

WELLINGTON'S FORGOTTEN FRONT – THE EAST COAST OF SPAIN 1810-1813

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By 1810 Napoleon's objectives in Iberia had carved two strategic axes of advance and corresponding lines of communication, the first from Bayonne to Madrid and onto Lisbon, the second from Bayonne to Madrid and south to Cadiz and Gibraltar. The former axis placed the *Grande Armée* on a collision course with the Anglo Portuguese army under the Duke of Wellington, while the latter axis resulted in more of an allied collaborative defence; protecting Spain's executive holed-up at Cadiz, and Britain's maritime and trading interests at Gibraltar. Two additional struggles were playing out on either side of these axes; the first was in the north of the country and along the Cantabrian coast, the second was in Catalonia and along the east coast of the Mediterranean.

Britain's involvement in these two regional struggles was, in the main, restricted to Royal Navy support and sea-denial patrolling. However, it was that very sea supremacy, coupled with the extant road network and the absence of any French troops in the east coast region, which enabled Spain to utilise, unhindered, the Mediterranean ports of Valencia and Alicante as logistic hubs supplying the Spanish armies and her people. Napoleon cited this as one of the principal reasons for the *Grande Armée's* failure to subdue the population, decisively defeat the Spanish armies and to drive the troublesome British from Iberia. Accordingly, in late 1810, he issued orders to General Suchet to commence operations and capture the two key cities and ports. Events started well with the rapid capitulation by the garrison at Tortosa and this prompted Napoleon to redirect half the French Army of Catalonia to assist Suchet in his task. Tarragona was captured a few months later, justifiably earning Suchet his marshal's baton in the process; but more significantly, the road to the region of Valencia was now open. The small fort at Peñíscola was masked and by-passed and the next major fort, at Oropesa, was besieged and captured by early October.

Napoleon, encouraged by Marshal Suchet's success, which shone like a beacon in a sea of subordinate mediocrity, then ordered another 15,000 men to be redirected from the other French armies in Spain to assist operations on the east coast, which was, by now, the French main effort. With the French forces in position, and his right flank protected, Suchet's army moved on to the more formidable structure at Sagunto; a fort that had held up Hannibal during the 2nd Punic Wars. It was, true to form, a hard nut to crack. Indeed, the structure was to evade capture by assault, but the Spanish garrison felt compelled to capitulate when, in late October, the combined Valencian and Murcian armies (under General Blake) were enticed from Valencia and beaten in open battle on the coastal plains between Sagunto and the regional capital. A few weeks later the city and port of



Marshal Louis Gabriele Suchet, 1770-1826



Valencia were also in French hands, and the first part of Suchet's plan was complete – it was January 1812, but the tide was about to turn on French success on the east coast.

The majority of the 15,000 troop reinforcements Suchet received at the end of 1811 came from Marmont's Army of Portugal; a decision that had far reaching consequences for Wellington's allied army which, early in 1812, were able to exploit the lack of French forces on the Portuguese – Spanish border and capture both Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz and subsequently move on Salamanca. With Napoleon embroiled in his Russian campaign, and essentially incommunicado, Marmont's four divisions were restored to his command, denying Suchet their support at a critical juncture. Suchet himself was struck down by illness which left him virtually immobile for three months; furthermore, he was, by Napoleonic decree, entangled in re-arranging the administration of the Kingdom of Valencia and raising (excessive) war-contributions across the region. If this were not enough, French spies in Sicily had warned of a planned invasion by an Anglo Sicilian amphibious force. Suchet's overriding problem was to determine where, along the east coast, this force would land, and without any firm intelligence he was committed to creating a mobile reserve to counter the threat, further weakening his main body, which was, by now, hanging on to their recent gains and unable to resume the offensive. In fact, this Anglo Sicilian force had long been an aspiration of Wellington, their arrival was timed to coincide with a number of other deception operations, across Iberia, in support of the allied advance on Salamanca.

When Suchet headed north to discuss how best to tackle this amphibious threat with General Decaen, the commander of the French Army of Catalonia, the new commander of the Spanish Army of Murcia, Joseph O'Donnell, took the opportunity to attack the French forces south of Valencia in direct contravention of Wellington's orders. O'Donnell's plan was flawed and his execution, at Castalla, correspondingly dismal resulting, much to Wellington's fury, in the Spanish army being put out of action for many months. Meanwhile, in August 1812, the Anglo Sicilian force had landed at Alicante and was able to thwart rekindled French intentions in the area but within days General Maitland, the commander of this force, was informed that the French Army of the Centre, dislodged by Wellington's move on Madrid, was heading in an easterly direction. By October, however, the impetus of Wellington's advance had dissipated at the walls of Burgos and his subsequent disastrous retreat to Portugal drew the French forces back west, opening opportunities for the allies on the east coast under their new commander General Sir John Murray.



An early victory over the French at Castalla in April 1813 appeared promising but the subsequent follow-up operation, in the wake of French withdrawal from the region following the defeat of the main armies at Vitoria in June 1813, was bungled and led to an embarrassing performance by the British commander at Tarragona. At Murray's subsequent court martial he was convicted, quite lightly, of 'an error in judgment'. Nevertheless, Wellington's success at Vitoria and the subsequent Battles of the Pyrenees drove the main French armies back into France and forced a corresponding withdrawal north by Suchet's east coast force to Catalonia. By April 1814, Napoleon had abdicated and the final battle of the Peninsular War had been fought at Toulouse; two days later, the ultimate action of the entire war took place on the east coast when, on the 16 April 1814, one of Suchet's subordinates executed a sortie from Barcelona in a desperate act of defiance at the disastrous news of Napoleon's abdication, and the consequent failure of the *Grande Armée* in their Iberian quest.

The French siege of Tarragona, 1811



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Professor Charles Esdaile, to coordinate the UK contribution to the bicentenary commemorative events which commenced in 2008 and will continue until 2014. His first book, an *Atlas and Concise History of the Peninsular War* was published in 2010 and was selected by Andrew Roberts as his *Daily Telegraph* Book of the year. He speaks German and Spanish, currently works in Portugal and lives in Spain with his wife Janny; they have three daughters.