



Napoleon is in the optimism of an easy conquest...

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He wrote to de Pradt, Archbishop of Mechelen: "...if this undertaking were to cost me 80,000 men, I would not attempt it. But it will not cost me 12,000. That's childish. The Spaniards don't know what a French army is. Believe me, it will be over soon. "

Napoleon's mistake was to limit Spanish resistance to the strength of their army alone, i.e. 117,000 men. However, and this is a reality, it is poorly equipped, poorly trained and its equipment is mediocre. As for the officers, they were poorly educated. The recklessness of the sovereign appears obvious when we analyze the troops sent in 1808 to the peninsula under the orders of Marshals Moncey and Murat. This army was formed from depots in the south of France, which were ordered to form four companies of conscripts individually. These units of 560 men were grouped by four to form a "provisional regiment". Twenty regiments were thus formed, with no old soldiers in their ranks, no soul, no esprit de corps, no training and supervised by officers, almost all of whom were on half pay, recalled to service, and by young sub-lieutenants. Six "marching regiments" were attached to this rather inhomogeneous group. These were made up of companies, sections, etc., the real remnants of the depots of the South. There were also a large number of auxiliary troops from the vassal kingdoms: 14,000 Swiss, Italians, Neapolitans, Portuguese, Prussians, Westphalians, Hanoverians and Irish. As for the cavalry, it is just as heterogeneous, also made up of "provisional regiments", also supplied from the southern depots.⁸. In total, in May 1808, of the 116,000 men sent to the south of the Pyrenees, only a third (34,000 men) belonged to the old units of the French army. For his part, General Dupont, whose mass of infantrymen represented 19,000 men, only had 1,700 men from old troops. The rest are conscripts who have not been in the army for a year. These are the roots of the Baylen disaster...⁹ (19-22 July 1808). In the autumn of 1808, to repair the damage from the beginning of the campaign, the best regiments of the French army were sent to Spain this time, with Napoleon at their head. So the situation improved. Napoleon won four victories: Burgos (10 November 1808), Espinosa (11 November 1808), Tudela (23 November 1808) and Somo-Sierra (30 November 1808). During these battles, he

annihilated the Spanish battle corps and a little later, he had an English army corps thrown back into the sea (A Coruña). He then imagined the situation restored.

It must also be said that throughout the conflict, Napoleon showed a certain blindness. According to him, the situation in Spain was not so bad. And indeed, the regular Spanish armies were gradually being destroyed one after the other. Moreover, he thought he had nothing to fear from the English, whose military qualities he underestimated and to whom he recognised only "naval virtues". Finally, Napoleon despised the guerrillas for whom he had nothing but repulsion. The terror they bring is unworthy, but he does not grasp its real significance: the humiliation and demoralization of the French soldier.

The distance between the principal and the executor is too great.

Napoleon has to deal with the international situation

It was the Baylen disaster and the signing of the Treaty of Tilsit (8 July 1807), which set the situation in Central Europe in stone, that determined Napoleon to intervene directly in Spain. He had these words: "Wherever I am not, we are only doing foolish things! ». One can indeed imagine that if he had been there, Napoleon would have rectified Dupont's mistakes in Baylen. Here and there it is written that Napoleon did not know how to end this (dirty) war. But when you read his correspondence, it is obvious that he understood everything. He wrote to Savary: "In a war of this kind, it is necessary to act patiently, calmly and according to well-established calculations. In civil wars, these are the important points that are defended. We must not go everywhere . His intervention is, moreover, successful. But how much time is left in Spain? Two and a half months.¹⁰ Austria, which knows that it has nothing to fear from Russia, is murmuring. That's all it takes for the Emperor to run off to Paris. His mistake was then to neglect to appoint a commander-in-chief in the Spanish theatre of operations.

The great captain imagines he can control everything...

It left eight corps in Spain, which were grouped into five largely autonomous armies. Their leaders, incredibly enough, receive their orders directly from the Emperor! This is a fault that Marbot points out in his memoirs. However, this principle had some success in fighting the guerrillas and defeating the armies of the provincial juntas. In the mind of the Emperor, this situation is temporary. As soon as the Treaty of Vienna was signed (14 October 1809), his hands were free again. His intention was then to put an end to the affairs of Spain, which in his opinion were dragging on too long. In November 1809, he decided to send a reinforcement of 120,000 quality troops, including eight new regiments of the Guard. He himself planned to return to Spain at the head of these reinforcements in the spring of 1810, once he had settled his divorce from Josephine and his marriage to Marie-Louise. The reinforcements will reach the peninsula but not him, because this time it is Russia that is in turmoil... From the moment (1810) when the Spaniards agreed to serve alongside the English and Portuguese under Wellington's command in chief, the army system Napoleon was unable to resolve the problem and left his marshals free to do as they pleased.

What are the chiefs worth?

Away from Paris and the master, they let their personal mood, indocile, ambitious or

jealous, show through. The character of the "chiefs", elsewhere compressed under the hand of the sovereign, flourished freely in Spain. It is hard to believe that Napoleon ignored the moods of his subordinates. How can he ignore the hatred of Soult and Victor, which has been pointed out many times? How can he ignore the fact that Lannes hated Murat because he loved Caroline and that the brilliant horseman had his preference? that he got on very badly with Bessières, with whom he had had words in Essling, that Marmont was in conflict with Soult and was at odds with Bessières because he had been appointed marshal before him, that the latter does not like Masséna and is moreover hated by Berthier, that Gouvion-Saint-Cyr is unanimous against him because he is considered too individualistic? Soult, in spite of his qualities, is above all looking for a throne in Portugal. Joseph, Murat, Eugène... why not him?¹¹ ? The result of this childishness compromises the work undertaken. Thus, the common operations between Soult and Victor are badly coordinated and this same Soult abandons Ney in Galicia, arrives knowingly too late at Talavera de La Reina (July 28, 1809) because he does not want to offer Joseph the victory that according to him, he does not deserve.¹² ! It is still he who lingers without reason, at the siege of Badajoz (22 April-12 May 1811) instead of rescuing Masséna. The latter can also, with good reason, complain of being poorly supported by Ney in Portugal. Moreover, Ney and Reynier enter into rebellion against the Prince d'Essling. At the Battle of Espinosa (10-11 November 1808), Victor and Lefebvre also showed themselves to be unintelligent, while Bessières, incredibly, refused to give the cavalry to Fuentès de Onoro (5 May 1811). There would be no end to all the misunderstandings between the marshals during this war. Spain gives the sad spectacle of disagreeing chiefs who ruin each other and finally find themselves confused in a common defeat.

8 In 1808, out of the 12,000 men who made up the cavalry, there were only three old regiments (1,250 sabres).

9 For the first time, a French army surrendered in open country. This catastrophe encouraged the English, who in the aftermath carried out an English landing in Portugal of 19,000 men under the command of Arthur Wellesley, the future Duke of Wellington. However, this defeat was salutary in that Napoleon decided to intervene directly... and was going to restore the situation.

10 From November 5, 1808 to January 17, 1809. By definitively throwing the English back into the sea, the guerrillas, deprived of moral and material aid, would have gradually weakened while the weary population would have finally given in to dialogue (as in the Vendée).

11 It would be a great promotion for the son of a little notary.

12 "We stopped at every moment under the pretext of having the artillery repaired," reports one witness .

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