

The Peninsular War: Napoleon's Maritime War

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Renewed interest in the brutal guerrilla warfare during the Spanish Peninsular War, thanks in part to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has led to a resurgence of scholarship, which has examined subjects ranging from the social origins of the Spanish guerrillas to the efficacy of French counterinsurgency tactics.¹ Meanwhile, the Duke of Wellington continually garners the fascination of Anglophile historians.² Yet, the focus on Wellington's campaign and the Spanish guerrillas has created an incomplete portrait of the war. Eager to depict the British expedition on the Iberian Peninsula or the rise of the Spanish insurgency, historians too often gloss over the origins of the war, thereby overlooking its influence on the initial phase of the war. It must be remembered that Napoleon invaded the Iberian Peninsula primarily as part of his maritime war against Britain and that many of the initial French troop movements were aimed at securing Portugal and Spain's naval assets. Furthermore, even after Napoleon's initial failure, the Peninsular War remained in part a maritime war, as navies played a major role in supplying both the British and French armies.

"Perfidious Albion" had long dominated Napoleon's strategic plans. With the signing of the

¹ For example, Charles J. Esdaile, *Fighting Napoleon: Guerrillas, Bandits and Adventures in Spain, 1808-1814* (New Haven CT, 2004), Ronald Fraser, *Napoleon's cursed war: Spanish popular resistance in the Peninsular War, 1808-1814* (New York, 2008), Mark A. Reeves, *The Iberian Leech: Napoleon's Counterinsurgency Operations In The Peninsula, 1807-1810* (MA Thesis, US Army Command and Staff College, 2005).

² Recent examples include Joshua Moon, *Wellington's Two-Front War: The Peninsular Campaigns at Home and Abroad, 1808-1814* (Norman OK, 2011) and Huw J. Davies, *Wellington's Wars: The Making of a Military Genius* (New Haven CT, 2012)

Treaties of Tilsit in July 1807 and the end of the Fourth Coalition, Napoleon was able to turn his attention from the Continent and return his focus back to his incessant foe across the Channel. Indeed, even before the Battle of Friedland, Napoleon had informed his Minister of the Navy, Denis Decres, that "everything leads me to believe that the war on the continent is over. Every effort must now be given to the navy."³ While the naval campaign of 1805 had culminated in the disaster off of Cape Trafalgar, Napoleon had not given up hope on renewing naval campaign against Britain. In fact, many of Napoleon's strategic designs from 1807 to 1808 were aimed specifically at increasing the naval forces at his disposal. In a letter to his brother Louis in April 1808, Napoleon laid out an accurate analysis of the naval war thus far. While the continental powers of Europe "also had colonies and a maritime commerce; they were disunited; England had fought their navies separately; she has triumphed on all the seas; all the navies have been destroyed. Russia, Sweden, France, Spain, who possess as much means to have ships and sailors, do not dare venture a squadron outside their harbors." Even if a "coalition of maritime powers" could be formed, Napoleon thought it "impossible" to maintain due to "distances and differences in national interests."⁴ Thus, Napoleon's maneuvers to expand the French Empire and its control over allied states can be seen in large part as his plan to unite the navies of the continental Europe under his direct command, in addition to expanding the reach of Napoleon system of embargos known as the Continental System. With his brother Louis ruling Holland and an alliance established with Russia,

³ Napoleon Bonaparte to Denis Decres, 4 June 1807, #12848, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier* [CN], XV, 382.

⁴ Napoleon Bonaparte to Louis Bonaparte, 3 April 1808, #13718, CN, XVI, 470-4

Napoleon turned his attention to Denmark, the Italian states, Portugal and eventually Spain.

With her substantial navy, Denmark quickly became embroiled in this renewed naval war. Caught between increasing demands from both Britain and France, Denmark attempted to remain neutral; an arrangement, however, that pleased neither belligerent. Already frightened by the prospect of the Danish fleet falling into Napoleon's hands, the British cabinet had convinced King George III by mid-July 1807 to authorize an expedition to watch Copenhagen and possibly take the city if necessary. On 26 July, Admiral James Gambier set out for Copenhagen with 17 ships plus numerous smaller vessels carrying around 18,000 troops.⁵ Meanwhile, on 31 July, Napoleon ordered his Minister of Foreign Relations, Charles de Talleyrand, to pressure Denmark: "they need to choose between waging war against England or me."⁶ While the Danes rejected both British and French demands, the British seized the initiative by launching a preemptive strike on 16 August without a formal declaration of war.⁷ When reports of the attack reached Napoleon, he offered Denmark military assistance, but he was not immediately concerned as "such a large and fortified town [as Copenhagen] will not be taken in two months, and the ice will provide means to secure it."⁸ Yet, after withstanding only several days of bombardment, the Danes surrendered. As part of the terms, the Danes turned their fleet over to the British. While only 4 of the 15 Danish ships-of-the-line were later deemed worthy of repairs by the British, this was of little conciliation to Napoleon. Even if most of the ships needed major repairs, Napoleon could have used their very existence to tie down an equal number of

⁵ Eventually, this fleet would be reinforced to 25 ships-of-the-line and 40 frigates and smaller vessels by mid-August. Rory Muir, *Britain and the Defeat of Napoleon, 1807-1815* (New Haven, 1996), 23-4; William James, *Naval History of Great Britain*, IV, 284-5.

⁶ Napoleon to Talleyrand, 31 July 1807, #12962, CN, XV, 459-60.

⁷ Muir, 24.

⁸ Napoleon to Champagny, 29 August 1807, #13089, CN, XV, 559.

British ships to the Baltic. An additional major blow was the loss of over 20,000 tons of much needed naval stores, including spars and masts that were often in short supply in France.⁹ According to Joseph Fouche, Napoleon's Minister of Police, news of this event led Napoleon into a "violent rage" that had not been seen since the assassination of Czar Paul 1st which had spoiled Napoleon's hopes for an rapprochement with Russia.¹⁰

Napoleon's maritime strategy also aimed at expanding the French naval presence in the Mediterranean, particularly along the Italian Peninsula. In early July 1807, Napoleon reported to his stepson and Viceroy of the Kingdom of Italy, Eugene Beauharnais that "the continental war will probably be over soon," recommending that naval construction should be pushed to have sufficient forces "to control the Adriatic."¹¹ However, Napoleon had his sights set further as he planned to annex the entire Adriatic coastline of the Papal States for the Kingdom of Italy, thereby extending its coastline to reach the Kingdom of Naples.¹² In particular, Napoleon was interested in the port of Ancona as he sought to determine how many ships could fit in the harbor.¹³ French and Italian troops quickly seized the Papal States' Adriatic coast in November 1807, as precursor to formal annexation to Kingdom of Italy in April 1808.¹⁴

On the western Italian coast, Napoleon was equally busy. In May 1808, Napoleon ordered the annexation of the Kingdom of Etruria, a client state of France that had been carved out of Tuscany in 1801. Napoleon felt that incorporating this territory was necessary to "increase our coastline, and thus the

⁹ William James, *Naval History of Great Britain*, IV, 295.

¹⁰ Fouche, *Memoires de Joseph Fouche* (1824), I, 362-3.

¹¹ Napoleon Bonaparte to Eugene Beauharnais, 4 July 1807, #12850, CN, XV, 385.

¹² Napoleon Bonaparte to Eugene Beauharnais, 5 August 1807, #13000, CN, XV, 478.

¹³ Napoleon Bonaparte to Denis Decres, 23 Oct 1807, #13292, CN, XVI, 114.

¹⁴ Napoleon Bonaparte to Eugene Beauharnais, 3 Oct 1807, #13210, CN, XVI, 64; Napoleon Bonaparte to Champagny, 2 April 1808, #13714, CN, XVI, 468; Napoleon Bonaparte to Eugene Beauharnais, 2 April 1808, #13716, CN, XVI, 469.

number of our sailors.” Furthermore, this would also put a buffer zone around the port of La Spezia, which Napoleon ordered transformed into a military port equal to Toulon.¹⁵ To facilitate the establishment of this new port, all of the naval facilities at Genoa were to be transferred to La Spezia. This port’s central location made for easy importation of wood from the Apennine Mountains and other resources from Livorno. Napoleon wanted this port being capable of building 3 ships and 2 frigates at once.¹⁶ In fact, Napoleon envisioned La Spezia eventually replacing Toulon as France’s main military port in the Mediterranean.¹⁷ Thus, Napoleon extended his control to almost the entire Italian coastline along both the Mediterranean and Adriatic seas.

When viewed in this larger context, it is difficult to dismiss Napoleon’s naval interests as a primary factor in drawing France into the Peninsular War. While extending the Continental System served as the justification for the attack on Portugal, Napoleon was also interested in obtaining control of Portugal’s maritime resources, particularly its fleet.¹⁸ Some historians have dismissed the importance of the Portuguese navy, stating that “most of its ships-of-the-line were mere ‘Fourth Rates.’”¹⁹ In fact, the Portuguese navy at Lisbon consisted of seven ships armed with 74 guns or more and four ships with 64 guns or less.²⁰ While not as substantial as the

¹⁵ Napoleon to Cambaceres, 11 May 1808, #13846, CN, XVII, 87-8; Napoleon to Prince Camille Borghese, 11 May 1808, #13855, CN, XVII, 94.

¹⁶ Napoleon to Denis Decres, 11 May 1808, #13848, CN, XVII, 88-9.

¹⁷ While La Spezia would be the primary military port and construction would be moved to Port-de-Brouc, west of Marseille, Toulon would no longer build ships, but rather just outfit or repair them Notes to Minister of Interior and Navy, 7 October 1809, #15905, CN, 19, 551.

¹⁸ Napoleon ordered Talleyrand to inform the Portuguese Minister that he had until 1 Sept to close Portuguese ports to England. At the same time, he was to make plans with Spanish to send 20,000 troops to Bayonne on 1 Sept. Napoleon to Talleyrand, 19 July 1807, #12928, CN, XV, 433.

¹⁹ Esdaile, *Napoleon’s Wars* (New York, 2011), 320.

²⁰ Fourth rate ships were still useful, as the British still used a number of 64-gun ships for escort duty or converted into large transports. *List of the Portuguese Fleet*

recently surrendered Danish fleet, even contemporary British naval experts praised the Portuguese navy, whose construction was “equal, if not superior to the British.”²¹ Napoleon’s plethora of orders to General Jean-Andoche Junot, commander of the invasion of Portugal, continually called for him to secure the Portuguese fleet at Lisbon.²² According to Napoleon, “Your mission will go perfectly beautiful if you can capture the fleet.”²³ To this end, Napoleon sent a contingent of several hundred French naval officers and gunners to quickly man the captured Portuguese ships.²⁴ Narrowly escaping the advancing French and Spanish armies, the Portuguese Royal family fled for the safety of Brazil on 29 November 1807 aboard 8 ships of the line, 4 frigates and many smaller vessels.²⁵ Upon entering Lisbon the following day, Junot found that the Portuguese had left only 4 ships and 5 frigates behind.²⁶ With several of them condemned and

that came out of the Tagus on the 29th of November 1807, Naval Chronicle, I8, 508; List of Portuguese ships that remained in Lisbon. Naval Chronicle, I8, 509.

²¹ *Naval Chronicle*, I8, 330.

²² Napoleon to Junot, 31 October 1807, #13314, CN, XVI, 128-30; Napoleon to Junot, 8 November 1807, #13340, CN, XVI, 147-8; Napoleon to Junot, 12 November 1807, #13351, CN, XVI, 156.

²³ Napoleon Bonaparte to General Junot, 8 Nov 1807 #13340, CN, XVI, 147-8.

²⁴ Napoleon to Decres, 2 Nov 1807, #13320, CN, XVI, 134-5 ; Napoleon to Junot, 12 Nov 1807, #13351, CN, XVI, 156.

²⁵ **84 guns (1)** – *Principe Reale*, **74 guns (4)** – Rainha de Portugal, Conde Henrique, Meduza, Principe de Brazil ; **64 guns (3)** – Affonso d’Albuquerque, D. Joao de Castro, Martino de Freitas. Frigates (4) – Menerva (44), Golfinho (36), Urania (32), and another unknown. **Brigs (3), Schooner (1)** *List of the Portuguese Fleet that came out of the Tagus on the 29th of November 1807, Naval Chronicle, I8, 508.*

²⁶ **74 guns (2)** – Maria Prima [unserviceable, to be floating battery, but not yet fitted], Vasco de Gama [under repair and nearly ready]; **64 guns (2)** – S. Sebastiao [unserviceable without a thorough repair], Princesa de Beira [condemned, to be floating battery]. **Frigates (5)** – Fenix (48) [needs thorough repair], Amazona (44) [needs thorough repair], Perola (44) [needs thorough repair], Tritao (40) [past repair], Veney (30) [past repair]. *List of Portuguese ships that remained in Lisbon. Naval Chronicle, I8, 509.*

beyond repair, the French eventually salvaged only two 74-gun ships and 3 frigates.²⁷ Once again, Napoleon's efforts to rapidly expand his navy through seizing a foreign navy had once again been foiled.

Already discontent with the machinations of Godoy, Charles IV and Prince Ferdinand, Napoleon's decision to overthrow the Spanish Bourbon monarchy was also based upon his desire to directly control Spain's naval assets. Considering Napoleon's vocal displeasure with the minor delays to his naval construction program in the French, Italian and Dutch ports, the absolute dearth of any vigorous activity in the Spanish ports must have been infuriating. In justifying the war, Napoleon viewed Spain as:

poorly governed, serving poorly or not at all France's cause against England. Its navy is neglected; one can barely count several ships in its ports and they are in the worst shape. The magazines lack provisions; the workers and sailors are not paid. There are no repairs, construction or armaments are being done in the ports. The most horrible disorder reigns in all branches of administration.

Accusing Spain of "abandoning its navy," Napoleon was angered that the "situation in Spain compromised the security of France and the fate of the war against England. The European country that offers the greatest maritime means is the one who has the least."²⁸ Napoleon believed that once under his control, Spain could concentrate all of her means to reestablishing her once-proud navy. ²⁹ Once the French covert invasion of Spain was underway, Napoleon repeatedly bombarded its commander, Marshal Joachim Murat, with requests for details on the state of the Spanish navy and orders to mobilize the Spanish fleets as soon as possible. Napoleon's impatience was clear: "I must have ships because I

²⁷ Dispatch by Sir Sidney Smith, 1 December 1807, *Naval Chronicle*, 18, 508-9.

²⁸ This report is viewed to reflect Napoleon's views as he heavily edited this report. Minister of Foreign Relations to Napoleon, 24 April 1808, #13776, CN, XVII, 33-36.

²⁹ Napoleon to Czar Alexander of Russia, 8 July 1808, #14170, CN, XVII, 359-60.

want to strike a great blow towards the end of the season."³⁰

In early 1808, Napoleon's plans to strike against Great Britain counted upon his control over the navies of Portugal and Spain. In March, Napoleon hoped to threaten England with expeditions from Cadiz, Lisbon, Boulogne, Brest and Texel. ³¹ In April, Napoleon optimistically believed that he would have 111 ships-of-the-line at his disposal by November, including 25 Spanish ships, 3 ex-Spanish ships turned over to the French and 4 ships outfitted from Lisbon. ³² By mid-May, Napoleon's optimism seemed to have diminished somewhat as he only counted on the Spanish to augment his Toulon fleet with several ships.³³ Not long after, Napoleon shift his focus of future operations to September 1809, where he calculated that he would have "119 ships under [his] immediate direction," including 10 Dutch ships, 1 Danish ship, 3 ex-Portuguese ships, and 20 Spanish ships.³⁴ The outbreak of the Spanish insurgency eventually dissuaded Napoleon from any notion of counting upon fleets from the Iberian Peninsula for his naval war against Britain.

To defeat the British, Napoleon adopted a three-pronged strategy. First, he launched a series of embargoes against British trade, known collectively as the Continental System. Although started in

³⁰ Napoleon to Murat, 9 May 1808, #13835, CN, XVII, 80-1 ; Napoleon to Murat, 11 May 1808, #13858, CN, XVII, 96-7; Napoleon to Murat, 11 May 1808, #13859, CN, XVII, 97-8; Napoleon to Murat, 14 May 1808, #13885, CN, XVII, 121-4; Napoleon to Murat, 16 May 1808, #13906, CN, XVII, 142-3; Napoleon to Murat, 19 May 1808, #13939, CN, XVII, 162-3; Napoleon to Murat, 28 May 1808, #14013, CN, XVII, 224-6; Napoleon to Murat, 28 May 1808, #14014, CN, XVII, 226-7.

³¹ Napoleon to Decres, 29 March 1808, #13698, CN, XVI, 454-5.

³² Napoleon to Decres, 12 April 1808, #13738, CN, XVI, 493-4.

³³ Napoleon to Decres, 13 May 1808, #13877, CN, XVII, 112-4.

³⁴ With 42 French ships and 35 more under construction, Napoleon expected to have 77 French ships, supplemented by 42 foreign ships. Interestingly, 18 out of the 35 ships were being built in non-French ports. Napoleon to Decres, 28 May 1808, #14005, CN, XVII, 218-220.

November 1806, Napoleon's economic embargo of Britain was not a substantial threat until it was bolstered by alliances with Russia and Denmark, the extension of French control of the Italian coastline, and forced compliance upon Portugal and Spain. While the most referenced element of Napoleon's strategy, it was by no means the only component. No longer seeking to invade England directly, Napoleon poised his naval forces to threaten attacks on British colonial possessions or their allies.³⁵ With fleets spread across the European continent, Napoleon felt the situation could "give rise to great opportunities against England."³⁶ In particular, Napoleon viewed Ireland, colonies in America, Surinam, Brazil, Algiers, Tunis, Egypt and Sicily as "vulnerable points."³⁷ While a plan to invade Sicily in February 1808 only resulted in resupplying the garrison on Corfu, the Toulon fleet was able to return to port unmolested.³⁸ While disappointed with the aborted attack on Sicily, Napoleon mistakenly believed the fleet's safe return "proves that at sea, in the position we are in, we can do what we wish."³⁹ In May, Napoleon entertained dispatching his Brest and Lorient fleets to threaten England's colonies in the Indian Ocean and the Toulon fleet to invade Algiers, Sicily or Egypt, while the Channel fleets threatened to launch an attack on Ireland.⁴⁰ However, by early

³⁵ "England, worried about Ireland, menaced in India by a French and Russian army, will be finally brought to the *princeps de raison*." Napoleon to Louis Bonaparte, 17 Feb 1808, #13573, CN, XVI, 337.

³⁶ Napoleon to Decres, 29 March 1808, #13698, CN, XVI, 454-5.

³⁷ Napoleon to Decres, 12 April 1808, #13738, CN, XVI, 493-4.

³⁸ Napoleon to Joseph, 15 February 1808, #13561, CN, XVI, 332; Napoleon to Decres, 29 Mar 1808, #13698, CN, XVI, 454-5; Napoleon to Joseph Bonaparte, 29 March 1808, #13701, CN, XVI, 457; Napoleon to Joseph Bonaparte, 18 April 1808, #13763, CN, XVII, 23-25.

³⁹ Napoleon to Decres, 11 May 1808 #13850, CN, XVII, 89.

⁴⁰ Napoleon to Decres, 12 April 1808, #13737, CN, XVI, 492-3; Napoleon to Decres, 13 May 1808, #13877, CN, XVII, 113-4; Napoleon to Decres, 17 May 1808, #13915, CN, XVII, 149; Napoleon to Decres, 26 May 1808, #13997, CN, XVII, 207-12.

July, with "the affairs in Spain having taken a serious turn for the worse," Napoleon was less inclined to "risk such a large quantity of forces on the sea, as well as land."⁴¹ He hoped that once his brother Joseph assumed the throne that things would improve, yet this opportunity never materialized.

The third element of Napoleon's strategy incorporated a concept known as "fleet-in-being." The idea was the very existence of French ships would force the British to expend more of its resources on its navy in order to counter this threat. Napoleon pushed Decres to continually arm more ships across Europe as it would force "the English to spend a lot and disseminate their forces, because they are obliged to have ships in the seas around Spain, Portugal, America, Baltic, etc."⁴² His goal was to "harass [the English] with expenses and fatigue." By forcing England to send expeditions to Sicily and Sweden, while maintaining fleets in the Baltic and Mediterranean, Napoleon sought to compel Britain to borrow more money, while the Continental System would hurt the British economy, thereby diminishing the British government's tax revenues. Napoleon "desired to put all [his] forces into play in [his] ports, as well as setting sail." As Napoleon understood, the concept of fleet-in-being only worked effectively if the fleets actively threatened the enemy. The Emperor ordered a small squadron from Brest and several frigates from Nantes to sortie often and "pass the summer playing tag."⁴³ Beyond the cost of maintaining overseas stations, having to remain constantly at sea, particularly during the winter, took a toll on the British navy. From 1808-10, the British navy lost two ships-of-the line, 14 frigates, and 45 smaller ships at sea.⁴⁴ Thus, Napoleon's strategy against Britain encompassed direct attacks on her colonial possessions, while simultaneously weakening her economy by embargoing their trade and forcing Britain to expend more on its navy to defend their widespread interests.

⁴¹ Napoleon to Decres, 7 July 1808, #14161, CN, XVII, 353.

⁴² Napoleon to Decres, 8 May 1808, #13829, CN, XVII, 75.

⁴³ Napoleon actually refers to the game of "barres" which is a medieval version of tag. Napoleon to Decres, 12 May 1808, #13873, CN, XVII, 107-9.

⁴⁴ See William James, *Naval History*, Vol. 4.

Napoleon's desire to control the maritime assets of Portugal and Spain not only precipitated the Peninsular War, but also had a key role in the conduct of the invasion itself. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities with Spain, Napoleon secretly slipped French troops across the border to be in place to carry out his intended coup, using the preparation of a naval expedition from Cadiz as a pretext. This ruse enabled the French to amass forces near Madrid, which was located along the purported route to Cadiz.⁴⁵ Once French troops occupied Madrid, Napoleon ordered Murat to dispatch forces to secure Spain's major ports of Cadiz, Cartagena and Ferrol.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Napoleon had to manage tens of thousands of Spanish and Portuguese troops whose support for the French takeover was suspect at best. To diminish any chances of trouble, Napoleon shuffled these suspect troops across his Empire. After invading Portugal, Junot was to dispatch five to six thousand Portuguese soldiers to France.⁴⁷ Upon seizing control of Spain, Napoleon ordered 8,000 Spanish troops to Portugal to reinforce Junot, while withdrawing 6,000 French troops from Portugal to help secure Spain.⁴⁸ It was especially imperative to quickly seize control of Cadiz, as a French squadron of five ships had been confined here for several years, the remnants of the massive Franco-Spanish fleet shattered at Trafalgar in 1805. While Napoleon ordered 10,000 Spanish troops, under the command of the Spanish general the Marques de Sorocco, to secure Cadiz and the area around Gibraltar, the Emperor did not trust leaving such a large Spanish force unsupervised.⁴⁹ Thus, Napoleon dispatched

⁴⁵ Napoleon to Murat, 14 March 1808, #13652, CN, XVI, 417; Napoleon to Murat, 16 March 1808, #13656, CN, XVI, 420-1.

⁴⁶ Napoleon to Murat, 7 May 1808, #13823, XVII, 72-3; Napoleon to Murat, 8 May 1808, #13830, XVII, 75-77.

⁴⁷ Napoleon ordered Junot to grant the right to retire to an Portuguese soldier, after taking their weapon. Napoleon to Junot, 12 November 1807, #13351, CN, XVI, 156-8; Napoleon to Junot, 20 December 1807, #13406, CN, XVI, 204-6

⁴⁸ Napoleon to Murat, 9 May 1808 #13835, CN, XVII, 80-1.

⁴⁹ Napoleon to Murat, 6 May 1808, #13818, CN, XVII, 69; Napoleon to Murat, 7 May 1808, #13823, CN, XVII, 72-3;

General Pierre Antoine DuPont with small force of 9,000 French soldiers and a nominally Swiss contingent of 8,000 men to Cadiz to ensure that the Spanish stayed in line.⁵⁰ Similarly, Napoleon dispatched Marshal Bon-Adrien Jeannot de Moncey with a division to secure Valencia and eventually Cartagena, while General Guillaume Duhesme was to seize Barcelona.⁵¹ Stretched across Spain, these forces were ill-situated to face the outbreak of the Spanish insurrection. While Duhesme took Barcelona by surprise on 29 February 1808, he soon found himself besieged by a larger Spanish army. While Moncey was able to extract his forces after several failed attempts to storm Valencia, Dupont was not so fortunate. A combination of insufficient reinforcements, overwhelming Spanish numbers, and a series of egregious errors upon his part, Dupont surrendered his entire command, in total over 17,000 men, at Bailen in mid-July 1808 without ever making it to Cadiz. Meanwhile, back in Portugal, the British had landed a large expeditionary force under the command of Sir Arthur Wellesley. After suffering several defeats, Junot's Army of Portugal was caught in a precarious situation. Yet, Wellesley was superseded by new British leaders, who opted to grant surprisingly generous terms to Junot in the Convention of Sintra. The Army of Portugal not only retained its equipment, but was also granted free safe passage back to France aboard British ships. It was only this fortuitous change in British leadership that saved Junot from suffering a fate similar to Dupont. Thus, it was Napoleon's overly ambitious plan to quickly seize the fleets and ports of both Portugal and Spain that left the French army stretched across the Iberian Peninsula. With corps often out of supporting range

Napoleon to Murat, 13 May 1808, #13879, CN, XVII, 115-8; Napoleon to Murat, 14 May 1808, #13885, CN, XVII, 121-4

⁵⁰ Napoleon to Murat, 10 May 1808 #13839, XVII, 82-3; Napoleon to Murat, 11 May 1808, #13856, CN, XVII, 94-6; Napoleon to Berthier, 18 May 1808, #13929, CN, XVII, 158-9; Napoleon to Murat, 18 May 1808, #13930, CN, XVII, 160; Napoleon to Murat, 19 May 1808, #13938, CN, XVII, 164-6; Napoleon to Murat, 22 May 1808, #13965, CN, XVII, 186-7.

⁵¹ Napoleon to General Clarke, 28 January 1808, #13496, CN, XVI, 281-2; Napoleon to Murat, 30 May 1808, #14029, CN, XVII, 242-4;

of each other, these isolated units faced serious risks of being overwhelmed.

The geography of the Iberian Peninsula also ensured that sea power would play an important role, particularly in the realm of logistical support. This was most evident for the British, whose navy enabled them to not only field an army overseas but also fund the armies of their Iberian allies.⁵² Compared to the British, French naval operations in support of the Spanish campaign have been generally neglected in the narratives of the Peninsular War, despite their significant impact on the course of the war. Although France shared a border with Spain, the Pyrenees presented a significant obstacle for overland supply trains. As soon as Barcelona had fallen into French hands, Napoleon planned to use this port to receive shipments of wheat and biscuits from Marseille.⁵³ For a time, Napoleon even contemplated shipping provisions to Junot in Portugal by using smaller boats, which would be able sail in shallow coastal water and therefore evade British cruisers.⁵⁴ In August, with Barcelona besieged by land by a Spanish army and blockaded at sea by a British fleet, Napoleon had to divert shipments of provisions to the nearby Port-Vendres. Over the course of October and November, workers in Marseille loaded 30 merchant vessels with around 500,000 rations. Divided into two groups, these

⁵² See Brian De Toy, "Wellington's Lifeline: Naval Logistics in the Peninsula" *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe: Selected Papers*, 1995, 359-68; Paul C. Krajewski, "British Military and Naval Cooperation, 1808: The Precondition for Allied Victory in the Peninsular War," *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe: Selected Papers*, 1998, 481-91; C.D. Hall, *Wellington's Navy: Sea Power and the Peninsular War, 1807-1814*. (Chatham Publishing, 2004).

⁵³ It appears that this early shipment never left as the grain arrived late and the ships were held up by a customs agent in Marseille. Napoleon to Clarke, 10 March 1808, CN, #13635, XVI, 406; Napoleon to Cretet, Minister of Interior, 11 March 1808, #13638, XVI, 409; Vincent Brun, *Guerres maritimes de la France: Port de Toulon, ses armements* (H. Plon, Paris: 1861), vol. 2, 491.

⁵⁴ Napoleon to Junot, 30 May 1808, #14032, CN, XVII, 245-6; Napoleon to Champagny, Minister of Foreign Relations, 1 June 1808, #14037, CN, XVII, 253.

lightly escorted vessel set sail in late 1808.⁵⁵ While the second division made it safely to Port-Vendres, the majority of the first division was captured by the famed British captain, Thomas Cochrane, in December 1808, who had been burning French telegraph stations along the Mediterranean coast.⁵⁶

The losses suffered by this convoy may have been the catalyst for Napoleon to subsequently order small squadrons to escort future convoys. At the end of March 1809, Napoleon ordered Admiral Honore Ganteaume, commander of the Toulon fleet, to dispatch a squadron of 5 ships and 2 frigates to escort a number of transports to Barcelona.⁵⁷ On 24 April, Admiral Julien Cosmao's squadron set out with 17 transports loaded with 100,000 kilos of gunpowder, a million bullets and 25,000 quintals of wheat and flour. After unloading these supplies at Rosas Bay, Cosmao sailed back into Toulon on 30 April unmolested, although narrowly missing a British fleet of 14 ships.⁵⁸ Given the success of this sortie, another shipment of a million bullets, a hundred thousand kilos of gunpowder, 32,000 quintals of wheat, flour, biscuits was loaded aboard 17 transports in September. Initially, Ganteaume contemplated setting sail with all 15 ships of the Toulon fleet, believing he outnumbered the British fleet of 11 ships under Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood. When Collingwood abandoned his station off of Toulon, Ganteaume suspected that the British fleet had returned to its port on Minorca. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Ganteaume opted to dispatch only a small squadron of 3 ships, 2 frigates and 2 smaller craft, under the command of Rear-Admiral François Baudin, to escort the convoy to Barcelona.⁵⁹ Baudin's departure on 21 October, however, did not go undetected as Collingwood had left two British frigates to shadow Toulon; they raced

⁵⁵ Brun, *Guerres maritimes de la France*, vol. 2, 492.

⁵⁶ Cochrane to Collingwood, 28 September 1808, *Naval Chronicle*, vol. 21, 73-4; Cochrane to Collingwood, 2 January 1809, *Naval Chronicle*, vol. 21, 499.

⁵⁷ Napoleon to Ganteaume, 29 March 1809, #14970, CN, I8, 401-2.

⁵⁸ Brun, *Guerres maritimes de la France*, vol. 2, 504-5.

⁵⁹ Brun, *Guerres maritimes de la France*, vol. 2, 507-9

to Minorca to report the French movements.⁶⁰ Although the British fleet had indeed set sail for Minorca, Collingwood did not remain at port for long. Upon hearing rumors of the Toulon fleet's imminent departure, Collingwood had already set sail with 15 ships and 2 frigates on 13 October. Easily deducing that the French convoy would head to Barcelona, Collingwood established a cruise to intercept Baudin and his convoy.⁶¹ Upon spotting the French convoy on the morning of the 23rd, Collingwood dispatched Rear-Admiral Thomas Martin with the eight of his fastest ships to chase them down. While one of the French frigates raced back to the safety of Marseille, the rest of Baudin's squadron fled northwards towards the French coast. Although a British frigate succeeded in capturing five transports, the majority of the French convoy eluded capture and continued on their course. Meanwhile, upon reaching the port of Cette, only one of Baudin's ship-of-the-line and a frigate were able to successfully navigate the shallow waters; the other two ships ran aground.⁶² Fearing of their capture, the French set fire to both ships. As for the convoy, the remaining ships reached the Bay of Rosas and began to swiftly offload their cargo. By the time the British were able to launch a successful expedition to cut out the French ships during the night of 31 October/1 November, the ships had already succeeded in unloading half of their cargo safely ashore.⁶³ Thus, France's efforts to resupply its forces in Spain by sea had met with mixed success and significant loss. While Napoleon thought of attempting another shipment in late 1810, he warned Decres that "Above all, I do not want to risk any of my ships of the line, I want to use only frigates." He even contemplated

⁶⁰ Collingwood to Secretary of the Admiralty, 30 October 1809, *Naval Chronicle*, vol. 22, 500-1.

⁶¹ Private letter from aboard HMS Sultan, 1 Nov 1809, *Naval Chronicle*, vol. 22, 457-60.

⁶² These two ships were able return safely to Toulon on 19 November.

⁶³ Collingwood to Secretary of the Admiralty, 30 October 1809, *Naval Chronicle*, vol. 22, 500-1; Martin to Collingwood, 27 October 1809, *Naval Chronicle*, vol. 22, 501-2; Collingwood to Secretary of the Admiralty, 1 November 1809, *Naval Chronicle*, vol. 22, 502-3; Hallowell to Collingwood, 1 Nov 1809, *Naval Chronicle*, vol. 22, 503-5.

whether or not a sufficient quantity of supplies would get through, even if only a third of the ships made it to their destination.⁶⁴ Eventually, Napoleon abandoned all plans to ship supplies to Spain, preferring to attempt to make the campaign pay for itself through forced contributions from the Spanish people.

Overall, Napoleon's efforts to rapidly expand his navy to defeat Britain in the maritime war ended with dismal results. Not only did he fail to gain control of the Danish, Portuguese and Spanish fleets, his strategy also cost him seven of his own precious ships. Already trapped in the harbor of Cadiz by a vigilant British blockade, Admiral Francois Rosily's squadron of five ships soon found itself threatened by the very city that had sheltered it for the last two and a half years. Trouble broke out during the evening of 27 May, eventually culminating a few days later when a mob stabbed the Spanish general Marques de Sorroco to death. Rosily attempted to extract his fleet from this increasingly precarious situation by declaring neutrality, but his efforts were rebuffed by both the British and Spanish. Upon seeing the Spanish installing mortars and cannons to shell his ships, Rosily attempted to sail his fleet into the nearby arsenal of Carraca, where he hoped his crews could man the fortifications and hold out until relieved by General Dupont's approaching force. However, contrary winds blew for several days, foiling Rosily's desperate gambit as the Spanish eventually deduced his intentions and cut off this avenue of escape by sinking several hulks in the narrow channel leading to the arsenal. After rejecting several calls for surrender and resisting a massive bombardment for several days, Rosily ultimately surrendered "as to not uselessly spill blood of the crews and prevent total destruction of the ships."⁶⁵ Coupled with the Baudin's two scuttled

⁶⁴ Napoleon to Decres, 20 Sept 1810, #16935, CN, vol. 21, 137-8; Napoleon to Decres, 28 Sept 1810, #16955, CN, vol. 21, 147-8.

⁶⁵ Spanish forces had up to 162 cannons, 33 mortars, 46 gunboats and 14 bomb vessels by the end. Account given to Emperor, 15 June 1808, SHD - Marine, CC7 Alpha 2186; Thomas Morla, Captain General, to Admiral Rosily, 9 June 1808, SHD - Marine, CC7 Alpha 2186; Admiral Rosily to

ships, the loss of these five vessels was an additional setback to Napoleon's maritime plans. While his navies continued to grow slowly through an expanded construction program, he never achieved the 100+ ships of the line he had hoped for.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that the Peninsular War began as a naval war. Not only did Napoleon want to seize foreign navies for his own designs, he also wanted access to their supply of sailors and nautical stores. These pressing interests, coupled with overconfidence, drove Napoleon to spread his forces too thin across the Iberian Peninsula. Unprepared for the fierce Spanish resistance, the dispersed French forces found themselves under assault by numerically superior Spanish forces, particularly Dupont, whose surrender at Bailen was a massive blow to French martial prestige. Furthermore, sea power played a critical role in supplying the armies during the Peninsular War. Unable to ship provisions without significant danger, Napoleon made the fateful decision to place the burden of logistics on the Spanish population. Of course, the character of the war changed dramatically with the outbreak of the Spanish insurrection in mid-1808. This later phase of the war has captured the attention of historians and military theorists. Yet, it is important to remember what Napoleon's original war aims were in order to better understand why the French suffered such a major reversal during the initial phase of the war in 1808.

Thomas Morla, Captain General, 10 June 1808 @ 3:45 PM , SHD - Marine, CC7 Alpha 2186; Rosily to Decres, 3 September 1808, SHD - Marine, CC7 Alpha 2186.