

**Vadym Adadurov. “Napoleonida” na skhodi Ievropy:
Uiavlennia, proekty ta diial'nist' uriadu Frantsii shchodo
pivdenno-zakhidnykh okrain Rosiis'koi imperii na pochatku
XIX stolittia [Napoléonide in the East of Europe:
Representations, Plans, and Activities of the French
Government in Relation to the Southwestern Border Regions of
the Russian Empire at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century]**

Serhiy Bilenky

Volume 9, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088682ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus717>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies University of Alberta

ISSN

2292-7956 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Bilenky, S. (2022). Review of [Vadym Adadurov. “Napoleonida” na skhodi Ievropy: Uiavlennia, proekty ta diial'nist' uriadu Frantsii shchodo pivdenno-zakhidnykh okrain Rosiis'koi imperii na pochatku XIX stolittia [Napoléonide in the East of Europe: Representations, Plans, and Activities of the French Government in Relation to the Southwestern Border Regions of the Russian Empire at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century]]. *East/West*, 9(1), 253–258. <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus717>



Vadym Adadurov. "Napoleonida" na skhodi Ievropy: Uiavlennia, proekty ta diial'nist' uriadu Frantsii shchodo pivdenno-zakhidnykh okrain Rosiis'koi imperii na pochatku XIX stolittia [*Napoléonide in the East of Europe: Representations, Plans, and Activities of the French Government in Relation to the Southwestern Border Regions of the Russian Empire at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*]. 2nd, expanded and revised ed., Vydavnytstvo Ukrains'koho Katolyts'koho Universytetu, 2018. 624 pp. Tables. Footnotes. Appendix. Bibliography. Indexes. Summaries. ₪250.00, cloth.

Since the time that Élie Borschak (Il'ko Borshchak) published his famous study "Napoléon et l'Ukraine" ("Napoleon and Ukraine"; in 1922, with its expanded Ukrainian-language edition in 1937), many people have come to believe that Napoleon Bonaparte and his government were sympathetic toward Ukraine and even planned to carve out a few states (including one comprising Ukrainian Cossacks) under French protectorate from the territories of Russian-ruled Ukraine. The works of other émigré historians, such as Oleksander Ohloblyn and Dmytro Doroshenko (*Liudy Staroi Ukrainy* [*People of Old Ukraine*] and *Narys istorii Ukrainy: Vid polovyny XVII stolittia* [*Outline of the History of Ukraine: From the Middle of the Seventeenth Century*], respectively), have similarly given rise to a related popularly held persuasion—that on the eve of Napoleon's invasion of Russia, a significant portion of Ukrainian nobles in Left-Bank Ukraine were looking forward to the arrival of the emperor of the French and were even prepared to actively support the invaders, which would have placed these descendants of Cossack officers among Napoleon's most ardent sympathizers anywhere in Europe, on a par with the Poles. All of these beliefs have continued to inspire Ukrainian historical imagination and to boost the pro-European sentiments of Ukrainians.

Unfortunately for the individuals who have been adhering to these alleged historical facts, the book "*Napoleonida" na skhodi Ievropy: Uiavlennia, proekty ta diial'nist' uriadu Frantsii shchodo pivdenno-zakhidnykh okrain Rosiis'koi imperii na pochatku XIX stolittia* (published in Ukraine in 2018; its first edition appeared in 2007, with a small print run) inflicts a fatal blow to their beliefs. This study consistently argues that the French government was not serious about liberating Ukraine from Russian rule and that the local Ukrainian nobles, far from rushing to help the French armies, considered their glory-seeking commander to be inglorious at best and "the Devil born out of hell" (my trans.; 198) at worst. This monograph was written by Vadym Adadurov, a historian teaching at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, and it is among the highest-calibre historical works coming out of Ukraine in recent years. The author's knowledge of the literature in several languages

(that is, French, Russian, English, German, and Polish) is immense, and his mastery of the archival research is even more extraordinary. The book's list of primary sources includes countless documents from a number of archives and libraries—mostly French, but also Austrian, Polish, and Ukrainian. The bulk of the primary documents are from the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères). Among them are memoranda and policy proposals submitted to France's foreign minister as well as direct correspondence between diplomats and Napoleon himself. The sources consulted by the author all refer to the territory of what is present-day Ukraine and its strategic importance in any fresh rounds of French-Russian hostilities; such hostilities seemed likely to resume soon after the Treaty of Tilsit's settlement of the first military encounter between France and Russia in 1806–07.

Adadurov's stated goal is to reconstruct how the French government imagined "the objects of its foreign-policy activities" (my trans.; 68), and he focuses primarily on the territory of Russian-ruled Ukraine in the period approximately between 1803 and 1812. By employing a set of interdisciplinary methodologies—ranging from traditional source criticism to the psychology of perception and imagining and historical anthropology—Adadurov accomplishes a monumental task consisting of three elements: first, the reconstruction of the image of Ukraine and its diverse population as perceived by the highest French officials, including Napoleon himself; second, the thorough study of the plans and policy proposals dealing with parts of what is present-day Ukraine as drafted by French diplomatic and intelligence officers and their (primarily Polish) allies; and third, the determination of Ukraine's place in the activities of French intelligence agents and military figures in the wake of Napoleon's invasion of imperial Russia in 1812. This is also how the book is structured: part 1 (63–246) deals with "[r]epresentations," or "[i]maginings," (*uiavlennia*); part 2 (247–379), with "[p]lans"; and part 3 (381–517), with "[a]ctivities" (my trans.; 63, 247, 381).

As it turns out, French government officials generally viewed Ukraine's geography, history, and demography through the prism of Polish, German, and Russian sources (often official descriptions and scholarly statistics), with the rare addition of eyewitness reports compiled by French diplomats and spies residing or travelling in Russia. The territory of present-day Ukraine appeared split into different historical and geographical regions. Among them were Volhynia, Podilia, and "Polish Ukraine" (on the right bank of the Dnipro River); "Russian Ukraine," or the former Cossack Hetmanate (on the river's left bank); the northern Black Sea region; and the "Cossack land" in the steppe north of the Sea of Azov (my trans.; 82). Characteristically, the French imagined the Right Bank essentially as a Polish territory populated

by Polish nobles (France's main allies in the region) and by peasants of uncertain ethnicity, who were seen not as Ukrainians but as "Russians" speaking a dialect of Polish or a mixture of Polish and Russian. By contrast, the Left Bank was populated by "Cossacks" (variants—"Little Russians," or even "Ukrainians"), but it is unclear whether they were related to the "Russians" of the Right Bank. These differences in classification were based on the French method of defining distinct nations, which was done exclusively via "the historical experience of state-building." Accordingly, the Left Bank, as the territory of the former Cossack state, was populated by the "Cossack nation" or its descendants—Little Russians, or Ukrainians—while the previously Polish territories on the right bank of the Dnipro contained only one real nation—the Poles (my trans.; 166–68). Regarding the Cossacks as a distinct social estate in parts of Left-Bank and southern Ukraine, the French government experts saw them as "natural allies" of France; however, the Ukrainian Cossacks, unlike the Polish nobles of the Right Bank, were ultimately deemed incapable of staging an uprising against Russia on their own. As a result, Napoleon and his officials ignored all of the proposals that enthusiastically suggested employing the Cossacks as a military force against Russia (227–28).

Most of these proposals were written by Poles. Adadurov mentions a half-dozen such authors—either émigrés in France or residents of the Duchy of Warsaw, a Polish puppet state created by Napoleon—who between 1806 and 1812 submitted to the French authorities around twenty memoranda and policy proposals containing various plans for the unmaking of Russia. All of these Poles called on Napoleon to restore Poland within its "historical borders"—that is, the ones that had existed prior to the partitions of 1793–95, when the boundary between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Russian Empire extended along the Dnipro River. One Polish author, in particular, stands out from all of the others owing to his geopolitical imagination and prolific output (in 1811 and early 1812, he wrote eleven of the twenty memoranda mentioned above). Michał Sokolnicki (1760–1816) was a major general in the army of the Duchy of Warsaw, and later, an aide-de-camp of Napoleon during his 1812 campaign in Russia. In Sokolnicki's memoranda commissioned by the French government, he argued for a breakup of imperial Russia along national lines and a further reorganization of eastern Europe under Napoleon. In order to eliminate the Russian threat from the direction of "the gate of Europe," a number of peoples conquered by the "northern barbarians" (Russians) would have to join Napoleon's "Great Empire." These conquered peoples (among them—Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainian Cossacks, and Crimean Tatars) would then gratefully accept the freedom brought to them by Napoleon (my trans.; 27). In one 1812 memorandum, Sokolnicki set forth an especially bold geopolitical project, in

which he was also the first to suggest the idea of Ukrainian independence in the form of an enigmatic duchy called “Napoléonide.”

Alas, the Napoléonide of Adadurov’s book title falls within the company of other stillborn or merely fictitious countries, such as Utopia, Herzoslovakia, and El Dorado—entities that were once imagined but never came to appear on political maps. Underlying the invention of some of these places were obviously satirical motives (we see this, for instance, in the case of Robert Musil’s *Kakania* [*Kakanien*] and, especially, Charlie Chaplin’s *Bacteria*, with its “great dictator” aptly named Benzino Napaloni). Napoléonide, by contrast, was not the product of a satirist but the idea of a political strategist, and as such, it is a fascinating piece of geopolitical thought. This project envisioned the creation of a set of “federated duchies” on the territory between a restored Poland and Muscovy, effectively forming a belt of military buffer states separating Europe’s “civilization” from Asia’s “barbarism.” Not surprisingly, these duchies would have to be placed under a Polish protectorate, but their governments were to be appointed by the French emperor. Among a half-dozen proposed duchies we see Chernihiv and Poltava. And there was the common state of former enemies the Ukrainian Cossacks and the Crimean Tatars—that is, “Napoléonide,” which was to include the historical Crimea and parts of Ukraine’s Left Bank between the city of Katerynoslav and the Sea of Azov. It was expected that once these communities were freed by Napoleon from “the Muscovite yoke,” they would gradually become civilized and join the European family of nations (my trans.; 215, 303). As Adadurov remarks, the most striking feature of the Napoléonide project was not its obvious Orientalist stereotypes but the fact that “the sole voice of this Polish [political] leader reminded [Europeans] about the importance of the Ukrainian Cossack state for the interests of Europe” (my trans.; 304).

Ironically, as the historian determines, the fact that one of the first concepts of an independent Ukraine rolled off the pen of a Polish noble was reason enough for Borshchak (an amateur historian who was famous for his anti-Polish views) to ascribe authorship of the concept to a *French* official, thereby erasing its Polish origins (40). In actuality, the French had nothing to do with the projected state slated to be named after Napoleon—it was entirely Sokolnicki’s idea, and it was not authorized by any high-ranking French official. It seems that the Pole’s audacious proposal fell on deaf ears. Adadurov convincingly shows that the French ultimately were not interested in creating a separate Ukrainian state—be it the Duchy of Chernihiv or Napoléonide, a utopian state comprising Cossacks and Tatars. And thus, Napoléonide had no real chance to materialize on the maps. Furthermore, contrary to the fervent desires of Napoleon’s Polish allies, the emperor of the French was reluctant to restore Poland within its pre-Partition borders,

toying instead with the notion of setting up a few “duchies” (my trans.; 337n117), or kingdoms, in Right-Bank Ukraine and restoring historical Lithuania as dependent on Paris and not reunited with other Polish lands under Warsaw (337–40). The emperor was even prepared to hand Volhynia over to the Habsburgs in exchange for Austrian help with the Russian campaign or, potentially, to simply leave the province within Russia as a concession to Czar Alexander I. The only consistent principle underlying Napoleon’s foreign policy was, as the old adage states, *divide et impera*. We also learn that even in retreat, Napoleon did not really plan to go to, or through, Ukraine. One of the reasons for this was the complete failure on the part of French intelligence to set up a network of reliable agents in the region (464) and to incite an anti-Russian insurgency anywhere in Ukraine.

While Adadurov’s book is impeccably researched and well written, there are a few small criticisms that can be made about the author’s approach. The psychological theory that Adadurov chooses for his discussion of French representations of Ukraine and imperial Russia is at times too elaborate for conveying the fairly obvious idea that much of what we see, or choose to notice, especially while travelling abroad or imagining a foreign country, is only a distorted version of reality and not reality per se. In spite of the exaggeration of this theory, the author’s observations about a “misrepresentation” of reality allow him to advance a wider argument that is crucial for the book. The French took much of what they “saw” (rather—chose to see) as the whole truth. In actuality, they consistently underestimated the strength of the Russian forces and overestimated both the popular discontent against Russian autocracy and the readiness of Polish nobles on the right bank of the Dnipro and Ukrainian peasants and “Cossacks” across Ukraine to rebel against Russian “tyranny.” By clinging to these distorted views, the French, including Napoleon himself, merely revealed their deep-seated condescending attitudes—as “civilized” Europeans toward “barbaric” Russia (322; my trans.; 526). Such gross miscalculations, the author seems to contend, ultimately led to the dramatic defeat of Napoleon in 1812—which occurred not only owing to meteorological resistance from the Russian Winter (famously known as General Frost) but also at the hands of very real soldiers, local partisans, and militiamen who clearly did not appreciate the kind of liberation from tyranny that the French claimed to have brought them.

One could also potentially criticize the book for its inclusion of numerous names that are of little consequence in Eastern European history, regardless of how significant these figures might be in the eyes of French diplomatic or military historians. Most readers will have difficulty differentiating the most important personalities in the story from the marginal ones. Furthermore, there are far too many quotations, which add little to the author’s argument

in specific sections. It is commendable that quotations in the French original are appended to translated passages, but it is hardly necessary in most instances, where translations on their own would certainly suffice. Original versions should accompany only the most noteworthy and debatable passages, phrases, and words.

Adadurov's monograph abounds with a wealth of empirical data, and it relies on strong theoretical underpinnings. Fundamentally, it is a remarkable achievement of Ukrainian historiography. The writing style is engaging as the author winds through and uncovers complex diplomatic and military topics and issues while at the same time ensuring that the subject matter is accessible to a broad audience. This book should be read by historians of the Napoleonic wars as well as by scholars interested in imperial Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian histories.

Serhiy Bilenky

Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, Toronto Office, University of Alberta

Works Cited

- Adadurov, Vadym. *"Napoleonida" na skhodi levropy: Uiavlennia, proekty ta diial'nist' uriadu Frantsii shchodo pivdenno-zakhidnykh okrain Rosiis'koi imperii na pochatku XIX stolittia*. 1st ed., Vydavnytstvo Ukrains'koho Katolyts'koho Universytetu, 2007.
- Borschak, Élie [published as Elie Bortchak]. "Napoléon et l'Ukraine" ["Napoleon and Ukraine"]. *Revue des études Napoléoniennes* [*Napoleonic Studies Review* (Paris)], Edouard Driault, director, Jean Bourguignon, editor-in-chief, year 11, vol. 19, July–Dec. 1922, pp. 24–40.
- [published as Il'ko Borshchak]. *Napoleon i Ukraina: Z nevidomykh dokumentiv iz tohochasnykh iliustratsiiamy*. Foreword by Eduard Drio [Edouard Driault], Vydavnycha Spilka "Dilo," 1937. Biblioteka "Dila" 19. *Chtyvo elektronna biblioteka*, <https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=https%3A%2F%2Fshron1.chtyvo.org.ua%2FBorschak%2FNapoleon%2FiUkraina.pdf>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2022.
- Chaplin, Charlie, director. *The Great Dictator*. Charles Chaplin Film Corporation, 1940.
- Doroshenko, Dmytro. *Narys istorii Ukrainy: Vid polovyny XVII stolittia*. Foreword by Oleksander Ohloblyn, 2nd (reprint) ed., Vydavnytstvo "Dniprova Khvyliia," 1966. Vol. 2 of *Narys istorii Ukrainy*, 2 vols. in 1 bk. *Diasporiana.org.ua elektronna biblioteka*, <https://diasporiana.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/books/2426/file.pdf>. Accessed 4 Feb. 2022.
- Musil, Robert. *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* [*The Man without Qualities*]. Rowohlt Verlag, 1930–43. 3 vols.
- Ohloblyn, Oleksander. *Liudy Staroi Ukrainy*. Vydavnytstvo "Dniprova Khvyliia," 1959. *Diasporiana.org.ua elektronna biblioteka*, <https://diasporiana.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/books/148/file.pdf>. Accessed 4 Feb. 2022.