Napoleon’s Cursed War: Popular Resistance in the Spanish Peninsular War

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Ronald Fraser’s Napoleon’s Cursed War: Popular Resistance in the Spanish Peninsular War is an important contribution to a growing field of history. His focus on Patriot Spain’s war effort against Napoleon’s 1808–14 occupation is eminently sensible: this area over the past few years has been subject to rigorous debate in the scholarly community, and Fraser’s contribution excites us both by providing fresh insights and by raising difficult questions in equal measure. If the overall impression provided by his work is therefore mixed, this does not detract from his achievements.

Regarding these first of all, the author has provided genuinely fresh evidence of the dire population losses sustained by Spain during the conflict. In a similar vein, Fraser has breathed life into the Peninsular War by providing case studies of individual militancies, these being laced with vivid imagery in a manner which reminds the reader of his ground-breaking Blood of Spain.(1) Many of these case studies are both original and fascinating, such as the militant Basque armaments workers who were spirited out of their French-occupied homeland and into Patriot Andalucía (pp. 270–6), and the popular allegations of witchcraft in a village in Aragón during 1812 (pp. 458–63). Fraser also provides excellent coverage of the high-political context, especially of the liberal clique that emerged to dominate Patriot politics and forced through the iconic but unworkable and socially myopic Constitution of 1812 (pp. 450–63). In fact, Fraser succeeds in blending a political analysis with an acute awareness of the veritable catastrophe which the war inflicted upon the Spanish population.

That said, given that the Schwerpunkt of his analysis is popular resistance, it is this which deserves most attention, not least because his treatment of this field raises some interesting questions. His first concern is to recount the famous Second of May uprising in Madrid. On the one hand, the Dos de Mayo would appear an unequivocal example of popular resistance to the French, as during both the fighting on that day and during Marshal Murat’s draconian policy of summary executions on the third, some 413 Madrileños from all walks of life lost their lives. Yet on the other hand, Fraser is right to point out the uniqueness of this event, for subsequent risings in the provinces were directed against the existing Spanish authorities, whilst none took place in those parts of the country under the control of French troops. This qualification might also be taken further than Fraser allows. In many ways, the Second of May can be described as a mass panic rather than a rising. With rumours flying around the capital, a crowd congregated outside the palace, whereupon the
French troops felt panicked into opening fire as a means of heading off what threatened to turn into a stampede. Forced by the French into violence, ordinary people either sought shelter or spontaneously took to arms against the 30,000 French troops stationed in Madrid. Yet the interpretation offered by Fraser tends towards the epic and heroic. To be sure, there were certainly several incidents of heroism that day. But there were also several stories of embellished or invented heroism which survivors submitted to Spanish authorities at various times after 1808 in the hope of gaining some recompense.

Moving on from the Second of May, Fraser’s argument becomes more nuanced and convincing, as he deploys some excellent evidence of popular disaffection with the Patriot juntas, of resistance to conscription, and of land riots. These findings both complement previous accounts offered by Fraser’s peers (Moliner Prada, Esdaile, Ardit Lucas, Moreno Alonso), and, most importantly, signpost the direction in which Peninsular War scholarship needs to evolve, namely, in the direction of social history. In fact, given that Fraser advances some excellent evidence of popular frustration with unreconstructed elites, one wonders why he has not been more ambitious. As Fraser makes clear, the forced abdication of Ferdinand VII doomed Spain to a particularly severe collapse, as decades of enlightened absolutism had made the monarch the fulcrum of politics and society, either, as contemporary progressives held, as the repository of popular will, or, according to conservatives, as the paternalistic father of his people. Add to this Spain’s growing pre-1808 social crisis of recurrent famines, war blockades and disease – which Antonio Moliner Prada has expounded with greater depth than is permissible in this review – and it is worth questioning to what extent all this misery led the masses to avenge themselves on their native elites, the former mobilising their grievance at having been deprived of their desired king to settle scores with the latter. In other words, it is worth considering the extent to which the revolution unleashed in Spain after 1808 was more anti-elite than it was pro-war. This premise would clear the way for a consistently ‘bottom-up’ social history of Patriot Spain (one need only read Michael Seidman’s compelling social history of the Second Spanish Republic at war to see what might be achieved in this regard). And all the more is this desirable given that Fraser’s treatment of his popular resistance theme raises some difficult questions.

For despite his avowed aim, Fraser’s analysis of la guerrilla, or partisan warfare, is actually less impressive than his discussion of demography, militancies, and social unrest. At the outset, he is quick to nail his colours to the mast by advancing the orthodox view which can be traced from such historians as Charles Oman and Gabriel Lovett according to which, in effect, a people’s war raged in Spain from 1808 to 1814. Or as his bold opening introduction remarks, ‘… one area (of this conflict) which has remained virtually unexplored (is) the unremitting popular Spanish resistance to Napoleon’s attempted seizure of the Spanish homeland’ (p. xi). Yet this immediately begs the question. In fact, the orthodox view of the ‘people’s war’ has recently been deconstructed by Charles Esdaile, currently the leading British expert on the Peninsular War, who has also exposed the complexities of the guerrilla phenomenon, and it is therefore surprising to remark that Fraser has not challenged Esdaile’s revisionism. Instead Fraser maintains that the ‘guerrilla was the crystallization of the villagers’ will to resist. It was the only form of combat available to the weak against the strong. The guerrilleros were the villagers’ kith-and-kin’ (p. 366). Well, this would have been news to the inhabitants of Zaragoza, who, as Javier Maestrojuán points out, after their liberation in 1813 found themselves subjected to all manner of denigrations at the hands of Espoz y Mina’s forces, or to the villagers of the Catalan interior, who, as John Morgan has recently shown, found themselves being pillaged by both Patriot guerrillas and French raiding parties in equal measure.

In fairness to Fraser, he does expound these complexities. Thus the population of Patriot Spain is shown to be ambivalent in its support for the war against Napoleon, whilst the guerrillas are shown, at least in part, to have depended upon forced conscription. But these qualifications become increasingly hard to reconcile with the social-revolutionary spirit with which Fraser is keen to imbue the guerrillas. Indeed, in this regard Fraser seems to defy the fruit of his own labours. Thus Fraser expresses surprise, given that many of their number came from humble backgrounds, that the guerrillas did not enforce a social dimension to the August 1811 Cortes decree which abolished feudalism in Patriot Spain (pp. 418–20). Yet as Esdaile makes clear, the leaders of the guerrilleros were for the most part members of the old elite, whilst the motivations of their subordinates appear to have been largely apolitical and subjective in nature (political adventurism, the
instinct to survive, desertion, personal ambition, and so on). As for the mail interception activities of the guerrillas, Fraser asks why these were at their greatest during the spring and summer months and less so during winter, and why there appear to have been no dedicated decipherers amongst the partisans (408–9). Well, again, if we accept the Esdaile thesis of subjective motivations driving the guerrillas, then these questions would likewise be answered.

Fraser would also do well to define more closely whom he means by the guerrilleros, (and, for that matter, fernandinos who hatched the provincial conspiracies of 1808, as his chosen epithet conceals the different and conflicting intentions of these men, ranging as they did from the liberal, to the absolutist, the medievalist, the exclusively professional, and the downright opportunistic). As for the famous partisan war, both regular Spanish armies, and even, on occasion, Wellington’s army, frequently engaged in recognisably guerrilla-style tactics (i.e. operating behind French lines, outmanoeuvring superior enemy forces, and preying on civilians). By the same token, as the war progressed, the irregular forces themselves grew to look much more like regular forces, the most successful partisan forces, those of Espoz y Mina in Navarra, being particularly prodigal in this regard. In short, the question of guerrilla warfare is more complex than Fraser allows. And even though he deploys vivid and fresh material to illustrate the Patriot war effort, the effect of all this is generally to confirm the analyses of previous historians rather than to challenge them.

In conclusion, then, if Fraser’s contribution is exciting and substantial, the effect of its analysis is decidedly mixed. Its most impressive features deal not so much with popular resistance per se, but with both the wider high politics and social tapestry of Patriot Spain. Thus it is the latter features which make this work an important addition to the historiography.

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