
Pro Rege

Volume 6 | Number 2

Article 2

December 1977

Running Sore: An Inquiry into Napoleon's Peninsular Campaign (Part Three)

Louis Y. Van Dyke
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Van Dyke, Louis Y. (1977) "Running Sore: An Inquiry into Napoleon's Peninsular Campaign (Part Three)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 6: No. 2, 2 - 7.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol6/iss2/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

"The Running Sore": An Inquiry Into Napoleon's Peninsular Campaign

(Part Three)

by Louis Y. Van Dyke
Professor of History



Louis Y. Van Dyke received the M.A. degree in history from the University of Washington and the Doctor of Arts degree from the University of North Dakota. Dr. Van Dyke is a member of the Conference on Faith and History and of the Organization of American Historians. He taught for nine years in Christian schools on the elementary and secondary levels before joining the staff at Dordt College.

In the last two issues of *Pro Rege* we examined the impact of geography, people, and military strategy as factors contributing to Napoleon's defeat in the Iberian Peninsula. In this last installment we will consider the role played by the "Little Corporal" himself, as well as that of his immediate subordinates in the collapse of French hegemony in Spain and Portugal.

The Emperor and the Marshals

The French campaigns began rather badly in Spain with two military disasters. In June 1808, Dupont, while attempting a march upon Seville, was caught by the Spanish at Baylen, and he surrendered a force of 18,000 men that had not put up much resistance. Then, in August, Junot was forced out of Portugal by Wellington.

France had not sustained military reverses of this magnitude since Napoleon had become Emperor; and he knew that to recover personal and national prestige he would have to take a hand himself.¹ Napoleon was not going to take any chances, however. Since prestige was involved, his campaign would have to be an unbroken series of triumphs. For this reason he gathered a force of 250,000 troops, a larger force than necessary, he assumed, in order to make quick work of the Spaniards and to push them off the Peninsula before the end of the year. Furthermore, a quick, victorious campaign would discourage any possibility of Austrian intervention on the side of Spain, and Austria seemed to be the only potential political problem in 1808.²

But Napoleon was present in Spain for only about three months out of the

five years that his forces saw action there. In October and November 1808, he conducted a sweeping campaign into Madrid, routed the Spanish, chased the English forces of Sir John Moore into Galicia, and then departed for France, leaving his subordinates to complete the task of subjugating the rest of the Peninsula.

There is some disagreement as to why Napoleon left Spain. Oman argues that possible intrigue or conspiracy in Paris during his absence, and the threat of possible war with Austria because of the disasters of Dupont and Junot caused him to return to France. It was not, Oman states, that Napoleon foresaw that the Spanish problem would require a long time to solve, and that he therefore wished to let others assume the distasteful task as well as the blame for the errors committed. Oman says that this argument does not make sense for the simple reason that in 1808 Napoleon did not recognize the seriousness of the Spanish insurrection. At that time the Emperor believed that the conflict in Spain would end soon. J. M. Thompson argues, on the other hand, that it was precisely the prestige element that caused Napoleon to leave Spain not to return.³ It is also possible that by December 1808, he thought the job was finished and decided to let his subordinates "mop up."

Scholars also disagree as to why Napoleon did not return to Spain. Thompson suggests that Napoleon had opportunity to intervene personally in Spain in 1810, 1811, and 1813, but that he did not want to risk possible failure and preferred to write off Spain as a partial loss instead. Bruun maintains that this view is incorrect and that people who accept it are deceived by the effective French censorship of the day.

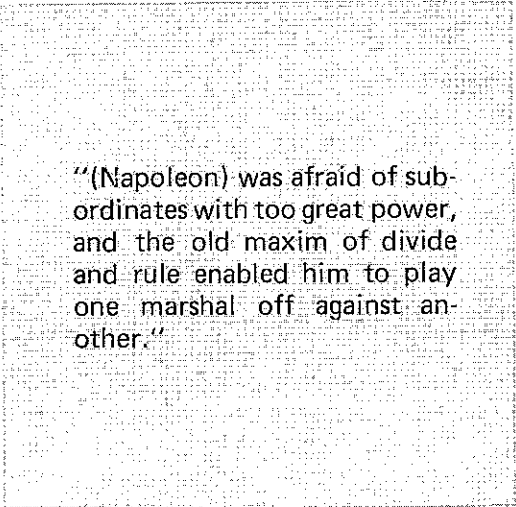
By 1810, Napoleon had massed 370,000 men in Spain, and this was the largest body of troops that he had so far sent against any single nation. Therefore, operations in Spain were hardly a sideshow. Oman asserts that until December 1809, Napoleon's correspondence made frequent

reference to his impending return to Spain. In December of that year, however, these references cease and Oman concludes that the reasons were domestic, namely, Napoleon's divorce and the possibility of his offers of an Austrian marriage being accepted. Furthermore, Spain was far off, and he did not like the idea of being caught in a remote area when it was possible that Russia might give him trouble. By the spring of 1810, he had given up any intention of returning to Spain.⁴

Whatever the reasons for Napoleon's departure from Spain and his failure to return, the fact that he did not return caused him to make errors. He totally misconceived the nature of the war in Spain. He had always been contemptuous of the fighting power of the Spaniards, and he believed that the troops he had in Spain in 1808 were sufficient to keep order in that nation. But these troops were second-rate soldiers in newly organized units, and they were ill-prepared for the campaigns that lay ahead of them.⁵ Napoleon had never had any experience with guerrilla warfare, nor had he encountered previously the spirit of resistance that a proud nation could offer. Hence, he assumed that the operation south of the Ebro was a military exercise similar to that north of the Rhine.⁶ He never grasped the fact that his armies were operating in a country where every peasant was their enemy, and he never understood that a division or corps was in reality nothing more than an occupation force in the area where it was located. As soon as the troops moved on, the area would immediately become hostile and would have to be reconquered.⁷

Furthermore, his troops were in the habit of living off the countryside while campaigning in Central Europe, and he therefore made no adequate preparations for their rations other than foraging. What he overlooked was that if an army tried to feed itself off the land in the Peninsula, it would soon face starvation and be forced to scatter in order to find enough provisions to stay alive.⁸

Napoleon's persistence in considering the military problems in Spain similar to those elsewhere caused him to issue orders to his marshals that were impossible to carry out even when those commands did arrive in time. His orders to Soult for the latter's campaign in 1809 is a case in point. Soult was to reach Lugo by January 9, to reach Oporto by February 1, and to



“(Napoleon) was afraid of subordinates with too great power, and the old maxim of divide and rule enabled him to play one marshal off against another.”

occupy Lisbon by February 10. In fact, Soult arrived at Corunna on January 19, but his army was so exhausted and his supplies so diminished that he could not begin to move again until February 20. He did not reach Oporto until March 29, and he had not yet started for Lisbon when Wellington caught up with him. According to distance, Napoleon's orders might have worked in Italy and Germany, but in a country where supplies had to be gathered by an army before setting out, and where bad roads, rivers, and defiles were constant obstacles, such orders were impossible. Despite his military genius, Napoleon continued to issue such impractical orders to the very end.⁹

When Napoleon left Spain, he also left behind a divided command. He did not name any commander-in-chief to take his place. He took Aragon and Catalonia from Joseph's authority, and he command-

ed the generals in the areas, Augereau and Suchet, to send every report and every request directly to Paris. Furthermore, the Basque provinces, Navarre, Burgos, Valladolid, Valencia, and Toro were formed into four military governments in which the generals were given complete civil and military autonomy. They had authority to raise taxes, administer justice, to designate and to discharge Spanish authorities, and to move troops according to their own judgment, being responsible only to the Emperor.¹⁰ Authorities are quite well in agreement as to why Napoleon used this system. He was afraid of subordinates with too great power, and the old maxim of divide and rule enabled him to play one marshal off against another. Also by making the marshals directly responsible to him, he could intervene personally in the campaigns without leaving Paris.¹¹

Such tactics, however, hardly produced an efficient prosecution of the war. Reports from Spain would sometimes take from three weeks to a month to reach him. He would then make decisions and issue orders on the basis of these reports, which were no longer accurate, and it would take another three to four weeks for these dispatches to reach their destination—if the dispatch rider was not butchered by the guerrillas first. By this time the orders would be wholly out of date.

This problem was only compounded in 1813 when Napoleon himself was in trouble and no longer in Paris. He would send orders to Clarke, his Minister of War, in Paris. Clarke would interpret what he believed Napoleon had meant by his orders and then would send them on to Spain where the generals in turn would interpret what they thought was desired. Therefore, it is conceivable that orders, when they were finally received at their destination, bore only slight resemblance to what Napoleon originally had in mind even if they had not been obsolete when sent out.¹²

It was not until March 1812, that Napoleon finally decided to combine the

command of Spain under Joseph with Marshal Jourdan as Chief-of Staff. This may have been the correct thing to do at an earlier time, but by 1812 it was too late. During the preceding three years, Napoleon had ignored his brother, insulted him, annexed parts of his kingdom, and allowed him to become the butt of insults by the military governors. It would be impossible to expect, after three years of almost absolute independence, that these men would now suddenly accept Joseph as their superior. In spite of it all, however, it seems that ultimately Napoleon never did allow Joseph to play the role of a truly independent monarch and that all lines of power still emanated from Paris.¹³

Several reasons indicate why Napoleon was successful when he intervened personally in Spain, whereas the marshals whom he left behind were not. Napoleon took an extra large force with him, larger than he thought necessary, to make sure he was successful. Also, his operations took him to Madrid which is situated in an area where Napoleon would not be bothered by mountains, rivers, and defiles, where his armies could be concentrated, and where supply lines were still relatively short. Further, the English had not yet presented an effective, organized counter force. Finally, Napoleon had a unified command. None of these conditions obtained for his marshals, however.

If Napoleon's insistence on conducting the war from Paris hindered the campaign, the attitudes exhibited by the various marshals in Spain did not help matters any. Space does not permit an exhaustive investigation into the frame of mind of each marshal in the Peninsula, but several examples will indicate what was going on. Massena was old (fifty-two), rich, and had

a good military reputation. He had no inclination to go to Spain, which was strewn with the graveyards of military reputations (and would include his own, eventually), but Napoleon prevailed upon him to go. Massena had indeed slowed down. He arrived in Salamanca weeks behind his troops, and then instead of marching after Wellington, he delayed further, making sure that his army was in fighting trim. When he did start after Wellington, he took his mistress (dressed in the uniform of a dragoon captain) with him on horseback. On one occasion during the grueling march, she became exhausted, and Massena halted his army for a week while she recuperated.^{14*}

In the spring of 1809, after Soult had driven Sir John Moore out of Portugal, it became evident that Soult was becoming less interested in soldiering and more interested in governing. He apparently believed that in isolated Portugal he might be chosen as the new Portuguese king, the Portuguese royal family by this time having fled to South America. He went out of his way to be friendly to everyone, and his supporters organized squads of cheerleaders who went about Oporto shouting, "Long live King Nicholas the First." Soult believed that if Marshal Murat could be made King of Naples (as Napoleon had declared him), *he* could be made King of Portugal. He wanted to impress upon Napoleon that the war in Portugal could be terminated immediately if a strong, wise, and sensible man were put in control of affairs and given the prestige that royalty commanded.

Soult's staff began to question his sanity, however, and considered arresting him. But his plans went awry with the sudden arrival of Wellington, and he fled

*R. F. Delderfield's book, *The March of the Twenty-Six*, is a fountain of such anecdotes. He tells the story of the time when Ney was requested by Massena to escort the latter's mistress to dinner. Ney considered this an insult, but led the lady in by the fingertips and then pointedly ignored her throughout the meal. The poor woman was obliged to faint in order to escape an embarrassing situation (p. 167ff.) Though Delderfield claims to base his material on sources, however, he does not bother with documentation.

Oporto in such a hurry that he had to leave guns, baggage, and his accumulation of personal loot behind. By this time Napoleon had gotten word of what was going on and had sent a strong warning to Soult, which in effect told him to stop making a fool of himself.¹⁵

Nor could the marshals be counted on to cooperate with each other. Soult had marched against the English in Portugal in the spring of 1809, while Ney was trying to cope with insurrections in Galicia. Ney was worsted by Spanish guerrillas, and he went to Lugo, where he expected to find Soult, only to learn that Soult had been driven out of Portugal by Wellington. When the two did establish contact, it was evident that they were both in exposed positions and that a coordinated retreat would have to be made. Neither trusted the other, so they committed their plans to a document that both of them signed in May 1809. The essence of this document evidently was that Soult would support Ney as best he could. Subsequently, Soult refused to help Ney, and Ney accused Soult of trying to expose him to some sort of defeat so that Soult's own losses in Portugal might be forgotten. Napoleon refused to take the quarrel seriously, however, and appointed Soult as Commander-in-Chief of the Second, Fifth, and Sixth corps. This made Ney, as Commander of the Sixth Corps, subordinate to Soult. Ney then asked Joseph to transfer him, refused the new assignment, and was removed from the Sixth Corps by Joseph. Napoleon ordered Ney back to his Sixth Corps, where he did nothing but sulk during the winter of 1809-1810. Such were the peccadilloes of the men whom Napoleon had trusted to make France safe in Spain.

Conclusion

Authorities do not agree on the impor-

tance of the Peninsular War in explaining the fall of Napoleon. Oman affirms that the Spanish War was the direct cause of the loss of Napoleon's reputation for invincibility and the indirect cause of his collapse in 1813-1814. Thompson maintains that Spain was an embarrassment, a running sore, but not a fatal wound. It was not the field of ultimate decision.¹⁶ However, the concentration of 370,000 men in the Peninsula by the end of 1811 indicates that Napoleon did not consider Spain a sideshow, an embarrassment. Even after relations with Russia began to deteriorate, he was still reinforcing Spain.

But this raises a larger question. If Napoleon committed such a vast number of troops to the Peninsula, he apparently wanted to win, but why then did he lose? It was not until after 1811 that Russia became a serious problem. Even when Napoleon did march to Moscow, he left some 200,000 veteran troops in Spain, and it was not until after Napoleon's formal abdication that Wellington fought his last battle of the Peninsular campaign.

A combination of circumstances contributed to Napoleon's downfall in Spain, not the least of which was the Emperor's own misjudgments. Perhaps his greatest mistake, from which others sprang, was his failure to take personal charge of the campaign from beginning to end. Then, perhaps, he could have made an accurate assessment of the nature of the Spanish people and of the war he had initiated. He might have realized that there was no enlightened middle class in Spain that would prove receptive to the ideas of the French Revolution. He might have accepted the fact that he would indeed have to fight a "monk's war," as he called it, a war in which peasants could be stirred to make extreme personal sacrifices against an invading heretic.^{17*}

Had Napoleon remained in Spain,

*Oman suggests that had Napoleon recognized this in 1808, there never would have been a Spanish War.

there would not have been that fatal division of command. True, there were geographic obstacles to overcome, but with Napoleon's personal driving force behind his marshals, perhaps they would have cooperated and campaigned swiftly and effectively, instead of indulging personal piques and ambitions. Furthermore, there would not have been the intolerable delays of reports and orders to and from the Chief, nor would there have been the creation of military governments which in turn helped to undermine the authority of Joseph.

The topography of the Peninsula also worked against Napoleon and in Wellington's favor. The Emperor had to fight in hostile territory, maintaining long supply lines while Wellington was in friendly territory where he could keep his small army concentrated and supplied by sea. Napoleon's troops were harassed by guerillas whose type of warfare he did not understand. His generals failed to diagnose the errors in French tactics, in some cases were driven by private ambition, and in other instances were not inclined to cooperate with each other. Even if they were disposed to aid one another, topography and the vicissitudes of guerrilla warfare made communication and cooperation difficult.

Most historians have rejected the notion that history repeats itself, and for the most part they are cautious about making predictions. Louis Gottschalk examines the pitfalls of generalization and Carl Gustavson warns against drawing facile conclusions in the matter of cause and effect.¹⁸ Nevertheless, I am compelled to argue that one state should count the cost before it attempts to impose its political system upon another. That cost must be measured not only in terms of its own unity of purpose, but also, and above all, in terms of the culture, attitudes, and ideals of its proposed convert. Failure to do so may result in the final cost being much higher than the original estimate, be it in Spain, or in Vietnam, or anywhere else for that matter.

Footnotes

1. Charles Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902-1930, 7 Vols.), VII, 515. See also Geoffrey Bruun, *Europe and the French Imperium, 1799-1814* (New York: Harper and Row, 1938), 162.
2. *Ibid.*, I, 397-398.
3. J. M. Thompson, *Napoleon Bonaparte* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 262. See also Oman, *Peninsular War*, II, 16, IV, 222, VII, 515.
4. See Thompson, *Napoleon*, 262; Bruun, *Europe*, 166; Oman, *Peninsular War*, III, 198.
5. C. W. Oman, "The Peninsular War, 1808-14," *Cambridge Modern History*, ed. by A. W. Ward, G. W. Prothero, and Stanley Leathes (London: Cambridge University Press, 1906), IX, 435-436.
6. Oman, *Peninsular War*, I, 400.
7. *Ibid.*, IV, 223-224.
8. *Ibid.*, I, 87-88.
9. *Ibid.* See also Vol. II, 16-20; V, 187-216.
10. *Ibid.*, II, 200.
11. *Ibid.*, III, 201. See also Arthur Bryant, *Years of Victory 1802-1812* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945), 344, and Piers Mackesy, *The War in the Mediterranean, 1803-1810* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 380.
12. Oman, *Peninsular War*, III, 201. See also Vol. VI, 334-335, and Thompson, *Napoleon*, 261.
13. *Ibid.*, V, 300-301. See also Felix Markham, *Napoleon*, (New York: New American Library, 1963), 168.
14. R. F. Delderfield, *The March of the Twenty-Six; The Story of Napoleon's Marshals* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962), 167ff.
15. *Ibid.*, 145-146. See also Oman, *Peninsular War*, II, 273ff., 341-342.
16. Oman, *Peninsular War*, VII, 518. See also Thompson, *Napoleon*, 262.
17. *Ibid.*, II, 21.
18. Louis Gottschalk, "Categories of Historiographical Generalization," *Generalization in the Writing of History*, ed. by Louis Gottschalk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 113-129. See also Carl G. Gustavson, *The Mansion of History* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976), 99.