

The Napoleon Series Reviews

Lipscombe, Nick. *Wellington's Eastern Front: The Campaigns on the East Coast of Spain 1810-1814*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire (UK): Pen and Sword Military, 2016. 241 Pages. ISBN# 9 781473850712. Hardcover. £25.00/\$44.95.

Contents:

List of Illustrations. List of Maps. Preface and Acknowledgments. Chronology of Events on the East Coast of Spain, 1808-1814.

Part 1 - The French Invasion. Chapter 1: Introduction. Chapter 2: Napoleon's Objectives. Chapter 3: Suchet's Baton. Chapter 4: Blake's Collapse. Chapter 5: O'Donnell's Miscalculation.

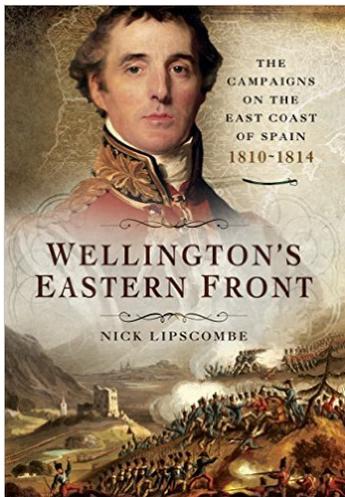
Part 2 - British Intervention. Chapter 6: Bentinck's Vacillation. Chapter 7: Murray's Arrival. Chapter 8: Murray's Victory. Chapter 9: Wellington's Memorandum. Chapter 10: Murray's Expedition. Chapter 11: Bentinck's Arrival. Chapter 12: Suchet's Dilemma.

Part 3 - Observations and Finale. Chapter 13: Murray's Tribunal. Chapter 14: Naval Influence. Chapter 15: Conclusion.

Appendix I: Commanders, Troops Organisations and Strengths.

Appendix II: Notes on Foreign Units in British Service on the East Coast of Spain.

Notes. Glossary. Bibliography. Index.



This is a slim hardback of conventional Pen & Sword pattern. Inside we find 3 colour & 23 B&W illustrations, supported by 6 colour & 11 B&W maps. In terms of actual text it is 198 reading pages excluding introduction, preface and appendixes etc. The B&W images are adequate to the task, photos of the battlefields providing much of the interest. The colour illustration of General Murray playing chess with his daughter is wonderful, and the engraving of the Battle of Castalla is fancifully atmospheric. The maps I found to be complimentary to the text, and are as detailed as the moment they are intended visualise.

A book about the Peninsular War that's not principally about Wellington? What will they think of next! Do not mistake the title and cover, *Wellington's Eastern Front* sees the great commander acting in a long distance managerial, advisory capacity only.

The talking points of this book seem therefore fairly obvious. It's that part of the Peninsular War that doesn't get the attention it should etc. But actually it isn't even that! Most books on the war will focus on Wellington and the French, those same books will usually include some coverage of the Spanish and Portuguese guerrillas and regulars, of late, the Navy has gotten a good word dropped in here and there. But to most readers Wellington's neglected front is in the south around Cadiz. The east coast campaign is practically invisible as a result. Nick Lipscombe's book, based as it is on a shorter work by the same author called *Wellington's Forgotten Front*, attempts to bring these operations into the limelight and show how they affected the course of the war.

In my opinion he's done a good job. Starting with the initial French invasion and the operations of Marshal Suchet, the balance of power in the east sways this way and that in a more fluid, continuous way, as opposed to Wellington's more methodical approach.

Generals in this theatre seemed to switch from audacity to timidity in a more conventional Napoleonic way.

Marshal Suchet is a man talked of in respectful tones by readers and scholars of the Napoleonic saga. Vaunted as the only Marshal to win his baton in Spain and the only one subsequently to come out of it with a patina of credit, this book puts Suchet squarely in a lead role. After all he was the driving French presence in the theatre. What is interesting is how much people suppose they know about a Suchet, and yet how little that is in reality. Commonly we hear that he took Tarragona and Valencia and assume that he won battles and was by extension a force to be reckoned with.

Not too long ago I discussed on a forum the possibility of Suchet fighting Wellington, and how that might have gone. Though not outright in saying it, the inference was there, Suchet could have taken Wellington. No, no! I countered, for all the Marshals who ran afoul of the Duke had been seen as Suchet was before they met Wellington in battle. And not only does this book show how admirable a soldier Suchet was, and how blind Napoleon was not to utilise him better, it clarified and shows that although he was able to win battles, and hearts, he was always against generally inferior opponents. Whether this will please students of the French army is perhaps debatable, but far from being the unerring commander, Suchet was perhaps as lucky as he was skilled, which of course, to Napoleon was just as good.

Peeling the mask from Suchet, while still praising his skill (he did occupy the almost entire east coast with limited support), would be enough on its own. Except that what comes from this appraisal of a formidable opponent is the importance placed on this theatre. Napoleon indeed seems to have almost overestimated it, giving the Duke breathing space on a few occasions. Meanwhile Wellington struggled to get politicians interested in it at all. Interestingly we see both antagonists playing a game of long range chess here, but with Wellington generally being more realistic as to what he could expect from the various armies trying to contain Suchet. Blake and O'Donnell, who were outwitted by the Frenchman, Murray who bested him but then ran away, and the vacillating Bentinck who was essentially licked in a limited defeat, but only had to basically not impale himself on his own sword to emerge with some credit by 1814, as the French withdrew from Spain. Indeed Suchet was never properly defeated in a manner that would have forced him to retreat if he had not been ordered.

If Wellington tied down much needed French troops in Spain, these allied commanders were the men who in the same way tied down much needed skill and materials that could have been used against him, making Suchet's gains increasingly superficial with each passing year. A striking revelation of Lipscombe's book is the emergence of a force not usually discussed in the literature of the Peninsular War: the Italians.

Both sides utilised large numbers of them. Both from the mainland and Sicily, in the eastern theatre. Suchet's army especially depended on frequent occasions on the services of General Palombini's Division and that of the Neapolitan Division. On the British side, which was only able to assist due to the buildup of troops in Sicily, a number of locally raised Sicilian units were engaged. And the importance of these states in the struggle plays an important part in the unfolding story. After all this entire campaign takes place in a Mediterranean context, and was conducted by the British as such. Essentially becoming an extension of the long running struggle to secure British centres of maritime commerce and good harbours while denying them to the French. It was vital to the blockade of

France that this coast remain secure, as it was that Wellington could depend on Suchet being kept busy expending resources to hold it.

The Spanish it must be said don't come out with much kudos. I doubt this is due to any prejudice, rather a frank appraisal of the fragmented and divided Spanish nation and government that had to try and resist the French. For indeed units under General Zayas were some of the finest troops available in the east, and the qualities of the Spanish soldier were such that two British officers formed divisions, trained along British lines, and put them in the field, small aspects that make the book fascinating reading. Yet often ill-equipped, poorly lead and badly taken care of by bickering, corrupt and prejudiced officials a less than peachy view perhaps cannot be avoided. The same is not so with the guerrillas, whose legends nevertheless receive a cold bucket of water here and there, for the country along the eastern seaboard of Spain doesn't lend itself to the tactics that made their north-western *compadres* so formidable.

The author's narrative flows with precision and for my part the only vagaries I was able to detect were some references to the 2nd Punic War. On the whole indeed I found little objectionable in this fair, straightforward account of a critical and under studied campaign. Personal and official accounts are well-utilised, many will be unfamiliar as source material. The entire memorandum written by Wellington prior to the 1813 campaign is discussed, as well as the invaluable contribution of the Royal Navy in active operations, and an insightful look into General Murray's court martial, one of only two to occur during the Napoleonic Wars.

Nearly all was a revelation to me. Highlighting as well the fact that British generals' had lost none of their ability to mess things up, since 1808. In a way the efforts of the British in eastern Spain stand as a testament to Wellington's skill at choosing men and organising victory in the central theatre. I should think that *Wellington's Eastern Front* will become essential reading for anyone wishing a comprehensive understanding of the wider Peninsular War.

Reviewed by [Josh Provan](#)

Placed on the Napoleon Series: December 2016