

A Nation in Arms:
Popular Resistance to Napoleon in Spain

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This thesis is dedicated to my history teachers at BUA.
Without your dedication and interest, this might have been about toe fungus.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
THE INVASION OF SPAIN	6
THE ORIGINS OF RESISTANCE	8
GUERRILLA WARFARE	14
OTHER POPULAR RESPONSES: ZARAGOZA	28
AFTER THE WAR	33
BIBLIOGRAPHY	36

Introduction

France's defeat in Spain marked one of the most important moments of the Napoleonic Wars. While the French Empire came to an end as a direct result of the more dramatic losses in Russia, Napoleon himself wrote that "it was the Spanish ulcer" that doomed his reign, sapping the empire of the manpower and determination that it would need in the coming years.¹ While most of the tactical victories in Spain were won by the Allied army of the Duke of Wellington, a significant role was played by the population of Spain, whose hit-and-run tactics gave guerrilla warfare its name. Time and again, the French were forced to deal with widespread popular efforts against their rule in Spain, eventually losing enough troops that they were forced to withdraw from Iberia.

Regardless of the strategic merits of the guerrilla movement, its mere appearance was an important event in European history. Less than twenty years after the French revolution, much of Europe was still under rule of monarchs, many of whom thought of their subjects as tools in the hands of the crown. Without any say in government, the residents of many countries had little sense of nationality, while France (where the formal mode of address was 'citizen') could boast

¹ Gates, David. *The Spanish Ulcer: A History of the Peninsular War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986), 468.

of a patriotism engendered by the common ownership that all Frenchmen felt. When determined and violent revolt spread across Spain, it marked one of the first moments when another country demonstrated the same intensity of patriotism that France had enjoyed for so long. But unlike the French, Spanish unity has often been questioned by historians, who contend that the resistance was neither as patriotic nor as effective as it seemed. By exploring the origins, methods, and aftermath of the resistance, I hope to more accurately determine its importance as a nationalist movement in Spanish history.

The Invasion of Spain

In the first months of 1808, Spain and France were technically allies, the product of a treaty signed several years before the battle of Trafalgar in 1805. After Trafalgar, Spanish usefulness to Napoleon had diminished greatly, and he saw little reason to put up with such a lukewarm ally as the Spanish had become. Pretending to attack Portugal under the guise of the alliance, Napoleon moved thousands of his troops into Spain, finally ordering them to attack after it became clear the Spanish Bourbons, led by King Charles IV and his son Prince Fernando VII, were not workable allies.

Even before they moved to the attack, French soldiers were not welcome in Spain. The Revolutionary armies were short on food, and French troops, many of whom were green and ill-disciplined, engaged in numerous episodes of pillaging. When the peasants heard of their atrocities, French foragers began to disappear one by one. Still, guerrilla bands were unheard of, and most of the people held out hope that the French armies really were meant for the subjugation of Portugal, even though their numbers were increasingly too large for this purpose.²

² Lovett, Gabriel. Napoleon and the Birth of Modern Spain, Vol. I (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 136-9

When Napoleon finally ordered his troops to invade, the situation changed drastically. After a complex series of events which culminated in the abdication of King Charles and the imprisonment of Prince Fernando, the heir to the throne, Joseph Bonaparte was proclaimed King, and he entered Madrid in a royal procession. Long a favorite of the masses, the loss of Fernando was seen as the ultimate national insult, and King Joseph's triumphal entry was a quiet and resented affair, many citizens choosing to hang rags outside of their houses instead of the proscribed bunting and flowers. For the time being, Spanish resistance waned, despite the fact that many Spanish armies remained unbeaten in the more remote areas of the country. Like most other Europeans without their king on the throne, most Spaniards simply thought the war was over.³

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Ibid, 130.

The Origins of Resistance

The insurgency was eventually touched off by a universal sense of national insult at Napoleon's cavalier treatment of the monarchy, but its resolve was only strengthened by the actions of the French troops and military authorities. Most of the emperor's best troops were engaged in occupying Germany and Italy, and the vast majority of the French soldiers in Spain were recruits, the last men to be selected by conscription. These green troops were not suited to the occupation of a hostile country, and they were little helped by the tactics of their generals, who seemed particularly adept at attracting the hatred of the peasantry.⁴

One of the greatest advantages enjoyed by Napoleon's armies was their mobility. His forces travelled with much reduced baggage trains, preferring to scavenge the countryside for food instead of bringing it with them by the ton. While this meant that his armies travelled faster and had fewer supply lines to protect, it also meant that a significant portion of his generals' attention was constantly devoted to finding food. Large concentrations of troops could easily strip the land bare for miles around an encampment, and foraging parties would often move far out on the wings

⁴ Charles Esdaile. *The Wars of Napoleon*. (New York: Longman Group, 1995), 122.

of a marching army, searching for granaries and ranches with large quantities of portable food. This strategy had worked well in most of the rest of Europe, but in Spain it only hurt the French. Just like most other Europeans, Spanish peasants were hardly excited to give up their year's supply of food, especially to the disrespectful French. Many villagers and landowners who had been hesitant to risk resistance were convinced when they found themselves with ransacked barns and trampled fields. Soon, French armies were having trouble finding food, as the Spanish did their best to hide all of their goods, even burning their wheat so as to deny it to the French. The French armies were still able to survive, but the diminished amounts of available food meant that larger armies were forced to either spread out over a large area or divide their forces, weakening the striking power of the French even as they sent additional divisions into Spain over the Pyrenees.⁵

But aside from the repercussions of their aggressive food policies, the French failed to make themselves popular in any other areas of life. The devoutly Catholic Spaniards resented the anticlerical leanings of many French soldiers who showed little respect for established services, defrocking priests and on several occasions driving parishioners out of churches during mass. Because of these actions, God was seen as being on the side of the Spanish, and many priests and monks became leaders of the resistance. More than any

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Ibid, 125

invasion before it, the French invasion was an attack by the whole people of France. Because of the republican roots of the Revolution, it was not considered just another instance of the French king fighting the Spanish king; this was Napoleon and the people of France uniting to conquer Spain. Every soldier could be held personally responsible for the invasion. Incited by the grating tactics of the French occupiers and feeling a deep antipathy towards the French as a nation, the Spanish felt that they had little choice but to fight. ⁶

The months of building tension finally came to a head on May 2nd, when the French took Prince Fernando and his family out of Madrid with the intention of placing them under house arrest in France. Just as in the rest of Spain, the French had busily worn out any welcome they might have had. Ever since the abdication of King Charles, Prince Fernando was seen as the true King of Spain, and his removal from Madrid overcame the city's remaining reticence. Having known about Fernando's planned deportation for several days in advance, peasants from the countryside streamed into Madrid by the thousands, overcrowding the streets with throngs anxious to see their prince before he left. When carriages pulled up outside the royal residence, a huge crowd formed in the plaza, chanting anti-French slogans and needing little further provocation to revolt. Murat, the French Marshal in charge of the Madrid garrison, was quick to provide that provocation, sending a

⁶ Lovett, 135.

battalion of troops, including an artillery battery, into the square, whereupon they opened fire on the crowd of Madridians (*madrileños*). Leaving behind dozens of dead and wounded, the survivors spread through Madrid, and soon much of the city was filled with enraged mobs hunting down French soldiers. Flower pots were thrown from windows, merchants took old pistols from their closets, and peasants in from the countryside used knives and hunting pieces to kill as many Frenchmen as they could find. Even with superior weaponry and far superior organization, the French took three days to end the uprising and restore order in Madrid. ⁷

By May 4th, almost 1,000 people on both sides were dead, and word of the angry revolt of the *madrileños* had spread throughout the country. Couriers read a proclamation by the *junta* (council) of Madrid calling for armed resistance and revenge, and the second of May was eventually declared a national holiday. The war, heretofore contained to isolated abductions and knifings of Frenchmen, suddenly became a struggle based (at least in name) on national and religious pride. Except in the middle of the country, where French troop concentrations were so large as to preclude resistance, regional councils began organizing peasants and recruiting the help of the remaining units of the Spanish army. Regional governors reluctant to support the resistance were threatened and cajoled by insurgent leaders, and soon the

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Ibid, 145-149.

revolt against Napoleon was official, with many provinces signing mutual aid treaties with the British.⁸

While few historians would disagree with the sequence of events just described, the effectiveness and unity of the subsequent resistance is often questioned. Nevertheless, it is important to note that from the beginning, the Spanish insurgency was never any sort of regionalist uprising. Spain was well-known for regionalism; some parts of the country did not even consider Spanish their official language. In the following passage, Gabriel Lovett expounds upon the precise nature of anti-French feeling:

Because of the lack of a unifying authority it was only natural that the revolution should proceed upon provincial lines. Every province in revolt formed its own supreme Junta, and juntas whose geographical location made it possible entered into communication with Great Britain as if each one were a sovereign power. It would be a mistake, however, to consider this seemingly independent activity, as some historians have done, as a sign of provincial separatism and a lack of an all-embracing national feeling among the people of Spain. Asturians did not challenge Napoleon solely as Asturians, Catalans did not rise against France primarily as Catalans, and Zaragozans did not forget that they were, above all, Spaniards when they declared war on France. Their faith was the faith of all Spaniards, their King was Fernando VII, king of all Spain, and there was but one, indivisible *patria*, Spain. (172)⁹

⁸ Ibid, 154.

⁹ Ibid, 158.

As Lovett says, Spanish resistance was very much *Spanish*, an important fact if we are to study the reality of the Peninsular War. Of course, this outbreak of national feeling was no guarantee that all involved had pure motives, and such a reaction would hardly be important without results. Over the next six years of war, did the Spanish keep their nationalistic fervor? Did this support remain widespread? Historians have more disparate answers to questions such as these.

Guerrilla Warfare

For many authors, the primary lessons of the Peninsular War come from guerrilla warfare, the success of which is understandably difficult to analyze. Unlike traditional warfare, victory in guerrilla campaigns is never achieved through single moments of battlefield superiority, and almost by definition clearly identifiable turning points are scarce. Success cannot be measured merely by comparing the numbers of dead on each side, and the disparity of force between guerilla and occupier can only tell part of the story. In the end, the success of a guerrilla campaign is probably best determined by the overall outcome of the war. Unfortunately, the Peninsular War was not fought only by guerrillas, which makes their impact on the outcome difficult to analyze. Far more Spaniards fought in conventional armies than in guerrilla bands, and both forces were aided by the presence of a superbly trained and equipped British expeditionary force led by Sir Arthur Wellesley, whose success in Spain led to his appointment as the Duke of Wellington. Without either the Spanish or British armies, it is no stretch of the imagination to say that the French would have won handily. But what about the guerrillas? Were they as essential to the war effort? Disagreements on this topic have come to symbolize much of the writing about the Peninsular War.

The first guerrillas originated soon after the revolt of the 2nd of May, and their numbers grew steadily during the following months. Guerrilla bands varied greatly in size; some were as large as several thousand, while most were made up of fewer than a hundred fighters. Guerrillas came from all walks of life. Some of the most famous guerrillas were priests; others were military officers, farmers, criminals, or deserters from the regular armies. While most guerrillas armed themselves with household hunting weapons, it was not uncommon for bands to be sponsored by noblemen, who gave the fighters weapons, food, and clothing. Many guerrillas also armed themselves with the muskets of fallen Frenchmen, sometimes wearing French uniforms as trophies of victory. Guerrillas operated continuously until the cessation of hostilities in early 1814, and were responsible for a significant fraction of all French deaths in Iberia. The exact size of that fraction, like most other issues concerning the origins and effectiveness of the guerrilla campaign, is under debate.¹⁰

As might be expected, historians with different motivations for writing will often have the most disparate views. For example, Charles Esdaile's *The Wars of Napoleon* is critical of the success of the guerrilla campaigns, perhaps owing to the fact that his book concentrates on the entire flow of the Napoleonic Wars. On the other hand, one of the most flattering accounts of the irregulars in Spain comes

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Esdaile, 132.

from Robert Asprey's *War in the Shadows*, a sweeping history of guerrilla warfare. Authors disagree on the motivations of the guerrillas, their military importance, the strength of their allegiance, and by extension, the reasons for which the Spanish took the field against Napoleon.

As one of the more complimentary commentators on guerrilla war in Spain, Robert Asprey's introduction to *War in the Shadows* gives a key insight into the motivation behind his account of the Peninsular War: "War in the Shadows is an attempt to explain the Vietnam Conflict in the historical terms of guerilla warfare." Writing in 1975, Asprey's book is clearly something of a justification for the recent success of nationalist guerrillas against overwhelming American material superiority. In keeping with this viewpoint, Asprey is understandably ebullient, asserting that "explosive nationalism" blew the guerrilla bands into existence, with their expansion owing mostly to nationalistic fervor. For example, even after the French began a program of executing leading citizens as revenge for guerrilla attacks, Asprey gives special attention to an appeal for recruits that was "justified almost solely by an appeal to patriotism."¹¹

While he thinks that their motivations were correct, Asprey also accords the guerrillas a large role in the French defeat, even going so far as to say that "much of

¹¹ Asprey, Robert. *War in the Shadows*(New York: Doubleday, 1975), *xi*, 139, 145.

Wellington's tactical success stemmed from [guerrilla activity]." Asprey's guerrillas deprived the French of taxes and food, "interdicted" French communications across much of Spain, and often even attacked French troop formations, inflicting heavy losses on several occasions. These accomplishments are impressive, and many are indisputable. However, it is difficult to call Asprey entirely unbiased, as he sometimes ignores points that are not helpful to his argument. For example, while quick to detail that a single attack killed over two hundred Frenchmen, he fails to provide the numbers of guerilla dead and wounded.¹²

For Asprey, French efforts to curb guerrilla activity were mainly counterproductive. Tens and even hundreds of thousands of French troops were uselessly tied down in garrison duty across the country, even as Wellesley was winning victories against French armies desperate for additional manpower. At times, it seems as if Asprey thinks the guerrillas were almost fighting Wellington's battles for him.

This view of events is not corroborated by all historians. Writing about the guerrilla effort as part of his compendium *The Wars of Napoleon*, Charles Esdaile takes a different tack, considering the guerrillas to be far more symptomatic of Spain's divided class structure than of any strong antipathy to the French:

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Ibid, 142.

All over Spain dissatisfied elements of all sorts now seized the chance to secure revenge or to advance themselves or their ideas. Thus, ultramontane clergymen eager to restore the property of the church and disaffected magnates who wished to revive the power of the nobility came together with Jansenists and liberals who wanted, not to turn the clock back, but rather to sweep aside the barriers that hindered further reform. Underpinning both were groups such as the subaltern officers of the army whose lowly origins . . . stood in the way of their promotion, and tenant farmers, landless labourers and the urban poor...it is therefore clear that the series of uprisings that now broke out all over the unoccupied regions of Spain had a powerful domestic interest.¹³

The motivations of many guerrilla leaders are difficult to establish, given that all of the guerrillas' public declarations were couched in lofty patriotic language. Beyond the fact that few of the thousands of guerrilla battles have been recorded, their words have also often been lost, and unlike Asprey, Esdaile mistrusts those that have survived.

Instead of concentrating on the guerrillas as forerunners of Vietnam, Esdaile is interested in their role in the continent-wide efforts against Napoleon, particularly in terms of the origins and efficacy of guerrilla operations. On both counts, he makes far more conservative judgments than does Asprey. Esdaile cautions that "In none of the revolts is there any trace of modern political consciousness, whilst serious doubts can be entertained as to their military

¹³ Esdaile, 127.

importance" (Esdaile, 109). Esdaile credits repressive French tactics as being the sole instigator of popular resistance, and denies any lasting nationalistic fervor ever became a part of guerrilla operations. Citing steep increases in taxation and strong local loyalties, Esdaile argues that the Spanish were only motivated by patriotism at the immediate beginning of the war, after which guerrilla activity died down for a time. Furthermore, he reasonably downplays the real effectiveness of the guerrilla warriors, saying that "what saved Spain was the presence of Wellington's well-disciplined and highly-trained regular army in Portugal. Indeed, had Wellington's troops not been there it is difficult to see how defeat could have been avoided." Esdaile tempers Asprey's arguments for the necessity of the guerrillas by saying that even though guerrillas drew French armies away from Wellington, Wellington's forces also deprived the French of the ability to suppress the guerrillas, as they no doubt could have done.

Also in opposition to Asprey, Esdaile contends that Spanish fighters never succeeded in halting the movements of French troops, and does not mention any successful confrontations with regular formations. Esdaile is nevertheless ready to concede that the guerrillas sometimes played an important role in the fighting. Echoing *War in the Shadows* almost word for word, he says that in the Spanish province of Galicia, "the French only controlled the ground they occupied." He also allows that the guerrillas, admittedly helped by the nearby presence of the British army, succeeded in occupying huge numbers of French troops in

frustrating police duty. Still, Esdaile is no believer in the usefulness of the guerrillas, and even posits that many guerrillas would have been put to better use in the regular armies from which they were often deserters.¹⁴

For Esdaile, there is little unique or important about the Spanish resistance. No doubt, he would have agreed with this quote from the Spanish Novelist Benito Perez Galdos: "That and nothing more than that constitutes guerrilla warfare, that is to say, the country in arms, the territory, geography itself, taking up arms."¹⁵ Because both the Tyrolean and Italian resistance movements occurred mainly in broken, desolate, ambush-friendly territory, he thinks that such resistance would have hardly even begun had Spain not also been such a suitable nation for guerrilla campaigns. Perhaps because he sees the guerrillas in terms of the continent-wide effort to defeat Napoleon, Esdaile is leery of giving them too much credit, instead preferring to consider them similar to the other resistance movements against the French.¹⁶

Unfortunately, both Esdaile and Asprey have used the Peninsular War as a piece in a greater argument. Esdaile spends only a fraction of a chapter on Spanish guerrilla resistance to Napoleon, and attempts to relate their success to similar movements in the Austrian Tyrol and Italy.

¹⁴ Esdaile, 137, 139.

¹⁵ Perez-Galdos, Benito. *Juan Martin El Empecinado* (Madrid, 1950), 54-55.

¹⁶ Esdaile, 125-137.

Similarly, Asprey's guerrillas are only a link in a chain of successful guerrillas that stretches from prehistoric times all the way to Vietnam. Perhaps symptomatic of the difficulty of analyzing guerrilla campaigns, neither author seems much willing to acknowledge a great degree of difference between their various subjects. Similar limitations affected the work of Gabriel Lovett, whose two-volume *Napoleon and the Birth of Modern Spain* is not distracted by any focus on events outside of Iberia. Making use of his broad study of the war, Lovett attempts to place the guerrillas within the context of the system of resistance to the French, making sure to also consider the contributions of both the Spanish and British regular armies, something that Asprey's guerrilla history often fails to do. With this less limited view, Lovett still considers the guerrillas integral parts of the war effort, and he generally agrees with *War in the Shadows'* claims of patriotic motivation and military relevancy. According to Lovett, the vast majority of guerrillas were patriotic and took care of the people in their areas of operation, to the extent that many became impromptu police forces. Still, Lovett acknowledges many of Esdaile's points when he admits that one of the main reasons for the necessity of such vigilante justice was that many guerrillas were also scoundrels who—whatever their original motivations might have been—lapsed into petty banditry, demanding exorbitant protection payments from the villages in their area.¹⁷

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Lovett, 678.

Lovett never pretends that the guerrilla movement was anything more than a shockingly heterogeneous scattering of armed groups who owed little to central authority. He cites several examples of guerrillas who brought captured messages great distances in order to take advantage of the higher rates of reward in other provinces, ignoring the military benefits of quicker delivery. Similarly, many guerrilla leaders used their status as folk heroes to prey on villages, demanding far more money and food than they needed. Other guerrillas came and went as they pleased, accepting orders from their superiors only when they saw fit. There is no doubt that such selfishness set back the revolutionary cause in Spain, but as Lovett says, "the positive accomplishments of the irregulars, so far as national independence was concerned, overwhelmingly outweighed the negative aspects of the guerrilla war."¹⁸

In many provinces that were overrun with French troops, guerrillas were the only forces operating against the French, and Lovett is quick to emphasize their importance. Even guerrillas in militarily unimportant districts had to be quelled with increasingly precious French troops, and with Wellington already fighting against numerically superior French forces, any diversion of force was of great importance. Lovett places the total number of guerrillas in action at any given time between 35,000 and 50,000, numbers that are considerably smaller than those of the

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Lovett, 679.

Spanish army, which often contained single armies approaching that size. To be sure, the guerrillas were often beaten by quick-witted French counterattacks, but though “always beaten, [they were] never conquered, and when destroyed reformed at once.” (680) Citing a French officer (something seldom seen in the works of Esdaile and Asprey), Lovett notes that “The guerrillas...caused more losses to the French armies than all the regular troops during the war with Spain. During a period of 5 years they have killed more than 180,000 Frenchmen, without losing...more than 25,000.”¹⁹

But beyond their importance in a purely tactical sense, Lovett also stresses the importance of the guerrillas as a persistent disruption behind French lines. While their depredations forced the French to divert significant forces for the purpose of occupation, the guerrillas also helped their nation by speeding allied communication and interdicting the messages of the French. Wellington and his Spanish allies found it easy to communicate between their various encampments, and the guerrillas would often provide information as to the whereabouts of French forces nearby. “To carry messages or news,” Lovett quotes from the memoirs of a French soldier, “they employed agile and vigorous young men, whom they placed near every inhabited place and in a suitable spot. There was always one of them at his post, eyes open and ears cocked, and as soon as he

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Ibid, 680-683.

received his message he would dart across fields and hand it to a comrade...these messengers never fell into our hands.”(681) Messages travelled across French-controlled territory with ease, often arriving with the latest intelligence on French activity. Conversely, at times a single French messenger needed to be escorted by 200 cavalry just to ensure his safe arrival, with an attendant decrease in speed and efficiency. With such large forces necessary for each letter, fewer orders were sent, and those that made it to their destination were often delayed by the precautions of the escorting companies. At times, French forces travelling along the main highway to Madrid had to make a habit of constructing palisades every night to protect themselves from attack.²⁰

According to Lovett, military communications were not the only operations affected, as the civilian administration of Joseph Bonaparte ran into serious difficulties. Taxes were extraordinarily hard to collect, civilian governors feared for their lives when they ventured outside city gates, and authority seldom extended far beyond the musket range of the occupying troops. In 1810, the French Ambassador reported that “The guerrillas have become so numerous and so well trained...that they will be able...to hold...the whole countryside.”²¹ So much did the French fear the powerful guerrilla bands that one diplomatic convoy from France

²⁰ *Ibid*, 681.

²¹ *Ibid*, 685.

arrived at Madrid under the protection of over 4,000 soldiers and a battery of artillery.

Portraying the war as entirely successful or entirely irrelevant would be wrong, and for every author whose view of the war is negative, there are generally others who take the opposite view. For example, a British quartermaster with Wellington's army was confused by the complacency of many liberated towns, saying "it often looks as if Spain were not even willing to defend herself. In all the...towns the inhabitants lounge about in their hundreds, completely sunk in utter idleness. Is this the daring, patriotic and impetuous race about which the press has raved so bombastically?"²² In contrast, a French General had a much different view of the population, saying that the guerrillas were so powerful that "the pacification of Spain does not depend on a battle with the English...we are too widely scattered...we are clinging on to dreams."²³

Clearly, the guerrilla war was capable of giving different impressions to different observers, and it is difficult to turn observations of one area into statements about the conduct of the war across Spain. In terms of tactics, many authors have borne out Lovett's more balanced yet exuberant portrayal of the guerrillas. In *Wellington in the Peninsula*, Jac Weller credits the guerrillas for the salvation

²² A. Ludovici (ed.), *On the Road with Wellington: the Diary of a War Commissary in the Peninsular War* (New York, 1925), pp 79-80.

²³ Asprey, 146.

of the British army at its low ebb in 1811, also citing examples of tactical victories won by Wellington because of the intelligence brought to him by irregular observers. In an essay on tactics for replacing French troops, Don W. Alexander says that even in times when no major combat operations were taking place, thousands of French troops were dying every month in the most guerrilla-infested provinces, a rate of loss that the French struggled to make good. Other examples of individual successes abound, but perhaps more importantly, the actual motivation and conduct of the guerrillas is still called into question by many other authors.²⁴

For instance, the ever-skeptical Esdaile says that "If the revolts provoked a nationalist crusade against France, it followed that they too were 'national,' embodying a belief that people had the right to determine their own future and secure their political freedom. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth." Continuing this line of thought, Brian Hamnett contends that "In a large part of eastern and southern Spain the rebels fought as much against the...nobility, secular or ecclesiastic, as against the French themselves." Such arguments are foreign to Esdaile and Asprey, who staunchly uphold the nationalistic and unified nature of the resistance. Considering the difficult nature of

²⁴ Weller, Jac. Wellington in the Peninsula. London: Nicholas Vane, 1962., Don W. Alexander

Military Affairs, Vol. 44, No. 4. (Dec., 1980), pp. 192-197.

the guerrilla campaign, the exact truth on the subject may never be fully known. The guerrilla movement, while generally patriotically motivated and polite in conduct, was no different from any other body with such heterogeneity. There were certainly 'bad apples,' and one of the flaws in current research is that authors tend to focus on only the patriots or only the brigands, leaving little information concerning their relative prevalence. And so, in a fashion perhaps most fitting with guerrilla warfare, we must make an educated guess as to their overriding character.

While the guerrillas could hide in the hills to avoid their French pursuers, it was only in the towns and villages that they could find food, clothing, and medical help. Because of their continued survival, we can be sure to a certain degree that the population supported the guerrillas, and while they certainly could not share in the profits of their brigandage, they could share in the freedom that they were trying to win for Spain. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the guerrillas enjoyed a good reputation amongst the peasants and other country people, and were more often helpful than harmful to the cause of Spanish freedom.

Other Popular Responses: Zaragoza

Of course, the guerrilla war was not the only way that popular resistance to Napoleon was expressed. As we have seen, only around 50,000 guerrillas were active at any given time, a number that can seem inconsequential among the millions of Spain. Of course, this number hardly represents the real number of people who resisted Napoleon. Enough of the population helped the guerrillas that their continued survival was never in doubt, but beyond this, there is little available information concerning the general willingness of townsfolk and farmers to help. Most significantly, there are few reported instances of guerrillas being turned over to the French by the help of collaborators, suggesting that even when a household was unwilling to give the guerrillas their extra musket or surplus food, they were just as unwilling to tell the French anything about the wounded partisan hiding in the cellar of their neighbor.²⁵

In this way, many times the actual force of the guerrillas became involved in the conflict, although logistical support for the existing military was not always the only way that the populace could show their hatred for Napoleon. At times, the situation in besieged cities and towns became such that their inhabitants became involved in the struggle. On such occasions, the population often showed a resolve

²⁵ Lovett, 698-719.

that matched or sometime exceeded that of the local Spanish commanders, no example of which is quite as extreme as that of the battle of Zaragoza.

The capital of Aragon, Zaragoza was a city of almost 60,000 on the banks of the Ebro, one of the principal rivers of Spain. By July 1808, the city was threatened by a French army that had broken through one of the paltry regular forces thrown together after the 2nd of May and taken up positions outside the city. With only about 1,000 regular troops at his disposal, the Spanish commander in Zaragoza left in the night, leaving the population to its own devices. The French commander thought the battle over and was preparing to enter the city in a triumphal parade, only to bring his plans to a halt after potshots from the city outskirts killed several men from his honor guard. He sent a detachment of cavalry into the city, but upon riding into the city square they were assaulted by a huge mob, and only a few of them survived to bring the news back to the French lines. Puzzled, the French commander ordered a frontal assault, still expecting only minimal resistance. But just a short distance inside the city, the French columns were almost stopped dead. Gabriel Lovett describes the scene:

General Lefebvre-Desnouettes could not believe his eyes. Civilians stiffened by soldiers were offering incredible resistance to French troops! In the rest of Europe cities never fought on after a battle had decided the fate of an army, and in some instances no sooner had French cavalry appeared when the gates opened and the

Frenchmen entered in triumph. How different it was in this strange, incomprehensible country and especially here, at the walls of this insane Zaragoza! There were no submissive city magistrates, no obsequious citizens, no smiling damsels offering French officers the best of the town. There was cold fury, there was grapeshot, there were bullets and bristling bayonets.²⁶

The soldiers and civilians of Zaragoza's ragged defense force pushed the French back out of the city and forced them to begin a conventional siege, as if they were facing a real army. Zaragozans settled in for the long run, organizing the production of powder and rationing short supplies. After constructing a series of parallels and approach trenches, the French stormed the city and once more gained a foothold inside the walls, engaging in fierce house-to-house fighting with the inhabitants. Hundreds on each side died every day as the French slowly gained ground. After more than a week, as Spanish reinforcements flowed in and news came of a relieving army only a day's march away, the French withdrew, leaving behind more than 2,000 dead.²⁷

Zaragoza was not the only city in Spain to exhibit such a degree of popular fervor. Many other towns and cities successfully withstood sieges, and Gerona managed to break a siege after 8 months of encirclement, four times as long as Zaragoza. After a second siege the next year, in which two thirds of the defenders were killed or wounded, Zaragoza

²⁶ Ibid, 239.

²⁷ Ibid, 234-239.

surrendered and remained under French occupation for the rest of the war. Nevertheless, the message had been sent. Zaragoza highlighted the difference between war in Spain and war elsewhere. In all of France's wars, soldiers had never encountered resistance on such a popular level as in Spain. While they first and foremost fought to defend their town, the people of Zaragoza fought so hard because they hated the French, whose armies had never before been seen in Aragon. It is hard to ascribe such hard fighting to a regionalist view of the resistance. After all, much of the battle was fought by the Spanish regulars who garrisoned the city, most of whom were from nowhere near Aragon. During the siege there was no differentiation between noble and commoner, in marked contrast to the 2nd of May when many middle class *madrilènos* hid in their houses. All Zaragozans ate the same coarse bread and received the same ration of water, and some of the most extreme examples of heroism came from the upper classes. A countess was almost singlehandedly responsible for stopping the townspeople in her areas from fleeing during a low point in the battle, and returned to the fight herself, vowing to die rather than see her house captured. ²⁸

The rest of the country did not ignore Zaragoza, and rewards were heaped on its brave inhabitants. A special medal was commissioned for the defenders, all officers were promoted one rank, and all common soldiers received the

28

Ibid., 253

rank of sergeant. In addition, all of the inhabitants were given the rights of the nobility, and exempted from paying taxes for ten years after the end of the war. Spain saw the defense of Zaragoza as a sign of national pride, and clearly, the defenders were rewarded as such.

Zaragoza and its sister cities are a demonstration of the breadth of Spanish loathing of the French. For at least a short time, the peoples of these towns banded together and fought with an intensity that was not seen anywhere else in Europe. Moreover, the resistance of these cities and towns cannot be called the product of any special circumstances. There was no forbidding Spanish terrain to give refuge to guerrillas; there were only walls and houses that were much like the rest of Europe. More concretely and more surprisingly than the guerrillas, the heroic defenders of towns like Zaragoza prove the uniqueness of the Spanish resistance to Napoleon.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid, 233,234,256, 257.

After the War

Combined with the controversial guerrilla campaigns, the resistance of the populations in towns such as Zaragoza gives us an idea of the real ferocity of the war against the French. While doubts will probably always remain, we can be reasonably certain that the resistance to Napoleon was a truly national affair, with all segments of the population taking part. In many of the other countries Napoleon conquered, the war was seen as a conflict between Napoleon and the local king, with resistance only breaking out after the imposition of outrageous taxes and conscription. In Spain, the people viewed the war as an attack on the identity of the Nation itself, ironically echoing the popular response of the French revolution.

In December of 1813 Napoleon signed a treaty agreeing to evacuate all remaining troops from Spain, as long as British troops left the peninsula as well. Helped by the various contributions of the nationwide guerrilla movement, the British and Spanish armies succeeded in defeating the most powerful nation in Europe. After a disastrous defeat in Russia, Napoleon was now on his last legs, and would soon abdicate and be exiled to St. Helena.

Having united against France, Spain now had the opportunity to unite under the leadership of Fernando VII. Despite the promise of the unity demonstrated during the war, this task was to prove even more difficult. Ignoring the

decrees of the liberal assemblies convened in his absence, Fernando attempted a return to the absolutist government of his father, with disastrous results. Such an extreme form of rule only served to alienate many of Spain's most ardent wartime patriots, who found themselves at odds with a conservative establishment that was bent on returning to the old ways. By 1833 civil war had broken out between the liberal and conservative factions of government. The war lasted until 1838, and was followed by civil wars from 1845-1849, 1872-1876, and 1936-1939. For more than five years, the people of Spain had fought together against a common enemy, uniting in a way that only France had hitherto been able to do. Now it seemed as if any unity gained from the war was as transitory and fragile as the orange blossoms of Andalucía.

In the end, the popular resistance during the Peninsular War may have had a worse legacy in Spain than in France, as many of its greatest strengths became weaknesses in peacetime. Some of the most celebrated leaders of the fight against Napoleon were guerrillas, who almost by definition owed nothing to any central authority, and had little experience taking orders from anyone. While there may have been an overarching patriotism that smoothed out differences, the war did not leave behind the legacy of cooperation that it could have, and many people no doubt felt disenfranchised by the new government, especially after the comparative freedom of the war years. Even had there been a more developed national government by the

end of the war, Fernando would almost certainly have disbanded it, breaking most of the ties of unity and making Spain once again vulnerable to internal dissension.

The success and widespread nature of the popular resistance to the French laid the groundwork for the civil wars of the following years. While the French provided a common enemy, the disappearance of that enemy left behind a country that was no more unified than before. Like the French Revolution, the Peninsular War created a new class of people who were passionately invested in the government and success of their country. Unfortunately, it did not create any lasting means for these people to have their voices heard. By showing so many Spaniards the benefits of guerrilla warfare while denying them any other outlet for their post-war grievances, the Peninsular War created an atmosphere that only invited more conflict.

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