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

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Preface

My interest having been piqued by America's recent experience in Vietnam, I decided to turn to other peoples and other times in order to determine how other nations fared when forced to deal with guerrilla warfare. In consequence, my thoughts turned to Napoleon's debacle in Spain. It was a puzzle to me why Napoleon should have been defeated in his campaigns in the Iberian Peninsula. Why, with 200,000 seasoned troops still in Spain in 1813, did Napoleon fail? After all, Wellington, the British commander, did not break into France until after the Russian catastrophe of 1812-1813. Sheer weight of numbers alone could not tell the story, for then, surely, "the Leopard would have been driven into the sea." The reaons had to lie elsewhere.

As I did more and more reading on the subject, however, new vistas that needed to be explored regarding the war kept appearing and the possibilities seemed almost limitless. What was the nature of the Spanish army? How effective was it? Was there a truly national rising in Spain? Was this a war of liberation, or was it as Napoleon said, a "monk's war"? Did the Spanish Cortes play an important role? There seemed to be a dearth of information upon this particular phase of Spanish history. What about Wellington's tactics on offense? How effective was Wellington's spy system? What effect did the back-

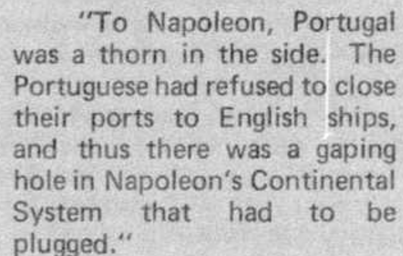
ground and training of the French generals have upon the war? How did King Joseph and his activities affect the outcome of the war? Surely, sea power must have affected the fortunes of the belligerents in the Peninsula. How would the character of the war have changed had Napoleon been successful in reestablishing Ferdinand on the Spanish throne?

One could go on and on. Because of the exigencies of time and space, I have limited my inquiry to three aspects of the war in order to begin at least a consideration of the reasons of Napoleon's defeat. In this issue of Pro Rege I will consider the role played by geography and people, and in the two succeeding issues I will discuss the roles of military tactics and of Napoleon and his generals.

It is not the purpose of this paper to inquire into what would have happened had there been no Peninsular War, or what would have happened if Napoleon had been successful, or whether he should have gone there in the first place. The purpose is rather to examine some aspects of the nature of the war in order to determine, at least tentatively, why Napoleon failed. The works of Charles Oman apparently still are the definitive works concerning the Peninsular War, and they form the basis for much of this paper. Other works consulted tended to copy or to corroborate what Oman has done.

Introduction

To Napoleon, Portugal was a thorn in the side. The Portuguese had refused to close their ports to English ships, and thus there was a gaping hole in Napoleon's Continental System that had to be plugged. In July 1807, Napoleon began to concentrate troops at Bayonne in preparation for an attack on Portugal; and in October, 1807, he signed the secret Treaty of Fontainebleu with Spain, which called for a partition of Portugal. The south of Portugal would be a principality for Godoy (the Spanish king's chief minister) in return for letting French troops invade Portugal through Spain. Napoleon would retain control of Lisbon, and the north would be given as compensation to the Queen of Etruria who was to be removed from Tuscany to make room for Napoleon's sister Elisa.[1] Also, according to the



treaty, if the English sent an army to aid the Portuguese, Napoleon, after giving due notice to the King of Spain, would be permitted to reinforce the French Marshal Junot, who was to make the expedition to Lisbon.[2]

Apparently, however, the attack on Portugal was a feinting maneuver for an attack upon Spain. A Bourbon on the throne of Spain, after all, claimed Napoleon, was dangerous to the interests of France.[3] Also, Napoleon had a mistaken notion as to the potential naval and economic resources of Spain, which he believed a decadent Bourbon monarchy was not exploiting or administering adequately.[4]

Junot infiltrated the northern fortresses of Spain and reached Lisbon in November, 1807. In the meantime, General Dupont was ordered into the valley of the Ebro even though no English forces had been sighted and the Spanish government had not been notified. In January, 1808, Marshal Moncey was in Biscay and Navarre, and in February, 1808, General Duhesme went into Catalonia and headed toward Barcelona. Barcelona is

not on the way to Portugal, however, and things began to look suspicious. By March, 1808, Napoleon ceased to disguise his intentions and began to occupy such areas as Pampeluna, Barcelona, and Catalonia.[5]

Meanwhile, quarrels within the Spanish royal house aided Napoleon's cause. Charles IV arrested his son Ferdinand on charges of attempting to dethrone the king and of attempting to murder the queen and Godoy. Ferdinand was then pardoned, perhaps because Charles IV did not wish to push the matter any further. By March, 1808, however, the Spanish had become aroused over the French threat and believed that Godoy had given the country over to the French. The king and queen had decided upon flight, but the people rioted on March 17, 1808. Ferdinand, taking advantage of his father's predicament, forced his father to abdicate in Ferdinand's favor, and he in turn dismissed Godoy from office.

Napoleon took advantage of Charles' protest of forcible abdication and informed Ferdinand that his father and mother were still the legal sovereigns of Spain. Finally, at Bayonne in May, 1808, Ferdinand signed an agreement restoring the throne to his father. Napoleon then produced a treaty, signed the day before by Charles, stating that he resigned all rights to the Spanish throne and that he gave them to the emperor of the French as the only person who could restore order in Spain. Napoleon then offered the throne to his brother Joseph, and the Spanish royal family went into exile.[6]

When he placed Joseph upon the Spanish throne, Napoleon opened Pandora's box. The Spanish did not appreciate an incompetent Bourbon, but they appreciated a foreign interloper even less. On May 2, 1808, the famous Dos Mayos occurred. While the French were in the process of removing the last of the sons of Charles IV from the palace in Madrid, a mob fell upon the escort and swept it out of the city with the loss of several hundred French officers and men. Moncey's men, however, came in from their encampment outside of the city and in a bloody action subdued the mob.[7]

When the news of Dos Mayos and of Bayonne circulated, the country erupted in a rage, and every region without exception took up arms during May and June, 1808.[8] On August 1, 1808, Wellington made his first appearance in Portugal (he was to return home shortly and to reappear permanently in May, 1809), and the stage was set for a war that was not to end until Napoleon himself had fallen.[9] This was a war that Napoleon called the "running sore." It was to drain him of men and money and to keep pinned down the army with which he might otherwise have obtained the balance of force necessary elsewhere in Europe in 1812-1813 to preserve his empire and his throne.[10]

The Peninsula and the People

Because of the topography of the Iberian Peninsula, an invasion from France is a rather difficult task. The mountain and river system lies directly across the French main line of advance; that is, the French had to move in a direction from north to south, whereas the rivers and mountains run east and west.[1] Within these mountain ranges are defiles and ravines that are filled with water in winter and are difficult to traverse in summer because of their steep sides. To add to the difficulty, there were few bridges, and the fords were dangerous.[2] With its rocky hills and waterless or unnavigable rivers, the country resembled northwest Africa more than any part of Europe with which Napoleon was acquainted. The western slope of the Peninsula has mountains running down it not unlike the thumb and fingers of a hand spread out flat upon a table with the palm of the hand resting somewhere in central Spain in the general vicinity of Madrid. The eastern slope of the Iberian Mountains and a portion of the Pyrenees envelop the Ebro basin with many ridges and spurs, thereby impeding the

course of the river and making navigation practically impossible.[3]

The rivers usually flow between steep banks and over rocks and sand bars in winter when the rivers are torrents. In summer, these same rivers become small brooks. Because of the mountain spurs and the uneven run-off of water, the rivers of the Peninsula are navigable for only short distances, so that they are useless for transporting supplies for any great distances into the interior. Therefore, rather than being highways of transportation, the Spanish rivers are obstacles in the highway.[4]

Because of its configuration, the Peninsula also has a great variety of climates which would cause an army operating in it to be exposed to extremes of heat and cold, thus hampering the efficiency of operations. The Peninsula is a fairly fertile country, but during the time of the Peninsular War many of the areas were thinly populated, and where they did subsist, people were not inclined to arduous labor and did not raise surplus crops. Consequently, it was a country where obtaining provisions or trying to live off the land was uncertain at best and perilous most of the time.[5]

Roads in the Peninsula were not much better than rivers as avenues of transportation. There were only two main roads from France into Spain across the Pyrenees: one from Bayonne, and one from Perpignan. Also, only two main roads ran from Spain into Portugal, both north and south of the Tagus River.[6] The roads, where they did exist, always took the line of least resistance. Spaniards preferred to look for easy passes, to go around an obstacle rather than over it, and, consequently, roads took tortuous and winding routes. To add to the difficulty, the main routes were at right angles to the rivers, rather than parallel to them, and were constantly crossing the watersheds. Hardly a route in the Peninsula had more than a fifty mile stretch where a good defensive position could not be drawn across it. Furthermore, when war broke out in 1808, existing roads were in notable disrepair.[7]

The topography of the Peninsula worked both to Napoleon's advantage and disadvantage. Being established at Madrid in the center of Spain, he could move at will from this central plateau down the basins of the various rivers. Furthermore, numerical superiority gave him the power of moving along two or three basins at once, threatening many points, while at the same time holding other portions under his control.[8]

In actuality, the nature of the land worked more against Napoleon than for him. As French armies moved down the river basins, they became separated from

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each other by mountain chains which had few passes over them. This resulted in poor communications between armies. Nor did these circumstances facilitate rapid movement to assist one army or another in case of need. Napoleon might be able to use these mountain chains as barriers of defense in case of attack from the north or south, but if the attack came from the west, from Portugal, for example, the result would be that the mountains would divide his front, and the front would have to be extended down many of these basins in order to watch for the enemy.[9]

The rugged country was admirably suited for defense against an invader, and it also gave the French other problems to contend with. The French lines of communication to Bayonne passed over these mountains and through these basins, and it required many men to guard the lines against guerrilla attack. Because French armies could not live off the land, long supply lines had to be maintained and strong detachments had to escort these supply convoys. If guerrillas did not capture the convoys, they at least delayed them interminably. Meanwhile, the army in front would run out of supplies and be forced to scatter itself over the land in order to find adequate forage, and at the same time weaken itself as an efficient fighting force. It was not impossible for Napoleon to gather large armies for service in Spain, but on many occasions it was impossible to provision them.[10] The topography made it nearly impossible to defeat the Spanish armies decisively. In Catalonia, for example, the French never succeeded in investing all the small upland plains and passes. If caught in one upland area, the Spanish army would simply slip away into the next one, and though the Spanish army eventually dwindled to nothing more than guerrilla bands, it was never caught and annihilated.[11]

Wellington used the topography well, for example, at Torres Vedras in 1810, when the French general Massena was pursuing him into Portugal. Wellington blocked the road into Lisbon at Torres Vedras by forming three lines of defense. The outer line was about thirty miles long, stretching from the Tagus River westward to the sea. This line was fortified with redoubts and guns and strengthened by scarping the mountains, damming the rivers, and breaking up the roads. Eight miles to the rear was a second line, and behind this, around Lisbon, Wellington established an entrenchment consisting of some 150 redoubts, on which 600 cannon were mounted. Massena probed the lines for about a month trying to find a way through. Meanwhile, Portuguese militia and peasantry attacked him from the rear, destroyed his munitions and forced him to seek provisions by scattering his army over the half-deserted countryside. Finally Massena gave up and withdrew.[12]

Although the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella and the conquest of Granada theoretically united Spain, Spanish particularism died slowly. It was not until the eighteenth century that national unity was achieved under the Bourbons. The Bourbons worked steadily to unify the political and economic institutions of Spain, endeavoring at the same time to distribute as evenly as possible the burdens and benefits of government. At last, even peripheral areas of Spain felt that Madrid was working for their best interests and they responded with loyalty to their king and country. In fact, French propagandists were unsuccessful in 1794 in trying to find evidence of particularism in the northern provinces of Spain that had once aided the enemies of Spain.[13]

The Church had also done its part in fostering Spanish unity. It kept progressives in Spain from imbibing the anticlericalism of revolutionary France, and it prevented the Enlightenment from sapping the religious vigor of educated Spaniards. The uneducated masses had a deep-seated, almost superstitious reverence for the Church, to the point where they responded favorably to their priests and monks when

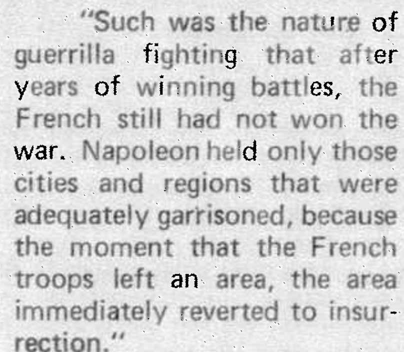
those clerics preached a crusade against the ideas of the French Revolution. Spanish nationalism at the end of the eighteenth century rallied around, "Religion, King, and Country!"[14]

Thus in 1808, the Spaniards were the least likely of all western Europeans to accept the reform programs of the Great Revolution. The landowners certainly would not accept them. The Church, strong enough to resist new ideas and confiscation of property, had also convinced the faithful that religious toleration was tantamount to heresy and atheism. Added to this was the fact that there was no large and literate bourgeoisie steeped in Montesquieu and Rousseau clamoring for recognition and centralized government.[15] Thus it was that in the spring of 1808, led by Juntas composed mostly of nobles and clergy, the Spanish provinces broke out in open revolt. It was a spontaneous revolt, conducted without regard to the consequences or to the relative strength of the opposing sides. Every province, and in many cases every town, acting for itself, called for resistance to the man who was the enemy of throne and altar.[16] Not that the French should have been surprised, for as early as 1793-1794, Spanish volunteers had appeared on the battle field carrying a banner depicting the Virgin, and singing litanies while being led by a priest in full vestments.[17]

The Spanish waged relentless warfare upon the French. In all of Spain it was the same story. In spite of suffering, defeats, and atrocities committed upon them, the ragged remnants of the Spanish armies would return from the plains and reform in the hills. As soon as the enemy had moved on, they would come out of the hills again.

This type of warfare was not without its adverse effect upon French morale. Fighting this rabble was not the same as fighting timid Italians or pacific Germans, and even the toughest French veteran began to detest duty in the Peninsula. Plunder was no longer a pleasure since no one could tell when a band of guerrillas would swoop down to retaliate. Every convoy had to be escorted, and every town had to be garrisoned before Joseph could even think of levying taxes upon it. Since the French generals never knew when or where the guerrillas would strike next, they had to scatter their men over wider and wider areas so as to keep order and maintain communications. And the more they did so, the weaker they became at any given point.[18]

Such was the nature of guerrilla fighting that after years of winning battles, the French still had not won the war. Napoleon held only those cities and regions that were adequately garrisoned, because the moment that the French troops left an area, the area immediately reverted to insurrection.[19] In the years 1810-1811, Napoleon had 300,000 men in the Peninsula, but he could muster only 70,000 of them for Massena's projected drive into Portugal. The rest of the troops were dispersed over areas that would revolt as soon as those troops were called into service in the field.[20] Some of the bands became so powerful that they tried to wage regular war instead of contenting themselves with mere raids, and while regions were in the hands of the guerrillas, King Joseph was prevented from raising taxes in those areas or securing requisitions from them.[21]


"Such was the nature of guerrilla fighting that after years of winning battles, the French still had not won the war. Napoleon held only those cities and regions that were adequately garrisoned, because the moment that the French troops left an area, the area immediately reverted to insurrection."

Thus, given the geography of the Iberian Peninsula and the character of the people who inhabited it, guerrilla warfare could be admirably employed to harrass the French invader. In the next issue of Pro Rege, we will examine how trained armies, British and French, operated in the field and how these operations worked against the French.

Footnotes for "Introduction"

1. 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, 428. See also Felix Markham, Napoleon (New York: New American Library, 1963), 165; R. B. Mowat, The Diplomacy of Napoleon (London: Edward Arnold and Co., 1924), 209.
2. Ibid., IX, 430.
3. Ibid., IX, 428.
4. Markham, Napoleon, 164.
5. Oman, "The Peninsular War, 1808-14," Cambridge Modern History, IX, 430.
6. Ibid., IX 429 ff.
7. Ibid., IX, 433.
8. Ibid., IX, 434.
9. Actually, the last battles were fought after Napoleon's abdication in 1814.
10. Oman, "The Peninsular War, 1808-14," Cambridge Modern History, IX, 482.

Footnotes for "The Peninsula and the People"

1. Charles Oman, A History of the Peninsular War (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902-1930, 7 Vols.), I, 85-86.
2. C. W. Robinson, Wellington's Campaigns Peninsula-Waterloo; also Moore's Campaign of Corunna (London: Hugh Rees, Ltd., 1907), 28-29.
3. Oman, Peninsular War, I, 75 ff. See also Robinson, Wellington's Campaigns, 32; J. M. Thompson, Napoleon Bonaparte (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 261.
4. Oman, Peninsular War, I, 75 ff.
5. Robinson, Wellington's Campaigns, 30-31.
6. Ibid., 35.
7. Oman, Peninsular War, I, 82-84.
8. Robinson, Wellington's Campaigns, 42-43.
9. Robinson, Wellington's Campaigns, 42-43.
10. Ibid. See also Oman, Peninsular War, IV, 224.
11. Oman, Peninsular War, I, 82.
12. Robinson, Wellington's Campaigns, 139-140. See also Oman, Peninsular War, III, 466 ff.
13. Richard Herr, The Eighteenth Century Revolution in Spain (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), 435-436.
14. Ibid., 436.
15. Geoffrey Bruun, Europe and the French Imperium, 1799-1814. Rise of Modern Europe (New York: Harper and Row, 1938) 161.
16. Oman, "The Peninsular War, 1808-14," Cambridge Modern History, IX, 434-435. See also Arthur Bryant, Years of Victory, 1802-1812 (New York: Harper and Brother, 1945), 239; Markham, Napoleon, 166; Thompson, Napoleon Bonaparte, 261.
17. Ramsay W. Phipps, The Armies of the First French Republic; and the Rise of the Marshals of Napoleon I (London: Oxford University Press, 1931, 5 Vols.), 207. R. R. Palmer has little use for Phipps, claiming that Phipps was partial to army men and that he considered civilians as incompetents. R. R. Palmer, Twelve Who Ruled (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 352.
18. Bryant, Years of Victory, 326-328. See also J. B. Morton, Marshal Ney (London: Arthur Barker, Ltd., 1958), 44.
19. Oman, Peninsular War, VII, 515-516.
20. Ibid.
21. Oman, Peninsular War, III, 115-116.