



## Lack of agility in the French army

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**The soil of the peninsula is unusual to that usually trodden by imperial eagles and particularly favourable for ambush warfare.**

"... Abrupt mountains with goat paths, muskeg, rocks, gorges, rivers without bridges, precipices. No guide. The worst was poverty. What did they live on in this country? No more cattle than butter. We'd devour bare distances through empty villages. Everybody headed for the mountains. The children spat in our faces..." said one soldier. The terrain has nothing to do with the soil of Italy, the Danube valley, the plains of Poland. The generals serving in Spain were used to the "vastness", the "horizon" and the "adversary".

In Spain, these three notions are lacking. Everywhere the valleys are narrow and the horizon ends with mountains. In such terrain, there is no such thing as a "blitzkrieg". Envelopment, which is the basis of imperial tactics, is impracticable. There is little room for manoeuvre. The result is echelon manoeuvres, tiring and fruitless. The enemy can then retreat and offers only his rearguard. With the sea, he becomes elusive. Such were the retreats of John Moore in January 1809 and of Wellington on several occasions. From the sea, the English intervene with their batteries. Thus, an English squadron supports the besieged troops of Tarragona (4 May-28 June 1811). On the other hand, as Napoleon wrote, the art of war consists of dispersing to live and gathering to fight. But in order to disperse and live, you need roads, rich cities and well-stocked countryside. This is what we find on the plains of Germany. In Spain, the mountains, which force dispersion, are an obstacle to concentration. Thus, in the Iberian Peninsula, Napoleon could not find his ordinary chessboard. He knows how to adapt and he proves it when he intervenes in person. The problem is that he leaves the war to his lieutenants. However, the latter only know the one he has accustomed them to. In the end, the country can be considered to be defended more by nature than by its inhabitants.

Napoleon stubbornly wanted to solve the Spanish problem by military force. Marbot writes in his memoirs: "Napoleon despised the nations of the peninsula for too long and believed that it was enough to show French troops to obtain from them whatever one wanted. It was a great mistake<sup>14</sup> ». It would be wrong to believe that, in the face of this interminable war, officers did not ask themselves how best to conduct it: should they use rigour against the population to convince it not to help the guerrillas, or try to reconcile it through measures of clemency? To this question, Clermont-Tonnerre, one of the best chroniclers of the war, replied that clemency was a mistake, we must be feared, but he added: "... it is necessary to combine security with exact justice, strict probity and the maintenance of discipline in the troops ". Thus, under General Sebastiani, the English Channel and Grenada enjoyed great stability. The same is true of the kingdoms of Cordoba and Jaen, under General Dessolle, "endowed with great natural gentleness, but who knows how to be severe out of humanity itself" . Desboeufs, appointed Commander of Fuentès in 1812, visited the notables, played with them in shackle, went to Mass every Sunday, and acted in favour of the poor.

In this way he manages to reconcile the good graces of the population and obtains information on the thieves who infest the city and have them arrested. Girard, the commander of Bentazos Square, maintains such good relations with the population that she warns him of an attack that is brewing. This skillful and humane conduct of some officers is unfortunately annihilated by the exactions of most of the marshals and generals.<sup>15</sup>

Special bodies are being created. A decree of 6 August 1808 created thirty-four companies of "miquelets" or "mountain hunters". Their mission: to protect the Pyrenean border. The young men were recruited in the departments of Ariège, Hautes-Pyrénées, Pyrénées- Orientales, Basses-Pyrénées and Haute-Garonne.<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of 1809, there were about 3,000 hunters. Unfortunately and contrary to promises, the battalions were directed towards the interior of Spain and were engaged in the south of Upper Aragon, even taking part in the siege of Zaragoza. This flagrant breach of the government's commitments has resulted in a relative effectiveness against the guerrillas due to a massive desertion rate (50 to 75%). The harassment operations against French soldiers by a hostile population give the gendarmerie a particularly important role.

By a decree of 24 November 1809, the Emperor set up around twenty squadrons of gendarmes, specially assigned to the peninsula. They were intended to hold the country north of the Ebro and crossed the Pyrenees in the spring of 1810. The squadron had just over 4,000 sabres and snap hooks. Their role was both preventive and repressive, at least at the beginning of their intervention. Unfortunately, as events unfolded, the gendarmes were almost exclusively employed as substitutes, rather than as a complement to the troops, with no account being taken of their specialisation. Their action is paying off in relation to the rebel leaders, many of whom are arrested. But the pacification aspect remains at a standstill. In December 1812, the squadrons were reunited into legions, which were disbanded in November 1813. There was also a massive use of dragons.<sup>17</sup> This is a mounted infantry equipped with a carabineer whose members, if they fight on horseback, are also capable of fighting like infantrymen. In A Coruña (January 16, 1809), they set foot and use their firearms in terrain unsuitable for cavalry movements. During the Spanish War, they were essential to the French army in anti-guerrilla operations, being used in mobile columns. Unfortunately, they too ended up being used in line combat and were lacking in the fight against guerrilla warfare.

In conclusion, "Spanish affairs" hurt because their repercussions were enormous. For the French people, far removed from strategic considerations, nothing imposes this war except the dynastic ambition of the Emperor to "place his family". The insurrection of the Spanish people in May 1808 was not without moving the former French revolutionaries of 1792. For the French, there is no legitimacy of action in this war that does not belong to the revolutionary heritage. A rift between power and the nation was taking shape, while in Europe, a wave of nationalism was taking shape against France.<sup>18</sup> The loss of prestige is also considerable. Of the 38 major battles that took place in Spain, the imperial armies won only 20, a derisory score if we compare it to that of Napoleon as commander-in-chief, who only conceded three out of the 60 major battles he fought. Finally, the Spanish War opened a school for English infantry where they would acquire new warrior skills and saved England from the economic crisis by breaching the continental blockade.

**14** It seems today that there has been a lack of a comprehensive approach.

**15** In his book "La guerre d'Espagne", Lucas-Dubreton reports: "so many ciboriums, chalices, statues transformed into ingots to be exchanged for hotels in Paris". Everywhere, they were only desecrated in churches, notably in Cuenca and Cordoba in 1808, in Zaragoza in 1809, in Murcia, Granada and Seville in 1810.

**16** Recruitment is rather singular since it is clearly aimed at refractory conscripts who, once they are registered on the controls, see the proceedings against them and their relatives suspended.

**17** Of the 30 regiments in the French army, 25 were employed there. Statistics taken from Martinien's "Tables by corps and by battle of officers killed and wounded during the wars of the Empire (1805-1815)," op. cit.

**18** Jean Tulard: "Le Grand Empire", Albin-Michel, 1982.

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