

## Napoleon's Total War

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When Revolutionary France declared war on the Austrian empire in the spring of 1792, its leaders promised a short, sweet and victorious campaign. Instead, 1792 marked the beginning of a long, grinding, hideously bloody series of wars that would drag on in every state in Europe and last, with scant interruption, until the final defeat of France's Napoleon Bonaparte at Waterloo in 1815.

These wars marked something fundamentally new in Western history, and collectively deserve the title of the first 'total war'. Long before 1792, the major European powers had fought with each other at regular intervals, but those conflicts were remarkably limited in scope. The armies tended to avoid large-scale battle. Noncombatants could hope for relatively merciful treatment. Enemy officers dealt with each other as honorable adversaries. The major powers and their armed forces were still dominated by hereditary aristocracies, and war retained the feel of an aristocratic ritual. It was not play-acting by any means, but earlier wars proceeded according to a fairly strict code of aristocratic honor.

The French Revolution marked a sudden and dramatic break with this tradition. Revolutionary France overthrew the country's aristocracy along with its king and queen, and brought in new men (including the young and talented Bonaparte) to lead its armed forces. By 1793, its leaders were calling for total military mobilization of the population. Not only would young men go into the army, but women, old men and even children would turn their energies to the war effort, producing weapons, uniforms and supplies. France declared that its opponents were not honorable adversaries but enemies of the human race who amounted to nothing more than criminals.

The result was a steady escalation of horror that did not stop even after the high point of revolutionary radicalism had passed in France itself, and after Napoleon took power there in 1799. The figures speak for themselves: More than one-fifth of all the major battles fought in Europe between 1490 and 1815 took place in the 25 years after 1790. Before 1790 only a handful of battles had involved more than 100,000 combatants; in the 1809 Battle of Wagram, largest in the gunpowder age to date, involved 300,000. Just four years later the Battle of Leipzig drew 500,000, with fully 150,000 of them killed or wounded. During the wars, France alone counted close to a million war deaths. In the process, France carved out for

itself the greatest empire seen in Europe since the days of the Caesars, but lost it again in a stunningly short time.

Among the most hideous novelties of the period was the spread of vicious insurgent campaigns against French occupying forces that the French themselves [tried](#) to murderously suppress. The first such campaigns took place in France itself, involving struggles by traditional Catholics and Royalists against the Revolutionary government. But as French rule spread like an inkblot over the map of Europe, more such episodes followed: in Belgium, in Italy, in the Tyrolian Alps of Austria. The worst of all occurred in Spain, where the War of Independence of 1808–14 set a new standard of horror in European warfare, and bequeathed a new word to European languages: guerrilla, from the Spanish for little war. It was in Spain that the French army's brutal campaign to suppress those guerrilla wars revealed fully the ugly face of the new total war.

During much of the early Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, Spain was allied with France. But as the years went by and Napoleon claimed the title of emperor, he contemplated overthrowing Spain's Bourbon dynasty, which he blamed for the [disaster](#) in 1805 at the Battle of Trafalgar, where the combined French and Spanish fleets were decimated by the British under Lord Nelson.

To top things off, the conduct of the Spanish royal family lurched embarrassingly between melodrama and farce. For years the lumpish, mentally unstable King Carlos IV had effectively surrendered power to a favorite, Manuel Godoy, who was generally known to be the lover of Queen Maria Luisa. [Fernando](#), the royal couple's 23-year-old son and heir, was a vain, ignorant bigot who had conspired against his father and written to Napoleon to enlist his help. In October 1807, these letters came to light, and the king put his son under arrest.

Godoy was meanwhile seeking to placate his French patron. The same day Fernando was arrested, Spain and France signed the Treaty of Fontainebleau, under whose secret terms a French army could cross Spanish territory en [route](#) to its invasion of Portugal, which had defied the Continental Blockade that Napoleon had imposed in an attempt to strangle British trade. In November General Jean-Andoche Junot crossed the Pyrenees with 28,000 troops, which overcame weak Portuguese resistance and stumbled into Lisbon in early December. The Portuguese ruling family fled to its colony of Brazil.

Napoleon continued to reinforce his army in Spain until, by the spring of 1808, it had reached a strength of nearly 120,000. Resorting to ruses, these troops

peacefully occupied important Spanish fortresses. Marshal Joachim Murat made a flamboyant entrance into Madrid on horseback, accompanied by trumpeters, drummers, lavishly uniformed cavalry and 97 turbaned Egyptian Mamelukes, a living relic of the Egyptian expedition. Murat, who was Napoleon's brother-in-law, hoped that the emperor might give him the crown of Spain, and his upbeat reports to Paris served this ambition. Your Majesty, he wrote Napoleon

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at one point, is awaited here like the Messiah. A slight exaggeration, to say the least. But initially, few Spaniards saw the French as invaders.

Prior to Murat's arrival, supporters of the conspiratorial son Fernando rioted at the royal residence of Aranjuez, forcing Manuel Godoy's dismissal and King Carlos' abdication. But Napoleon refused to recognize Fernando's ascension and instead summoned both father and son to meet with him. In the meantime, the Spanish population had finally grown anxious about the swelling French presence, and when rumors spread that Murat had abducted a Bourbon prince, an uprising took place in Madrid. The French suppressed it amid gory street fighting, and the next day firing squads summarily executed hundreds of prisoners. The painter Francisco de Goya later devoted two of his most brilliant works to these two days in May. One painting highlighted the small number of Mamelukes in the French force, so as to evoke Spain's long struggle against Islam. Another offered a phantasmagorical tableau of implacable soldiers taking cold aim at an illuminated, Christlike victim. The paintings made the *Dos de Mayo* and *Tres de Mayo* iconic dates of the Spanish War.

Meanwhile in Bayonne, just over the French border, Napoleon insisted that both Carlos and his son abdicate in his favor, alternately cajoling, threatening and bursting into fits of sheer rage. Napoleon had utter contempt for Fernando in particular. He is so stupid I have not been able to get a word out of him, he wrote to his counselor Talleyrand. Whether you scold him or praise him, his face remains blank. In the short term, the threats worked. Father and son both surrendered their rights and departed for exile in France. The emperor then played a game of musical thrones, ordering his brother Joseph to trade Naples for Madrid and giving Murat, a former grocer and army private, the lesser but nonetheless royal reward of southern Italy.

The confidence and scorn that Napoleon's men felt as they poured into Spain in the late spring of 1808 were breathtakingly vast. Surely, they believed, this corrupt and somnolent country could pose no serious resistance to the greatest empire since Rome. To

judge from their letters and memoirs, imperial soldiers and administrators mostly seemed to have the same impressions: the dirty, poor and old-fashioned appearance of Spanish houses, the profusion of monastic robes in the streets, the dark and wild look of the men, who all seemed lice-ridden. Napoleon's men condemned the Spanish as weak and archaic in equal measure.

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What the French did not expect was the following: O happy gothic, barbarian and fanatical Spaniards!

Happy with our monks and with our Inquisition, which, according to the ideas of the French Enlightenment, has kept us a century behind other nations. Oh, if we could only go back two centuries more! These lines, written by Spanish General Manuel Freyre de Castrillon in 1808, formed part of a smoking lava flow of broadsheets and pamphlets that answered Napoleon's actions and helped prompt the uprisings. Some adopted a language of national hatred, depicting the French as barbaric, even inhuman: What sort of thing is a Frenchman? A being monstrous and indefinable, a being half-created. There is nobody who does not have the right to kill these ferocious animals. This was rebellion on a massive scale. There were uprisings across the country: Barcelona, Saragossa, Oviedo, Seville, Valencia, Madrid and many more. The so-called Peninsular War would follow a twisting and complex course for more than five years. At times the French faced little opposition from regular armies, but the guerrillas were a different matter, and the number of troops Napoleon had to maintain in the peninsula testify eloquently to their importance: from 165,000 in June 1808 to more than 300,000 in October and to well over 350,000 in July 1811. Only when the Russian campaign greedily sucked men away did the number shrink, falling below 100,000 by July 1813, with catastrophic consequences. Estimates of total French military deaths in Spain vary widely, but they may have amounted to as many as 180,000.

The excesses and atrocities of the Peninsular War took many different murderous forms. There were the Madrid executions of 1808, scorched into European memory by Goya as deeply as Picasso would later scorch the name of Guernica. There were the ferocious initial reactions to the French — for instance, the massacre of as many as 330 French citizens by a mob in Valencia on June 5, 1808. And there was Napoleon's brutal march on Madrid in the fall of 1809,

in which soldiers, eager for revenge and made desperate by a lack of supplies, took to sacking even towns that offered no resistance. The churches were sacked, the streets were choked with the dead and the dying, wrote Joseph's counselor Miot de Melito about the sack of Burgos. In fact, we witnessed all the horrors of an assault, although the town had made no defense! We may date from this period the manifest change which took place in the French army...the soldiers would no longer do anything but fight and plunder.

The most concentrated horror of the war, meanwhile, did not involve the guerrillas at all but uniformed troops involved in that classic form of Old Regime warfare, a siege. In the spring of 1808, Saragossa, a city on the banks of the Ebro River whose people had particular devotion to a basilica where the Virgin Mary had allegedly appeared on a pillar of marble, declared itself in revolt against the intruder king (*el rey intruso*). Saragossa was poorly fortified, with only 1,000 regular Spanish troops available to protect it, and on June 15 French General Charles Lefebvre-Desnouettes attempted to storm it. But the population of Saragossa offered unexpectedly fierce resistance, spurred on by the supposed miraculous appearance of a palm tree topped by a crown in the sky above the basilica. Thousands of men and women rushed to the walls, eager to serve the virgin of the pillar. The French retreated in disorder.

On June 28, they tried again, this time under Jean-Antoine Verdier, the same man who had helped carry out the scourging of southern Italy. Once again, Saragossa beat the French back. According to legend, a Catalan girl, Augustina Zaragoza Domenech, managed to take over a cannon from her dying lover and fire it point-blank at the advancing French, saving a key strongpoint. Verdier pulled back and began a ferocious bombardment. On June 30 alone, his men fired 1,400 explosive shells into the city. The siege reached its height a month later, when shells set the hospital of Nuestra Señora de Gracia on fire, and patients and staff leapt to safety to the accompaniment of inhuman screams from helpless incarcerated lunatics. One French witness reported that the city was like a volcano as explosion ceaselessly followed explosion....The streets were strewn with corpses. Bombs and grenades knocked whole pieces of buildings into the streets, while cannonballs smashed openings in the walls for French troops. But when Verdier demanded the city's surrender, its leaders sent back the message *Guerra y cuchillo* — war to the knife. A lack of troops kept Verdier from mounting a successful assault, and he finally withdrew. Several months later, the French returned to a more heavily fortified Saragossa with a much larger force

commanded by the hardened Marshal Jean Lannes. Once again the French launched a storm of fire, lobbing as many as 42,000 explosive shells into the city during December. With Saragossa overcrowded by soldiers, civilian defenders and refugees from the countryside, a typhus epidemic began, killing more than 350 people a day. In January, Lannes' infantry began to penetrate into the city. There then began some of the worst urban combat ever seen in Europe before the 20th century. The French advanced literally house by house. According to one French account, it was necessary to mine them and blow them up one after the other, break down the partition walls and advance over the rubble. Sometimes the battle even proceeded room by room, with both sides gouging loopholes in the walls, sticking their muskets through and blazing away point-blank at each other. A third of the town became a virtually impassable maze of broken rock through which the French could navigate only by following paths cleared by their engineers and marked with stakes.

Finally, in mid-February, Saragossa surrendered. The city's total death toll amounted to at least 50,000 — more than its prewar population. But even as the French prevailed in Saragossa, the rural guerrillas gnawed at the strength and morale of their forces and radically disrupted the administration of the country. An uncannily similar situation unfolded in Iraq after the American victory in 2003. American and allied forces engaged in a protracted, frustrating attempt to move Iraq toward peace and stability, and a part of the Iraqi population, led by the titular government, sided with them. Another part, probably larger, remained aloof, focusing principally on its own safety and well-being. A third part viewed the foreign forces with open hostility, while a fourth part, probably quite small, engaged in active resistance. Since these insurgents had no chance of successfully confronting the American army in pitched battles, they instead engaged in sneak attacks on small detachments or civilians, after which they immediately melted back into the population at large. Their actions made it nearly impossible for Americans to leave heavily fortified bases except in heavily fortified convoys. American soldiers complained in private about being unable to secure any territory other than that within immediate range of their guns, with the result that they needed, in the words of one Marine, repeatedly to sweep the same insurgents, or other insurgents, out of these same towns without being able to hold them.

In Spain, the equivalent of the new Iraqi government was the fragile regime of Joseph Bonaparte, supported by the self-proclaimed enlightened Spaniards known as the *afrancesados* (literally, the Frenchified). A large segment of the population

remained aloof from the conflict entirely. Another large segment greeted the French with hostility. The guerrillas themselves probably never numbered more than 40,000.

Their effect, however, was far out of proportion to this figure. Their preferred method of attack (lacking car bombs and plastic explosives) was to descend without warning, in bands of hundreds, on small, isolated detachments of French troops — stragglers, sentries, scouts and messengers. They relied on surprise and shock, and generally retreated on meeting any serious resistance. On a single day, November 20, 1807, 80 of the 719 French soldiers crossing the Sierra de Gata en route to Portugal simply disappeared. As Miot de Melito put it melodramatically, An invisible army spread itself over nearly the whole of Spain, like a net from whose meshes there was no escape.

Rather than tracking the small, mobile guerrilla forces, the French concentrated mostly in relatively few strongpoints, leaving the rest of the country thinly occupied and therefore effectively out of their control. An entire army corps spent its time simply safeguarding the crucial road from Madrid north to France. General Honoré-Charles Reille, the French military governor of Navarre, in northern Spain, put the matter with stark eloquence in a letter of 1810: Unfortunately, in this region as in many others of Spain, our influence extends only as far as the range of our cannon....The Spanish say quite rightly that our troops are plowing furrows in the water.

The guerrillas had a complex profile. Their leaders were part military commander, part bandit-chieftain, and they took colorful nicknames: The Potter (*El Cantarero*), The Priest (*El Cura*), The Lad (*El Mozo*), The Grandfather (*El Abuelo*), The Doctor (*El Medico*), The Stick-in-the-Mud (*El Empecinado*). The social composition of the forces varied widely. Often, as historian Charles Esdaile has stressed, bands preyed as much or more on their fellow countrymen as on the French. By 1810-11, some had set up regular systems of tolls and taxations, through which even French merchants could pass unmolested as long as they paid. Many bands had their origins in scattered units of the old Spanish army, which had partly crumbled after Napoleon's victories in 1808. And as time went on, others effectively transformed themselves into new units, complete with standard ranks, regimental organization, uniforms and even artillery (mostly seized from the French). By 1813, Francisco Espoz y Mina (Uncle Francisco, or The King of Navarre), the Basque commander of the single most successful band, had over 6,000 soldiers organized in 10 regiments, dressed in blue uniforms with breeches and jackets, armed with muskets and bayonets, and trained to fight in line and column. Yet he also

continued to use established guerrilla tactics and managed to pin down as many as 38,000 French soldiers in 1812-13.

What confirmed the guerrillas in their stance of absolute enmity toward the French was religion. The massive presence of the clergy on Spanish soil noticed by French observers had a very real effect. In 1808 a full quarter of Spanish land revenue went to the Church. The population of 10 million included 30,000 parish priests and another 120,000 monks, nuns and other clergy. These men and women preached against the invaders without respite and even promised remission from divine punishment for those who fought against them. A much-used Spanish Catechism of 1808 called the French former Christians and modern heretics and insisted that it was no more a sin to kill them than it would be to kill a wild animal.

A large proportion of the French officers posted in Spain had previously confronted partisans in the Tyrol and Italy. Not surprisingly, then, the French attempted to use the same tactics that had worked against previous insurgencies: massive deployment of mobile columns to areas of guerrilla activity, the taking of hostages to ensure tranquility, exemplary punishment of villages suspected of supporting the guerrillas, swift execution of civilians captured bearing arms, and raising local auxiliary forces to take on an increasing share of the burden. The orders for summary executions, hostage taking and arson came straight from the top. Hang a dozen individuals in Madrid, Napoleon advised his brother. There's no lack of bad sorts to choose from. Tell [Reille] to arrest the brigands' relatives and send them to France, he wrote on another occasion. Levy taxes on the towns where the brigands operate, and burn the houses of their relatives.

In a few cases, the tactics showed signs of succeeding. The tough and talented Marshal Louis Suchet, for instance, managed for a time to impose something close to peace and order in areas of the north. He did so in part through co-opting nobles and other large landowners and in part through terror. His mobile columns shot captured guerrillas and priests found with weapons out of hand. They virtually wiped the town of Saliente off the map. Suchet took hostages and tried to recruit local auxiliaries. But as the historian of his campaign in Aragon concludes: Suchet's success was deceptive and fleeting. He had not eliminated resistance, only stunned it. It did not help that the French commanders squabbled mightily with each other and that, increasingly, they had to rely on inexperienced conscripts newly arrived from France. Above all, they simply did not have the manpower to make their tactics work — particularly as the guerrillas were killing or capturing an average of 25

French soldiers a day.

The reports filed by General Reille from the northern city of Pamplona testify with particular eloquence to the Sisyphean nature of guerrilla war for the French. From mid-1810 to mid-1811, Reille vainly struggled against the increasingly professional force of Francisco Espoz y Mina. In letter after letter, he complained about the influence of priests and monks, about the guerrillas' swelling numbers and about his inability to force them into pitched battles or to contain them without garrisoning every major town. He bitterly chided his superiors for withdrawing troops rather than sending more. He boasted to them of the priests his men shot and the hostages they took. But it made no impression on Paris, and in April 1811, Napoleon himself chided Reille for showing little energy and leaving everything unpunished. This bolt from Olympus left the general almost speechless with shock, and he reacted by turning increasingly vicious in his tactics, until his own reports come to seem like the draft of a bill of indictment against him for war crimes. On July 8, 1811, he had 40 alleged guerrillas, held prisoner in the citadel of Pamplona, summarily shot and warned that the same thing would happen to another 170 unless the guerrillas abandoned their campaign.

Here was absolute enmity on the French side as well. And it takes little effort to imagine the sort of war that followed from the respective positions of the guerrillas and the French. Even high-ranking French officers frankly acknowledged in their memoirs the general mercilessness of the conflict. Joseph Hugo called it a *guerre assassine* (an assassin's war) and explicitly likened it to the Vendée. Albert-Jean Rocca, who served under Marshal Nicholas Sault in Andalusia, wrote: The French could only maintain themselves in Spain through terror. They were constantly facing the need to punish the innocent with the guilty, of revenging themselves on the weak instead of the powerful.

One might fill volumes with the atrocities committed on both sides in this graceless war, wrote French Captain Elzéar Blaze years later. Indeed. Blaze himself recorded gruesome stories of soldiers flayed alive by the guerrillas or placed between wooden boards and sawn in two. Belgian soldiers wrote home of seeing victims of the guerrillas with their eyes plucked out, their genitals cut off and stuffed in their mouths. French troops recounted seeing comrades literally nailed to barn doors and left to die. On the French side, General Jean-Marie-Pierre Dorsenne, the governor of Burgos, developed a ghastly reputation for torture. He made a policy of hanging the bodies of three guerrillas permanently on gallows outside his office; when relatives stole away one body in the night,

he immediately ordered a prisoner executed to take the man's place.

Whole towns could pay a terrible price for insurgency. Early in 1809, Marshal Claude Victor, operating in central Spain near Talavera, sent a detachment of 25 German soldiers through nearby villages to ask for supplies. Four of them stopped in the village of Arenas, where the inhabitants pretended to greet them with hospitality but then fell on them and killed them. According to the account left by their officer Karl Franz von Holzing, the Spanish women, before murdering the soldiers, crushed their bones and testicles and cut off their penises. Holzing himself then led an expedition against Arenas. When the villagers tried to flee, his men shot at them from a distance as if on a hunting expedition, laughing whenever their victims fell into the grass. The French then set the village on fire. Holzing recalled, with horror, how wild and uncontrolled soldiers dragged young women into the streets and raped them and, in one case, dashed a baby's head against a wall before tossing the body into a fire in front of the shrieking mother.

As the French retreated from Portugal in the spring of 1811, after one last attempt to invade that country, their conduct evoked with particular, nauseating force what Shakespeare had called the filthy and contagious clouds / Of heady murder, spoil and villainy. The command belonged to Marshal André Masséna, the same man who had overseen the sack of Lauria 4½ years before. In the town of Porto da Mos, 200 men, women, and children were burned to death in the parish church. A German in the British service later recalled:

*Every morning at dawn, when we started out, the burning villages, hamlets and woods, which illuminated the sky, told of the progress of the French. Murdered peasants lay in all directions. At one place, which contained some fine buildings, I halted at a door to beg water of a man who was sitting on the threshold of the house staring fixedly before him. He proved to be dead, and had only been placed there, as if he were still alive, for a joke.... The corpse of another Portuguese peasant had been placed in a ludicrous position in a hole in a garden wall, through which the infantry had broken. It had probably been put there in order to make fun of us when we came along.... The villages through which we marched were nothing but heaps of debris.*

The most powerful evocations of the horrors of this

war never even saw the light of day until 1863. During the fighting, Francisco de Goya, very much an enlightened Spaniard with little sympathy for the Church, had flirted with the new regime. He even painted Joseph Bonaparte's portrait. But the unceasing cascade of atrocities revolted him. They drove him to produce a series of blisteringly powerful etchings titled *The Disasters of War*, which depicted atrocities committed by all sides. Their unflinching, deliberately obscene detail exposed the horrors of war in a manner rarely before seen in European art. In fact, they speak better to later sensibilities, which perhaps explains why Goya never published them in his lifetime.

The guerrillas, however, did not defeat Napoleon in Spain. Even when such forces as Espoz y Mina's turned into something closely resembling regular armies (and managed to get the French to end summary executions of prisoners), they still could not hope to beat Napoleon's men in battle. They did, however, manage to tie down hundreds of thousands of French soldiers desperately needed in other theaters of operations (particularly Russia), while bleeding them badly and destroying their morale. The Spanish war: death for soldiers, ruin for officers, fortunes for generals, ran a piece of cynical French graffiti found on a Spanish wall.

The distinction for beating the French in the field, however, belonged above all to the British and their meticulous, stern commander, Wellington.

Commanding his relatively small, well-disciplined professional force but aided by troops from the old Spanish army and the Portuguese one reorganized by his associate Sir William Beresford, he carried out a brilliant series of victories: Talavera, Busaco, Badajoz, Salamanca, Vitoria.

In 1809-10, thrown back into Portugal, the British commander constructed massive fortifications and stopped the French advance. Finally, in 1813, with Napoleon withdrawing troops from the peninsula to replace Russian losses, Wellington forced the French army back toward the Pyrenees, and Joseph Bonaparte's regime collapsed.

France had not yet been definitively defeated. It would take the disastrous Russian campaign of 1812, and subsequent events in Germany, to bring Napoleon down. But France had been terribly weakened. And in the process, the Spanish War had given birth to a new, horrid form of warfare that we have seen repeated again and again during the last two centuries.

At the Battle of Vitoria on June 21, 1813, a convoy carrying the papers and treasures of King Jose was pillaged, leaving trunks, ledgers, books and silver scattered across the field — an apt symbol for the wreck of French ambitions. Joseph Bonaparte himself

fled to France; after his brother's final defeat he emigrated to southern New Jersey, where he lived the life of a dissolute country gentleman until the 1840s on land now used by Ocean Spray to raise cranberries. This article was written by David A. Bell and originally published in the April 2007 issue of *Military History* magazine. For more great articles be sure to subscribe to [Military History](#) magazine today! [Price Companion Deal Finder](#)  
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