey to trace their quarrel on the backdrop of and during the massive French invasion when the stakes were so high.

Q: They are indeed fascinating men. I guess the list could go on and on.

A: Yes . . . Aleksey Ermolov is described by contemporaries as "the Sphinx of modern times" for his craftiness. Mikhail Miloradovich was a fearless commander, but a passionate gambler and womanizer. And many, many others . . .

Q: Were the Russian generals as competent as their French counterparts?

A: Some Russians were as capable as French officers. The first to come to mind are Barclay de Tolly, Ermolov, and Bistrom. Unfortunately, many were inexperienced and incompetent officers and poor officer education haunted the Russians throughout the Napoleonic Wars. Contemporary memoirs and letters often attest to this problem. However, if you look at this period, the Russian army was very successful on all other fronts. It defeated the Swedish army in Finland and crushed the Turks in Danubian Principalities and the Persian forces in the Caucasus.

Q: How do you think Russian officers compare to Prussian or Austrian officers?

A: They were equally capable in some regards, but there are always exceptions. Russian officers themselves considered both Prussian and Austrian officers incompetent. However, one must remember that many German officers were in the Russian service.

*The Russian Officer Corps* contains biographies on men such as Phull, Wallmoden, Wolzogen, Wurrtemberg, and Tettenborn who left Prussia or Austria after they suffered defeats at the hand of Napoleon and served in the Russian army in 1812-1814 Campaigns.

Q: Were you surprised by anything you discovered in your research?

A: I was very surprised by the poverty of the officers. People often assume officers enjoyed the best quarters and food. In reality, many of them suffered as much as common soldiers. Only a few had large estates or large numbers of serfs. In fact, the majority had no property at all.

Q: What about their literacy rate?

A: That is an interesting question. I discovered there was a high level of illiteracy among the Russian officers--especially compared to the French army.

Q: The introduction is packed with this sort of information, as well as material on the development of the Russian officer corps, military school education, and officer promotions. How do you hope this information will help readers before they delve into the biographical sketches?

A: The introduction provides readers with background knowledge on how officers were trained and prepared for the army. It also gives a general overview of the officer corps that helped to bring down the Napoleonic Empire and highlights some specifics, such as social status and education. This information is scarce in Western historiography. My hope is this book will be of use to anyone interested in the Age of Napoleon and the Russian army.

Q: Serious students of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars will certainly need to consult your study . . .

A: Well, thank you for saying that. I hope others think the same way.

Q: Thanks for sharing this interesting background Dr. Mikaberidze. I hope the book does well for you.

A: Thank you so much.