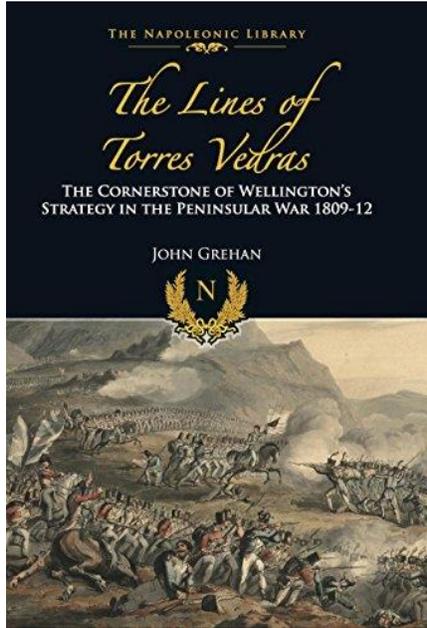


The Napoleon Series Reviews

Grehan, John. *The Lines of Torres Vedras: The Cornerstone of Wellington's Strategy in the Peninsular War 1809 – 12*. Barnsley: Frontline, 2015. 240 pages. ISBN# 9781473852747. Hardcover. \$40



In the summer of 1810, the French under Marshal Massena began their third invasion of Portugal. After successfully capturing the border fortresses of Ciudad Rodrigo and Almeida, the French marched into central Portugal almost unopposed until they reach Busaco, where the combined Anglo-Portuguese Army under Wellington stood in a defensive position on a mountain. Marshal Massena ordered his army to attack them and suffered one of the worse defeats by any French army in the Peninsular to that date.

Despite his overwhelming victory, Wellington chose to withdraw back to Lisbon and into what was known as the Lines of Torres Vedras, a massive set of fortifications that encircled the city, and were built in secret. The French followed the retreating Anglo-Portuguese Army, unaware of what was waiting for them. They soon found out, when they arrived outside the Lines. They quickly realized that the Lines were virtually impregnable. Rather than admit defeat, Marshal Massena kept his army in the vicinity of the Lines for the next five months, no easy feat, since Wellington had ordered a scorched earth policy to prevent the French from feeding its army from local resources. This policy worked to a point and eventually Marshal Massena ordered his hungry troops back to Spain.

By the title, the book appears to be about the building of the fortifications that stopped the French. However it is not. Although the author provides a good overview of the Lines, he places them in the context of their impact on the campaign. He begins with a look at the political situation in Portugal and England, and the options Wellington had for defending the country. Wellington realized that his army was too weak to defeat the French in open combat and knew that if it was defeated or took heavy casualties, he would have to withdraw from Portugal and effectively lose the war. His plan was to delay along the Portuguese – Spanish border as long as possible, while the defensive lines around Lisbon were being constructed and then when the invasion began, to fall back forcing the French to follow them deeper into the country. Part of the plan was to have the population destroy all their fields, excess food, and anything that the French might use to feed itself. This plan exceeded all expectations and eventually the French

were forced to retreat after taking losing 40% of its men, mostly to starvation and disease.

The Lines of Torres Vedras looks at all aspects of the campaign. Beginning with the sieges of Ciudad Rodrigo and Almeida, the French advance into Portugal and the problems they had, the battle of Busaco, the Allies' retreat to the Lisbon, and the reaction of the French when they arrived before the lines. There is a detailed examination of the scorch earth policy, its effectiveness, and its impact on the civilian population and the French Army. The author also examines how the French were able to maintain itself for so long in what was a wasteland and then their retreat back to Spain.

In addition to all of this, Mr. Grehan devotes two chapters on the fortifications themselves. They were laid out in three lines, which stretched from the Tagus River to the Atlantic Ocean. Total length of them was over 90 kilometers. Within the Lines were 156 redoubts with over 600 pieces of artillery. Protecting the approaches to them were abattis, flooded areas, and ridgelines that had been sculpted to make them impassable except in areas that were guarded by the redoubts. Because the engineers who built them left detailed accounts of their work in their letters and journals, the author was able to provide a firsthand descriptions of what it took to build them. The chapters include such things as the amount the laborers were paid, how many were employed building the redoubts, the number of tools needed, and the time it took to do so. *The Lines of Torres Vedras* is richly illustrated with contemporary maps, diagrams, and drawings of the fortifications made by the engineers who constructed them, plus photographs of the fortifications that still survive today.

There are three appendices. The first is the order-of-battle of the Anglo-Allied Army that was in the Lines. The second is a chart providing details on each redoubt within the Lines, including its name, its location, the size of its garrison, number and type of artillery pieces, and its altitude. The final appendix is a guide to the Lines as they exist today.

The Lines of Torres Vedras ends with critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of both Massena's and Wellington's strategy. For examples he looks at why Massena was so slow to start the invasion and the impact it had on its outcome. Mr. Grehan also explores the reasons why after finding it almost impossible to successfully assault the Lines, Massena chose to sit in front of them while his army slowly starved instead of retreating back to Spain. The author examines Wellington's strategy and brings up some interesting points especially about whether after defeating the French at Busaco, was the retreat to the Lines and the subsequent devastation of the countryside really necessary? He looks at both sides of the question and comes up with some plausible theories about why Wellington chose to continue his retreat and not to defend so far forward.

The Lines of Torres Vedras has one noticeable flaw. The author assumes that the reader is familiar with the geography Portugal and makes numerous references to towns, cities, and rivers in his narrative. Unfortunately many of these places cannot be found on the maps in the books. Detailed maps of the areas being discussed would be an invaluable addition to future editions. Despite this problem, the book is an excellent campaign study of the events that had such a profound impact on the Peninsular War. It is not surprising that this is the second time it has been reprinted since 2000. Recommended.

Reviewed by [Robert Burnham](#)

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