

The Beginning of the End in Spain: Napoleon's Decision to Make War Pay for War and the Creation of the Military Districts of Spain in 1810

By Michael A. Bonura, US Army

Napoleon's Peninsular War presents one of the most interesting and complex periods of the First Empire.¹ With more troops and resources going into Spain and Portugal than perhaps any other single region of Europe over the course of six years, trying to determine why the effort failed to achieve victory vexes Napoleonic and military historians to the present. Why were French troops and commanders so unable to turn tactical victories into strategic ones? Some historians point to the unusual nature of the insurgency in Spain, and imply that the French armies were simply unable to adapt to the requirements of unconventional warfare.² But this is not generally accurate as French armies occupied most of Europe and had to fight to do so. An example of this was the successful French pacification efforts in northern Italy and northern Germany.³ Perhaps more importantly, the French Army had the experience suppressing the Vendee to inform their operations in Spain.⁴ Another argument focuses on the decision to tie French forces to Spanish provinces instead of keeping the armies concentrated more geographically.⁵ While this argument is compelling, it is only a symptom of the problem and not one of the central causes for the French failure to

pacify Spain and defeat the Allied armies during the Peninsular War. The central cause of French failure lay with Napoleon's decision to make the Spanish war pay for itself, and the resulting administrative reorganization of the war effort in Spain. This administrative reorganization had a negative effect on the military command of the war effort which led to the divisive and separate operations of the French armies in Spain.

Throughout 1808 and 1809, French officers played a critical role in the administration of French control over the Spanish provinces. Alongside Joseph's commissioners, intendants and prefects, they collected taxes and harvests, they governed cities and exerted control over civil authorities.⁶ Through these actions, they attempted to maintain not only French administration, but also to maintain the French troops in the field. However, they also supplemented the Spanish administration of King Joseph Bonaparte in Madrid. They upheld the Spanish judicial system such as it was and responded to decrees from Madrid. They supported reform projects and the reorganization of the administrative provinces of Spain all using a French revolutionary model. While devotion to Joseph's government in Madrid differed across the French officers managing the occupation, overall these officers worked towards administering a French kingdom in Spain.

In the same period, Joseph attempted to coordinate the operations of the French armies in Spain with mixed results. Joseph had to deal with Napoleon directing the war effort from afar by issuing orders directly to the corps commanders and marshals. In this way, Joseph often learned of new campaigns after the French corps were already in

¹ This paper was presented at the 2012 Society for Military History's 79th Meeting in Arlington, Virginia.

² John Lawrence Tone, *The Fatal Knot: The Guerilla War in Navarre and the Defeat of Napoleon in Spain* (Chapel Hill NC, 1994), 146-182.

³ Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon* (Indianapolis IN, 1978), 157-158; Ramsey Weston Phipps, *The Armies of the First French Republic and the Rise of the Marshals of Napoleon I*, (London, 1931), III, 215-238.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20-66.

⁵ Don W. Alexander, *Rod of Iron: French Counterinsurgency Policy in Aragon during the Peninsular War* (Wilmington, 1985), 233.

⁶ Charles Esdaile, *The Peninsular War: A New History* (New York, 2003), 230-233.

motion. Following Nicolas Soult's withdrawal from Portugal in June 1809, Napoleon gave him command of his own 2nd Corps as well as Michel Ney's 6th Corps and Édouard Mortier's 5th Corps to maneuver behind the Duke of Wellington's army, preventing it from returning to Portugal.⁷ This was also a good example of Joseph's problem of command authority in the peninsula. The marshals were very resistant to following Joseph's orders. Sometimes those orders tried to take advantage of or repair events on the ground, but they conflicted with Napoleon's orders given at such a distance. When Joseph could no longer communicate with Soult's corps in Portugal in April 1809, he ordered Mortier's 5th Corps to occupy Valladolid so that he could reopen communications and act as a reserve. Mortier refused to move as the Emperor had ordered him to remain in near Logrono far away from Old Castile.⁸ In effect, they followed the orders they agreed with and disregarded the orders they thought foolish. Both Ney and Soult seemed to disregard Joseph's orders to work together to remain in Galicia, even though the king did not believe them threatened by superior forces.⁹ This lack of willingness on the part of the marshals applied equally to supporting each other in the peninsula. While Soult and Ney paid little attention to Joseph's orders, it also seemed as though they paid little attention to each other. After reaching an agreement to envelope Pedro Caro, 3rd Marquis de la Romana's army in Galicia, Ney advanced to St Jago until reports from local peasants reported Soult's corps leaving the province.¹⁰ This was enough to cause Ney to leave the province immediately, believing Soult to have abandoned him. On top of geographic separation, difficult terrain, and guerilla operations making fast communication almost impossible,

Joseph's command problems made a coordinated effort in Spain in 1808 and 1809 extremely challenging.

This is not to say that Joseph was not able to exert a coordinating influence on the French operations. The loss of communication with Soult's invasion of Portugal in March and April paralyzed Joseph's efforts until he regained contact with Soult and Ney in May. Responding to reports from Ney and Soult, Joseph put François Etienne Kellermann, then in command of the provinces of Old Castile, in charge of 7,000 men that stripped the garrisons of northern Spain to reinforce Ney.¹¹ This represented a significant number of troops and resources Joseph was able to concentrate to support the corps commanders in the field. At this point in the war, Joseph wielded not only Imperial authority, but also financial and resource authority so that when Soult came back from Portugal bereft of artillery or material, Joseph was able to supply it, and did so as rapidly as possible.¹² This support allowed Soult to make the unsuccessful attempt of maneuvering to cut off Wellington from retreating after supporting the Spanish during the Battle of Talavera. In response to the Spanish offensive against Madrid in the fall of 1809, Joseph was able to concentrate his field armies for the Battle of Ocaña. These instances demonstrated Joseph's ability to coordinate, direct and influence the battles for Spain.

To strengthen their position in Spain, the Central Junta decided to launch an offensive aimed at Madrid in the fall of 1809 even though Wellington refused to take part of the ill-conceived affair. The Spanish gathered a large army in La Mancha under Juan Carlos de Aréizaga with the objective of driving onto Madrid with 50,000 men in the beginning of November. Aréizaga planned to advance rapidly toward Aranjuez with the intention of crossing the Tagus River and threatening Madrid while the Duke of Albuquerque was to demonstrate towards Talavera with 8,000 men to draw French forces away from the capitol and the Duke Del Parque had a similar mission to advance into Old Castile with 30,000 men to fix French forces in the north away

⁷ Clarke to Joseph, 18 June 1809, *Memoirs et correspondance politique et militaire de Roi Joseph*, ed. A. Du Casse (Paris, 1854), VI, 196-97; Soult to Joseph, 13 July 1809, in J. Belmas, *Journaux des sieges faits ou soutenues par les Francais dans la peninsula, de 1807 a 1814* (Paris, 1836), I, 394-402.

⁸ M. Adolphe Thiers, *The History of the Consulate and the Empire of France Under Napoleon*, translated by D. Forbes Campbell and H. W. Herbert (Philadelphia, 1872), III, 278.

⁹ Joseph, *Memoirs et correspondance*, vol. 6, 141-142.

¹⁰ W. F. P. Napier, *History of the War in the Peninsula and in the South of France: From 1807 to 1814* (New York, 1882), II, 109-112

¹¹ Charles Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War* (Oxford, 1908), II, 377.

¹² Joseph, *Memoirs et correspondance*, VI, 142.

from Madrid.¹³ When Soult, who replaced Jean-Baptiste Jourdan as Joseph's chief of staff, recognized the Spanish advance for what it was he immediately began to concentrate the disparate French corps. At that time, Etienne Heudelet's 2nd Corps was at Oropesa, Mortier's 5th Corps was at Talavera, Horace Sébastiani's 4th Corps was at Ocaña, Victor's 1st Corps was outside Toledo, and Jean Marchand's 6th Corps was at Salamanca (Ney had left the 6th Corps to return to France). Soult ordered Sébastiani's corps to deploy in front of the Spanish while he concentrated the 1st and 5th Corps at Ocaña. He replaced the 5th Corps at Talavera with the 2nd Corps to keep the Duke of Albuquerque's army under observation.

As four French corps marched to a single purpose, Joseph assigned command of the 6th corps and an additional brigade from the 5th Corps to Kellermann to ensure that Old Castile was not overrun by Del Parque's army. Although Aréizaga realized his mistake and began to retreat destroying the bridges over the Tagus, the rapid French concentration allowed Joseph to take the field and on 19 November 1809, destroy the Spanish army in detail by enveloping their right flank in conjunction with a frontal attack.¹⁴ The resulting victory eliminated the Spanish threat to Madrid.

Meanwhile, by leaving four battalions to garrison his entire government, Kellermann was able to concentrate his dragoon division of 3,000 troopers, and an infantry brigade of 1,500 men bringing the total against Del Parque to 13,000 men and 4,000 cavalry. In the beginning of November, Kellermann advanced with his army against Del Parque who had just crossed the Tormes River only to find the Spanish forces retreating to the north and west. On 6 November, Kellermann left Marchand in control of Salamanca, and force-marched his troops back to Valladolid. Since he left the province undefended guerilla bands multiplied in the absence of French troops and threatened to overrun his government. Julian Sanchez, the Empecinado, and other guerrilla leaders increased their operations, cutting supply lines and intercepting communications.¹⁵ Kellermann

marched his infantry back to their outposts, and sent his dragoons in flying columns across Old Castile, reestablishing French presence and driving the guerillas from the roads and larger towns. Kellermann spent the next few days re-establishing French control and battling guerilla bands.¹⁶ When Del Parque re-crossed the river and advanced towards Valladolid on the 20th, Kellermann concentrated his forces with the 6th Corps and marched toward Salamanca. On the 26th, Del Parque learned of the Spanish defeat at Ocaña and began another withdrawal at Alba de Tormes where Kellermann caught half of the Spanish army on each side of the river. Not waiting for his infantry, he ordered half of his troopers to envelope the Spanish right flank and the rest to drive the Spanish cavalry from the center.¹⁷ The result was remarkable with 1,000 killed and 2,000 prisoners falling to Kellermann immediately while the harsh winter reducing Del Parque's army to only 9,000 men by the spring of 1810. The Duke of Albuquerque was not as interested in offensive operations as Del Parque, and thus he made no real attack on the 2nd Corps. This campaign demonstrated Joseph's ability to exert a central control over French operations, the ability of French marshals to fight together, and the ability to coordinate forces and missions from across Spain.

These actions in the fall of 1809 gave the French occupation a much needed respite to consolidate power and reorganize the war effort, as well as rest and recuperate the French armies in Spain. It was not until April 1810 that Wellington's forces began to even patrol close to the border, and the Spanish armies took much longer to return to the field, although the guerillas and fortified towns continued their resistance. 1809 had its fair share of defeats, disasters, and miscommunications, but it also showed that coordination could happen in the peninsula. Although there were officers in charge of towns and provinces in this period, there seemed no lack of effort to assist each other when threatened by

¹³ Oman, III, 68-72.

¹⁴ Charles Théodore Beauvais de Préau, editor, *Victoires, Conquêtes, Désastres, Revers et Guerres Civiles des Français, de 1792 à 1815* (Paris, 1818-1821), vol. 19, 299-305.

¹⁵ Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, vol. 3, 83.

¹⁶ Juan Ortega Rubio "Al Excmo. Ayuntamiento de La Ciudad de Valladolid," in Hilarion Sancho, editor, *Valladolid Diarios Curiosos (1807-1841)* (Valladolid: Grupo Pinciano, 1990), 204-10.

¹⁷ Kellermann, Rapport Combat L' Alba de Tormes le 28 Novembre, 1809, Service Historique, C⁸ 34.

Spanish armies or guerillas or at least to respond to legitimate military authority.

However, 1810 brought about a fundamental change in the prosecution of the war in Spain. Beginning in February, Napoleon began to transfer the support of the war effort from French coffers to Spanish ones. On 8 February 1810, he notified Louis Alexandre Berthier that the armies in Spain needed to collect taxes and contributions for their own maintenance from the regions under their direct control, identifying generals in command in northern Spain specifically to begin collecting their own taxes and support.¹⁸ This order in and of itself was not outside of the French military experience, as there was perhaps no better army in the world at foraging off of the land. The British officers especially were impressed by the French ability in the peninsula to find at least a subsistence level of provisions in the most desolate of countries.¹⁹ Just as Napoleon attempted to conduct the war from afar, he also wanted to control its finances, and the requests made on the French treasuries were beginning to adversely affect both the French economy and public opinion. So he took another step towards ensuring that the perceived riches of Spain were used to fund the war effort. On 29 May 1810, Napoleon created six military governments granting the governors the power to collect taxes and revenues while in the other parts of Spain the corps commanders now had the authority to fill their corps coffers by levying taxes on whatever region they occupied. He chose the military governors personally.²⁰ He also determined the geographic boundaries of those six governments or districts of Spain. He created one of the most controversial in all of Spain to consist of the northern provinces of Valladolid, Palencia, and Toro as the 6th Military District, and gave the command of that district to Kellermann.²¹ This made sense as

Kellermann had commanded in Valladolid for over a year, but his elevation as a governor of a semi-autonomous military district was representative of the problems of these military districts across Spain.

This was a very different way of supporting the war than in 1808 and 1809. Although Joseph did collect contributions from the Spanish nobility, and the governors of the Spanish provinces used local resources for the maintenance of their formations, there were many ways in which the use of French resources supported operations in Spain. Some fortresses were bribed into surrendering with the use of French money. Soult experienced some of this capitulation in his first invasion of Portugal in 1809 at the fortified cities of Corunna and El Ferrol.²² Laurent de Gouvion Saint-Cyr's operations in Catalonia were focused on the capture of Barcelona, but keeping Barcelona required Napoleon to send supply convoys for both the military and civilian populations.²³ Additionally, Joseph was only able to rearm Soult's 2nd Corps in June 1809 because he was receiving money and material from France. Much like Napoleon's other brothers, when Joseph re-entered Madrid, he did so with the intention of ruling as the Spanish king. Part of that effort was leniency from Imperial taxes, so when Napoleon wanted the Spanish nobility to pay, Joseph acted with charity and benevolence. Allowing the generals of the French armies to collect their own taxes not only placed an incredible burden on the Spanish economy, it also forced Joseph to become harsher himself in the collection of taxes, and it prevented the formation of a truly Spanish Bonaparte monarchy.

It also rapidly began to break down the military hierarchy of Spain, especially during the pivotal 1810 campaign. Napoleon put Andre Massena in command of the Army of Portugal with the purpose of invading that country a third time. After the twin sieges of Ciudad Rodrigo and Almeida, Massena led 65,000 men into Portugal. However, his problems began far before crossing the border, and they began as a function of Napoleon's administrative decisions. Massena thought himself master of the northern

¹⁸ Napoleon to Berthier, 8 February 1810, in *Correspondence de Napoleon I^{er}*, No. 16230, vol. XX (Paris: Imprimerie Imperiale, 1856), 226.

¹⁹ Jac Weller, *Wellington in the Peninsula 1808-1814* 147-148.

²⁰ Decret, 29 May 1810, in *Correspondence de Napoleon I^{er}*, No. 16506, vol. XX, 440-41.

²¹ Decret, 29 May 1810, in Joseph, *Memoirs et correspondance*, vol. 7, 289; Decision, 4 June 1810, in Napoleon, *Unpublished Correspondence of Napoleon I*, ed. Ernest Picard and Louis

Tuetey, trans. Louise Seymour Houghton, vol. 2 (New York: Duffield & Company, 1913), 584-85.

²² Napier, *History of the War in the Peninsula*, 11-12.

²³ Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, vol 2, 74-75.

Spanish provinces for men and material, and planned on their logistical support for his advance into Portugal.²⁴ However, he quickly ran into trouble with the Governor of the 6th Military District, Kellermann. From the first Kellermann took his new charter to heart, and issued an order to his province declaring independence from both Madrid and Massena.²⁵ Kellermann had a large and exposed government and sought the means to govern and secure it. While Joseph screamed at such conduct, Massena re-established control by declaring that Kellermann could not use the taxes raised in his district for anything but the support of the Army of Portugal. Seemingly, this led Kellermann to become creative, turning to the seizure of church property and even the ransoming of prisoners as a way to raise funds.²⁶ Although censured for his conduct by Massena, Kellermann continued to make his district pay for and resource the French war effort. However, there were problems with more officers than just Kellermann. The Governor of Zamora General Jean Victor Rouyer refused to collect the additional taxes levied by Massena causing disruptions in the funding for the Army of Portugal. In addition to this, Napoleon's decree also gave the authority to corps commanders to raise whatever sums and resources necessary for the war effort. While Massena and Kellermann were attempting to raise money in northern Spain, Ney collected 9 million reaux, and Jean-Andoche Junot collected 6 million reaux from the same provinces.²⁷ It became every commander for their own command, not a single army using a single commissariat. This rapacity had predictable results on the war effort as a whole, and prevented any kind of a peaceful establishment of either French occupation or Joseph's Spanish monarchy.

This led to a similar and related instance of subordination born of the independence of the military districts that resulted in the starvation of

Massena's armies at the gates of the lines of Torres Vedras. Once the army moved into Portugal, Kellermann was responsible for collecting provisions and sending them onto the army. From the very first, Kellermann resisted his orders. First it was the limited amount of transportation for the supplies. Wagons were worth their weight in gold in Spain, and Kellermann did not want to surrender the use of his so Massena had to work out an arrangement that they had only to go as far as Salamanca. This was a symptom of the parochial view these generals took of the war effort. Essentially, their concern now stopped at the end of their domain.²⁸ It got so bad that Kellermann ordered the grain and supplies dumped out of his wagons when they reached the border of the 5th Military District. The logistical problems of Massena's Army were one a huge constraint on the operations they could prosecute against Wellington's forces defending Lisbon. The parochialism institutionalized by Napoleon's reorganization of Spain was a central cause in this short sighted view of the war.

By making his officers civilian administrators, Napoleon encouraged them to act in a more political capacity, and this capacity began to have other disastrous effects on the war. Each military governor was now playing a central role in the political life of their provinces, and this focus reduced the effectiveness of the French response to the insurgency that continued to rage across the peninsula. From Madrid, Joseph claimed that the imposition of military government prevented him from forging a Spanish nation loyal to his rule or a sustainable economy.²⁹ The provincialism of the military governors prevented a coordinated effort to combat the guerillas. After 1811, Mina was able to take advantage of the border between Aragon and Navarre to recuperate losses, recruit insurgents, and to plan effective operations in both provinces while Louis-Gabriel Suchet never pursued him across the border into Navarre.³⁰ Obviously, this increased the effectiveness and longevity of the guerrillas and limited the French response. The increased French requisitioning and taxation exacerbated an already

²⁴ Berthier to Massena, 16 January 1811, in Napier, *History of the War in the Peninsula*, 518.

²⁵ Jean Jacques Pelet, *The French Campaign in Portugal 1810-1811*, ed. and trans. by Donald D. Horward (Minneapolis, 1973), 102.

²⁶ Donald D. Horward, *Napoleon and Iberia: The Twin Sieges of Ciudad Rodrigo and Almeida, 1810* (Tallahassee FL, 1984), 239-40.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁸ Pelet, 155.

²⁹ Joseph, *Memoirs et correspondance*, VII, 318-319.

³⁰ Alexander, 233-34.

poor economy and led many areas to the brink of starvation. Zaragoza saw the price of food soar while the supply diminished. Madrid itself suffered horribly over the winter of 1811 to 1812 with 20,000 starving to death.³¹ The military governors and even corps commanders became responsible for these deaths and for the sufferings of the civilian population, and their plight took resources away from the war effort and in some ways fed their insurgency problems.

Kellermann, who was responsible for more than his fair share of tax collecting at the expense of his province, wrote Berthier this letter at the beginning of 1810, "The war with Spain is no longer an ordinary affair; there are doubtless no reverses or disastrous checks to be feared, but this obstinate nation undermines the army by petty oppositions... We must, therefore, have more men. The Emperor, perhaps, is weary of sending them; but it is necessary in order to put an end to the war, or else to be satisfied with strengthening ourselves in one part of Spain, in order thus to complete the conquest of the other. Meanwhile, the resources diminish, the means of agriculture perish, money is exhausted or disappears, we know not which way to turn, to provide pay or maintenance for the troops, or to supply the necessities to the hospitals, or in short, to attend to the endless minutiae indispensable to an army."³² This letter showed the understanding of these governors and the impact their policies were having on the Spanish people and economy. What led them to continue these policies was the lack of any real alternative. As long as war had to pay for war, the resources for the occupation had to come at the expense of the Spanish people. This created a situation which almost necessitated resistance to French rule.

That Napoleon's decision to live off of the land in Spain and reorganize Spain through military districts was a bad decision is not a new idea or argument. Joseph stated in his letters to Napoleon and in his memoirs that he believed the establishment of military governments in Spain to be

fatal to the war effort. He cited the lack of centralized control from Madrid and the increased resistance by the Spanish people as the chief problems resulted from the decision.³³ He was absolutely right. The military governments encouraged the military governors to focus exclusively on their provinces to the detriment of those around them and allowed the Spanish guerillas to operate more effectively because of these arbitrary boundaries to French operations. While deplorable, this result was not unforeseeable or even unreasonable as these governors, and the corps commanders became responsible for supplying their commands from the regions they occupied. However, this situation created an arbitrary authority exercised on the Spanish people from whatever French army or forces were present and eliminated the possibility of winning the "hearts and minds" of the Spanish people. While the economic and political friction was bad enough for French operations in Spain, it was not the worst casualty of Napoleon's decision.

More detrimental was the effect on the French military command, discipline, and good order. Prior to the decision to authorize commanders with the maintenance of their commands off of the land, French commanders and governors in Spain functioned in the traditions of military occupations. They did regulate civilian administrative actions and made sure the Spanish government ran, but they were far more concerned with the French military operations in the Peninsula. While there were instances of insubordination, Joseph was able to exercise centralized command authority, to shift resources and troops across the peninsula, and he attempted to build a legitimate Spanish monarchy. After the decision, the French commanders in Spain became as much political figures as they were military leaders, and often the political won out. The exercise of civilian power and authority became their primary focus, and when military operations were undertaken they were in support of that civilian authority. The governments encouraged the governors to disregard the central authority in Madrid, and even to fight with the marshals placed in command by Napoleon himself. In the effort to become financially viable and support their

³¹ Charles J. Esdaile, *Fighting Napoleon: Guerillas, Bandits and Adventurers in Spain, 1808-1814* (London, 2004), 118-120.

³² Thiers, 401.

³³ Joseph, *Memoirs et correspondance*, VII, 164-65.

commands, French officers engaged in sometimes deplorable tactics like prisoner ransoming, extortion, and property seizures. The exercise of these powers had an extremely negative effect on their military discipline and the ability to conduct coordinated operations. It was this institutional breakdown in the French officer corps, far more than the events on the battlefield or the stresses of counter-insurgency

warfare that spelled the doom of the French army in Spain. It is also a cautionary tale for armies in occupation conducting nation-building operations across the globe. The adverse effects on military officers when forced to function as civilian officials has wide ranging and categorically negative effects on those officers in particular, and the army as a whole.