

H-France Review Vol. 4 (March 2004), No. 30

Charles Esdaile, *The Peninsular War: A New History*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003. ix + 587 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-4039-6231-6.

Review by John Lawrence Tone, The Georgia Institute of Technology.

From 1807 to 1814, Napoleon tried to conquer and hold Portugal and Spain against the combined efforts of British, Portuguese, and Spanish troops. The war was a turning point in the history of four countries: it revolutionized Portugal and Spain and helped to consolidate British global dominion and to diminish French power. This is not an easy story to tell. A scholar must have command over an enormous body of evidence drawn from English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish sources, and must also have a flair for military narrative, because warfare is central to everything that happened in the Iberian Peninsula. Charles Esdaile qualifies on all counts, and his work sets a new standard for the history of the war.

Part of the story is familiar. Moore's epic retreat through Galicia, Wellington's defense of the lines at Torres Vedras, his exploits at Talavera, Salamanca, and Vitoria, the sieges at Badajoz and Ciudad Rodrigo, are all recounted. Esdaile also discusses Napoleon's political and military strategy in Iberia, the failings of his generals, and other themes commonly covered in any history of the Peninsular War. What will be new to most readers is Esdaile's somewhat perverse insistence that the Peninsular War was a mere sideshow of little military importance in the defeat of Napoleon, though a central event in the history of Spain, something he takes care to underscore in his skillful analysis of the political and social revolution unleashed by the resistance to Napoleon's occupation of the Peninsula.

The author of several works on Spain and the Spanish military in the Napoleonic era, Esdaile provides an account of the Bonaparte "reforms" in Spain, as well as exposing their limitations. He also brings clarity to what contemporaries called the Revolution of 1808, when Spaniards, their monarchs imprisoned by Napoleon and their armies destroyed, rose up to create new armies and juntas, culminating in a revolutionary national government at Cádiz operating under the radical Constitution of 1812.

The majority in this new government--the Cortes of Cádiz--styled themselves "Liberals," and they sought to refashion Spain by breaking the power of the church and other privileged "feudal" institutions, clearing the way for a new democratic and liberal society. These notables should not be confused with the bourgeoisie of Marxist legend. As in France, many of the radical Liberals were nobles or at least seigneurs, whose wealth derived from rents. However, because the Cortes met at industrious and commercial Cádiz, there was a significant representation of merchants and other "bourgeois" elements in the government, and the populace of Cádiz affected the course of events, pressuring the government toward more radical positions. In this way, the Spanish revolution of 1808-14 reproduced some of the traits of the French Revolution. Opposing the Liberals was a group known derisively as the "Serviles," many of them clerics, who sought to preserve the Old Regime. This clash between Liberals and Serviles shaped the political trajectory of Spain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by opening a deep chasm separating the left and right. Esdaile properly places this conflict at the center of the Peninsular War where it belongs. This contribution alone amply justifies the book's subtitle.

Esdaile points out that the Spanish revolutionaries did not do a very good job organizing, supplying, and training armies. They talked a lot about the "nation-in-arms," but they lacked the resources to do much other than talk. Neither were they a very talented group of men, at least if one is to believe

Esdaile. Unfortunately, when evaluating the Spanish revolutionaries, Esdaile has a tendency to cite Wellington and other British officers repeatedly and at great length. But British officials—especially Wellington—never much liked Spanish radicals, whom they despised for being Jacobins, Catholics, and Spaniards, not necessarily in that order. It would have been interesting to hear more from the Spanish revolutionaries themselves—men like Toreno, Argüelles, and Quintana—to balance the frankly racist and elitist assessments by British officers.

Esdaile himself is very clear about rejecting a view of Spanish incompetence rooted in arguments about “national character.” The armies put together by the Spanish regime fought poorly because they lacked cavalry, cannon, food, clothing, and almost every other resource an army needs. It had nothing to do with their “character” and everything to do with the resources controlled by the men of Cádiz. In any case, Spanish armies proved unreliable and prone to dramatic defeats. The military effort fell, therefore, to the Anglo-Portuguese Army.

Esdaile takes a very bleak view of the role of the Spanish popular uprising. He discounts the impact of the resistance in Gerona, Tarragona, Valencia, Zaragoza, and a thousand other places where Spanish civilians fought Napoleon’s troops. And he sees the guerrillas—the most original thing about the war—as “brigands” who probably damaged the Allied effort more than they helped. Esdaile’s view of the guerrillas is overly pessimistic and frankly reminiscent of William Napier’s old interpretation.[1] In support of his contention that the guerrillas were worthless, Esdaile cites Spanish, French, and especially British officers and elites who lived through the war. But, of course, rich men hated and feared poor men who did not know their place, and the officers who directed the regular war against Napoleon despised the irregulars. Relying exclusively on them to evaluate the guerrillas and the popular movement as a whole is, I think, a methodological mistake.

Esdaile argues, too, that the Spanish people had less enthusiasm for the war than traditional histories assert. According to legend, the Spanish people rose up in “unanimous ardor” against the French. This is doubtless absurd, and Esdaile is right to scoff at it. Nevertheless, the distinctive thing about the Peninsular War was the willingness and ability of the Spanish to rebuild their armies, engage in guerrilla warfare, and fight to the knife in places like Zaragoza. They astounded the world at the time, and we should not lose sight of that fact. In short, the popular movement in Spain probably deserves less scorn and more appreciation for its central contribution both to the war effort and to the “Revolution of 1808” than Esdaile is willing to give it.

NOTES

[1] William Napier, *History of the War in the Peninsula and in the South of France, from the year 1807 to the year 1814* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1842). Napier and the British tried to take all the credit for Napoleon's defeat in Spain, while the Spanish tried to do the same. This controversy may now seem a bit silly, given our understanding of the symbiosis between guerrilla forces and regulars in other contexts.

John Lawrence Tone
The Georgia Institute of Technology
john.tone@hts.gatech.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes,

provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 4 (March 2004), No. 30

ISSN 1553-9172