



The Spanish War of 1808-1813, the reasons for a bogging down

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Histoire & stratégie

Saint-cyrien de la promotion Grande Armée (1981-1983), Doctor of History, Lieutenant-Colonel HOUSSET served ten years in the Train Corps before taking up the post of office manager, successively in the Minister's Office (SDBC), the Directorate of Heritage Memory and Archives (DMPA) and the Defence Historical Service (SHD). In 2006, he was assigned as Deputy to the General Delegate for Army Heritage (DELPAT) and then returned to the SHD to head the Defence Symbolism Division. Since 2015, he has served at the Command Doctrine and Education Centre (CDEC) as head of the research and history function within the PEP (pôle études et prospective), deputy to the commander of the PEP.

The author reviews, from the conception to the execution of the manoeuvre, the reasons that made the conflict in Spain an interminable war that was finally lost by the imperial eagles. He takes the opportunity to denounce Napoleon's accumulated errors, notably the lack of a global approach, while underlining his dependence on the evolution of an international context that is unfavourable to him.

After stating in 1808 that he would "find in Spain the columns of Hercules, but not the limits of his power", Napoleon, defeated, said eight years later about the Spanish War: "Events proved that I had made a great mistake in the choice of means, much more than in principle..."¹ ». So what are these principles?

Jean Tulard recalls them. It was with the aim of closing the coasts of the South to British goods that French troops invaded Portugal in 1807, while the invasion of Spain was to allow the peninsula to be fully integrated into the continental system.² Indeed, in the struggle between France and England, it was important to enforce the rules of the continental blockade then in place. But Napoleon could not trust the Portuguese, who were totally subservient to the English. As for the Spaniards, the French sovereign was wary of them and the Iberian Peninsula still represented some 4,800 km of coastline.

The Emperor also saw a strategic interest in this politico-economic aspect, which consisted in supplementing the security of southern France. The Kingdom of Italy already ensures the protection of the south-eastern departments of the "sanctuary". But the departments of south-western France remained under threat from the English and poorly guaranteed by the Spanish Bourbons. By appropriating the northern provinces of the Ebro (Catalonia, Aragon, Navarre and Vizcaya), the kingdom of Italy was able to protect the southern departments of the Ebro.³), the southern border is padlocked. This obsession with security should be seen in parallel with the progressive constitution of the Rhine confederation (1806-1813) which, through its satellite states, protected eastern France.

One can only adhere to the principles set out; it is the means used that are rather questionable. Proof of this is that the Spanish War was uninterrupted and interminable.⁴. History teaches us that not only is the implementation of the springs used inappropriate, but also the choice of the springs was inappropriate. This is due to a lack of general understanding of the theatre, the exercise of command at too great a distance that proves too cowardly, and finally, an overall failure to adapt troops to operations.

The Emperor's difficulties of understanding

What does Napoleon know about Spain?

Numerous works appeared in France at this time to portray the Spanish as having experienced a long decline over the last few generations. They point out that "the essential virtues of the Iberian race have been dulled", that their pride has been blanded, that their courage has fallen asleep... Reports from ambassadors taking turns in Madrid describe a court prone to intrigue and a Spain undermined by divisions. They underline the impotence of the Bourbons. The country would therefore be waiting for a saviour, as in 1799 in France.⁵ ! Napoleon, who did not have a personal idea about the country, made his own the prejudices of his compatriots about the degeneration and inertia of the Spaniards. He therefore has the image of a Spain in perdition and archaic which, according to him, can only aspire to reform. What is true is that the Spanish population (10 million inhabitants in 1803) was then suffering from massive illiteracy. If a "spirit of the Enlightenment" exists, it remains very limited. Moreover, there is a church in Spain that strongly frames the spirits. The weight of traditions is heavy. "In Spain, it was an absolute principle to always do what one had done the day before and absolutely as one had done," according to Father Cavanilles, quoted by Jordi Canal.⁶. According to Miguel Artola, an eminent Spanish historian of the 20th century : "In this 18th century, when rationalism is gaining ground throughout Europe, even in faraway Russia, in this century when the entire continent considers itself ignorant and is educating itself for a better future. Spain, in the certainty of its faith, remains as it is, refuses to examine the political, philosophical and religious transformations that characterize the modern age, and thus remains outside the spiritual mainstream". Thus, when in May 1808, the sovereign of the French wrote to Bessi res: "the Spaniards are like other peoples", imagining that they could be sensitive to promises of reforms and liberties⁷ he was mistaken. The rest will show that the sovereign of the French ignores almost everything about the Spanish soul, character and patriotism.

¹ General Louis Candille: "The imperial gendarmes in Spain in 1810: reason for foolishness?" in *M moire de l'Acad mie des sciences, inscriptions et belles-lettres de Toulouse*, 1901.

2 Jean Tulard: " Napoleon ou le mythe du sauveur ", Paris , Fayard, 1987.

3 Imperial decree of 8 February 1810 which detached the said provinces from the Kingdom of Spain, which were henceforth to be administered by French governors.

4 There is talk of the 1805 campaign, the 1806-1807 campaign, the 1809 or 1812 campaign... but of the Peninsular Wars (1807-1813).

5 Jean Tulard: "Le mythe du sauveur", op. cit.

6 Jordi Canal: " Histoire de l'Espagne contemporaine de 1808 à nos jours ", collection U, histoire, Paris, Armand Colin, 2009.

7 The aim was to provide the country with a liberal Constitution (7 July 1808). It deals with the principle of the sovereignty of the nation. The monarchy is maintained, as is Catholicism, which remains the state religion. Orders are not abolished and the principle of the unicity of justice is approved. On the other hand, the Civil Code is not included in the Constitution. We can therefore see that Napoleon acted with restraint.

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