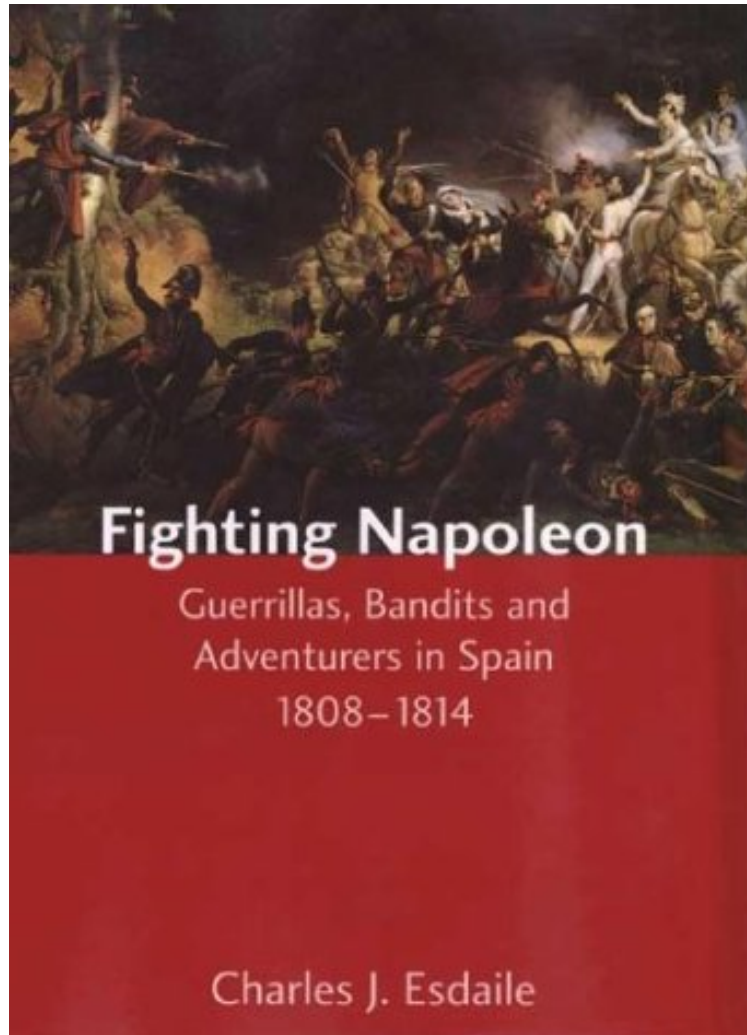


# Fighting Napoleon

Charles J. Esdaile

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#2403932 in Books 2004-05-10 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.64 x 1.15 x 6.32l, 1.47 #File Name: 0300101120288 pages | File size: 20.Mb

**Charles J. Esdaile : Fighting Napoleon** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Fighting Napoleon:

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Excellent breakdownBy foodheadEsdaile has achieved another brilliant work here. He addresses the reality of the origins of the guerrilla groups, and looks objectively at their role throughout the conflict. I found this book invaluable as a research tool, and an entertaining read. I thoroughly enjoyed this from start to finish, and found it shed a great deal of light on a topic that others often skirt around. An excellent resource and welcome addition to the debate.1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Important book, but...By Antonio J Carrasco ÁlvarezWhen this book was published in 2004, there was a dear of professionally researched analysis on the topic of the Spanish insurgency during the Napoleonic Wars. Just a few articles, many of

them not particularly well researched, and the outdated XIXth Century "history" of the guerrilla written by Rodríguez Solís, and this book can be considered as "history" only in the most lax of terms. Professor Esdaile's book came to fill a gap in our knowledge regarding the Spanish guerrilla, written by a professional historian. Esdaile is a well known Napoleonic scholar, with years of research experience, and several well considered books published, ranging from the International Relations in Napoleonic Europe to overall narratives of the Spanish War of Independence, or Peninsular War, as it is usually known in English-speaking world. In "Fighting Napoleon" he takes a declared "revisionist" analysis on the topic of the guerrilla. According to Esdaile, the idea of a popular insurgency is a myth, created by XIXth Century propagandists and uncritically accepted by present-day public and historians alike. The Spanish guerrillas were neither "popular", nor well regarded, nor composed by patriots, but, mostly, bands of brigands, moved by greed rather than patriotism. Partisan bands were loathed and feared by the Spanish population, almost as much as the French themselves. To prove his points, professor Esdaile uses a wide range of archival material, most of it researched in Spanish Archives. Professor Esdaile has tried to demonstrate that the guerrillas weren't a manifestation of the Spanish people in arms against the invader, but bands of opportunistic thieves and malingerers that used the chaos provoked by the war to benefit themselves. According to Esdaile, the guerrilla bands were despised and feared by the local peasantry, and loathed by the regular Army, which considered them not only as a nuisance but also as a dangerous competitor in recruitment. Argues Esdaile that most of the guerrillas actually hurt the war effort, instead helping it; only those that were more militarized became marginally more useful in the later part of the war. To support his arguments he has used complaints sent to the Junta Central and to the Regencia by local Spanish authorities, the minutes in the trials against partisans as collected by the Juntas Criminales (Bonapartist) that are preserved in Simancas, and a wealth of memoirs and journals, mostly French and British, but also some of the scarce Spanish memoirs that have been found. Compelling as this image might be, the truth is that it is not without problems. First, I think that professor Esdaile gives too much relevance to the complains of local communities against the guerrillas. Those complains existed and were, commonly, a catalogue of misdemeanours and violence exercised by partisans against -usually, although not always- local propertied classes. It must be pointed that the same kind of complains, some times so similar that even phrased the same, were filed against regular units in the Spanish and British army. Actually, what it is relatively surprising is that complains against the guerrillas were not more numerous and vocal, given the usual conflict that can be observed as ongoing between civilian and military authorities during the XVIIIth and early XIXth Centuries. The same can be said about the complains of regular military authorities against partisans. They concentrated in three bones of contention: the struggle for recruits, the lionization of partisans by the Patriotic press and the military ranks bestowed upon the partisans by the civilian authorities. Recruits were a scarce commodity, and joining a partisan band was, in theory, more attractive than joining a regular outfit. To professor Esdaile, the competition of the guerrillas for this scarce commodity hurted in the long run the war effort of the Patriots. I think this is debatable. For starters, the known supply problems of the Spanish army makes difficult to imagine that even if all the manpower supposedly sequestered by the guerrillas bands would have been available to the Patriots it could have been transformed into regular soldiers, trained, armed, fed and ready to fight. Secondly, it is problematic to imagine that the extra 35,000 soldiers that would have been available, in theory, did the guerrillas not exist, would have made a difference. Third, the struggle to get recruits didn't poised the guerrillas against the regulars only, but also regulars against each other. Finally, even if we chose to ignore these caveats, it is undeniable that for the French the presence of strong, mobile, armed bands of irregulars operating in their strategic rearguard supposed a major headache, as well as a drain in resources, both human and material. For instance, in February 1811 the French had 68,000 deployed covering Northern Castile, Basque Country, Navarre, Rioja and the routes from Valladolid and Madrid to Burgos, two divisions of the Young Guard included; there were no regular Spanish or Luso-British units that could have operated in the area at that time... and no, most weren't deployed in the Cantabric coast, but in the interior; the only Allied troops that operated at the time in that region were the motley partisan units that formed the so-called 7th Army, under the theoretical command Mendizabal, which, optimistically, wouldn't have been more than about 8,000 men. The lionization of the guerrilla in the Spanish press was a sore spot for the regular officers. Also, they felt threatened by the sudden influx of lower-class individuals that were obtaining officer ranks by their services in the guerrillas. Remember that before the war almost a 94% of the Spanish officers were from aristocratic stock, and as in the British army they had paid for their commissions. That a bunch of arrivists would be receiving regular ranks for "free" did devaluate their investments. Naturally, they weren't precisely objective when criticizing the guerrillas. In my opinion, professor Esdaile puts too much faith in the criticisms against the partisans. Finally, I also find disingenous his observations about the greed of the partisans as opposed to some kind of purer patriotism. At the time, all armies and navies operated under the same idea: you supplemented your income by taking it from your enemies. Was Nelson's patriotism less pure because he pocketed prize money from the ships he captured? Was Wellington or Castaños patriotism less "patriotic" for accepting the honors and titles bestowed upon them for their actions at the front of their armies? Were the French Marshals, or soldiers, less in love with the idea of France because of all the loot they took from Spain? Then, why should be the moral standard to judge the patriotism of the partisans higher than for those others? Overall, I find professor Esdaile's book an important contribution to our knowledge of the partisan warfare in

Spain, but not without problems. I would recommend it as an introduction, but having in mind that it should be not taken as the definitive word on the matter. 15 of 17 people found the following review helpful. 3.4 stars; not entirely convincing. By pnotley@hotmail.com

For some time now historians have been critical of the democratic claims of the French Revolution. Where once people saw the birth of liberty, many scholars see mass indifference, active opposition and widespread fear. So I suppose it was only a matter of time that historians would start seeing the same things about the counter-revolution as well. And surely there is no place where the counter-revolution was as popular as Spain during the Peninsular wars? For not only did Spain provide a guerilla warfare unmatched in the rest of Napoleonic Europe, it even provided the term "guerrilla." But not so fast, argues Charles Esdaile. He relies on archives from Madrid, Barcelona, Tudela, Zaragoza and London, thirty-three contemporary newspapers, several dozen memoirs and contemporary accounts as well as a wide secondary literature. The result is a stimulating, provocative work, that is not entirely convincing.

After discussing the basic pro-Guerrilla historiography, and then giving a brief survey of the guerrilla war which seems to vindicate them (even Joseph Bonaparte, Napoleon's brother and king of Spain, said the guerrillas undermined the Spanish position) Esdaile starts to attack. He starts off slowly, arguing that what some people describe as guerrillas were actually local home guards. The regular Spanish army still existed and they often provided vital assistance. Many "guerrillas" were actually members of the regular army. Now moving in to the kill, Esdaile discusses the pro-Patriot response. The Bourbon elites still remained in power, and often had to repress angry Spaniards outraged over their corruption, brutality and use of conscription. Indeed, in parts of Spain they were serious jacqueries, which should be distinguished from social banditry. The guerrillas had little interest in larger social change, while the many bandits were decidedly anti-social. Not only was there resistance to conscription, but there was also mass desertion. Nor were the "guerrillas" particularly popular. Only in Navarre, where feudalism was extremely weak and the Church atypically mild, was there real enthusiasm for partisan warfare. Looking at the biographies of many guerrillas, Esdaile finds many lies and deceptions, and a strong streak of opportunism. Elsewhere, there was little enthusiasm for the struggle. People joined the guerrillas because they had to flee the consequences of their own actions, or because they were forced to by the often brutal guerrillas themselves, or because they were basically bandits. Economic disaster made joining the guerrillas an economically rational move. What achievements were made was the result of Napoleon's withdrawal of troops. Elsewhere guerrillas squabbled among themselves for the most petty and selfish of reasons, while they often looted and burdened themselves on the public at large. After the defeat of Napoleon the guerrillas' violence only intensified before they were suppressed by the state. Many romantic liberals thought this was unfair, but gradually realized that this was right. Finally, contrary to what people might think, few guerrillas became principled liberals; the most famous examples can really be explained by opportunism. Such is Esdaile's argument. On a first glance it looks convincing, and it is backed by many examples. But a second glance reveals some problems. Commenting on the roots of the guerrillas, Esdaile writes that they "lay not in heroism but hunger, not daring but despair." But surely this is too sharp a distinction. After all one reason why many people would find the French intolerable was because of the economic crisis they encouraged. Another problem with the emphasis on opportunism is that opportunists and ne'er do wells could join the French occupying authorities. But they did not, or at least not enough to help them. A larger problem is a complete lack of comparative analysis. There is certainly no doubt that Spain caused more trouble for Napoleon than most of the rest of Europe together. Surely there must be some explanation for this ability. It certainly can't be the efficiency of the state or the effectiveness of the army that made Spain deadlier than the Netherlands, Switzerland or the domains of the Habsburgs. Likewise a comparison with Vietnam would undercut Esdaile's suggestion that guerrillas have only limited tactical abilities. And whether it is discussing wartime Greece, the French resistance or the Vietnam war, recent histories by Mark Mazower, Julian Jackson, Eric Bergerud and David Elliott have made clear that while partisans can be brutal, greedy and viewed with some skepticism by the local population, they can also receive genuine support and carry out real damage on the occupying countries. But Esdaile has nothing to say about the rest of occupied Europe and other guerrilla wars. Similarly if most of the guerrilla leaders were selfish, opportunistic and rapacious, were their betters in the regular army, the Absolutist state or Wellington's forces any better? We get no clear discussion of this point, and we get even less about the guerrilla rank and file. And Esdaile does not distinguish as well as he could between opportunism and a lack of political sophistication that would be inevitable in a country as autocratically run as Spain. Esdaile tells us much about politics in a country whose historiography often remains shadowy even among well educated readers. But there is an all or nothing tendency in his book that undercuts his points.

Alongside the Spanish army in the campaign against Napoleon (1808-1814) was an assortment of freebooters, local peasants, and bandits who were organized into ad hoc regional private armies. These "guerrillas"—a term introduced to the English language during the Peninsular War—ambushed French convoys, attacked French encampments, and pounced upon, dodged, and fought French columns, often with extreme brutality. This book investigates for the first time the irregular Spanish forces and their role in resisting Napoleon. Delving deeply into previously untapped archival resources, Charles Esdaile arrives at an entirely new view of the Spanish guerrillas. He shows that the Spanish war against Napoleon was something other than the great popular crusade of legend, that many guerrillas were not armed

civilians acting spontaneously, and that guerrillas were more often driven by personal motives than high-minded ideology. Tracking down the bandit armies and assessing their contributions, Esdaile offers important insights into the famous “little war” and the motives of those who fought it.

About the Author Charles J. Esdaile is reader in history, School of History, University of Liverpool. He is the author of several books and numerous articles on the Napoleonic wars.