

# MOTIVATIONS FOR RESISTANCE: GUERILLA WARFARE IN THE PENINSULAR WAR

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The nature of any given war depends greatly upon the characteristics and qualities of its participants. The motivation of a nation's populace greatly influences that population's conduct in war. Lord Londonderry, a colonel in the British Army during the Peninsular War, 1808-1814, wrote of the Spanish reaction to Napoleon's replacement of King Ferdinand VII, "From the mountains of Aragon to the pillars of Hercules, and from Valencia to Cape Finisterre, there arose one loud and simultaneous shout, 'Long live King Ferdinand - Death to the French!'"<sup>1</sup> Lord Londonderry then proceeded to claim that the Spanish "ran to arms with the alacrity of men determined to regain their freedom."<sup>2</sup> The picture painted by Lord Londonderry (and most other historians until recently) indicates an exceptionally high level of patriotism and solidarity among the Spanish people; however, such an image proves less than accurate under further scrutiny. Consideration of the social and economic state of Spain at the time of the Peninsular War lends itself to the conclusion that Spanish resistance to the French occupation most likely stemmed from an attempt to acquire liberty and opportunity, rather than the defense of such. Ultimately, the guerilla war derived more from an internal struggle against a continuously oppressive political and social system than from a sense of national unity or patriotism, and such a distinction proves crucial to better understand the true origins and conduct of guerillas in the Peninsular War.

A study of Spanish history prior to Napoleon's overthrow of the Bourbon throne demonstrates an established tradition of both agrarian unrest and armed irredentism by the peasant classes in many provinces. During the Thirty Years' War, the French invasion of Roussillon in 1639 placed Spanish Catalonia in the front line of conflict. Over the next year,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles W. Londonderry, *The Peninsular War*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1848), 57.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

Spanish peasants in this region found themselves continuously supplying and dealing with passing troops as well as paying taxes and undergoing conscription for military service.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately tensions in the area resulted in a peasant army attacking Barcelona and killing the viceroy there, indicative of a situation wherein, “suspicion of Madrid, an attitude of reserve towards the war effort . . . and the memory of defeat . . . undermined fidelity to the king of Spain.”<sup>4</sup> From the Thirty Years’ War in the seventeenth century until the Napoleonic era, Spain languished from periods of economic stagnation, and its peasantry lived in what essentially amounted to serfdom. Frustration with such a system occasionally expressed itself through armed irredentism of the peasantry.<sup>5</sup> On the eve of the French takeover, Spain’s populace found itself subject to a stagnating and humiliated power. Despite having been France’s ally since 1804, all Spain had to show for its military efforts was the shattered remnants of its navy after the battle of Trafalgar. In terms of leadership, King Charles IV, his successor Ferdinand VII, and their prime minister Manuel de Godoy failed to offer much for the people of Spain. Generally, de Godoy was “cordially hated by one and all,” his continued support for the French at the expense of the Spanish military and state was highly unpopular with the his people.<sup>6</sup>

From the time of the Thirty Years’ War, the Spanish demonstrated remarkable disdain for military service. Just prior to 1808 the peasantry was especially radicalized due to, “disastrous war [damaging the economy], a series of epidemics and disasters, and a program that not only produced disruption . . . but threatened a wide range of customs.”<sup>7</sup> Essentially, at the time of Napoleon’s seizure of Spain, we encounter a populace tired of war, discontent with the status quo, and wanting nothing more than to be left alone. As one British officer put it, “had they been permitted to live in peace, it would have been a matter of the greatest indifference to them whether their king was Joseph, Ferdinand, or the ghost of Don Quixote.”<sup>8</sup> While battles such as the Siege of Saragossa, 1808, in which city residents participated against the French (and Spanish

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<sup>3</sup> Yves-Marie Berce, *Revolt and Revolution in Early Modern Europe: An Essay on the History of Political Violence*, Joseph Bergin, trans. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 170.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Humble, *Napoleon’s Peninsular Marshals* (New York: Taplinger Publishing, 1974), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Esdaile, “Popular Mobilisation in Spain, 1808-1810: A Reassessment,” in *Collaboration and Resistance in Napoleonic Europe*, Michael Rowe, ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 94.

<sup>8</sup> Esdail, “Popular Mobilization in Spain,” 94.

casualties neared 54,000), certainly played a role in forcibly involving the Spanish populace in the war, the general outcry to join against the French was still not as great as historians tend to believe.<sup>9</sup> Far from Lord Londonderry's descriptions of patriotic ardor, the general populace of Spain cared far more about bettering their living situations and avoiding conscripted military service in costly foreign wars than about who actually ruled Spain.

One difficulty in labeling and analyzing the proponents of "guerilla activity" stems from the universal application of such tactics by regular troops, militia units, and bandits. Guerilla tactics were applied liberally by one and all as needed. Even more challenging for the purposes of analysis, the roles of regulars, militiamen, or bandits were far from mutually exclusive. This truth was reflected in both Spain and Portugal. When Massena invaded Portugal, 1810-1811, he "could barely move without it being reported" by Portuguese guerillas who cut his lines of communication and ambushed his detachments.<sup>10</sup> While irregular forces such as militia and bandits could not decisively defeat French forces, their collaboration with regular units of the British, Spanish, and Portuguese armies provided an utterly hostile landscape and caused the French numbers to diminish greatly via strategic consumption. Additionally, guerilla forces did not necessarily constrain themselves to guerilla tactics, as was the case with General Renovales of the Roncal guerillas, who was willing to engage French troops in conventional battle at times, though this stratagem provided little success.<sup>11</sup> Although Spain's regular forces lacked a winning record, they still managed to survive and continually reform despite losing battle after battle.

In conjunction with militias and groups of peasants contributing to the lawless and chaotic nature of the Spanish countryside, as well as the unrest of the urban setting, the Spanish forced France to choose between maintaining enough troops to pacify the populace, which required dispersion of force, or concentrating their forces in a manner suitable for campaign against the threat of British, Spanish, and Portuguese regulars. The importance of regular troops in conjunction with guerilla forces cannot be overstated. Other guerilla movements, such as the revolt in Calabria which broke out in 1806, were brutally put down by the French by 1810,

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<sup>9</sup> David Gates, *The Spanish Ulcer: A History of the Peninsular War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2001), 127.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>11</sup> Don W. Alexander, *Rod of Iron: French Counterinsurgency Policy in Aragon during the Peninsular War* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1985), 24.

namely due to lack of a conventional force which could work in conjunction with partisan forces to oppose French forces.<sup>12</sup> Further convoluting study of the perpetrators of guerilla activity and their motivations, many guerilla groups owed their existence to individual efforts and did not associate with the Spanish *Juntas*, the political leadership of each Spanish province in the absence of King Ferdinand, despite opposing the French.<sup>13</sup> The decentralized nature of Spanish guerilla operations that made them effective against the French also made them difficult to conclusively attribute to one particular group or another. Spanish guerillas could be soldiers tired of risking their lives for little gain in pitched battles against superior French regulars, militiamen hoping to supplement their income as well as negate the superior equipment and experience of French regulars, or more often than not, impoverished peasantry hoping to profit from the plunder that could be taken off French corpses and supplies.

The undeniable aspect of opportunism further damages the romantic image of patriotic guerillas roaming the Spanish countryside daringly opposing French occupational forces. In 1808 the central *Junta* issued a decree authorizing the formation of irregular bands up to one hundred men strong (though how they would enforce this numerical limit is not mentioned) and furthermore stating that, “any money and other valuables seized from the French and their supporters would automatically become the property of the men who had taken it.”<sup>14</sup> The prospect for social advancement (in the form of leadership within one’s own created organization) and even more so through the profits that could be obtained through state sanctioned banditry drew more volunteers to the guerilla movement. Men such as Captain José Crivell, Sergeant Pablo Morillo, the Marqués de la Romana, and Captain José Caro among thousands of others could advance themselves beyond their previous station of authority by forming their own partisan groups (coincidentally enriching themselves via French plunder at the same time).<sup>15</sup> Considering the members of the *Juntas* the motivation for starting a partisan group becomes even more evident. Despite the overthrow of the Bourbon monarchy, the *Juntas* leading each region were composed of Bourbon elites, namely military officers, priests, and officials. If a lower ranked member of Spanish

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<sup>12</sup> Charles J. Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars: An International History, 1803-1815* (New York: Viking, 2008), 352.

<sup>13</sup> Charles J. Esdaile, *Fighting Napoleon: Guerillas, Bandits, and Adventurers in Spain, 1808-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 105.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

society wanted to advance themselves, joining a guerilla band offered enticing opportunities.<sup>16</sup>

The lure of lucrative partisanship actually corrupted some guerilla bands away from their original purpose of opposing the French (or at least opposing them exclusively). Groups such as these learned quickly, however, the costs of alienating the populace which otherwise offered shelter. In the provinces of Navarre and Aragon, the indiscriminate banditry of guerilla bands gradually led to the acceptance of the French occupiers, and thus a corresponding low point for the Spanish resistance in that region. The French, "used information supplied by [Spanish] civilians . . . overtook Empecinado [a famous guerilla leader] and killed 180 of his men . . . practically cleared Aragon of guerillas . . . and formed six *Spanish* companies to fight against [them]."<sup>17</sup> The turning away of the populace from their own resistance movement in this region of Spain indicated the lack of universal support which would otherwise exist were the people of Spain as fervently patriotic and anti-French as historians have tended to assume. Additionally, if all of the guerilla forces were motivated by patriotic fervor, banditry directed at fellow Spanish citizens would have been non-existent.

The large numbers of Spanish deserters further illustrated the general disinterest in opposing the French invasion. In a letter from one of the commissioners sent out by the central *Junta* to find and bring back deserters and recruit men for the army, the commissioner expressed fear for his personal safety and an inability to recruit anyone for fear of being killed by the various groups of deserters. He wrote, "the entire body politic is undone. On every side one sees ferment, disorder, intrigue, and the spirit of faction."<sup>18</sup> In addition to desertion, bribes or pleading disability were also common methods of avoiding service in the Spanish military. Such large numbers of deserters often turned to banditry as their only means of sustenance once on the run, and as a result, the chaos in Spain continued to increase. While deserters would also prey upon French troops they also had no qualms about attacking fellow Spaniards.<sup>19</sup>

The composition of the various *Juntas* which ran Spain during the Napoleonic time period indicates a surprising lack of difference between

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<sup>16</sup> Charles J. Esdaile, "Popular Mobilization in Spain, 1808-1810: A Reassessment," in *Collaboration and Resistance in Napoleonic Europe*, Michael Rowe ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 95.

<sup>17</sup> John L. Tone, *The Fatal Knot: The Guerilla War in Navarre and the Defeat of Napoleon in Spain* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 88.

<sup>18</sup> Esdaile, "Popular Mobilization in Spain," 99.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

Napoleonic forces and the Bourbon monarchy. The *Juntas* were composed of Bourbon elites, individuals interested primarily in advancing their own power while maintaining the status quo in Spanish society. In provinces such as Aragon and Navarre, where the French successfully concentrated their forces against unsupported and increasingly more lawless partisans, the *Juntas* began to support the French occupational government and forces.<sup>20</sup> The partisan struggle became less a matter of Spain against France and more so a conflict of the armed lower class against the social elites of the old regime who were striving to maintain power and influence, even as the French struggled for dominance of the country. The riots which had swept the nation after Ferdinand's removal were viewed as the result of patriotism among the Spanish citizens, but more likely, the Spanish authorities were struggling to maintain order in a strict social system which now found its very foundations stressed by the invasion of France. Many of the riots seemed more so to target symbols of wealth, privilege, and authority, such as the riots at Castellon de la Plana, where the governor was murdered, a nunnery broken into and robbed, and the local prison attacked with all prisoners being released.<sup>21</sup> Contrary to the movements of certain *Juntas* to raise partisan groups as part of the Spanish war effort, elsewhere in the country a system of repression was being enforced on Spanish citizens as elites feared losing their social status and power. For example, in Galicia, *Juntas* established police commissions, passport requirements for travel, militia companies, prohibitions on the use firearms, laws against gathering in crowds, and curfews.<sup>22</sup> In Cadiz a proclamation was issued by the *Junta* forbidding drinking, gambling, carrying of knives or pistols, loitering, vagrancy, or any form of suspicious idleness. Additionally tavern owners were encouraged to shorten their guests' stays and spy upon them when possible.<sup>23</sup> In their attempts to preserve social status and control the increasingly volatile lower classes of Spanish society, the *Juntas* exasperated many Spanish citizens and in some cases were held to be just as, if not more, repressive than the French invaders. The actions of the *Juntas* demonstrated the real struggle taking place in Spain, not the fight against invading French forces, but rather the struggle between the impoverished and irritated lower class and the societal elites who remained in some form of power regardless of whether Spain was ruled by a French or Spanish king.

The Peninsular War could not have been an Allied victory were it not for the fierce guerilla warfare of the Spanish and Portuguese people in

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<sup>20</sup> Alexander, *Rod of Iron*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Esdaile, "Popular Mobilization in Spain," 92.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

conjunction with traditional regular Allied troops. However, our understanding of the motivations behind the partisan resistance influences our understanding of just how the Spanish people contributed to the eventual French defeat. The belief in a widely celebrated and organized patriotic movement for the Spanish monarchy among the lower classes of Spanish society proves misleading and ultimately unfounded. Ultimately, the stagnant economy and mounting social pressures, which made Spanish citizens restless within their immobile society, contributed to a general domestic unrest which opposed French occupiers just as much as it often opposed elite led Spanish *Juntas*. The invasion of France into Spain ripped the social fabric, allowing the host-nation population an outlet for centuries of social repression. The success of guerilla warfare in Spain stemmed not from patriotic fervor, but rather from the inherent chaos that accompanied the beginning of societal change



