

SOME NOTES ON THE BATTLE OF RIOSECO (1808): OPINIONS OF ENGLISH AND SPANISH HISTORIANS

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In this article we endeavour to explain events leading up to and the outcome of the battle of Monchín in Medina de Rioseco (in Valladolid) during the Peninsular war (1808 – 1814). We examine the different points of view of English historians such as Robert Southey, William Napier, Charles Stuart and Charles Esdaile, whose opinions don't differ greatly concerning the different phases of the battle itself, the outcome and the consequences of the Spanish defeat.

The Peninsular War (1808-1814), which decided the fate of Spain and in large part that of Europe, was brought about through the presence of a foreign king imposed by force of arms and that of a French army which remained in the country in order to uphold the foreign monarch, thus seriously imperilling the national unity. This, in itself, brought about a national uprising supported and seconded by people from all social classes and spectrums.

The month of May, 1808, is the date given by historians as the beginning of the uprising by the Spaniards against the Napoleonic invasion. This invasion really commenced in 1806 when Napoleon Bonaparte decided to fight Britain by attacking its economy and tried to force the nations of continental Europe to close their ports to British goods. The conflict was precipitated when Portugal refused to comply with Napoleon's Continental System. By a secret convention reached at Fontainebleau in October 1807, Spain agreed to support France against Portugal. A French army under Marshal Junot occupied in November of

that same year Portugal, and King John VI and his family fled to Brazil without resisting. Napoleon then began a series of manoeuvres to secure Spain for France. On the pretext that they were reinforcements for Junot, large numbers of French troops entered Spain and seized Pamplona and Barcelona. On March 23 the French marshal Murat entered Madrid. Portugal would not agree to join the pact, and Napoleon proposed and pushed through a joint Spanish-French invasion of Portugal. After some political wrangling Napoleon's next decision was to add Spain and Portugal to the French Empire. He occupied Spain and attempted to occupy Portugal.

The first uprising, that of the 2nd May 1808 in Madrid, was rapidly followed by others in Corunna, Valladolid and Santander, among other places, which rapidly spread to encompass the whole Peninsula and bring about a conventional war which, despite resistance of all kinds, permitted the triumph of the French forces and the occupation of Spain, especially of the main towns and cities. It was in Valladolid, the second focus of the insurrection, that general Cuesta, giving heed to the clamour of the masses, authorized two “Juntas”, of “Armamento” and “Defensa” for the whole of Old Castile. A popular uprising was not something Napoleon had bargained for and to combat it he launched punishing operations against the places where the rebels were entrenched, among these Old Castile. After Valladolid was taken by the Napoleonic army, despite the resistance of Cuesta, aided by general Blake with reinforcements from Galicia and Asturias, the Spanish forces were defeated in the decisive battle of Rioseco.

This victory by the French permitted the march towards Madrid of the new king appointed by Napoleon, Joseph the First.

It is in this context that the present article is situated, in which we endeavour to analyze the said battle through the perusal of historic documents, both contemporary to the events and of a later date, in order to see the authors' opinion of the Battle of Rioseco, or as it is sometimes called locally, the battle of Monclin, since this is the place in which it was fought. This place was of strategic importance to both armies since it is located in the heart of Tierra de Campos, at a crossing of the ways close to the Torozos hills, which command the highest vantage point in the province of Valladolid.

The fact that studies of the Peninsular War have up to now generally centred on the historiography of the contending powers- France and Spain without paying due attention, perhaps, to English sources has led us to direct our analysis to interpreting and comparing the different points of view about the events leading up to and involving the battle mentioned above.

The Spanish historian, Albi de la Cuesta (2002) underlines the really staggering differences in the points of view of British and Spanish writers when

considering Napoleonic period in the Peninsula. This affirmation, however doesn't hold good because neither do all British historians think alike when evaluating the events leading up to and taking place in the Peninsular war, nor do their opinions always differ from those of their Spanish counterparts.

It is sufficient to mention two cases to show the differences that existed between the viewpoints of the different British historians: those of Robert Southey and those of William Napier. The former, a poet and a traveller as well as a historian, was very favourable to Spain, as is shown in his work *The History of the peninsular War* (1832), and was consequently cold-shouldered by Wellington who did not permit him access to any document dealing with military affairs or battles in which the English forces took part during the Peninsular War. These documents were, however, ceded to Napier, who, thanks to the wealth of detail contained therein, wrote his *History of the War in the Peninsula* (1840), much more to the liking of the British command, since in it the author continually extols the merits of the British army, to the point even of tendentiousness.

Our study of the opinions of British and Spanish sources concerning the Battle of Rioseco, leads us to consider that they do not differ greatly the ones from the others. They coincide to a large extent with regards the antecedents, the development, the causes and the consequences of the Spanish defeat. Where there is almost exact coincidence is in the undoubted importance of this victory for Napoleon's troops over the Spanish and English forces as well as in the description of the unlicensed sacking of the city, which was accompanied by all types of atrocities, as well as in the fact that it permitted and facilitated the French march on Madrid. There are a few differences of opinion regarding the exact reasons for such a calamitous defeat, but there is almost complete agreement in respect to the ability and ingenuity of the three principal generals in question: García de la Cuesta and Blake on the Spanish side and Bessières on that of the French.

Gregorio Garcia de la Cuesta (1740 – 1812) who had been one of the most outstanding Spanish soldiers at the beginning of the war with France, was also the one who was less well considered by the British allies. His service record in Peru as well as in the Rousillon campaign had been brilliant but at 68 years old he was considered too old for the post of command. Besides, he was quite ill, (as Areilza (1985) points out; he walked with a limp, which meant that to traverse the line fire he had to be taken in cart drawn by six mules, and he had to be lifted on to his horse), but worst of all, he was self-willed and obstinate.

Napier, who saw things from the point of view of the typical aristocratic conservative, doesn't lose any opportunity to criticize and disparage the Spanish forces, and Cuesta in particular. He lays the whole blame on him for the defeat

of Rioseco, accusing him of improvisation, “so typical of the Spaniards” and makes comments like the following: “...for the Spanish general with the usual improvidence of his nation, had established all his magazines in the open towns of the flat country.” (Napier 1840:69). In fact, by laying the whole blame on Cuesta, Napier exonerates Blake: “Cuesta, assuming the command, chose the last (attacking Bessières in open country) though he had few horsemen and Bessières had many. He left, against Blake’s wishes, a division to protect his stores...” (Napier 1840:69).

Areilza, for his part, after analyzing the role of the ageing general in the Peninsular War, comes to the conclusion that he was more of a hindrance than a help to the English. He recognizes the general’s valour but affirms that he was old-fashioned. He also believes that he was violent-tempered and headstrong and that his efficiency on the battle field was low and that he apparently had no idea of military strategy or tactics. Arthur Wellesley, later Viscount of Talavera and Duke of Wellington, who was with Cuesta in the battle of Talavera, criticized him for not taking sufficiently into consideration the importance of the terrain on which the battle was waged and of giving too much importance to the possible manoeuvres and strategies which the enemy could mount.

Another opinion, which endeavours to be more favourable to Cuesta, is that of the British author, Charles Stuart, 3rd Marquis of Londonderry. In his book, *Narratives of the Peninsular War* (1829), he defines him as lacking in talent, though he admits that he was brave and just and, above all a man of his word.

Charles Esdaile, a contemporary writer, author of *The Peninsular War* (2003), and teacher at University of Liverpool, endeavours to exonerate Cuesta from some of the blame for the failures and inclines rather to cast doubts on the performance of Blake who, he says, was really too young and inexperienced, and who, besides, was dispirited and doubtful of the outcome.

A cautious and relatively junior officer – at the time of the uprising he had been a mere brigadier – Blacke Would have much preferred not to risk his army in combat for some while yet and, having almost no cavalry, was all too well aware of the dangers of operating in the plains of Castile. (Esdaile 2003:71).

Esdaile is, however, in no doubt when he points out the tremendous strategic error which in his opinion cost the battle, due solely to precipitation and lack of information as to the enemy’s movements or lack of expertise in the final preparations, when he points out that defeat was due to the fact that the French were expected to attack from the direction of Valladolid, when they, in fact, attacked unexpectedly from the direction of Palencia, thus upsetting all the tactical plans of the defending army.

As for Spanish authors, they show themselves just as critical with Cuesta; Rojo Vega (2000) calls him “useless”; González de Sásamo (1850) is of the opinion that he showed a considerable lack of skill in the battle of Cabezón de Pisuerga, the 12th June 1808, and that, despite the enormous losses amongst the Spanish troops, he continued his retreat with absolute tranquillity and, without pausing, withdrew with his cavalry into Rioseco to present battle once more to the French, with the same result. Sancho (1989), in the book edited by Grupo Pinciano and titled Valladolid. Diarios Curiosos (1807-1841) coincides in this judgement and underlines the differences of opinion between Blake and Cuesta, when he says:

... que habiendo ocurrido varias disputas entre el general Cuesta, y el de Galicia, llamado Blake, excusándose éste a continuar la acción por decir que sus tropas no debían venir en auxilio de Castilla y sí solo de sus provincias gallegas y puestos, se dispersó el ejército. (Sancho *et al.* 1989:135)

Sancho and Esdaile also refer to the difficult relations between Blake and Cuesta: “De estas desavenencias causadas por el General Blake y otros de sus jefes, según se decía, resultó que los franceses tomaron fomento y se rehaciesen” (Sancho *et al.* 1989:136). Esdaile’s comments cast at least some of the blame for the defeat at Rioseco on Blake’s shoulders: “...but the unwilling Blake in fact moved very slowly” (Esdaile 2003:71) and “...for Blake had also insisted on keeping his army separate from that of Cuesta” (Esdaile 2003:71).

Consequently, we can say that all the historians studied up to now have coincided in considering the differences of opinion between Blake and Cuesta to be important and an added factor in the ultimate defeat, though some of them endeavour to a certain extent to exonerate Blake: “Nuestro general Blake se portó perfectamente, y sentimos no poder decir lo mismo de Cuesta” (Sancho *et al.* 1989:136).

General Joaquín Blake (1759-1827) of Irish ancestry but born in Málaga, began his military career at the age of fifteen years. The vicissitudes of his chosen career saw him present at the blockade of Gibraltar and later taking part in the siege of Mahón; he also took part in the battles of Zara and Urrunge, in the Western Pyrenees. A short time after the Peninsular War began, he was ascended to General, without having passed through the post of Field Marshall, by the Junta of Galicia so that he could lead their army, in substitution for General Filangieri, who had been murdered a short time previously. On being appointed to general he was expressly ordered to obey only the orders that came to him from the Galician Junta, and this was the initial cause of his frictions with Cuesta.

According to Esdaile, after the defeat of Cabezón de Pisuerga the Spanish needed to attack the French rapidly with all their forces; Blake, however,

considered it dangerous to launch an attack in the plains of Castile and, a prey to despondency, he acted very slowly. Besides, he left two divisions of the four in his power behind to cover his retreat and to make sure that Galicia was suitably protected. In fact, Blake's service record leaves no doubt about his merits and the main criticism of him in the various sources regarding his part in the battle at Rioseco is of his lack of experience as well as overriding loyalty to the Galician Junta. Blake died in Valladolid, the 27th April, 1827, in Calle López Gómez, where a plaque records his memory.

As for the figure of Jean Pierre Bessières (1763-1813), most historians are in agreement that it was thanks to the circumstances of the battle rather than to any great skill on his part that left him the victor. He was one of the few marshalls who could consider himself a friend of Napoleon Bonaparte. In his distinguished military career, he took part in several actions, among those the fight with the Swiss Guard to save Louis XVI, the Napoleonic campaigns in Egypt and the battle of Austerlitz. In the Peninsular Campaign, apart from winning the battle of Medina de Rioseco, he fought at Somosierra and pursued the retreating army of Sir John Moore to Corunna. He was, in a word, a charismatic soldier much admired by his men, despite his reputation for being a strict disciplinarian. But, returning to the comments we made previously, the general opinion among the different authors with respect to the battle of Rioseco is that he was favoured with fortune and took advantage of the mistakes made by the Spanish army.

Esdaile is the only one to point out that Bessières' strategy was superior since he had infiltrated spies in the Spanish ranks so as to learn their plans beforehand. But, as well as praising these tactics, he underlines the importance of the tactical error of the Spanish forces in believing that the attacking French would come from the direction of Valladolid and not of Palencia.

Napier, on his part, also shows great admiration for the French Marshall, although he also lays special critical emphasis on the Spanish forces, declaring scornfully that their "patriotism" needed to be fuelled by money: "Spanish patriotism always required large sums of money" (Napier 1840:64) or pointing out that the strategy of the Spanish consisted in increasing the number of fighting men without regard to their effectiveness: "The second line composed of the best troops, augmented, not strengthened, by some eighteen thousand armed peasants..." (Napier 1840:68). For his part, Sancho (1989) is also of the opinion that the French troops were encouraged ("tomaron fomento") and their resolve strengthened by the divisions between the Spanish generals.

With regard to the battle of Rioseco itself, it has to be pointed out that all the authors consulted are adamant in claiming that the Spanish generals' tactical errors and their differences of opinion were the reason for the defeat. Some even

go further and allude to the “total incapacity” of the Spanish forces. Napier, for example, gives an ample account of the errors in deployment of the forces as well as of the advantages and disadvantages of many of the manoeuvres carried out. He says, for example, that Cuesta should have remained close to his base in Galicia, that he should not have left his stores of ammunition at Benavente and that he should have waited a few days more before confronting Bessières at Rioseco so as to give time for the British warships to bombard Santander, thus weakening Bessières’ reserves. Above all he criticizes Cuesta’s having taken on Bessières in open country. Esdaile agrees affirming that the defeat was due to an error of calculation on the part of the Spanish, particularly on that of Cuesta.

Sancho believes that the defeat was due to a dispute between Cuesta and Blake, who was of the opinion that the first duty of his troops was to defend the Galician provinces and not to help out the Castilian army. For this reason he dispersed his army leaving Cuesta to fend for himself, being obliged to retreat towards Toro, Zamora and Salamanca.

One last point many of the authors we have studied mention – very often in exaggerated terms – the contribution to the fray. Napier, whenever he can, emphasizes the “generous” English contribution towards the Spanish cause: “... the abundant supplies poured in from England were beginning to be felt” (Napier 1840:64); “They (The French) halted the 15th but the next day entered Benavente and captured many thousand English muskets and vast quantities of ammunition” (Napier 1840:68). Sancho, on his part, also underlines the fact that the English lent all the help they could to General Cuesta after the defeat at Cabezón so that he could take on the French at Rioseco.

As can be seen, there is practically complete agreement among the different historians about the battle of Rioseco; some point out the good fortune that attended Bessières, while others the poor organization of the Spanish and the lack of coordination between Cuesta and Blake, taking on the French in open country without the necessary contingents of cavalry, leaving part of the army behind to protect Galicia, and not protecting the ammunition stores at Benavente. All of this explains how, following the defeat of the Spanish and before the famous victory at Bailén, Napoleon could exclaim: “Bessières has saved Spain!”

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