

Translated by Greg Gorsuch
Part 5

HISTORICAL SUMMARY

OF THE

PENINSULA WAR,

FROM 1807 TO 1814,

SERVING AS AN INTRODUCTION TO THE JOURNALS OF THE SIEGES MADE
OR SUSTAINED BY THE FRENCH IN THIS WAR.

CAMPAIGN OF 1807 AND 1808

III

Napoleon had hoped, in seizing Madrid, that the provinces would immediately submit; but the Spanish people no longer had a sovereign and defended their independence by their own energy alone: the loss of the capital was therefore a less noticeable setback for them. They even went a long time without believing it; by an extraordinary illusion, it was thought, throughout the Peninsula, that Madrid continued to resist, even after the capture of the Retiro. The Supreme Junta, having taken refuge in Seville, did, for its part, all it could to propagate this error. The Spaniards, maintained in their hopes, redoubled their efforts to stop the invasion of the French, and began to organize, in each province, bands which acted in isolation.

Meanwhile the English army, which in the month of October had set out from Lisbon to Valladolid, advanced only very slowly. General Moore, who commanded it, hesitated to engage in the interior of Spain, before being certain of being supported there by the efforts of the inhabitants, and before the Supreme Junta had adopted a general plan of defense. On the 13th of November, he arrived with his infantry at Salamanca, by the road of Almeida; but fearing, in leaving Lisbon, that this road would be bad, he had made his artillery and his cavalry, under the escort of a corps of three thousand men of infantry, commanded by General Hope, take the main road to Madrid, by Badajoz, Almaraz and Talavera de la Reyna, to reach thence the Escorial and Salamanca, adding by this detour more than a hundred leagues to their march. During more than twenty days that he awaited their arrival, he remained an idle spectator of events. As soon as he learned of the first successes of the Emperor, he sent orders to Sir David Baird's corps, which was advancing by Astorga, to withdraw to Corunna, where he had landed, while he himself prepared to affect his retreat to Lisbon.¹

However, in the early days of December, General Moore, deceived by the false rumors of the resistance of Madrid, and by the stories he was told of the enthusiasm which was breaking out

¹ See supporting documents, no. 23.

throughout Spain, excited by the public clamor and by the orders of his government, seeing moreover that no army was marching against him, resolved to countermand the retrograde movement of General Baird's troops, and advanced himself on Valladolid to create a diversion, in favor of the defenders of the capital, on the line of operation of the French army. But, on the 13th of December, he was drawn from his error by an intercepted dispatch from the Prince of Neufchâtel, Major-General, to Marshal Soult. He learned from this dispatch that the French were really masters of Madrid; that Marshal Victor had advanced to Talavera de la Reyna, and was moving towards Almaraz, threatening Lisbon by the valley of the Tagus, and supported in the rear by the Fourth Corps, the Sixth, and the reserves of the Imperial Guard; that Marshal Soult, after having left the province of Santander and having left General Bonet there on the Deba with a division, had gone to Saldaña, in the valley of the Carrion, and had orders to push the Spaniards into Galicia; that finally the troops of General Junot, forming the Eighth Corps, had already crossed the Bidasoa and were on the march towards Burgos.

General Moore judged from then on, that Burgos would be strongly occupied, that the road to Corunna would be anything but safe for the retreat of General Baird, if Marshal Soult advanced, and that he himself might have his communications cut off from Lisbon by Marshal Victor. Seeing, moreover, that the French were ignorant of the movements of the English army, he conceived the project of operating on his left to join General Baird and the Marquis de la Romana, posted behind the Esla at Leon, with ten thousand Spaniards, and then, to envelop Marshal Soult, whom he judged should be at Saldaña, without immediate support. In any case, he hoped to attract part of the French forces to the north and thus make a powerful diversion in favor of the southern provinces, the only ones that were not yet invaded. He immediately set out on Toro and Mayorga, where he made his junction, on 20 December, with the troops of Sir David Baird. He thus found himself at the head of about twenty-five thousand combatants. At the same time La Romana advanced to Mansilla.

Marshal Soult had only eighteen thousand men. Informed of the march of the Anglo-Spanish army, and fearing to be attacked before having received the orders of the Emperor, he took it upon himself to change the destination of the troops which were closest to his reach. He was joined successively by the Division of Dragoons of General Lorge, by the First Regiment of Hussars, and by the divisions Delaborde and Loison of the Eighth Corps, which had just entered Spain.

On the 23rd of December, General Moore was advancing with all his forces by Mayorga, Villada and Sahagún, to outflank Marshal Soult, when he learned that Napoleon had left Madrid on the 21st, and was arriving by forced marches on the Esla, by the road of Arévalo and Tordesillas, followed by the Imperial Guard, the Sixth Corps under the command of Marshal Ney, the divisions of Lapisse and Dessolles, and the cavalry of Marshal Bessières, in all about fifty thousand men; that Marshal Soult, at the head of twenty-four thousand men, had set out on Leon and Astorga, while the division of General Lapisse was heading for Salamanca. Recognizing then all the danger of his position, since the movements of the French army tended to surround him, he left La Romana at Mansilla, before Marshal Soult, and fell back with all haste on Benavente, in order to secure the great road to Galicia, by which he was to affect his retreat on Corunna. His columns were assembled at Benavente on the 26th of December, when the first French troops, who had been stopped for two days by the snows in the Guadarama, appeared on

the Esla, only twelve hours after the English had crossed this river and blown up the bridge. General Moore hastened his march for fear that Marshal Soult would arrive before him at Astorga, the point of junction of the roads from Madrid and Leon to Corunna, endeavoring to reach Villafranca twenty leagues further on, where the road enters a frightful defile. His retreat took place in dreadful weather; the roads were covered with snow and damaged in several places by torrents that had swollen and overflowed. In order to flee more quickly, the English abandoned their sick, their baggage, their ammunition and part of their artillery.

On the 1st of January, the Emperor arrived at Astorga, which, in the general terror, had opened its gates to the French troops. There he received the news that Austria, yielding to the advice of England, was preparing to take up arms again; he immediately retreated to Valladolid with his Guard, and soon after left for Paris, leaving Marshal Soult to pursue the English army, and Marshal Ney to contain the troops of the Marquis de la Romana, beaten at Mansilla and dispersed in the mountains.

Marshal Soult did not lose a moment; on the 3rd of January, his cavalry reached the enemy's rearguard on the heights of Prieros, at the entrance to the defile of Villafranca, and partly destroyed it. This action increased the terror in the English army, tired and without provisions. The remains of the Spanish army, which crossed the English columns to take refuge in the valley of the Sil, further increased the disorder. The road was covered with broken wagons, expiring animals, stragglers exhausted by cold, hunger and fatigue. On the evening of the 5th, the English arrived at Lugo; General Moore, finding provisions and some reinforcements there, took up position to reform his army, hoping to stop the French troops by this unexpected demonstration. Marshal Soult, who had only one head of column engaged in the defile, and who also lacked provisions, was obliged to stop, to regroup his forces before beginning a decisive attack. Marshal Ney, who was to support him, had remained at Villafranca; but, pressed by the orders of the Emperor, he had to march also on Lugo. The English army resumed its march during the night of the 8th to the 9th, having gained ten hours on the French columns. Finally, on 11 January, after a race of one hundred and fifty leagues and unheard-of fatigue, she arrived under the walls of Corunna, at the end of her efforts.

In this disastrous retreat, the English lost nearly nine thousand men, including six thousand prisoners, almost without engagement, by the sole effect of fatigue and misery. Add forty-four pieces of cannon, one hundred and fifty caissons, the baggage, and twenty-five thousand pounds sterling which composed the treasury of the army. The cavalry was dismounted; four thousand horses, both troops and artillery train, had perished from weariness or even by the hands of their drivers.

The port of Corunna offered the English a safe point of embarkation; but, by a fatality which seemed to assure the total ruin of their army, the vessels which had transported General Baird's troops to Galicia had been sent to Vigo, at the beginning of the retreat, and when it was still unknown what direction it would take. While awaiting their return, General Moore had the narrow front of the promontory leading to the city fortified and took up position there. His army was reduced to fourteen thousand five hundred men. Three thousand light troops whom he had directed by the road from Orense to Vigo had embarked there. Marshal Soult, obliged to stop at the village of del Burgo on the Mero, to restore the bridge destroyed by the enemy, was only able

to arrive on 14 January, with part of his troops, in the presence of the English army. That same evening, the transport ships arrived from Vigo, and the English began to embark their sick, their wounded, and some artillery pieces. Marshal Soult, having been joined by the last columns that he was impatiently waiting for, attacked the English line on the 16th at two o'clock in the afternoon. The fighting was fierce and lasted until nightfall. The enemy nevertheless managed to hold his position, but not without significant losses: four hundred men remained on the battlefield, two thousand were wounded; General Moore was killed, and General Baird, who replaced him, had his arm blown off. On our side, we had one hundred and fifty men killed, and five hundred wounded. General Hope took command of the English army, and withdrew, during the night, into the city, in order to embark. He abandoned there rich stores, sick, wounded, fifteen thousand fusils, nineteen pieces of cannon, and the two thousand horses that remained to him, after having had their hamstrings cut. At daybreak, a battery of howitzers, established by the French on the shore, forced the English fleet to put to sea; it set sail for England, where it did not arrive until it had experienced the most terrible storm.

The Spaniards, discouraged and few in number, did not even think of defending the places of Galicia. Corunna capitulated on the 19th. The important place of Ferrol, situated on the opposite point of the bay, surrendered, on the 26th, without firing a shot, as well as the Spanish fleet, composed of seven ships of the line and ten frigates or corvettes, which was in the port. Santiago and Vigo were occupied, and Marshal Soult found himself master of all Galicia.

During these events, Marshal Victor approached Madrid with the First Corps, to cover this capital, where King Joseph had returned, on 22 January, with his entire court. A part of his troops occupied the line of the Tagus, from Toledo to Aranjuez. Marshal Lefebvre had replaced him, with the Fourth Corps, at Talavera de la Reyna, and was observing General Galluzo who, after having gathered five or six thousand men from the remains of the Army of Extremadura, had posted himself on the left bank of the Tagus, where he occupied a line of more than fifteen leagues. On 24 December, Marshal Lefebvre forced the passage of the river at the bridge of Almaraz and dispersed the Spaniards. General Galluzo took refuge behind the Guadiana.

The Duke of Infantado had succeeded in forming, at Cuenca, an army of twenty thousand men, with which he set out on Madrid in the first days of January, believing that he would find this capital unprepared. Marshal Victor, informed of his approach, spared him half the journey. The encounter took place on 13 January, near the small town of Uclés. The enemy was completely defeated; two thousand Spaniards remained on the battlefield; thirteen thousand prisoners, eighteen flags, all the artillery and baggage were the trophies of this victory. Marshal Victor entered Cuenca and pursued the enemy to the foot of the Sierra Morena; then, heading by Consuegra and Madridejos, he cleared the plain of La Mancha, and retired to Toledo, behind the Tagus.

No. 23.

*Letter from Sir John Moore to Major-General Mackenzie,
commander in Portugal.*

Salamanca, 29 November 1808.

Sir, the armies of Spain, commanded by Generals Castaños and Blake, one in Biscay and the other in Aragon, have been beaten and dispersed, which renders my junction with David Baird's corps impossible; but even if it should take place, I cannot hope, with the English troops alone, to resist the formidable force which France brings against that country, and nothing now in Spain can stand against it.

I have ordered Sir David Baird to fall back on Corunna, to embark there, and to sail towards the Tagus. I myself, with the troops coming from Lisbon, think to withdraw by Ciudad-Rodrigo or Almeida, and, taking such position as I shall find, seek to defend for a time the frontier of Portugal, and cover Lisbon. But as this cannot last long in the face of superior forces, it is necessary that I give you notice that you can embark the crews of the army, keeping on land only what can least hinder the re-embarkation of the whole army, both the troops who are with you, and those that I bring.

We shall have great difficulty in finding provisions on the frontier....It would be well to examine with the Portuguese officers and engineers the points that could be immediately fortified and those that would be susceptible of defense, and also how you could employ the troops under your orders to support me in the defense of the frontiers..... In order not to disturb the population, the rumor can be spread that reinforcements of English troops will join us via Portugal: this will reassure them at first, but the truth cannot be long in coming out. I have great need of money, and nothing else can help to relieve the country.

I have the honor to be, etc.

Signed: J. MOORE.

P. S. Elvas should be supplied.