

Spanish Armies of the Napoleonic Wars

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MEN-AT-ARMS SERIES

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ALBAN BOOK SERVICES

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OSPREY PUBLISHING LIMITED



Published in 1975 by
Osprey Publishing Ltd, 12-14 Long Acre,
London WC2E 9LP
Member Company of the George Philip Group
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ISBN 0 85045 243 0

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Filmset and printed in Great Britain
Monochrome by BAS Printers Limited, Wallop, Hampshire
Colour by Barnicotts Ltd, Taunton, Somerset

Spanish Armies of the Napoleonic Wars

Spain in the Napoleonic Era

Spain's involvement in the Napoleonic Wars came about largely as a result of the unstable political situation in the Iberian Peninsula at that time and her resulting weak and vacillating policies which caused Napoleon, Emperor of the French, to act in order to fill the power vacuum thus caused.

For years Britain and France had been at war and the situation in 1806 was that France had achieved almost undisputed control of the European mainland while Britain ruled the seas around the world. Neither great power was able to attack the other in the environment of its choosing, so military engagements fell into the background while the main focus of attention moved into the field of trade and commerce. Napoleon established the 'Continental System' over all countries in his sphere of influence by which they were forbidden to import English goods or goods which were carried in English ships. This cut Britain's Continental trade almost to nothing and only smuggling kept the Continent supplied with the exotic imports which they had come to regard as essential. By his rigorous enforcement of this blockade against Britain, Napoleon struck at the Royal Navy's battle efficiency as they had previously drawn almost all their spars and tackle from the Baltic area.

One of the last remaining inlets for British goods into Napoleonic Europe was via Portugal's ports and across Spain. Portugal was allied to Britain, Spain to France. Both were then relatively backward countries with weak and ineffective monarchies. The Bourbon dynasty had been on the Spanish throne since the line of old Spanish Habsburg kings had died out. Within a century



Spanish officer of hussars, Regimiento Maria-Luisa. This figure is taken from Goddard and Booth's work, 'Representations of the Principal European Armies'. The shako shown here is somewhat bell-topped and is not of the type given in the 'Coleccion de Noventa y Siete Estampas'. I think this picture is the less reliable. Uniform details are given in the relevant section of this book (National Army Museum)

this dynasty had exhausted itself and was under the effective dictatorship of the 'Prince of Peace' Manuel Godoy. From humble beginnings Godoy had worked himself into this powerful position by subtle and active exploitation of the favouritism



Spanish officer of artillery: From Goddard and Booth, again differing from the 'Coleccion' of 1806. In particular the mysterious squiggle of a collar badge and the excess of buttons on the cuff flap make Goddard's figure slightly unreliable (National Army Museum)

of Queen Maria Luisa of Spain who completely controlled her weak husband, Charles IV. An adventurer, Godoy was also a squanderer on imperial scale and enraged both the Spanish nobility and the people by his blatant self interest. In 1807 the Spanish national debt had risen to a record 1,200 million reales but Godoy's personal fortune had increased to 525 millions. The state had practically no sources of income, almost all financial matters passed through Godoy's hands and he constantly benefited from this situation. The army, then 50,000-60,000 strong, had not been paid for months and the soldiers' uniforms hung in tatters. To survive, the common men were reduced to begging or to carrying out public work. In contrast to these poor creatures, there

was a host of 'active' officers all on full pay; they included five captain generals, 127 field marshals, 87 lieutenant-generals, 252 brigadiers and 2,000 colonels.

Since 1795 Spain and France had been allies but this had given neither state any particular advantages. Spain, as an ally of Britain's arch-enemy, had been correspondingly treated and had lost her fleet and many of her American colonies to England. Prior to the Franco-Prussian War of 1806, Russia had intrigued with Godoy in Spain in an attempt to win Spain over to the anti-Napoleonic Coalition. The offer was attractive and the chances that the Prussians would defeat Napoleon were fairly highly fancied in European circles at this time. No one suspected that the Army which Frederick the Great had forged was now just an outmoded and fossilised remnant of its former self. On 5 October 1806 (just before the twin battles of Jena and Auerstädt on 14 October 1806 which were to smash Prussia's army into fragments before an astounded Europe) Godoy announced the mobilisation of the Spanish Army and, although Napoleon's name was not mentioned specifically, no one reading the document of mobilisation could be left in much doubt as to who was to be the object of the army's attention.

News of Napoleon's victories in Prussia caused the mobilisation to be cancelled hastily and sent Godoy into a frenzied panic of damp fawnings on the conqueror which reached almost oriental depths of obsequiousness. Godoy assured the Emperor that the mobilisation had been directed against Portugal (England's oldest and, by now, only free surviving European ally), and sought to avert Napoleon's well-justified rage with a spate of expensive gifts including four of the most beautiful Spanish thoroughbred horses as replacement for one of the same breed which the Emperor had lost in the recent campaign.

Napoleon was prepared to leave Spain as she was for a little longer, provided he could use her to bring about the conquest of Portugal, a land in a state similar to that of Spain and ruled by the Prince Regent João in place of his mother, Queen Maria I, who was mentally ill. A French ultimatum to Portugal demanded that she close all her harbours to English shipping by 1 September



Spanish Army: (1) Canonier, Royal Artillery. (2) Fusilier of the 1st Regimiento de Estramadura. (3) Dragoon of the Regimiento de Zamora (from Goddard and Booth): The artilleryman looks quite authentic and the fusilier is wearing his fatigue cap in the facing colour (crimson) and white with a regimental badge on the front. Normal headwear would have been the bicorn. The long black gaiters were worn in summer and in winter. The Dragoon is impossible to place; there was no regiment of dragoons entitled de Zamora but the yellow coat and the equipment certainly indicate a dragoon regiment. The black facings lead us to the regiment 'de Numancia' but the collar badge (crossed sabre and palm) is missing (National Army Museum)

1807, intern all Englishmen then in Portugal and confiscate all English goods. João refused (the British fleet would have destroyed Lisbon and taken Brazil if he had not!) and the pre-planned Franco-Spanish invasion of Portugal was set in motion.

A treaty enabling French forces to enter Spain had been signed at Fontainebleau on 27 October 1807 by the Spanish ambassador Esquierdo and the Grand Marshal Duroc. For this task General Junot was to invade Portugal with 26,000 French troops, Spain was to aid him with 10,000 and was

to provide a further 17,000 men to garrison Portugal after the end of the conquest. Portugal was to be split into three parts. One of these (the northern area between the rivers Duero and Minho) was to become the 'Kingdom of North Lusitania' and was to be given to the Queen of Etruria as compensation for the loss of Tuscany. The southern provinces of Alemtejo and the Algarve were to go to Godoy, while the central area was to remain under French administration until 'peace reigned in Europe'. The Portuguese colonies were to be divided between France and Spain and Charles IV was to receive the title 'Emperor of America'.



Spanish officer of heavy horse, Regimiento Carabineros de la Reyna: Once again, the squiggle collar badge spoils this otherwise excellent plate from Goddard and Booth. The badge should have been a rampant lion. The cuffs are also suspect; the Spanish heavy cavalry wore plain round cuffs at this time without cuff flaps (National Army Museum)

On 13 November 1807 the *Moniteur* announced laconically: 'The regent of Portugal has lost his throne. The removal of the House of Braganza is new proof of the unavoidable destruction of those who support England.'

As the Portuguese army was in no better state than that of Spain, and as effective British military assistance with Portugal could not be realised within the time allowed, King João, accompanied by his family and 15,000 retainers, fled to Brazil escorted by a British squadron under Admiral Sir Sidney Smith, and set up a kingdom in exile in Rio de Janeiro. Portugal thus fell into Napoleon's hands without a struggle, and he immediately turned his attentions to his faithful ally, Spain.

The major part of the Spanish army was now in Portugal, and General Dupont d'Etlang, with 40,000 men destined to reinforce Junot's corps, provided Napoleon with the tool with which to grasp the Spanish prize. Godoy saw the danger too late and began to form plans to take the Spanish Court to South America after the Portuguese example.

The Infante Ferdinand of the Asturias, however, disrupted Godoy's intentions by organising a palace revolution against his father (King Charles IV), mother (Queen Maria Luisa) and her favourite (Godoy) with the aim of taking the Spanish throne for himself. On the 29 October 1807 Napoleon was told of the intrigue by a letter from King Charles. A few weeks prior to this the Infante Ferdinand had also written to the Emperor asking for the hand of a French princess to replace his first wife (the daughter of ex-queen Marie Caroline of Naples—dethroned by Napoleon to make way for his brother Joseph.) Seizing this opportunity of intervention in Spanish court affairs as a cloak under which to take Spain for himself, Napoleon thus made the fateful decision to involve himself and his armies in a long and bitterly costly war which sucked away the strength of his military machine year by year, denying him the services of troops more and more desperately needed on other fronts.

On 2 December 1807 the Emperor met his brother Joseph in Venice and offered him the Spanish throne, but Joseph — apparently aware of the situation in that country — gave no immediate answer. The Emperor ruminated in Paris

for the winter and dedicated himself to the reconstruction of his capital city. General Dupont's army was now established between Burgos and Valladolid, poised to do the Emperor's bidding.

On 18 March 1808 Godoy attempted to persuade the Spanish royal family to move to Seville (which was yet free of French troops) but Ferdinand seized this opportunity to try to topple his mother's favourite again and called upon the people to help him. Godoy's palace was stormed by a mob and the favourite clapped in jail. The weak King Charles needed little urging to abdicate in favour of his ambitious son and the happy Spanish mob proclaimed the prince of the Asturias 'King Ferdinand VII of Spain'. His dethroned father turned to Napoleon for help – Napoleon invited all belligerents to Bayonne. Ferdinand could scarcely fight his way out of Vittoria to go there – so insistent were his followers that he should not put his head in the lion's mouth. Napoleon had all Ferdinand's letters from Bayonne to his supporters in Spain intercepted and thus knew the extent of the new king's anti-French feelings. During this long and wearisome period of political dallyings, on 5 May 1808 Napoleon received news of the Madrid uprising of 2 May in which many French soldiers, including numbers of sick in hospital, were murdered by the Spanish mob.

This news galvanised Napoleon into action – there was a stormy and unpleasant meeting during which Napoleon declared that Ferdinand was no longer King and that he would put Charles back on the Spanish throne if he wished. Charles, however, had no desire to return to a land seething with hostile feeling to him and his party, and refused. Ferdinand gave up the Spanish throne on 6 May 1808 and ordered the Junta in Madrid to be loyal to his father and the Emperor. Meanwhile, Napoleon had worked out an edict with Godoy by which Charles IV renounced the Spanish throne in favour of the Emperor, and on 10 May Ferdinand did the same. The Emperor maintained friendly relationships with Charles IV and his queen until the time of his death on St Helena. Napoleon now transferred his brother Joseph from the Neapolitan throne to that of Spain and replaced him in Naples with his brother-in-law, Joachim Murat, previously Grand Duke of Berg.

Berg fell under Napoleon's personal administration.

On 9 July 1808 King Joseph left Bayonne with 1,500 French troops to enter Madrid and take up his new throne. The whole of Spain was united in a common cause – to throw this French usurper out of the country. The remnants of the Spanish army (about 35,000 strong) concentrated near Benavente under General Cuesta but were scattered on 14 July 1808 at the battle of Medina del Riosecco by Marshal Bessières, commander of Old Castile and Leon, with half that number of French troops. On 20 July Joseph entered Madrid with a much reduced following but this



Spanish officer of infantry of the line. Regimiento de Irlanda: Having given collar badges (correctly) to the artillery and heavy cavalry, Goddard now donates them to this foreign regiment, a supposition not confirmed in the 'Coleccion de Noventa' of 1806 (National Army Museum)