The Spanish Ulcer: British Cooperation During the Peninsular War

BY
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Sean D. Sutter is a junior studying Military History at the United States Military Academy. He wrote this paper for a course over the evolution of warfare during the Napoleonic Wars. Sutter found the British military's ability to cooperate in great depth with their Spanish and Portuguese counterparts during the Peninsular War to be unique, compared to other coalitions that faced Napoleon that were notorious for their lack of cooperation with one another.

During the Napoleonic Wars that raged in Europe from 1803- 1814, several nations fought collectively in various attempts to hinder Napoleon's ever-growing empire on the European continent, which at its greatest point stretched from the Lisbon in the west to Moscow in the east. These coalitions, which included at various times Great Britain, Spain, and Portugal, sought to reestablish pre-Napoleonic Europe through cooperation on both a strategic and operational scale. A prime example of this is demonstrated in the Peninsular War that raged from 1807-1814 in which troops from the Fifth Coalition fought together on the Iberian Peninsula. During this protracted war against Napoleonic France, the success of coalition forces on the Iberian Peninsula hinged greatly on Great Britain and her ability to cooperate with the allied militaries of Spain and Portugal.

Prior to the invasions of Portugal and Spain in 1807 and 1808 respectively, British military operations in Europe were limited to small- scale raids which had been made possible by British naval supremacy and the constant blockade of the continent. However, popular uprisings after the fall of the Portuguese and Spanish governments and solicitations from Spanish juntas for British military support allowed the British government to begin planning for a military intervention on the Iberian Peninsula.[1] After the defeat of French forces at Baylen at the hand of Spanish general Francisco Castanos, the British decided to land 30,000 troops in Portugal under then Lieutenant General Arthur Wellesley, who would later become
the Duke of Wellington.

[1] The juntas that attempted to rule Spain after French occupation consisted of several local administrations that were centered on pre-invasion municipalities, and were often disorganized and fragmented. Alexander Shand, *The War In the Peninsula*, (Seeley, 1898), v-vi.

With the introduction of British forces on the Iberian Peninsula also came immediate cooperation with Portuguese, and later Spanish, militias and regular army troops. While Spanish, British, and Portuguese forces often operated independently, it was just as common for the coalition forces to intermingle. In fact, British troops under Wellesley often served alongside their Portuguese counterparts. On the eve of the Salamanca Campaign, Wellesley's force consisted of approximately 52,000 troops, two-fifths of whom were Portuguese.[2] There are other accounts of Wellesley's army consisting of a large force of Portuguese soldiers. A prime example of such intermingling of allied units within the makeup of the British forces occurred during the defense of Portugal from advancing French forces under the command of Marshals Jean de Dieu Soult and Claude Victor-Perrin. Wellesley, who was under strict orders from the British Cabinet to defend Portugal from the advancing French, had a force of approximately 18,000 which was divided among 16,000 British personnel and 2,240 newly-recruited Portuguese, with a Portuguese battalion placed into each of the five brigades under Wellesley's command.[3] However, Wellesley was not the only British commander to take advantage of using local troops, as General William Beresford, who had been tasked with blocking Soult from any advances into northern Portugal, was in charge of a force made up of 1,875 British and 4,200 Portuguese troops.[4]

Portuguese and Spanish troops were not the only allied troops to fight alongside and intermix with their British compatriots. The King's German Legion, a British Army unit made up entirely of German volunteers from the Electorate of Hanover, fought with distinction throughout the entirety of the Peninsular War and played a pivotal role in several campaigns, including the Battle of Salamanca. Second Captain Thomas Dyneley, an artillery officer with 'E' troop of the Royal Horse Artillery, paints a vivid picture of the actions of the Legion in the beginning actions of the Battle of Salamanca as they charged the rear guard of the enemy: "On the morning of July 23rd, Anson's light cavalry brigade, and that of the heavy dragons of the King's German Legion, under major-General von Bock, attacked the rear-guard of the French army near the village of Garcia Hernandez . . . breaking a square and taking prisoners

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[2] Shand, *The War In the Peninsula*, 151.
[3] Roger Parkinson, *The Peninsular War* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1973), 78-81.
[4] Parkinson, *The Peninsular War*, 80.

three battalions of the enemy's infantry."[5] Dyneley has several accounts that highlight the cooperation between Great Britain and her Germanic allies. In a letter dated from August 5, 1812, Dyneley wrote that his unit "consists of two regiments of heavy German cavalry, two strong regiments of Portuguese cavalry, a German infantry light battalion and our troop."[6] This "corps of observation and communication," as Dyneley terms it, fought head to head at the Battle of Salamanca in an attempt to reach the Spanish capitol of Madrid.

While the British relationship with their foreign counterparts was largely positive, it was not always the case. Especially at the beginning of the Peninsular War, Portuguese and Spanish troops seemed to hinder British efforts more than they helped. There were several instances during the entirety of the war where poor discipline from Portuguese and Spanish troops led to difficulties for the British. A prime example of this occurred during the Battle of Talavera, July 27-28, 1809. In the late afternoon of the battle, French dragoons appeared opposite of several Spanish divisions and, despite the 1,000 yard range, "enjoyed themselves by popping off their pistols."[7] The Spanish reaction was rather amateur, as the entire front in this southern sector suddenly retreated from the harmless enemy without waiting for orders, creating an "infectious panic" that began to seize all of the Spanish troops in the area: "troops started to break into flight, throwing away their arms and pushing to the rear."[8] Wellesley, who witnessed the event firsthand, was aghast at what he saw as he described it to a fellow officer: "Nearly 2,000 ran off, who were neither attacked, nor threatened with an attack, and who were frightened only by the noise of their own fire; they left their arms and accoutrements on the ground, their officers went with them, and they . . . plundered the baggage of the British army."[9] Another such account of poor discipline from Spanish forces during fighting at Mansilla helps paint a clearer image of how disorganized the Spanish often were: during the fighting at Mansilla the Spanish rearguard was attacked by Soult, which immediately caused the rest of the Spanish army to flee in panic to the town of Astorga, where other Spanish and British forces were also retreating. The chaos that ensued created a traffic-jam of sorts that threatened to entrap the entire allied force by the fast-approaching French forces. Wellesley was largely unimpressed with

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[5] *Letters Written By Lieut.-General Thomas Dyneley C.B., R.A., While on Active Service Between the Years 1806 and 1815*, Thomas Dyneley, ed. (London: Lionel Leventhal Limited, 1896), 33.
[6] Ibid., 35.
[7] Parkinson, *The Peninsular War*, 91-92.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

the regular Spanish army throughout the entirety of the war, and often preferred working with Spanish militias instead, as he felt that they were more valuable to the war effort.[10] Wellesley was not the only British commander to have problems with his Spanish counterparts. Lieutenant General Benjamin D'Urban, a quartermaster-general who served in the Iberian Peninsula throughout the war, recalled a particular instance where the Spanish displayed a sense of "warped and mistaken judgment:" "General Carrera has made overtures to Marshal Ney, inviting him to come over to the Spanish Cause and offering him the Rank of Captain-General, he thinks he too he shall succeed. This is too absurd to need any comment."[11] General D'Urban's views were widely shared among several British officers, who viewed their Spanish allies as troublesome.

While the regular Spanish forces had their share of troubles, they were not the only allies that made life hard on their British counterparts. The Portuguese regular forces were at times almost as ineffective as their Spanish cousins. Upon his arrival in Portugal, Wellesley was under the impression that he would be supplied by his native allies. However, he soon found that the Portuguese would be unable to give the maximum assistance that Wellesley needed as many of their own units were under supplied. One of the Portuguese commanders that fought under Wellesley at the beginning of the war expected the British to supply his forces as well as their own, and this logistical misunderstanding led to Wellesley only using a fraction of the Portuguese forces that he had at his disposal. [12] Wellesley would later have the exact same problems with the Spanish, who would pledge logistical support and transport as the British made their way into Spain, only to falter on their promises, leaving the British troops in dire straits.[13]

Despite such setbacks, British training and supply efforts, especially with Portuguese troops, helped develop their allies on the Iberian Peninsula into an effective fighting force. The most drastically improved units were Portuguese, as they had received almost constant support from their British allies since they disembarked on the Peninsula in 1808. Wellesley utilized such troops in his advance on Oporto in 1808, where British warships and the newly-trained Portuguese troops helped ensure victory against their French opponents.[14] The Spanish also found themselves becoming a more formidable force. The Spanish Advanced

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[10] Ibid., 100.
[11] *The Peninsular Journal of Major-General Sir Benjamin D'Urban*, Benjamin D'Urban, ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1930), 107-08.
[12] D'Urban, *The Peninsular Journal*, 32.
[13] Ibid., 87.
[14] Parkinson, *The Peninsular War*, 81.

Guard, which had been in charge of securing the Bridge of Almaraz, was a prime exception to the rule when it came to Spanish units. Whereas several conventional Spanish units were largely considered to do more harm than good, the Advanced Guard remained in good order, highly alert, and had proved itself in the field of battle, pushing a French force from Mirabete and capturing several cannons.[15]

Though Wellesley recognized the potential of such units, he was not the only one to notice the benefits of using the newly trained and organized Portuguese troops. Beresford utilized a sizable Portuguese force under the command of a Portuguese general to beat back a large French force east of Lamego, which allowed for Beresford to move east to prevent Soult and his corps from reaching a fellow French force under Victor- Perrin.[16] D'Urban described the Portuguese forces that he encounters near Ciudad Rodrigo as a well disciplined fighting force that would fight better than expected: "I don't at all doubt of their doing their duty."[17] Dyneley recalled an action in the opening moments of the Battle of Salamanca, where his battery supported the advance of British infantry and two regiments of Portuguese infantry up a hillside that was occupied by the enemy. Such cooperation between British and Portuguese formations became more commonplace as the reliability of the Portuguese as an effective fighting force gradually became the norm.

The British support of allied units evolved as the war continued to rage on the Iberian Peninsula. The British, who at the beginning of the war were unable to provide logistical support to its allies, began to fulfill the role as the war went on. In his journal, D'Urban wrote frequently about supply missions that were intended for Portuguese and Spanish troops. One such example included a meeting between Beresford and Wellesley over how to supply the Portuguese troops currently under Wellesley's command. D'Urban recalled that it was necessary that the British Commissariat often step in to supply their Portuguese brethren, or "the troops will often starve, for such is the poverty, imbecility, and total want of arrangement of the Portuguese government, that any regular system of supply is not to be expected."[18] Due to the government's inability to effectively supply its own troops, Portuguese army units often leaned on their British counterparts for much needed supplies. D'Urban argued that, without such support from the British, the Portuguese would only be able "to carry on operations . . . for more than a week or two together, if even

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[15] *The Peninsular Journal,* 33.
[16] Parkinson, *The Peninsular War*, 3..
[17] *The Peninsular Journal,* 101-102.
[18] Ibid., 103.

so long."[19] The Portuguese also took advantage of the medical support that was at the British disposal. When on the march in 1810 Wellesley established a "Hospital of Rest for the Sick of the Advanced Brigades" in Govea, in order to care for British and Portuguese soldiers who had been wounded in battle.[20]

British forces also utilized both Portuguese and Spanish partisan fighters throughout the entirety of the war on the peninsula for various purposes, including reconnaissance missions of French formations, gathering intelligence on enemy locations, and harassing the enemy's supply lines and marching formations. These partisans, who were fueled by the anger that came with French occupation, often fought alongside regular allied formations. One such example of this is shown by D'Urban in his journal as he recalled fighting that had occurred around Jaraicejo, Spain. In his notes D'Urban describes how the Portuguese Armed Peasantry, which was equipped and supplied by the British, fought alongside their regular army counterparts in support of allied operations in the area.[21] Portuguese partisans were also used heavily by Wellesley to harass the advancing French forces under Soult as he made his way into Portugal.[22] These militias were invaluable to British strategy in Iberia, as they could count on them to slow French troops and keep them occupied, which in turn would free up regular allied troops for major combat operations.

There were additional cases of growing British logistical support for its allies on the peninsula, which had come fairly early on in the Peninsular War. This involved the rescuing of General La Romana and his division from French-held Denmark, where they had occupied several French garrisons when the two nations were once allies. In a daring attempt, La Romana fought his way to Gothenburg on the Danish coast, where he embarked his division upon a squadron of the British Royal Navy that had been waiting for his arrival and would then take him to Santander to join other coalition forces fighting in occupied Spain.[23]

The entrance of British forces onto the Iberian Peninsula helped to create the "Spanish Ulcer" that drained the French of both brilliant commanders and precious supplies. Even though the guerrilla war fought by Portuguese and Spanish militias had done wonders to whittle down French forces in the peninsula, it was in conjunction with the regular

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 104.
[21] Ibid., 32.
[22] Parkinson, *The Peninsular War*, 83.
[23] David Chandler, *The Art of Warfare on Land* (London: Hamlyn, 1974), 611.

actions by allied formations that allowed for the allies to become successful on the peninsula. However, the coalition's success was largely due to the support from Great Britain, especially in the form of logistical aid and military support. This included the training and equipping of Spanish and Portuguese regular and militia armies, as well as providing bases of supply in occupied Spain through British fortresses towns, such as Gibraltar. British military officers that served in the Peninsular War were able to cooperate with their allied counterparts, many of whom were severely incompetent, in order to overcome the French threat and finally restore peace to the area in 1813, when the French finally returned north of the Pyrenees. Cooperation between the British and the rest of its allies resonated on several levels, and would set the framework that would help the coalition ultimately defeat Napoleon in 1814.