

THE SPANISH WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

In 1804, an outstanding personality of Corsican origin crowned himself Emperor of France taking the title of Napoleon I, thus putting an end to twelve years of republican misgovernance. Three years later, the Emperor had defeated the Austrians, Prussians and Russians in a series of legendary battles - Austerlitz, Jena, Eylau and Friedland and transformed himself into the most powerful man in Europe. For Napoleon, 1807 was the year in which he would set out to defeat the only power that could thwart his grandiose schemes...Great Britain. After all, he along with his then ally Spain, had been defeated at Trafalgar two years earlier. Napoleon realised that a military confrontation against Great Britain would be the fight between an elephant and a whale, hence only economic pressure could bring the British to their knees. On the 17th December 1807 he signed the Milan Decree, which declared Europe closed to British commerce.

Portugal, traditionally an ally of Great Britain, was one of the countries that ignored the Imperial decree. This caused Napoleon to force Spain to allow the French

Army, consisting of some twenty-six thousand men, to traverse the Iberian Peninsular to invade Portugal. The army, under the command of General Jean Andoche Junot, took Lisbon on the 1st of December and the Portuguese royal family fled to Brazil.

Napoleon had organised it in this way to introduce French troops into the allied kingdom of Spain, a country that had become one of the main smuggling centres thus undermining the economic war against Great Britain. Furthermore, Napoleon had little trust in the Bourbon king and even less in his right-hand man Godoy, who he knew would betray him at the first opportunity. In consequence, he decided that Spain should meet with the same fate as Portugal. The weakness of the Spanish monarchy facilitated Napoleon's plans that began by naming Marshal Joachim Murat as Lieutenant General of the kingdom. With this, France began its blatant interference in Spanish affairs. Murat arrived in Madrid on 23rd March 1808, while the pathetic royal family was embroiled in an internal fight for the throne. Five days earlier, the heir to the



The executions at Príncipe Pío. Oil on canvas by Francisco de Goya, 1814.



The 2nd of May. The defense of Monteleón Park was one of the most dramatic episodes of the 2nd of May. Oil on canvas by Joaquín Sorolla, 1884.

throne had provoked the riot of Aranjuez, a devastating blow for the state and which precipitated the fall of Charles IV in favour of his son, crowned Ferdinand VII on the 19th of March.

All these events made the Spanish throne accessible to Napoleon. It only remained to remove the two aspirants to the throne from the Spanish scene. To achieve this, he invited Charles and Ferdinand to a meeting at Bayonne, promising them assistance to each in becoming King of Spain. Once there, Napoleon forced Ferdinand to return the throne to his father who then renounced it in favour of Napoleon who in turn promptly named his brother Joseph as King of Spain.

This shameless interference was a grave mistake. Provoking a war with Spain was not a good idea. While

it was the case that the Spanish royal family was totally servile to Napoleon, when he overthrew it all hell broke loose. Admittedly, both the king and his heir were absolutely incompetent but this time the Spanish people preferred to have a useless king of their own rather than a more competent one imposed by a foreign power.

On the 2nd of May 1808 in Madrid, the French tried to force the youngest member of the Spanish royal family,



The people of Madrid fighting near El Prado. 19th Century Engraving.

THE GUERRILLA REGIONS AND THEIR LEADERS

Andalusia

The victory of the Spanish troops at Bailén on the 19th of July 1808 unleashed patriotic euphoria throughout Andalusia and heartened the civilians who watched by the side of the road as files of French prisoners passed by to Cadiz. The people of Andalusia greeted the defeated and disarmed soldiers with stones, insults and looks of hatred; the Spanish soldiers charged with escorting them were barely able to protect them. On the 7th of December in Lebrija, the situation became out of control. Here, some three hundred French troops belonging to General Pryve's Dragoon Brigade were also being held prisoner. A series of misunderstandings led the French to fear an attack from the neighbourhood, which turned into a prisoner uprising. This fear turned to fury and the people of Lebrija launched themselves against the French, killing thirty of them, nearly half of whom were officers and non-commissioned officers. Among them was Jean Baptiste Baron, a veteran of many campaigns who had been awarded the Legion of Honour in 1804. It was a sad way for a military man to die, assassinated without his sabre in hand, a nightmare that had nothing to do with a battle where one gave his life for the Emperor on the battlefield.

Once the Bailén prisoners had been transported to the island of Cabrera, Andalusia remained free of the French during almost the whole of 1809, which is why the Andalusia guerrilla phenomenon occurred a little later than in other Spanish regions. But after the Spanish debacle at Ocaña, the French opened the gates to Andalusia once again and then guerrilla groups really came out into the Spanish daylight, particularly those of Francisco Gonzalez, "El Manquetero", Juan Marmol, Andres Ortiz de Zarate, the priest Clemente of Arriba, José Romero, Rafael Panizo "El Cortaorejas" and so on, until there were about a hundred groups.

Aragon

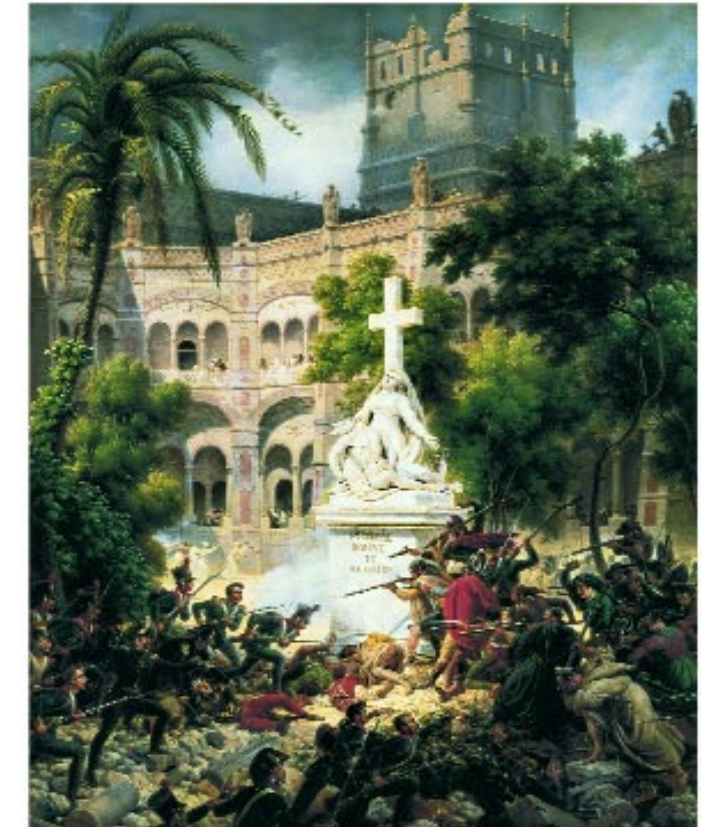
The heroic resistance shown by the people of Zaragoza during the French sieges of 1808 and 1809 and the ensuing tragedy provided plenty enough reason to dispose of siblings in other parts of Aragon to take arms. These often centred around the survivors of the tragedy that took place in the capital, who had decided to avenge the horrors they had experienced. The first groups in this region appeared in the Calatayud hills and the nearby towns of Huesca and Barbastro. The first group, that of Pedro



Surrender at Bailén. Dupont surrenders his army to General Castaños. Painting by José Casado del Alisal, 1864.



Agustina Saragossa y Domènech, called Agustina de Aragón. Spanish heroine at the Siege of Zaragoza. Painting by Lucio Rivas.



Attacking the Santa Engracia Monastery. Episode that took place on the 8th of February, 1809 at Zaragoza. Painting by Louis François Lejeune, 1809.

Antón Juárez, was formed in Aragon and ended tragically in 1810, when its leaders were surprised at night, captured and executed.

However, most of the Aragon groups managed to escape the French anti-guerrilla units and some even dared to penetrate French territory, massacring their compatriots who had collaborated with the enemy on the other side of the Pyrenees.

Among the Aragon guerrilla leaders, there were some who already had experience in these matters, leaders such as Felipe Perena y Casayus and Pedro Villacampa, who had fought during the War of Convention. Of course, there were also guerrilla priests such as Lorenzo Barber and Friar Teobaldo Rodriguez, among others. The remainder were people from all walks of life, who joined the fight, like Miguel Domper, the priest Francisco Sarto and the potter, Manuel Alegre, plus many more.



Juan Díaz Porlier, nicknamed "El Marquesito" due to a supposed ancestry with the Marques of La Romana, 19th Century engraving.

Asturias

Juan Díaz Porlier, also known as "El Marquesito", began his adventures bearing witness to the disaster of the French-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar. After such a talked-about marine defeat, Porlier applied to be transferred to the army and by 1806 he was stationed in his new post as captain of the Mallorcan Regiment. In May 1808, Porlier formed part of the Extremadura Army troops heading towards Northern Spain. He took part in the battle of Gamonal and when he became aware of the imminent Spanish defeat, he managed to retreat with his battalion that had suffered some four hundred losses during the battle. He and his men took refuge in the Burgos mountains. While here, they decided to form a guerrilla group in the Asturian mountains, exasperated by the Spanish armies' defeats on the battlefields.

THE GUERRILLAS AND BRITISH MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

At the end of the war, Wellington never conceded recognition of any kind of military merit to the Spanish but wrote in reference to the guerrillas: "(...) They obliged the French to fortify each and every town and village of the country, they intercepted the convoys carrying provisions destined for the enemy stores, killed unfocusedly and from time to time captured the food convoys. They made enemy communications very difficult, frequently cutting them off completely for weeks at an end".

It was probably this last guerrilla act, that of impeding the enemy communications that provided the greatest benefit to the British general. While the French had overall numerical superiority in the Peninsular, the British could count on people prepared to provide them

with information throughout the territory where the French troops were moving. It was highly unlikely that anyone chose to collaborate with the French troops, for fear of reprisal that the guerrillas inflicted on any collaborator. Hence, one of the greatest weapons of the British in the Peninsular was its military intelligence supported by guerrilla activity. The guerrillas captured French messengers in spite of the fact that the Marshals, aware of the problem, assigned them large escorts. Afterwards, the guerrilla groups handed the captured messages over to the Army Guides, a diverse group of soldiers made up of Spanish, Portuguese and deserters from the French army of Italian origin, Swiss and Irish that were recruited for their knowledge of the terrain and Spanish language and who were responsible for



The entrance of the Duke of Wellington in Salamanca, centre of his spy network, on the 16th of June 1812. 19th Century colour engraving by Jenkins.

carrying the captured messages to General Wellington's barracks. Once there, Captain George Scovell, the officer in command of the Army Guides and gifted with both a great intellect and an enormous capacity for learning languages, received the messages and embarked upon the task of deciphering the secret codes used by the French in their communications.

However, Scovell's vital task could never have been carried out without the guerrillas' continuous ambushes, always lying in wait for passing Imperial mail. Hence, in October 1810, the British began to pay the guerrilla leader Julián Sánchez in silver coin and weapons (light cavalry sabres and light cannons), so that he would redouble his efforts in the task of intercepting enemy communications. The following year, Julián Sánchez' men were assigned to Captain Scovell's Army Guides. Thus, what had begun as a Scovell party in the west of the province of Salamanca had been transformed into a body of scouts in service of the British Empire. Sánchez's guerrillas did not restrict themselves to capturing Imperial messengers, but also visited the towns and cities to meet with informers, who always had some important news for Wellington scribbled on scraps of paper. One of the most important information centres was in Salamanca, from where the Professor of Natural History and Astronomy and rector of the Irish College, Patricio Cortes, controlled a spy network that extended throughout the whole of Spain. Moreover, he was in permanent contact with the guerrillas to provide them with whatever piece of information that may be of relevance to Wellington.

This collaboration between some of the guerrilla units and the British forces is one of the least known aspects of the War of Independence and a key episode to support the theory that guerrillas were widespread and varied greatly from band to band. It is impossible to give a simplistic vision of such a complex world. In this world of spies, encoded messages

Wellington's triumphant entrance into Madrid. 19th Century engraving.



Portrait of Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, attributed to William Etty. 19th Century.

and churchmen carrying out subversive activities, the guerrillas acquired a dimension that far exceeded the image of flea-ridden half savages dedicated to the assassination of the first Frenchman who dared to look him in the face.