The Fatal Knot: The Guerrilla War in Navarre and the Defeat of Napoleon in Spain, John Lawrence Tone, UNC Press Books, 1994, 0807821691, 9780807821695, 239 pages. From 1808 to 1814, Spaniards waged a guerrilla war against the French Empire, turning Spain into a nightmare for Napoleon's armies and making the Peninsular War one of the most violent conflicts of the nineteenth century. In The Fatal Knot, John Tone reco.

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The Spanish Ulcer A History Of Peninsular War, David Gates, Apr 30, 2009, History.

A History of the peninsular war Volume III, 1908, 568 pages.


The Peninsula years Britain’s redcoats in Spain and Portugal, Donald Sydney Richards, Oct 1, 2002, History, 228 pages. The Peninsular Campaign was conducted over terrain ranging from the sun scorched plains of Andalusia to the picturesque snow covered passes of the Pyrenees. Drawing on the ....

War and Genocide in Cuba, 1895-1898, John Lawrence Tone, 2006, History, 352 pages. From 1895 to 1898, Cuban insurgents fought to free their homeland from Spanish rule. This book offers answers to questions concerning the war. It examines the origin of Spain's ....


History of the War in the Peninsula and in the South of France From the Year 1807 to the Year 1814, William Francis Patrick Napier, Patrick Napier, Feb 17, 2011, History, 732 pages. This classic history of the Peninsular War was first published by a participant, Lieutenant-Colonel Napier, between 1828 and 1840.


Doctrine for joint operations, United States. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1995.

La guerrilla espanola y la derrota de Napoleon / The guerrillas of Spain and Napoleon defeat, John Lawrence Tone, 1999, History, 365 pages. En esta obra, John L. Tone desmonta algunos de los mitos que han deformado la historia de la Guerra de la Independencia espanola (1808-1814) y que presentaban la movilizacion ....

Legacy of glory the Bonaparte kingdom of Spain, 1808-1813, Michael Glover, 1971, History, 353 pages.

Napoleon's Peninsular marshals a reassessment, Richard Humble, 1975, History, 228 pages.

Napoleon’s cursed war Spanish popular resistance in the Peninsular War, 1808-1814, Ronald Fraser, 2008, 587 pages. An authoritative history of the Peninsular War examines the factors that contributed to Napoleon’s defeat against the Spanish guerrillas and their British and Portuguese allies ....

Navarra, the durable kingdom, Rachel Bard, 1982, History, 254 pages.

John Tone recounts the dramatic story of how, between 1808 and 1814, Spanish peasants created and sustained the world's first guerrilla insurgency movement, thereby playing a major role in...
Napoleon's defeat in the Peninsula War. Focusing on the army of Francisco Mina, Tone offers new insights into the origins, motives, and successes of these first guerrilla forces by interpreting the conflict from the long-ignored perspective of the guerrillas themselves.

It is one thing to eulogise John Tone's, The Fatal Knot as one of the most important works of Napoleonic scholarship ever written, but it is quite another thing to defend such a position against cherished favourites and so-called 'definitive' surveys. The fact of the matter is this work deals with a very narrow subject matter in a very specialised and increasingly unfashionable field; that is to say, the Peninsular War and the guerrilla war as part of it, and more specifically only the guerrilla war in the province of Navarre. At 183 pages this isn't even a very big book and therefore some might be inclined to say, "So what?"

What is so special about The Fatal Knot is that Tone is doing something very rare in Napoleonic, or indeed any military history, and that is to contribute something entirely new to the field. Historians generally tend to sneer at military history. As one of my undergraduate tutors once admitted, historians traditionally tend to start and finish eras with wars, leaving out the war itself (‘Europe from 1815 to 1914,’ for example). Frankly, one unfortunate reason for this is that military history often doesn't measure up to professional scrutiny. History is fundamentally about why something happened, as it is already given that it 'has' happened. Therefore countless re-constructions of events don't cut much ice in the field. This is not to say that the retelling of events is not worthwhile in the form of a survey. After all, Oman's History of the Peninsular War is often ranked second only in importance to Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire as an historical work in the English language.

In my mind, far too much of what purports to be serious historical reference material is nothing more than collections of anecdotes. Not that there is anything wrong with this kind of research for certain specific purposes. Rory Muir's, Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon, where the whole purpose is to interpret the human experience, would be one example. However anecdotal writing does not really serve to write a full history. The main archival research seems all too often to be on 'orders of battle' (OBs). Unfortunately, while research is restricted to OBs and general surveys to anecdotes, then military history will deserve its lowly place. Of course I am generalising in my criticism, there is a need for a range of approaches and there have been many excellent books in recent years.

However, in military history, unlike traditional history, it is rare that something really new is turned up. One work that springs to mind when it comes to original thought is Major-General B. P. Hughs' Firepower, in which he has analysed casualty rates, ammunition expenditure, available time and rates of fire to determine the effectiveness of 'firepower'. That is to say research is undertaken in causality, whereby information acquired in one area gives understanding in some quite different area.

In The Fatal Knot, John Tone has undertaken a detailed analysis of the demographic data of Navarre (Navarre is basically the province of Spain nearest to France on the Bay of Biscay) to give us a profound understanding of the character and nature of the Navarre guerrilla forces led by the two Minas. Because Tone is only writing about the guerrilla war in Navarre, his conclusions aren't necessarily to be taken for the whole of Spain. Nevertheless, he makes some very insightful observations. For example, even in a guerrilla stronghold like Navarre there was quite a variation in support for the guerrillas. In the mountain country where there was a homogeneous population of homesteaders the guerrillas of Mina received strong support (i.e., the people personally had a lot to lose and thus were personally involved in the power structures). However in the low country, where there were urban centres, large land holdings and a more stratified society, the poor didn't actively support Mina and the rich were more self-interested in supporting the government of Joseph Bonaparte. That is, social forces had a lot to do with patriotism.

The Peninsular war to Spain is the 'War of Independence' because it is a foundational event in the moulding of Spain into a modern state. But another point Tone makes about Navarre is that it was less the matter of nationalism than a matter of regionalism that motivated the guerrillas. I don't know
Spanish history but is seems that a strong tradition of regional privileges and rights had always existed. Paradoxically the regions were likely to support Ferdinand, as the king governing over themselves, because he was more likely to confirm their traditional independence compared to the French style centralised state.

The first half of the book consists of the statistical/demographic analysis. The other half presents a narrative on the history of the guerrilla war of the two Mina's. The Minas were no angels; they were cruel and ruthless with the French, as well as their own people. In many ways it is an example of classic guerrilla warfare and Mao in China, Vietnam, Tito and the like. The Fatal Knot is practically a textbook on the subject and it does read a bit that way too, discussing the whys, whens and wherefores needed for a successful guerrilla war. Or, indeed, how to defeat one!

The main criticism I would levy is that The Fatal Knot is disappointingly dry reading. The statistical analysis is fascinating stuff but bound to be a little tedious. However, surely there could hardly be more opportunity for tension, colour and flair then in the retelling of daring ambushes, harrowing flights and the ruthless climb to power of the Mina tyranny (if we can call it that) which makes up the second half. However Tone writes very matter of fact and the book suffers from it. Still, The Fatal Knot is short enough not to tire the reader given the quality of the material. I can't but regret that another dozen pages of colour (perhaps some of those memoirs and anecdotes) would have made the brevity irrelevant.

was also saddened to see Tone on occasion taking quite unnecessary digs at Wellington and the British part in the Peninsula War, thereby undermining his own integrity and portraying his American origin. John Tone is an associate professor of history at Georgia Institute of Technology (surely an unlikely place to find a Napoleonic scholar!) and it is a shame he couldn't resist that temptation to polarise in what is otherwise a vitally important piece of work. For this book is a must-read and a significant contribution to the art of military history in general.

"From 1808 to 1814, Spaniards waged a guerrilla war against the French Empire, turning Spain into a nightmare for Napoleon's armies and making the Peninsula War one of the most violent conflicts of the nineteenth century. In The Fatal Knot, John Tone recounts the events of this conflict from the perspective of the Spanish guerrillas, whose story has long been ignored in histories centered on Wellington and the French marshals. Focusing on the insurgent army of Francisco Espoz y Mina, Tone offers ... 

Only months after Napoleon's invasion in 1807, Spain seemed ready to fall: its rulers were in prison or in exile, its armies were in complete disarray, and Madrid had been occupied. However, the Spanish people themselves, particularly the peasants of Navarre, proved unexpectedly resilient. In response to impending defeat, they formed makeshift governing juntas, raised new armies, and initiated a new kind of people's war of national liberation that came to be known as guerrilla warfare. Key to the peasants' success, says Tone, was the fact that they possessed both the material means and the motives to resist. The guerrillas were neither bandits nor selfless patriots but landowning peasants who fought to protect the old regime in Navarre and their established position within it.


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