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Conflitti militari e popolazioni civili.
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Conflits militaires et populations civiles.
Guerres totales, guerres limitées, guerres asymétriques

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The impact of the Peninsular War on the Portuguese civil population (1807-1809)

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The Peninsular War, as all wars, had a negative impact on civil populations, and the French armed intervention in Portugal between 1807 and 1812 was no exception. Of course we have to think that this was an early 19th century conflict, in many aspects different from the wars of the beginning of the 21st century, but the sufferings it caused on the civilians is not very different from nowadays. Perhaps there is a change on scale and I would probably dare to affirm that nowadays impact, due to the new technologies and to the fact that there is not a real war front, is worse than it was in those days.

It is important however to explain what brought the Napoleonic Armies to the Iberian Peninsula, namely to Portugal. Napoleon needed to close Portuguese ports to British ships and navigation, since Portuguese ports were a good base for the Royal Navy in the European Continent. In fact, as early as 1801, by means of his brother Lucien Bonaparte, sent as envoy to Madrid, he managed to persuade D. Manuel Godoy, Spain's Prime-minister, to accept the possibility of a war against his Iberian neighbour. After the signature of the Madrid Convention, in January 1801, Portugal was attacked through the borders of the Alentejo in May. The invasion lasted 2 weeks and the so-called Treaty of Badajoz, whose articles were very unfavourable to Lisbon, put an end to it on June 1801 (Serrão, 1982: VI, 326).

Things however changed with the battle of Trafalgar, as great victory for Britain as it was a big defeat to Napoleon. After October 1805 the British became masters of the ocean and as French Historian, André Latreille writes, Napoleon was confined to the continent and condemned to its conquest. The Emperor won several victories over Austria (Ulm), Russia (Austerlitz) and Prussia. After the signature of the Peace of Tilsit, Russia adhered to the Continental Blockade (Latreille, 1974: 143; Godechot, 1984: 166-170, 174, 176; Droz, 1972: 232, 237-238; Fugier, 1994: II, 171, 176-177).

Unable to beat Britain militarily, Napoleon decided to use an economic weapon to defeat her. So, by the decrees of Berlin (21st November 1806) and Milan (17th December 1807), he forbade all trade between the United Kingdom and continental Europe. He hoped this would provoke serious social problems and force the English cabinet to negotiate peace. London however replied by the Orders in Council, declaring France and her allies in state of blockade (Godechot, 1984: 181-182; Macedo, s.d.: 339; Ribeiro, 1990: 51).

These events were going to have serious repercussions in Portugal, as Lisbon persisted in being faithful to the United Kingdom's alliance, Portuguese ports continued open to all British shipping, remaining an important base for the Royal Navy. At the same time we must not forget that by 1807 almost all European ports were closed to the navigation of Great Britain.

Napoleon decided to invade Portugal, in order to avoid a possible British landing on Portuguese shores, enabling an attack to Spain, since metropolitan Portugal had an important strategic position, at the entrance of the Mediterranean. Besides this, the Atlantic islands
(Madeira, the Azores and the Cape Verdes) were Portuguese possessions and were important points for Atlantic navigation. On the other hand Napoleon feared that if Spain decided to become neutral, her ports could be used by the Royal Navy. We must not forget that in Napoleon's mind Portugal was also economically important to France. He wanted to replace England in the Portuguese market and gain access to the richness of Brazil. All this helps to explain why Napoleon decided to invade Portugal (Ribeiro, 1990: 52, 101; Macedo, s.d.: 344-345, 348; Silbert, 1977: 51, 57).

At the approach of the French Armies, the Portuguese royal family, following a previous decision, left for Brazil, so that the king as the fundamental focus of political power shouldn't fall into French hands and avoid the possibility of being obliged to take decisions that would put in jeopardy the country's independence.

Lisbon didn't agree with the French Ultimatum as the conditions were quite unaccept-able: closing the ports to British trade and shipping, imprisoning all the English subjects that inhabited in the country and seizing their properties. In the face of this decision, Napoleon ordered that the Army of Gironde, commanded by general Junot, governor of Paris and former ambassador in Lisbon, to whom he will bestow the title of Duque de Abrantes, be prepared to march towards Portugal (Macedo, s.d.: 350-351).

Nevertheless, in order to reach Portugal it was necessary to have the complicity of Madrid as French troops had to cross Spain. It was not difficult to obtain the necessary authorization and even military help due to problems in the Spanish Royal family and the ambition of D. Manuel Godoy. In exchange for a principality Godoy negotiated with Napoleon the Treaty of Fontainebleau, signed in 29th October 1807. Metropolitan Portugal was to be divided in three parts. The Alentejo and the Algarve would be given to D. Manuel Godoy, who would become Prince of the Algarves. Northwest Portugal (Entre-Douro e Minho) was to be granted to the King of Bruria, with the title of King of Northern Lusitania. The remainder of the territory would stay occupied by French troops until a general peace was to be settled and only then would its destiny be decided (Ribeiro, 1970: 102; Macedo, s.d.: 352).

The French army crossed the Portuguese border during the first days of November 1807 and entered Lisbon on the 30th of the same month. Junot was not able to imprison the Royal Family since it had already embarked to Brazil. He dismissed the governors left in charge of the country by the Prince Regent, appointed a new government, took several measures to neutralize the Portuguese armed forces and put Frenchmen in key posts. At the same time North-western Portugal, the Alentejo and the Algarve were occupied by Spanish troops in accordance with the stipulations of the Fontainebleau Treaty (Macedo, s.d.:353-354; Serrão, 1982: V: 334-335; Serrão, 194: 20-21, 24).

The important and powerful community of British merchants established in Oporto, who traded in all kind of commodities, is a good example of the impact of war on civilians, as they undertook effective measures to escape French fury, as soon as they realized Portugal could not remain neutral and there was a strong possibility of being invaded.

Before the French armies arrived, the English were able to leave the country, taking everything they could with them. In this way they managed to save their belongings from the seizures ordered by French and even by Portuguese authorities. In November 1807, under the pressure of Napoleon, the Lisbon government confiscated all the British assets in Portugal.
Prior to their departure the merchants took dispositions to ensure that their real estate was not going to be taken by the occupants. For that purpose they used several stratagems. They contracted mortgages giving their landed property in pledge and declared before a public notary they owed money to Portuguese citizens, guaranteeing the payment of these debts with their estate if they were never to return. The merchants also left powers of attorney to their employees, so that they could take care of their business while they were away.

Some British subjects, however, stayed in Oporto, throughout the occupation to look after their property and their fellow-countrymen’s business and were arrested, in December 1807, by the Spanish invaders who in accordance with the stipulations of the Fontainebleau Treaty, signed between Napoleon and Spain, were occupying the northwest of Portugal.

The measures taken by the English merchants, we described, proved to be effective as they didn’t suffer much loss in the course of the French interventions of 1807-1808 and 1809, the only ones that reached Oporto. In fact, as soon as the Napoleonic armies retired many of these tradesmen returned and went on with their business (Ribeiro, 1990: 34, 51, 54-55, 59, 87, 107-130, 183-187; Sanseau, 1970: 63).

At the economic level, war also had an impact on the activities of these merchants as they shipped wine to the United Kingdom and imported the indispensable foodstuffs to feed the British and Portuguese armies. In fact, due to war conditions, Portugal was cut from her other traditional markets such as Spain, France and Hamburg, a British Army was stationed in her territory and Portugal had to rely mainly on the United Kingdom as a provider of foodstuffs and as a buyer of her products. Actually, the quantities of products entering Portugal were by far much superior than the needs, as part of them was to be sent to Spain (RIBEIRO, 1998: 135).

North Portugal was the first place in the country to rebel against the invader and because of this commanded the restoration’s movement of the legitimate government. This is connected and articulated with the Spanish Junta’s movement of restoration of Fernando VII’s authority. In fact the 2nd of May in Madrid started the rupture of the cooperation between France and Spain. In the 18th of June in Oporto took place the proclamation of independence (Capela, Matos, Borralheiro, 2008: 23, 57-58; CRUZ, 1970: 21-22).

It can be said that in 1808 there was a popular insurrection and in 1809 a national war, because in this year the reaction against the invader took place within a military framing. The people is indeed present in this revolutionary movement in some places and as it dominated the events obliged the local elites and authorities to join it. Quickly however legal authorities, military commanders, city halls, magistrates, ecclesiastical institutions, men of letters and even merchants took over the leadership. At this time what can be described as the populace seems to remain absent from the dynamics that will organize the political organs issued from these movements. On the other hand, the dominant classes wanted that the demonstrations of patriotism to fit into the established system, but the people more anarchically transformed their actions into guerrilla movements against everybody and everything. In consequence in some northern municipalities appeared new organs of government, the Junta, a kind that will spread all over the country (Matos, 2000: 149-151, 177).

In the course of 1809 a new invasion took place, this time the occupation army was commanded by Marshal Soult, duke of Dalmatia, and northwest Portugal was specially attained.
The military operations and the forced lodging of troops were a great burden to civilians.

One priest contemporary to these events wrote a diary in which he speaks about the atrocities committed by the French on their way to Oporto and says this exasperated each time more the population, who ambushed and killed the soldiers. He also alludes to the deaths caused by this war, having died besides the civilians many priests and monks who took up arms against de invaders (Monteiro, 1809, f.1, f.6).

In fact, if we are to believe in what Pierre le Noble, a French officer who took part on this campaign, wrote in his Mémoires about how the inhabitants were forced to take up arms at the approach of Soult’s army, menaces or arrests were used by the Portuguese authorities to obtain cooperation and the most reluctant were massacred. It seems also that the consuls of Denmark, Holland, Prussia and Russia were forced to serve on the Oporto batteries (LE Noble, 2005: 130; Soult, 1955:78).

Soult arrived near Oporto on the 26th March 1809 and started the attack on the 29th at 8h 00m in the morning. It was this day that one of the biggest disasters in the city’s history happened. The bridge of boats, built with vessels put side by side, that linked Oporto to the southern shore, to Vila Nova de Gaia, collapsed under the weight of the enormous quantity of people fleeing the city. Many persons drowned in the river Douro. Marshal Soult in his Mémoires speaks of 2,000 people and a French priest émigré of 3,600, but many more lost their lives during the attack (Soult, 1955: 77; Avril, 2006: 81-82). After this, Oporto was “thoroughly sacked”, even if it seems that Soult tried to prevent it, but the pillage lasted three days. As Sir Charles Oman writes in his History of the Peninsular War Soult had conquered the city and had delivered some French captives, but was “far from having completed the conquest of northern Portugal as on the day he first crossed its frontier, He had only secured for himself a new base of operations, to supersede Chaves and Braga”. His main goal, however, the capture of Lisbon, never occurred and the same Oman states “like so many other French generals in the Peninsula, he was soon to find that victory was not the same things as conquest” (OMAN, 1995: II, 248-249; AMS, Dictário de Tibães, 1798-1829: f.8, 125).

Colonel Napier an eyewitness of the war in the Peninsula also speaks about the conciliatory policy of Marshal Soult, endeavouring to remedy the soldiers’ fury “recovering and restoring a part of the plunder, he caused the inhabitants remaining in the town to be treated with respect, and invited by proclamation all those who had fled to return. He demanded no contribution, and restraining with a firm hand the violence of his men, contrived, from the captured public property, to support the army and even to succour the poorest and most distressed of the population”. At the same time, it seems that there was an amelioration of “relations between the army and the peasantry”, French soldiers were no longer murdered and even the priests were not so hostile. It is interesting to note this defence of Soult made by a British officer. He even criticises Portuguese ferocity when he speaks about the death of colonel Lameth and the consequent retaliation. In fact, this young officer was ambushed and murdered near the village of Arrifana his body being “striped, and mutilated in a shocking manner”. This, in Napier’s point of view, “was justifiable neither by the laws of war nor by those of humanity” and he concluded that “no general could neglect to punish such a proceeding”. As a consequence Soult decided to punish the culprits and send with that purpose to Arrifana general Thomiers accompanied by a Portuguese civilian. After a “judi-
cial inquiry” 5 or 6 persons considered guilty were killed. It seems, however, that the real individual responsible, a major of militia together with some companions managed to escape (Napier, 1993: II, 227-231).

During the occupation of Oporto, civilians had to live together with their enemy, the French troops. Some divisions were quartered in barracks and convents, while the officers were lodged in the inhabitants’ houses. In fact, 167 officers, 50 servants, 129 horses and a donkey were accommodated in the city centre. We obtained these data in a document kept in the Oporto Municipal Archives and we could ascertain that the major part of them, were billeted with the knowledge of their superiors. As we can imagine this must have caused a great deal of inconvenience to the civilian population (AHMP, Maço n°. 1832). On the other hand Portuguese authorities were summoned to deliver furniture, household-linen, table-linen, bed-clothes and other objects of daily use, all of the best quality, to the occupant. This was of course very onerous to the city (Basto, 1926: 148-156).

We would also like to draw attention to the collaborationism that took place between the inhabitants and the military occupant. In fact, some of the Portuguese were convinced that the only way to modernize and develop Portugal was under Napoleon’s rule, which could give the country a Constitution and put in practice the Revolution’s ideas and achievements. Obviously many of these people had problems after the war. But, besides this, there was also what we could probably call another form of collaborationism. After the retreat of Soult’s army one woman was arrested and accused of receiving at her home French officers and that she had said that they would return and play ball with the head of the Portuguese. She denied all these accusations and declared that the plaintiffs were two Portuguese soldiers who besides desiring to maintain with her illicit relations, wanted to rob her. The fact that they wanted to steal from her was proved. But on the other hand however although the inventory made by the judiciary authorities of all her belongings, showed that she owned money and some valuable objects, like silver-plate, jewels and a big quantity of other items such as furniture, household linen and nice clothes. And we must bear in mind that the city was plundered for three days. Besides, this inventory was made on demand of a man who wanted to know if some of his things were among them. This was possible, because at the approach of the French army he had fled his home, living behind all his personal property and the house was used by several French officers who lived there some women, including the accused. We also ascertained that this woman sometimes received at her home French officers and that although single she had a nine year old daughter, whose deceased father had left her an important heritage in Brazil. So, after analyzing the judiciary process we can guess that even if she had not been favourable to Soult’s government, she maintained closed relations with some French officers, making it possible that she continued in possession of all her assets. This fact aroused the cupidity of the Portuguese soldiers (BPMP, Ms. 1773).

As we have seen on this paper, taking as an example the armed French interventions of 1807-1808 and 1809, precisely 200 years ago, we can see how the military operations disrupted everyday life and affected the civilians. To start with the Portuguese royal family and the court left to Brazil, the country was invaded and became a theatre of operations that caused suffering and destructions. Not only Portugal had in its territory the French occupation army, but after the beginning of August 1808 also a British army, under the command of
Sir Arthur Wellesley, future duke of Wellington, that came to Peninsula to help to defeat the French. The fact that there were two foreign armies in Portuguese soil was viewed by some as a negative thing and by others as a hope for the country’s development and modernization. At least this seems to have been favourable to the British merchants business. In spite of what one believed, all, the English inhabitants included, expected the end of the military operations to enjoy a normal and better life. In Oporto and northern Portugal the occupation was very hard for the inhabitants, who had to socialize, lodge and feed the occupants.

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