

The Napoleon Series

Maps in the Peninsular War

Part IV: Study 1 – Masséna's invasion of Portugal - September 1810

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Opening Deployments

During the siege of Almeida, the British army had been held in a position somewhat less advance and more concentrated. Wellington had brought back his headquarters from Alverca da Beira to Celorico, where he had the Light Division under his hand. Picton and the 3rd Division had been drawn well back from Pinhel to Carrapinchana (west of Celorico, on the road south of the Rio Mondego), but Cole and the 4th Division remained firm at Guarda, further south. The French held back, close to Almeida, with a strong advance guard at Pinhel. On the morning of 26th August, the fortress of Almeida was largely destroyed by an explosion, forcing the garrison to surrender on the following day.

Initially the French cavalry patrols pushed west, scouting out the possible routes, even though none were marked on the López map. However, it would have been obvious to these scouts that part of the British army had taken a mule trail to the west from the bridge over the Coa River. On 2 September a brigade of infantry and 1,200 horse went forward along this route and drove in the British cavalry outposts to Maçal de Chaõ, only five miles in front of Celorico.¹ This reconnaissance in strength only confirmed that it was unsuitable for artillery, since all the bridges along the mule trail were destroyed.²

So the decision for the French Staff was just how best to proceed further – it was time to get out the maps.

Masséna's Maps

Extracted from *The French Campaign in Portugal 1810-1811, an Account* by Jean Jacques Pelet,³ edited, translated and annotated by Professor Donald Howard. Pelet was first aide-de-camp to Marshal Masséna during the invasion of Portugal and it caused some friction that he was tasked with planning the invasion rather than the Chief-of-Staff, General Fririon, or the Quartermaster General Lambert.⁴

¹ This was from 3rd Division of General Loison with the Cavalry Brigade of General Lamotte.

² Oman, *History of the Peninsular War*, vol III.

³ According to Pelet's service record at the *Archives de la Guerre*, he held the rank of *chef de bataillon* during the campaign; this usually equated to the rank of Major, however, in duties this rank corresponded more closely to that of Lieutenant Colonel (non-existent in Napoleon's army). Masséna's letters to Pelet always addressed him as *Colonel*.

⁴ Oman, *History of the Peninsular War*, vol III, pp 209-213.

“We were in effect without maps, since that of López, in spite of its large scale, was poorly marked, the roads and rivers horribly drawn and the terrain even more poorly represented.”

On the López map, published in 1779, the routes were copied from Juan Bautista de Castro's Itinerary, officially known as *Roteiro Terrestre de Portugal* published in Lisbon in 1748. López also used Castro's *Mappa de Portugal* published in 1762 and Thomas Jefferys' maps of Portugal drawn in 1762.⁵ The map scale is two leagues to an inch.

Pelet then continues from page 135 :

“Following are the various data on which our entire plan for the campaign was founded, as well as the resources put at my disposal for working on it. We possessed only the maps of Jeffreys [sic] and López, the inaccuracies of which have already been mentioned. There was also a poor little map by a Portuguese major, not to mention several even more defective ones drawn on the previous maps. Quite a few private drawing had been given to us, but they could not be of any help; they showed even more errors, for their scale was larger. Meanwhile there was excellent material in Paris that I have seen since. Although it would not have been enough to draw a complete topographic map of Portugal, copies would have enlightened us considerably during our operations if they had been sent and used to fill the gaps found in our information.⁶ These aids were withheld and the only things that the Prince was able to obtain from the Depot of War at the time of his departure was kind of geography of Portugal. Composed of very incomplete manuscripts translated from works printed in this country and a military reconnaissance of the kingdom, the document carried a note in the corner with the signature of Dumouriez, which appropriately reflects on his abilities.⁷ Finally there were some very insignificant materials on the campaign of the Gallo-Spanish army in 1762.

General Thiébault sent us two good memorandums on Portugal. The presence of this distinguished general would have been very useful to our army.⁸ A single

⁵ An English map of Portugal by Thomas Jefferys, map-engraver and geographer to George III. Jefferys' map is not mentioned in the list of his publications in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, but is in the British Museum. It is in six sheets. The soundings have been closely followed by López, whose map is on nearly the same scale.

⁶ When Junot's army was returned to France by the British Navy in the fall of 1808, all topographical material produced by the French engineers in 1807/1808 went with it and were deposited at the *Dépôt de Guerre* at Paris. The most reasonable explanation appears to be that the *Dépôt de Guerre* was neither ready, nor willing, to send such precious originals on the hazardous voyage through guerrilla infested Spain and Portugal and that there was neither time nor personnel enough to have everything copied. From Charles Raeuber, Centre d'Histoire et de Prospective Militaires, Switzerland.

⁷ Dumouriez's *Etat present de royaume de Portugal en l'annee 1766* was published in 1775; it was used by both the French and the Allies during the Peninsular War.

⁸ General Paul Charles François Adrien Henri Dieudonné Thiébault (1769 - 1846) had been Chief-of-Staff to Junot in 1807/1808. In 1809 he commanded the province of Burgos and in 1810 became the governor of Salamanca. His *Plan d'une nouvelle campagne en Portugal* was drawn up at Burgos on 12 January 1810.

conversation with him at that moment might have enlightened us on everything. However, we had been given a fatal quantity of itineraries, notes, inventories and statements of every description which contradicted each other; they were either based on misinformation or apparently drawn up to confirm the specific systems or campaign plans of their authors. This is not what an individual writing a military report should do. The misfortune was that none of these self-styled strategists had ever gone over the ground they were describing, and they could not answer the only thing we asked them. 'Can a carriage go on this road? Is this river deep? Is this range of mountains impracticable?' In the end I felt obliged to compile an extract of the best accounts and attach it to a few ideas on a plan for the campaign in Portugal.

The presence of the Portuguese officers was particularly disastrous for us.... a dismal listing of all the errors transmitted to us in the information that the Prince or I requested...We were even less fortunate in what we had been told about the military topography of Portugal, about the inaccessibility of the Serra da Estrela and the banks of the Zezere, the nature of the Tagus and the country in general, the roads, and the positions of Bussaco and Murcella.

I had to begin by correcting the map, or rather, by drawing a new one based on the confused and often contradictory notes. Then, with little information, I had to learn the military topography of the kingdom in order to draw up some kind of description. ...[we knew that] the enemy had worked everywhere to augment the obstacles which we would encounter. On the most direct road to Coimbra, between the Mondego and the Serra da Estrela they had carefully fortified the position of Ponte de Murcella, which was already very formidable, rendering it almost inaccessible.⁹ We had been told that some good roads extended on the right bank of the Mondego through open, easy country up to Coimbra."

Given the lack of good information available, his basic plan for the campaign was an advance on Vizeu, which lies to the north of the Mondego. The advance guard would thrust through Celorico. This was led by 6th Corps under Marshal Ney and would be followed by 2nd Corps of General Reynier moving up from Guarda.

It is important to note that, whilst López's map does not show a road to the west from the bridge over the Coa River to Celorico,¹⁰ the scouts had followed the British retreat along a mule trail and this route had been added in red ink on Masséna's Staff map (see map 4).¹¹

⁹ An extensive network of fortifications composed of redoubts and trenches was thrown up at Ponte de Murcella on the Mondego and near the mouth of the Zezere.

¹⁰ This route is, however, shown on the 1790 Jefferys *Mappa ou Carta Geographica dos Reinos de Portugale e Algarve* but it was possibly not depicted on the 1762 edition.

¹¹ The actual case of plans used by the staff of the Army of Portugal was acquired from the French baggage train by Major James Walker of the 42nd in the rout following the Battle of Vittoria in 1813 and is preserved in the Special Collection at the Library of Queen's College Belfast.

No doubt, because the Celorico route would be impossible for artillery, the 8th Corps under General Junot would take the more northern route to Vizeu. López's map [included below] depicted the road from Pinhel, sweeping north through Valcovo to Trancoso / Transcolo and then on to Vizeu as being at least as well constructed as the route by Celorico. For this reason the reserve artillery, the baggage train, and General Louis Montbrun's cavalry was to form the rear of 8th Corps' column. Yet it was, in fact, the worst road that Masséna could have selected for the movement of the wheeled columns.¹²



4. Masséna's Staff Map – Tomás López 1778

López's map depicted the actual road from Pinhel going north through St Eufemia and Cotimos, on up to a crossroads north of Soutomaioir, before turning left down to Trancoso. However, on Masséna's Staff map there is a red ink line turning due west at Valbon, through Povia del Rey and Amial to Trancoso.

On page 53 of Professor Horward's other book, *The Battle of Bussaco*, he notes:

"The rugged roads became progressively worse as the reserves artillery and supply wagons reached Povia del Rey. ... The men attending to the wheeled columns were not only forced to climb and descend four craggy mountain chains between Pinhel and Vizeu, they also had to repair and actually construct the roads over which they were to pass."

Captain Noel recounted in his journal:

"We passed the little village of Trancoso with its battlements; all the country is mountainous and rocky. There is no road, only a narrow rocky and dangerous path that causes the artillerymen considerable difficulty. I am forced to send cannoneers forward armed with picks and shovels to open and mark the route. One soldier

¹² 'We could not even predict marches of only four or five leagues on the road to Trancoso, which had been designated as rather good.' Per Pelet, page 170.

marches before them carrying an iron bar the same width as our wagons to indicate the extent that the passage must be widened.

I have only an incomplete map of López to guide me.

At noon of the 18th, marching isolated from my company, I halted with my two batteries after two hours of continual climbing to find myself at the crest of a mountain bordering on the right bank of the Taueres. From this point, the countryside extends as far as the eye can see, and I am dismayed by the sight of the desolate country and the roads we must cross. Before me a perpendicular descent into a deep valley and opposite, as ascent as far as the eye could see, cut by a tortuous path.¹³

It is interesting to recall that Sir John Moore faced a similar lack of sound topographical information when preparing for his invasion of Spain in the autumn of 1808. He was assured by the Portuguese Army that neither the Coimbra nor Guarda roads were fit for artillery. Faced with this intelligence, Moore had little choice but to send his artillery (but for one battery) with a strong escort and all his cavalry by a long and circuitous route via Elvas, the bridge at Almaraz and Talavera. This extended the march by more than a third and the resulting delay in the concentration of the army was a very critical two to three weeks.

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¹³ JNA Noel, *Souvenirs Militaires d'un officier du premier empire, 1795-1832* (Paris 1895) pp 112-115.