

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 9 (January 2009), No. 13

Guy Dempsey, *Albuera 1811: The Bloodiest Battle of the Peninsular War*, Frontline Books: London, 2008. 336 pp. Foreward and Appendices, £25 (hb). ISBN 978-84832-499-2.

Michael Oliver and Richard Partridge, *The Battle of Albuera 1811: "Glorious Field of Grief"*, Pen & Sword: Barnsley, 2007. 176 pp. Appendices and Notes. £ 19.99 (hb). ISBN 1-84415-461-0.

Reviewed by Frederick C. Schneid, High Point University.

Guy Dempsey, Michael Oliver and Richard Partridge have published two books contributing to the general historiography of the Peninsular War (1808-1814) and the specific debate concerning British and French tactics in the Napoleonic Wars. These books are part of the enormous literature being produced during this bicentennial era, which include a number of rather interesting and important works examining the dynamic of allied armies that faced Napoleon's military machine. Alexander Mikaberidze's, *Battle of Borodino* and Robert Goetz, *Austerlitz*, are two such books recently published as battle studies, and to which John Gill, *Thunder on the Danube*, is the most recent addition.[1] The history of the Peninsular War, however, is a particular subfield in the world of Napoleonic history. British and Spanish authors have examined the six years of resistance to Bonapartist rule with great interest, as it represented the first strategic blunder in the course of Napoleon's conquest of Europe.

British and Spanish scholars however, have pursued the study of this conflict along separate historiographical lines. The Spanish refer to the period 1808-1814 as the War of Independence, and tend to focus on the role of popular resistance as embodied in the guerrilla. British historians examine the war from a strategic and tactical perspective. It was in 1807 that Sir Arthur Wellesley (later the Duke of Wellington) issued his first decisive defeat of the French under General Junot in Portugal. Later, Wellington's campaigns in the Peninsular War along with popular Spanish resistance tied down more than a quarter million French and Imperial troops, denying Napoleon the ability to employ these men in central Europe, especially in 1809 and 1813. Furthermore, British historians have often reduced or denigrated the performance of conventional Spanish forces, and their lack of sagacity on and off the battlefield. Charles Esdaile, noted Napoleonic historian, has spent much of his academic career bridging this gap between the British and Spanish efforts, although with significant resistance from his English contemporaries and Spanish friends.[2] The French histories have tended to focus exclusively on a French narrative of the war, especially counter-insurgency operations.

The study of the Peninsular War remains rather contentious along national lines, but also among Napoleonic historians who focus on the campaigns in central Europe and those who write about the Spanish war. All, however, agree that it was a serious drain on Napoleon's military resources, and that the Emperor never fully appreciated the difficulties his brother Joseph, as a Bonapartist king, and his marshals experienced during these six tumultuous years. The British military histories of the Peninsular War, beyond those of Esdaile, have followed a traditional pattern of examining the reasons behind British success on the battlefield against French tactics that had won great victories in other parts of Europe. Most popular is the battle of Salamanca in 1812, where Wellington decisively defeated Marshal Marmont's army in Spain, opening the way for the final Anglo-Spanish offensive that drove the French from Spain by late 1813. Salamanca's popularity in British historical memory and military history

overshadowed an equally significant and bloody victory the year before at Albuera.[3] In this battle, an Anglo-Portuguese-Spanish army under General William Beresford successfully defeated a French army under the able Marshal Nicholas Soult, securing Wellington's line of advance from Portugal into central Spain. As Guy Dempsey proposed in his thoughtful introduction, "the military history of this period is so overshadowed by the colossal figures of Napoleon and Wellington, that a major battle fought without either present provides a unique opportunity for investigating and understanding the elements of Napoleonic warfare as it was actually practiced on the battlefield by 'ordinary' commanders" (p. 21).

Dempsey's second purpose is to examine this bloody battle because Beresford, along with some of his contemporaries, was highly dismayed by the enormous casualties suffered by the Anglo-allied army. Wellington was more forgiving, writing Beresford that "You could not be successful in such an action without a large loss..." (p. 20).

Indeed, Beresford found himself in a position turned by the French, with few forces to prevent an envelopment, and yet the Spanish division holding his flank stood long enough to permit British divisions to enter the fray, blunting the French assault and turning what should have been an unmitigated disaster into a near run victory.

The specific aspects of the Battle of Albuera feed into the larger general analysis of British and French tactics during the Napoleonic era. In an age where the French had succeeded in concentrating greater forces on the battlefield and a utilizing a more effective command and control system in the conquest of central Europe, British forces on a smaller scale were able to achieve dramatic victories over sizably smaller French forces. In particular, the debate centers on the use of British line versus French attack columns. The first dramatic victory occurred at Maida, where a British expeditionary force defeated a slightly larger French division in southern Italy in July 1806. Sir Charles Oman first introduced this engagement in terms of the superiority of British tactics in his *Studies on the Napoleonic Wars*. Rory Muir reintroduced the debate in his *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon* and James Arnold further explored the topic in his article "Column vs. Line" in the *Journal of Military History*. The Prussians were the only other European army to employ line with élan and skill to equal the British, but they failed to stem the French tide at Jena and Auerstadt despite professionalism and discipline.[4]

Guy Dempsey has succeeded in writing a clear and intelligent history of the battle. His use of primary sources in English, French and Spanish is refreshing, and quite important. Although Dempsey is not an academic—hardly a requirement for writing good history—he does not succumb to the all too common hagiographic narratives of Anglophile or Francophile Napoleonic historians, either lauding Wellington or Napoleon's "genius" as can often be the case among some historians. He understands the historical process, and the importance of qualifying sources. He also has a solid grasp of the historiography and provides textual footnotes when appropriate to place his interpretation within these debates. Dempsey is not new to Napoleonic military history, having previously published *Napoleon's Mercenaries*, for Greenhill Press.[5] He spends the first three chapters providing the strategic context for the events of 1810-11, critical to understanding the battle; then seven chapters on the battle itself. It is quite easy for any historical narrative to become bogged down in detail, yet Dempsey avoids this pitfall, integrating personal recollections with analysis of actions to create a flow that is informative and cogent. Maps, tables and charts provide further clarification when the discussion becomes more involved. The final chapters examine the aftermath of battle. When the drums and bugles ceased, the caring for wounded and prisoners along with the dealing with dead are addressed. What one finds is that Dempsey is part of a trend in military history to reclaim, or reintroduce traditional military history—maligned by many, including revisionist military historians for too long- by not concluding the history with ground taken and glory attained, but by providing a human face in the sense of a comprehensive examination of the battlefield, before, during and after the even, carnage and all.

Michael Oliver and Richard Partridge are far less successful in bringing anything new to the table. There is nothing wrong with battle narrative and the "old military history" when done properly. Yet,

Oliver and Partridge have written a book that is wholly insufficient when compared to Dempsey. The book is rather short, 136 pages of text, but twenty-eight pages are dedicated to the general history of the Peninsular War beginning in 1808 and a discussion of Napoleonic warfare. The biographies of the generals involved occupy another 50 pages, leaving little more than 40 pages for the actual battle. The concluding chapter, eight pages, addresses the aftermath and provides a cursory analysis of the battle. The authors have no greater ambition than to provide a narrative of events. It is, however, poorly written, and the sources consulted are few when compared to Dempsey's footnotes and comprehensive bibliography. While the dust jacket claims that the authors' research took them to British, French and Spanish archives, there is little in the endnotes to indicate a great deal of time was spent digging through cartons and cartellas. The maps and photographs of the battlefield are perhaps the best part of the book, providing a clear view of the ground as it is today, accompanied by illustrations of the key events of the battle. It is rather disappointing.

What we have then are two histories of the same battle. One is a valuable addition to the historical literature, the other a rather poor description of the context and events of the battle. Dempsey's book is a mere £6 more than Oliver and Partridge's, and a worthy investment to those who are seeking to expand their Napoleonic library.

#### NOTES

[1] Alexander Mikaberidze, *The Battle of Borodino: Napoleon against Kutusov* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2007); Robert Goetz, *Austerlitz 1805: Napoleon and the Destruction of the Third Coalition* (London: Greenhill Press, 2005), and John Gill, *Thunder on the Danube: Napoleon's War with Austria* (London: Greenhill Press, 2008).

[2] Charles Esdaile, *The Peninsular War: A New History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), *Fighting Napoleon: Guerillas, Bandits and Adventurers in Spain, 1808-1814* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004); *The Spanish Army in the Peninsular War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); and *The Duke of Wellington and the Command of the Spanish Army, 1812-1814* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1990).

[3] Rory Muir, *Salamanca 1812* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001).

[4] Sir Charles Oman, *Studies in the Napoleonic Wars* (London: Methuen, 1929); Rory Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998); James Arnold, "A Reappraisal of Column versus Line in the Peninsular War," *Journal of Military History* 68 2 (April 2004), 535-552; Dennis Showalter, "The Prussian Army," in Frederick C. Schneid, ed., *Armies of the French Revolution* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 2009), forthcoming and "The Prussian Army from Auerstadt to Waterloo," paper presented at the Gunther E. Rothenberg Seminar in Military History at High Point University, November 2006.

[5] Greenhill is the former name for Frontline Press that published Dempsey's book under review.

Frederick C. Schneid  
High Point University  
fschneid@highpoint.edu

educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172