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Charles J. Esdaile, Ed., *Popular Resistance in the French Wars: Patriots, Partisans and Pirates*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. vii + 233 pp. Figures, notes, index. \$74.95 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 14-03938-261.

Review by David P. Jordan, University of Illinois at Chicago.

The myth-making nationalist historians of the nineteenth century saw the resistance to Napoleon's empire, especially in Spain, as popular, spontaneous, and hugely successful: a patriotic and nationalistic response that foreshadowed the future European nation-states. La guerrilla, the little war waged against the French invaders, was, in this view, an important early step on the teleological road to nationhood, and paradoxically the unexpected but legitimate response to the national and supposed 'universal' principles of the French Revolution that Napoleon sought forcibly to impose.

Charles Esdaile, who has written the best modern history of the Peninsular War as well as the best general account of guerrilla warfare in Spain^[1], organized the symposium at the University of Liverpool in 2003 that became the basis for this collection of essays. Whatever shortcomings are inherent in such a collective enterprise, which attempts a European perspective, are overshadowed by the merits of the volume. The ambition of historians to de-center Napoleon himself by turning their attention to the empire and local sources is here obvious and fruitful. The essays deal with Russia, Italy, the Rhineland, France and, of course, Spain. All present a useful snapshot of the state of scholarship devoted to popular resistance throughout Europe. If there is another thread of similarity running through the collection, it is the imperative, whether explicit or implicit, that much more work in the archives remains to be done before there can be a comprehensive picture of popular resistance. Historians share the same irony as biologists: the closer they look at a specimen the more closely still they want to look and the whole organism gradually recedes from view.

At least part of the problem of establishing a plausible and sufficiently flexible topology of the subject is announced in the sub-title of this collection: Patriots, Partisans and Land Pirates (note the absence of "guerrillas" here). It is no easy matter to disentangle the various groups who resisted Napoleon in one active way or another, and it is even more difficult to tease out their motives. Alan Forrest, in his piece "The Ubiquitous Brigand: The Politics and Language of Repression", writes about the Vendée where first the Jacobins and then historical opinion successfully turned the rebels into brigands: "This is a war in which public opinion mattered, and where words carried a special weight. Once dehumanized in this way, once stripped of those characteristics which others shared with him and depicted as a beast of the fields, the Vendean became an easier target for vengeance" (p. 39). But it wasn't all propaganda that would inspire General Turreau's killing squads. Brigandage was virtually impossible to distinguish from patriotic guerrilla activity everywhere in the empire, especially when there was no will to do so. A good many resisters were in it for loot and plunder, and welcomed the cloak of patriotism, a disguise denied the chouans.

If we cannot separate the altruistic from the criminal, it is equally difficult to make careful class distinctions. Esdaile heads a research project to identify the resisters and publishes a status report here with Leonor Hernandez Enviz entitled "The Anatomy of a Research Project: The Sociology of the Guerrilla War in Spain, 1804-14." Leaving aside the usual technical problems of doing social history, especially for an illiterate population who are mostly known through the eyes and words of their enemies, Esdaile and Enviz propose some tentative and tantalizing conclusions. "Thus", they write, "there were 322 men whose occupation in 1808 was known with a reasonable degree of certainty. Of these, no fewer than 204 (63.35 percent) may be said in one sense or other to have been the representatives of property, power and social success as students, professionals, landowners or wealthy tenant farmers, serving or retired army officers, or members of the clergy..." (p. 119). They go on to argue that the data suggest "that participation in la guerrilla of those with some stake in society--something to lose, indeed--was far higher than that of those on its margins..." (p. 124) and "a large part of la guerrilla can be seen to have depended on and been controlled by the patriot authorities, rather than having been the spontaneous work of the pueblo [the town and its people]" (p. 125).

In "Resistance, Collaboration or Third Way? Responses to Napoleonic Rule in Germany", Michael Rowe finds similarities in the Rhineland (although without the machinery of statistical analysis). He is concerned with elites and finds them remarkably shrewd in opposing Napoleon. "Rhinelanders", he asserts, "treated Napoleon rule as an à la carte menu: they picked and chose, selecting those Napoleonic institutions and innovations that they liked best, and opposing the others. In so doing, they were motivated by hard-nosed self interest, not broader ideological considerations." (p. 86). Indeed almost everywhere self interest seems to have trumped ideology. In Russia the peasantry treated the Cossacks not as fellow "patriots" but as marauders every bit as savage and dangerous as the French: "one contemporary account notes that Cossacks were regarded by peasants as 'worse than the enemy'" (p. 186) writes Janet Hartley ("The Patriotism of the Russian Army in the 'Patriotic' or 'Fatherland' War of 1812").

In Russian historiography the problem of resistance to Napoleon is further complicated by an overlay of first Tsarist and then Soviet historiography. The latter is at pains to discount the participation of the elites. "As part of the deliberate attempt to downplay the role of the elites in the defeat of Napoleon, Soviet analyses stressed the role of non-nobles' in organizing armed groups of peasants, including retired soldiers and members of the lower urban classes." (p. 185). Even Rostopchen, the incendiary governor of Moscow, is marginalized.

What remains after so much intelligent and careful microscopic research is the question of finding some meaning that will accommodate all this new work and fit it into a broad view of just how well Napoleon conquered, held, and ruled his empire. Esdaile, another of whose essays closes the collection ("Popular Resistance in Napoleonic Europe: Issues and Perspectives"), makes the role of popular resistance indirect but significant to Napoleon's fall. After 1808 the war gradually came home to France. There was no great victory in Spain but rather an endless bloodletting, and it became more and more difficult to replenish the ranks. The cost of this war lingered and mounted. It was indeed, as he said at St. Helena, an ulcer to which irregular combatants significantly contributed.

Esdaile's conclusions are not only antithetical to the Whig histories that see the emergence of nationalism, but also to interpretations that argue that the guerillas enjoyed broad support. "Far from being a

genuinely popular movement,” he writes, “enthused by the determination to fight for God, king and fatherland, the guerrillas appear as a much more conventional phenomenon: men were not inspired to fight by the new force of patriotism, but rather driven to fight by the old ones of poverty, hunger, despair and the voice of authority.” (p. 220). Janet Hartley, weighing western historiography offers support and a further distinction. “Western historians,” she writes, “have dated the emergence of modern forms of Russian nationalism to the later nineteenth century and have characterized peasant resistance during the Napoleonic invasion as ‘xenophobic’ rather than “nationalistic” but, nevertheless, the events of 1812 are regarded as an important stage in this development.” (p. 181).

The guerrillas could not alone have brought Napoleon down, but they did deny him the collaborators that he needed to hold his conquests and drive up the costs of war in men, matériel, and money. Outside the big cities of Spain collaborating with the French was often fatal so long as guerrilla bands roamed unchecked. La guerrilla raised the ante, not only because of the steady trickle of bloodletting, but also the need for more and more troops to hold territory where there were so few collaborators. Even if the guerrillas, whose social composition was often mongrel and even criminal, and whose motives were dubious, were not proto-nationalists—and Esdaile and his contributors make a convincing case—they stubbornly kept the French busy, frustrated, and savagely repressive. This, in turn, spawned more guerrillas or at least more resistance. For the moment then ‘xenophobic’ unconventional resisters may be a good definition of la guerrilla.

Reading these essays I was regularly reminded of the work of two historians, neither of whom figures prominently in the essays by Esdaile and his colleagues: Eric Hobsbawm and Richard Cobb.[2] Both are mentioned only once, by Alan Forrest, one of Cobb’s most distinguished students. Hobsbawm does not directly discuss guerrilla war, let alone the Spanish version directed against Napoleon--although he does write of Spanish anarchism, which is not unrelated to the earlier irregular struggle against Napoleon. He does, however, have much to say about bandits, their role in society, their geographic and political occurrence, and the meaning of the phenomenon for the general history of modernizing societies. Cobb, on the other hand, eschews all theory. What gives his work vigor and significance are his talent as a writer and an historian with a novelist’s gifts of observation and empathy.

Esdaile and his collaborators, for all the value and ingenuity of their work, are basically positivists. They have, or at least this is true of Esdaile who makes the plea specifically, faith in the archives to reveal truths about the past. It is only a matter of time, of stamina, and of funding to make the work possible for a hitherto murky picture to become clearer. I have no quarrel with what Edward Gibbon called the “profane virtues” of history, but there is a danger that unless historical works are informed by theory or art, they risk becoming catalogues or encyclopedias. It seems unnecessary to set aside the work of Hobsbawm and Cobb, who remain not only two of the most brilliant historians of marginal social movements, but who represent the two most fruitful approaches to so diffuse, complex, irregular, and sporadic a form of protest and resistance as la guerrilla.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Charles J. Esdaile, "Patriots, Partisans and Land Pirates in Retrospect"

Alan Forrest, "The Ubiquitous Brigand: The Politics and Language of Repression"

Martin Boycott-Brown, "Guerrilla Warfare avant la lettre: Northern Italy, 1792-97"

Michael Rowe, "Resistance, Collaboration or Third Way? Responses to Napoleonic Rule in Germany"

Antonio Moliner Prada, "Popular Resistance in Cataloni: Somatens and Miquelets, 1804-14"

Charles J. Esdaile and Leonor Hernández Enviz, "The Anatomy of a Research Project: The Sociology of the Guerrilla War in Spain, 1808-1814"

Vittorio Scotti-Douglas, "Regulating the Irregulars: Spanish Legislation on la guerrilla during the Peninsular War"

Emilie Delivré, “The Pen and the Sword: Political Catechisms and Resistance to Napoleon”

Janet Hartley, “The Patriotism of the Russian Army in the ‘Patriotic’ or ‘Fatherland’ War of 1812”

Charles J. Esdaile, “Popular Resistance in Napoleonic Europe: Issues and Perspectives”

NOTES

[1] *The Peninsular War: A New History* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 2003), and *Fighting Napoleon: Guerrillas, Bandits and Adventurers in Spain, 1808-1814* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004).

[2] The particular works at issue are E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Praeger, 1959), and his *Bandits* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), as well as Richard Cobb, *Les Armées révolutionnaires: Instrument de la Terreur dans les départements, Avril 1793-Floréal an II*, 2 vols. (Paris: Mouton, 1963).

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