The Guerrilla and the Peninsular War

Dr. Robert Young

Associate Professor, Department of History and Military History
American Military University

Abstract

In today's world, we constantly hear of insurgencies. In recent history, the famous wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan displayed the potential effectiveness of the insurgent against the established power. During the Era of Napoleon, a similar situation existed in supposedly French occupied Spain. Spanish guerrillas continually frustrated and eventually wore down the world's foremost military power at that time. It rightfully earned the nickname "The Spanish Ulcer."

Keywords: Guerrilla, Insurgent, Peninsular War, Napoleon Bonaparte, Andre Massena, Spanish Ulcer

La guerrilla y la guerra peninsular

Resumen

En el mundo de hoy, escuchamos constantemente sobre insurgencias. En la historia reciente, las famosas guerras de Vietnam y Afganistán demostraron la eficacia potencial del insurgente contra el poder establecido. Durante la Era de Napoleón, existió una situación similar en la supuestamente ocupada España francesa. Las guerrillas españolas se frustraron continuamente y eventualmente desgastaron al principal poder militar del mundo en ese momento. Con razón se ganó el apodo de "La úlcera española".

Palabras clave: Guerrilla, Insurgente, Guerra Peninsular, Napoleón Bonaparte, André Massena, Úlcera española

游击队与半岛战争

摘要

当前，我们我们不断听到叛乱事件。近期历史中，越南和阿富汗发生的著名战争展现了叛乱者在挑战国家权力方面的潜

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在有效性。在拿破仑时代，据说法国占领的西班牙地区出现过一次类似的场景。西班牙游击队在此期间不断阻止并最终挫败了当时最著名的军事力量。游击队合格地获得了“西班牙溃疡”（The Spanish Ulcer）的绰号。

关键词：游击队，叛乱者，半岛战争，拿破仑·波拿巴，安德烈·马塞纳，西班牙溃疡（Spanish Ulcer）

Few can argue that the years 1796-1815 were the Era of Napoleon. He conquered the most of Europe, installing vast political and social changes in his new possessions, changes eliminated after his fall from power, but changes, nonetheless, which laid the foundation for the numerous revolutions that occurred throughout Europe during the 19th century. However, the Napoleonic military machine that was the instrument of these changes could not subdue one region of Europe, the Peninsula. In the two countries of the Peninsula, Spain and Portugal, the Napoleonic military machine would grind to a halt while losing nearly 200,000 soldiers, scores of supplies, dozens of excellent commanders, and perhaps most importantly, its pride. One would think, quite naturally, that it would take an army superior to Napoleon's to bring about such a defeat. On the contrary, a new type of army, one that first appeared on a limited scale in the American Revolutionary War, was the instrument of this defeat. An army of insurgents, or as military historians term them, guerrillas, were, along with a small British army under the Duke of Wellington between 1808 and 1814 became the scorn of France's Peninsular armies. They didn't fight in the conventional methods of line vs. line. They didn't offer their entire force to battle or conduct siege operations. Spanish guerrillas were poorly armed and equipped, often poorly led, and faced with summary execution if captured. Yet with groups at times as small as only a few men, they bled the French army during the years 1808-1814. They did not win the Peninsular War, but they did make it unwinnable for the French.

Guerrillas ambushed patrols and outposts, prevented commanders from talking to each other through their control of the countryside, making coordination of operations next to impossible. They were also a British intelligence asset. At the same time, they prevented any important intelligence from reaching the French. However, their greatest role was their mere presence. French military forces had to be available to counter guerrilla threats and such threats were possible anywhere in Spain. This prevented the concentration of the French army, depriving them of any chance at victory.

The term guerrilla was used only sparingly during this era. A war of resistance after an invader had already physically conquered a nation was termed an insurrection. Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), the famous observer and later writer and commentator on Napoleon and the art of war, laid out the following guidelines for an insurrection in his classic *On War* (1832):

1. The war must be fought in the interior of the country.
2. It must not be decided by a single stroke.
3. The theater of operations must be fairly large.
4. The national character must be suited to that type of war.
5. The country must be rough and inaccessible, because of mountains, or forests, marshes or the local methods of cultivation.[1]

These conditions are only effective if the enemy is unable to fight a similar type of war or allows a conflict to degenerate into such a situation. The French unwillingly and unwittingly complied.

The first condition for a successful war of insurrection, fighting it in the interior of a country, was the Spanish guerrilla's calling card. French troop strength centered around towns and for ill-trained, ill-equipped guerrillas to fight an efficient army was suicidal. As long as the guerrillas existed, the French had no choice but to pursue them into Spain's interior.

The guerrillas avoided that general battle that would end their existence and the struggle against France. Avoiding battle allowed the guerrillas to cripple one of Napoleon's major military tenets, the destruction of the enemy army in one major battle: "I see only one thing, the enemy army and its destruction … if you wage war, do it energetically and with severity. This is the only way to make it shorter, and consequently less inhuman."[2] His legendary victories at Jena and Austerlitz were conducted with that goal in mind. Those armies were razor sharp. The army in Spain after the initial French invasion lacked that edge; they were an army of occupation. Escorting couriers and foraging expeditions, chasing guerrilla bands often no larger than a few men, and garrisoning towns where the population hated them were their tasks.

Spain and its people were synonymous with Clausewitz's third and fourth conditions specifying that the theater of operations must be fairly large, and the national character must be suited to that type of war. Guerrillas used all of Spain other than their major population centers as a cover. The Spanish also did not embrace the ideas of the French Revolution politically, especially the elimination of the monarchy, which led to a revolt.[3] The people, not the Spanish army, inspired the nationalism the French encountered. Diversity personified the Spanish guerrilla, "…the priest girded up his black robe, and stuck a pistol in his belt; the student threw aside his books, and grasped the sword; the shepherd forsook his flock: the husbandman his

home."[4] The Spanish people were perfect for this type of war.

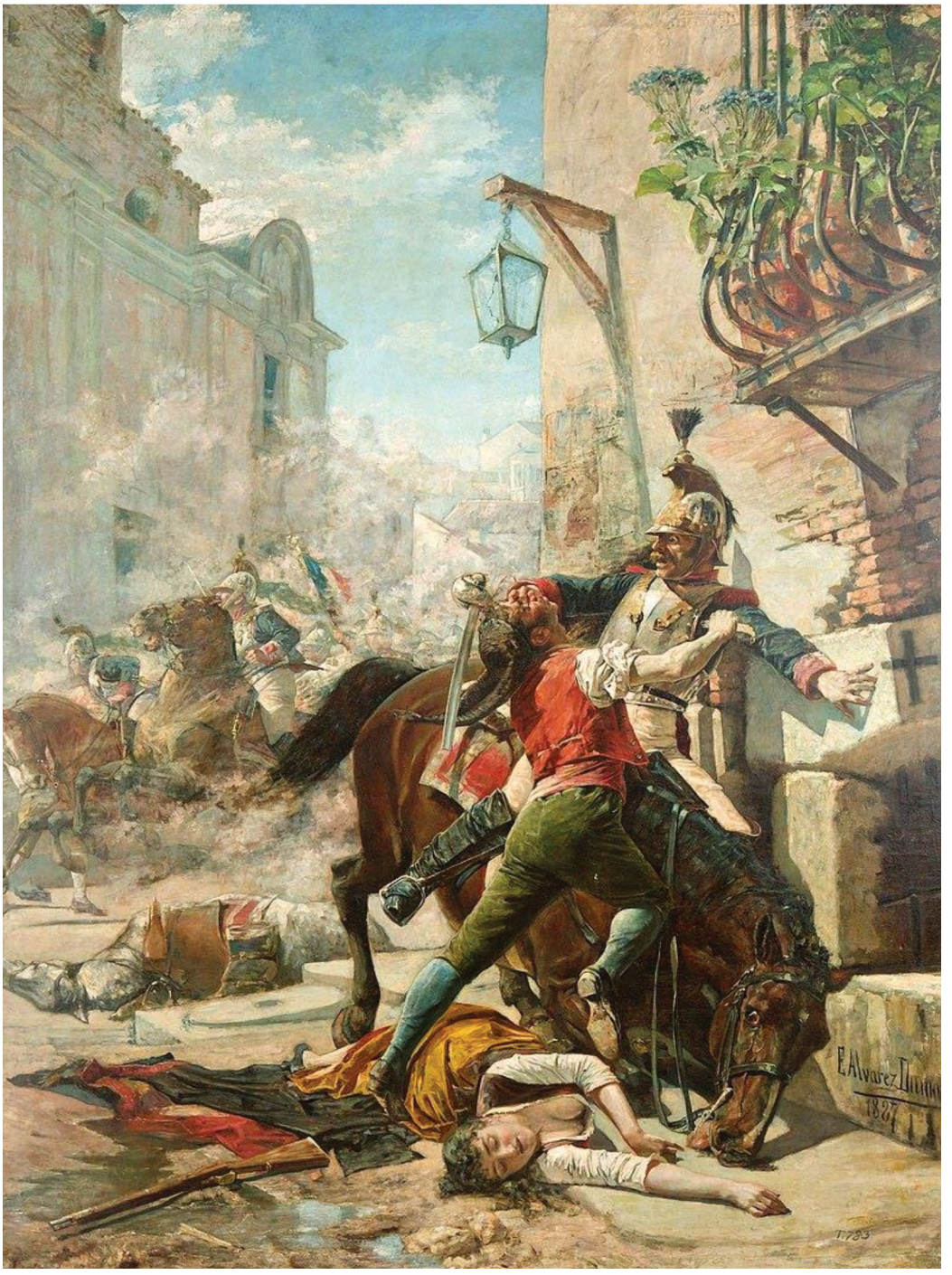
Clausewitz's fifth and final condition (the country must be rough and inaccessible, because of mountains or forests, or the local methods of cultivation), is noted in Spain by legendary Napoleonic historian David Chandler, who admitted that:

> The terrain of the Peninsula favored the tip and run of guerrilla harassing operations to a marked degree … Much of the area is an immense plateau of between 2000-3000 ft., bordered by the Cantabrian Mountains in the north, the Ebro Valley to the east, the Sierra Morena and River Guadalquivir to the south, and the mountainous spurs running westwards into Portugal … The barren nature of much of Spain – 'a country where small armies are defeated and large armies starve' (Henry IV of France) – makes only a few areas suitable for cavalry action … In sum a ragged, barren country of few roads – ideal for waging a popular war by a proud, fierce, implacably xenophobic people, as the Spanish certainly were.[5]

A French cavalryman made a similar observation of Spanish terrain, the terrain he chased Spanish guerrillas over for three years:

> The untamed character of the inhabitants of the peninsula, the mildness of the climate, which admits of living in the open air almost all the year, and thus to abandon one's dwelling upon occasion; the inaccessible retreats of the inland mountains; the sea which washes such extensive shores; all the great circumstances arising from the national character, the climate and local situation could not fail of procuring for the Spaniards numberless facilities for escaping from the oppression of their conquerors, and for multiplying their own forces, whether by transporting them rapidly to those points on which the French were weak, or in securing their escape from pursuit.[6]

The hopelessness of Spain's natural features was impressed upon Marshal Andre Massena, one of the many French commanders in Spain who failed miserably after a career previously filled with glory. In 1810, Wellington's army constructed a line of fortifications near the Spanish-Portuguese border and entrenched behind them. Massena would not attack because of a lack of numbers and other French commanders could not help; the guerrilla's control of the countryside made them oblivious to Massena's situation. Massena eventually withdrew back into Spain, losing men to the guerrillas and starvation along the way. Another French officer, Jean Jacques Pelet, adds: "The bands of insurgents were more bothersome for individual soldiers in our army than dangerous to the army itself. They brought delays rather than obstacles to the operations by compounding the two greatest difficulties of the war – food and communication."[7] Unable to forage or com-



Juan Malasaña avenging his daughter Manuela Malasaña on the streets of Madrid during the Dos de Mayo uprising. Painted by Eugenio Álvarez Dumont in 1887.

"The Surrender of Bailén", by Casado del Alisal, 1864, Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain. Wikimedia Commons.

A painting depicting a column of Spanish troops during the Peninsular War, painted by Augusto Ferrer-Dalmau. Wikimedia Commons.

municate, the French army could never concentrate against a British army they massively outnumbered. The guerrillas ensured this.

Napoleon coined the famous phrase, "an army lives on its stomach." An unfed army may lack that extra effort needed at the key part of a battle if hungry. France's Peninsular armies were continuously ill fed. This permeated the French soldiers' mindset, a cavalry colonel noting: "Our soldiers never inquired what country we were leading them to; but if there were provisions where they were going, it was the only point of view in which they ever considered the geography of the earth."[8] Supplying these Peninsular armies tormented Napoleon. Sending food and supplies from France over broken roads, endless mountains, on trips that could last over a month, whatever made it tended to be of little value. The entire route, once it reached Spain, also suffered continuous guerrilla attacks. Soldiers had to escort the convoys, taking strength away from the army's main body and consuming supplies along the way that further depleted what arrived for the French army. Foraging seemed to be the answer, but it ultimately allowed guerrillas to make an even larger impact.

Foraging created its own set of problems. Huge escorts were needed to safeguard foragers, and they often traveled many miles from French strongholds. Yet armed escorts were needed, as the following episode attests:

> On October 12 (1809) Milosewitz took out 2,000 men for a cattle hunt in the valley of the Besos. He pierced the blockading line, routing the miqueletes of milans at San Jeronimo de la Murta, and penetrated as far as Granollers, 20 miles from Barcelona, where he made an invaluable seizure, the food depot of the eastern section of the investing force. But he was now dangerously distant from his base, and as he was returning with his captures, the guerrillas fell upon him at San Culgat with men brought from all over the region. The Italians were routed with a loss of 300 men and their convoy was recaptured. After this Duhesme made no more attempts to send expeditions far afield: in spite of a growing scarcity of food, he could not afford to risk the loss of any more men by pushing his sorties into the inland.[9]

Once leaving the town foraging expeditions were harassed continuously, losing a few men in one spot, a few more at another. When an expedition traveled far enough inland help was impossible and the guerrillas could concentrate against even larger numbers of men. With foraging expeditions now too costly the only other option available was forced requisitions from the Spanish civilian population.

Forced civilian requisitions never work. It did help, temporarily, France's supply needs but also made enemies of all Spaniards as the French forcibly took food and other necessities from the Spanish peasants. Before this policy

much of Spain was already anti-French but much of the population remained ambivalent. That ended with the forced requisitions and the fury of the guerrillas, who exacted vengeance against any who helped the French, voluntarily or involuntarily.[10] Cavalry commanders frequently conducted these requisitions and lamented its effects:

> … Violent measures far from keeping down the inhabitants, only sharpened their hatred of the French, and, what always happens in a country where there is patriotism, violent measures led to reprisals still more violent. Squadrons, entire battalions were annihilated by the peasants in the course of a night. Seven hundred French prisoners were drowned at once in the Minho by order of Don Pedro de Barrios, Governor of Galicia for the Junta; and the fury of the inhabitants, far from diminishing, was every increased by the growing weakness of the French army.[11]

The officers of the French army were now aware that this was an unwinnable situation.

Napoleon never thought the Peninsular War would develop into the "ulcer," as he called it, that it did.[12] After driving the British army out of Spain in 1808 he felt he could control the war from Paris, while trusting older but previously reliable commanders to garrison the country. To do so, his dispatches had to pass through guerrilla-infested territory. The guerrillas knew this, and those dispatches were a top priority for obvious reasons. General Marcellin Marbot, Massena's deputy, commented in his memoirs that it took four months on the average for a message to leave his command post, get to Paris, if it made it there, and return to Spain.[13] In that time the entire situation changed, rendering Napoleon's orders obsolete. When Massena advanced against Torres Verdas, he did so with 60,000 men. Marshals Soult and Ney's commands were supposed to join him, raising the army's total strength to 100,000 troops. However, Soult could not advance since his area was infested with guerrillas. Ney had no idea of his role in the campaign. The dispatches from both Napoleon and Massena never reached him because the guerrillas intercepted them. Colonel De Rocca, Soult's cavalry commander, noted his superior's predicament:

> The inhabitants of Portugal had risen in mass like those of Galicia, and the Portuguese opposed the French with 12,000 soldiers of the line, and 70,000 of their militia. Marshal Soult could not with only 22,000 men keep the country in his rear and advance to Lisbon. He remained, however, more than forty days in Oporto, trying in vain to make the inhabitants submit, and to re-establish his communications; he had not received for several months either orders or reinforcements. Notwithstanding the danger of his situation, he did not make a retrograde movement fearful that by this he might injure the

> operations of the other bodies of our armies, of whose positions he remained completely ignorant.[14]

An entire operation whose success may have been enhanced by the addition of Soult's 22,000 men was doomed. An entire corps was kept out of battle by the guerrilla's control of the countryside. This is but one example of the isolation felt by the various parts of the French Peninsular army. There were many more and each would in some way impact military operations.

Communication between units as small as battalions developed into complex operations. De Rocca recalled:

> It sometimes required entire battalions to carry an order of a battalion to another distant one. The soldiers wounded, sick, or fatigued, who remained behind the French columns, were immediately murdered. Every victory produced only a new conflict. Victories had become useless, by the persevering and invincible character of the Spaniards; and the French armies were consuming themselves, for want of repose, in continual fatigues, nightly watchings and anxieties.[15]

A regiment comprised three battalions. To have to move an entire battalion from an assembly area to another unit just to deliver a message was time-consuming, exhausting, and depressing to soldiers and commanders. Operations were delayed or as in Marshal Ney's case, never begun. Military operations, from the simplest movement to the biggest battle, are complex undertakings that require preparation, coordination, and reconnaissance. A battalion not being where it was supposed to be could cause utter turmoil. Such was the case throughout the Peninsular War.

1810 saw the isolation of various French corps throughout Spain, isolation resulting from the inability to communicate with each other or receive orders from Paris. In Galicia the guerrillas for intermittent periods cut the lines of communication between two different corps and those corps communication with King Joseph Napoleon (Napoleon's brother).[16] Communications had been kept open by convoys with escorts of at a minimum a few hundred men. As 1811 began, safety disappeared. Increased numbers and smarter tactics gave the guerrillas new advantages. Instead of striking these convoys in the open they now blocked roads in rocky places. In Spain, those were everywhere. The guerrillas followed French columns like vultures. They would "fire from inaccessible side-hills, attacked and detained its rearguard so as to delay its march, thus causing a gap to grow between it and the main body, and only closed when the column was beginning to get strung out into a series of isolated groups."[17] The convoys sent up from Astorga, the main French supply depot in Galicia and the key to the survivability of the two army corps stationed there, were especially vulnerable to guerrilla ambushes. Should a few horses or cattle be killed, should a wagon be disabled, an entire convoy would be in danger. The two corps, the 2nd and 6th, did not participate in operations throughout 1811. Only in

1812, when they were withdrawn from Galicia to join Napoleon's army preparing to invade Russia did this ordeal end and a new one begin.

The approximately seven years of the Peninsular War produced many intermittent periods of communications blackouts, all the result of guerrillas. No information reached Massena, and none reached Paris for three critical months during the winter of 1810.[18] In 1812, little significant correspondence between King Joseph and Marshal Marmont ever reached its intended destinations. The result was that Joseph and 14,000 men never reached Marmont and the Salamanca battlefield. Marmont did not wait for those men because he had no idea they were enroute.[19] Spanish guerrillas intercepted all the dispatches. For twelve days before the Battle of Salamanca, every attempt to coordinate failed. King Joseph and Marmont were never more than fifty miles apart yet neither had the slightest notion where the other was located. During the early months of 1813 the main road between Madrid and Burgos was cut for five weeks and the quickest a message ever arrived from Paris, if it ever arrived, was 41 days.[20] Wellington glorified the guerrillas in an 1809 dispatch: "No column appeared south of the Tagus. Victor was feeling north not only for forage, but also perhaps to find out what had happened to Soult, for it was already the case that the French could not control an inch of Spain beyond musket range of a soldier: the guerrilleros had made it almost impossible for one army to talk to another."[21] Such praise was rare from the mercurial, pompous, yet great Wellington. He praised their role in 1809 but never mentioned in postwar writings the saving of his army by guerrillas after the Battle of Talavera. Wellington had won the battle and set after the retreating French army. He believed his 18,000 men would have to deal with no more than a screening force of 10,000.[22] Marshall Soult was racing towards him with another 30,000 French soldiers. Disaster was averted when guerrillas informed the Spanish who informed Wellington. An immediate retreat saved the British army.

Talavera was Wellington's first decisive victory in the Peninsular campaign. The British had 20,641 troops available for battle; the French army had 288,851 men in Spain and Portugal of which only 46,138 reached the battlefield.[23] Where was the rest of the French army? 36,326 men pursued guerrillas as their primary mission, 36,018 garrisoned the province of Saragossa, and 12,000 of the Saragossa force foraged, tried to protect couriers and convoys, and pursued guerrillas.[24] Over 100,000 other men were scattered throughout Spain in towns or provinces like Saragossa. Soult's force in Galicia, approximately 42,000 men, all either garrisoned towns, pursued guerrillas, or scoured the countryside for supplies.[25] They could not aid any other French commanders in any battle. At the Battle of Busaco, on September 26, 1810, Massena faced Wellington's 52,000 British and Portuguese soldiers with 62,575 troops, a stunning number considering the French army had peaked in strength only a few months earlier at 360,603.[26] 300,000 men were

either garrisoning towns or chasing guerrillas.

Napoleon's commanders suffered no illusions about why they were defeated in Spain and Portugal. King Joseph's chief aide, General Bigarre, clearly stated: "The guerrillas caused more casualties to the French Armies than all the regular troops during the whole course of the war in Spain; it has been proved that they murdered a hundred of our men daily. Thus, over the period of five years they killed 180,000 French soldiers without losing more than 25,000."[27] De Rocca, when analyzing the guerrilla way of war, stated: "… This manner of fighting had procured them the name of mountain flies, even from the Spaniards themselves, alluding to the manner in which the obstinate insects torment living beings without ever leaving them an instant's rest."[28] General Jean Jacques Pelet, Massena's aide, noted: "…in the absence of guerrillas, the French armies would have acquired a unity and strength that they were never able to achieve in this country, and the Anglo-Portuguese army, unwarned of our operations and projects, would have been unable to withstand concentrated operations"[29] Wellington's chief intelligence officer, Edward Cocks, the man responsible for receiving and evaluating the dispatches and information provided by the guerrillas, noted:

> If any arm is unopposed, can march where it will and draw supplies from all parts, the country is militarily conquered but not civilly unless the resources of every description are at the disposal of the governor and the individuals can pass freely. The guerrillas prevent this. Individuals and even small parties are not safe, convoys required strong escorts, and the number of French required in Spain is inconceivably multiplied and Spaniards are kept out of the French service.[30]

One of Napoleon's foremost military maxims was bringing more force to the decisive point of battle: "The art of war consists, with a numerically inferior army, in always having larger forces than the enemy at the point which is to be attacked or defended. But this art can be learned neither from books nor from practice. It is an intuitive way of acting which properly constitutes the genius of war."[31] Napoleon possessed this genius as no other before him. His generals, who for years served under him, also had this belief. They discovered the Peninsula was not their previous campaigns. Concentration was over the horizon, impossible to achieve since the army did not control its line of communication and supply. Commanders could not assist each other. The greatest impact of the guerrilla in the Peninsula was its prevention of the mighty French army's concentration.

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