

IMPERIAL SOLDIERS AND THE EXPERIENCE
OF GUERRILLA WAR IN SPAIN, 1808-1814

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ABSTRACT

The Peninsular War of 1808 to 1814 remains unique in Napoleonic History. On canvas, Francisco Goya painted its brutality. Napoleon blamed it for his defeat. Historians assent to both assessments with passing references to the guerrilla conflict's terrible nature and its negative effect upon the French. Commonly, these brief references turn on such points as the harassing effect of guerrillas upon strung out forces in Spain, the difficulty of foraging for the French, the allied intelligence advantage and finally the notoriously low morale of the French army of occupation. These brief comments on the guerrilla war are, however, buried in the traditional histories of campaigns and generals, of Bailens and Salamancas, of Wellingtons and Soult. Peninsular historiography is almost totally devoid of any information about how French soldiers themselves regarded the guerrilla conflict. By and large, this human element is ignored. This oversight leaves important questions unanswered: How did the French and imperial troops experience the guerrilla war? What exactly did poor morale mean for a soldier who suffered from its effects? Many memoirs of imperial veterans specifically center on the Spanish conflict and provide excellent material with which to illustrate the experience of guerrilla war. By looking into the accounts left by soldiers of all ranks, this work will show how for the troops charged with the conquest and occupation of Spain and Portugal, poor morale created a complex weave of isolation, frustration, and exhaustion that affected their ability to perform their duties.

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DEDICATION

Elyse.