

Imperial Glory (1807-1812)

During the height of Napoleon's power, he faced two of his biggest challenges: the Peninsular War and the Fifth Coalition (1807–1809). Despite having secured peace with Russia and Prussia at Tilsit, Napoleon now had to organize his expanded empire and enforce the Continental System against the British. To do so, he focused his attention on reining in the Kingdom of Portugal, which had violated Napoleon's trade prohibitions, by conducting business with the British. Portugal's future King John VI, nicknamed "the Clement" (r. 1816–1822), then prince regent due to the mental illness of his reigning mother, had agreed to close Portugal's ports to British trade following the Franco-Spanish defeat at Trafalgar in 1805. Nevertheless, in defiance of Napoleon's orders, John resumed both diplomatic relations and trade with Britain. A displeased Napoleon, therefore, followed up his victory over Russia and Prussia by sending an army to invade Portugal. On October 17, 1807, General Jean-Andoche Junot (1771–1813) led 24,000 French troops across the Pyrenees into Spanish territory. Spain permitted this army to traverse its lands and head toward Portugal to enforce Napoleon's Continental System. What was later known as "The Peninsular War" (Spain and Portugal are in the Iberian Peninsula¹) became a drawn out, six-year affair that bled the French army and diverted valuable troops, attention, and resources from other theaters that may have been more important.

With Napoleonic forces moving throughout the Iberian Peninsula by the winter of 1808, French agents intrigued in the internal affairs of their Spanish ally and not just in those of their Portuguese enemy. With apparent discord dividing members of the Spanish royal family—

¹ The Iberian Peninsula, also known as Iberia and located in the southwest corner of Europe, is principally divided between Portugal and Spain, comprising most of their territory, but also including Andorra and a small part of France along the peninsula's northeastern edge, as well as Gibraltar on its south coast, a small peninsula which forms an overseas territory of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

discord stoked by French agents—Napoleon announced on February 16, 1808, that he would intervene as a mediator between the rival political factions in the country. This “mediation” included sending French Marshal Murat with 120,000 troops into Spain, which arrived in Madrid on March 24, where they were far from welcomed. Instead, riots soon erupted against what was perceived as a foreign occupation, and to the further outrage of many Spaniards, Napoleon appointed his brother, Joseph Bonaparte, as the new king of Spain in the summer of 1808. Spain’s heavily religious and conservative population opposed the imposition of a French monarch who had no significant prior ties to Spain, especially one with ties to a Masonic lodge. Although Joseph managed to put an end to the Spanish Inquisition during his reign, Joseph and his loyal Spanish followers (called “*Josefinos*” by rebellious Spaniards) were held in contempt by the public.

Throughout Spain, resistance to French occupation spread to such an extent that in July, the French suffered a major defeat at the Battle of Bailén. Spain suffered a mere 243 dead and 735 wounded while France suffered 2,200 dead, 400 wounded, and 17,635 captured. Joseph attempted to secure Napoleon’s permission to abdicate after retreating to the north, but Napoleon would hear none of this defeatism, and, instead, sent reinforcements. To stave off total disaster, the French emperor decided to intervene in person, and Madrid was promptly recaptured.

Joseph’s reign also saw the successful declaration of independence from Spain by Venezuela (1810) before Joseph eventually abdicated in 1813. Joseph’s command of French forces on the Peninsula had been an illusion, as French generals would consult Napoleon and not Joseph before taking action.