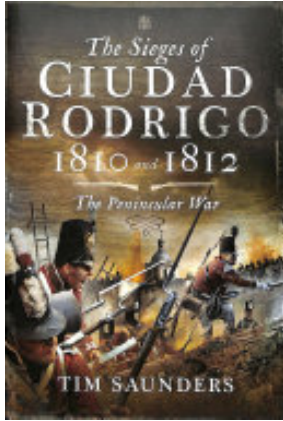


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Saunders, Tim. *The Sieges of Ciudad Rodrigo, 1810 and 1812: The Peninsular War*. Barnsley (UK): Pen & Sword, 2018. 269 pages. ISBN# 9781526724328. Hardcover. \$34.95/£25.



Title notwithstanding, this book is about rather more than simply the capture and recapture of this Spanish border fortress. Or, to look at it another way, it serves to remind us that there was a lot more to sieges than the slow scientific progression of trenches and saps or the visceral horror of the storm. Thus, nearly as much time is spent outlining the course of covering operations as is devoted to the sieges themselves and this helps add a sense of context to the work. The author is a former soldier, turned battlefield guide, and this latter experience in particular is what gives the book one of its main strengths which is a full and clear appreciation for the role of terrain. This is of importance both with respect to the placement of batteries and entrenchments during the siege operations but also in bringing to life the relatively small actions that took place involving the screening forces and in particular the Light Division. One could well use the book as the basis for a self-guided tour to the area, and, indeed, the end-matter contains a number of recommendations for anyone planning on doing so.

The first two chapters provide an introduction to Ciudad Rodrigo as a fortress and to the course of the Peninsular War up to the end of 1809. We then move on to the preparations for the French invasion of Portugal as planned for 1810, which necessarily required the capture of Ciudad Rodrigo and its Portuguese twin Almeida before the French could move against Lisbon. Wellington, conversely, required the two fortresses to hold out as long as possible in order to complete his defensive arrangements. This, of course, set up a tension since the Spanish garrison of Ciudad Rodrigo had expectations that the British would come to the relief of the fortress whereas Wellington, unwilling to risk a cavalry-light army on the open plains, had no such intention. Wellington did, however, deploy the Light Division to screen the border and Chapter 5 introduces this formation and outlines the course of the night action at Barba del Puerco. We then move on to the formal French investment of Ciudad Rodrigo, and then back to the continued activity of the Light Division screen, before the main events of the French siege are dealt with in Chapter 7. This was perhaps the most formulaic of all the Peninsula sieges, and the seizure of the outworks and the slow progress of trenches and batteries are clearly laid out in a series of overlays onto period maps. This remorseless progression, and the lack of any British relief effort, led to the eventual surrender right at the point where the French were preparing to assault the breeches.

Before we leave the events of 1810, Chapter 8 completes the story of the screening operations by taking a detailed look at the action at Villar de Puerco, in which the Light Division and its attached cavalry were bested by a French force. A series of maps again illustrate the course of the action and lay out the course of events by which Brigadier General Craufurd managed to misjudge his enemy. The book now jumps ahead to the events of late 1811 and 1812, with only a brief chapter to give a potted history of what was going on elsewhere in the interval. It would have been interesting at this point to have also been given some idea of what life was like in Ciudad Rodrigo under occupation, but from this point onwards the coverage of the book is far more from the Anglo-Portuguese perspective, unlike the first half in which French and Spanish voices both have a central role. Before looking at the siege and capture of the fortress, Chapter 10 addresses the blockade under which Ciudad Rodrigo was placed by Wellington, and the French efforts to relieve the place and replenish its supplies; this includes an account of the combats of Espeja and El Bodon. We then get three chapters covering the 1812 siege, devoted respectively to the preparations, the formal siege, and the storming. As with the French siege, the British progress is traced through a series of maps and day-by-day narrative takes the reader from ground being broken right up to the creation of the breeches. Finally, we are taken through the storm and subsequent sack with a series of eyewitnesses whose accounts bring home the horror of close-quarters warfare.

Taken together, the book brings out a number of interesting points. The Spanish in 1810 were far more active in their defence than the French in 1812, and, indeed, Major Saunders highlights poor French leadership as a major factor in the swift loss of the fortress in 1812. Furthermore, as is pointed out, things might have gone worse still for the French had Wellington been free to employ mortars to bombard the defenders, but this he was unable to do due to an unwillingness to inflict civilian casualties.

There are a few unfortunate slips – most obviously, Junot here gets the Marshal's baton that eluded him in reality. However, the only significant fault that I would point out is the lack of any scholarly apparatus or citations. This is, to be sure, a book aimed at the general reader rather than the scholar, and the many personal accounts are at least fully introduced in the text so that we know who the eyewitness was, their regiment and role, but since there are neither citations nor a bibliography it is made harder than it needs to be for an interested reader to follow up these accounts. Similarly, although it is evident that much thought has gone into reconstructing events – and this applies in particular to some of the screening actions – the reader is given little indication of which sources have been used to develop the conclusions that are presented, or how those conclusions were reached. The same can be said for events for which multiple interpretations have been put forward, such as the cause of the explosions that inflicted heavy casualties during the 1812 storm – were they mines, or a magazine? Deliberate or accidental? We know the author's conclusions, as they are presented in the narrative, but we are given no indication of how he reached them.

This gripe aside, this is a lively and thought-provoking read which tells a good story and makes some interesting points about the nature of siege warfare and its place in the operational conduct of the war more generally. It is profusely illustrated and, as already noted, full of helpful maps and diagrams: the latter in particular are a strong selling point, as is the author's obvious knowledge of the terrain, and these two aspects alone are more than sufficient for the work to come recommended.

Reviewed by [Andrew Bamford](#)

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