

Problems for Napoleon

By 1807, Napoleon had reached the peak of his political power and military might. Near the end of the year, in an effort to expand the scope of his empire, French armies occupied Portugal. (Portugal had not agreed to join the Continental System, which was designed to cut off all European trade to England.) From there, Napoleon launched campaigns in Spain. In 1808, he overthrew the Spanish monarch, Charles IV (ruled 1788–1808) and Ferdinand, Charles's designated heir. A brother of Napoleon became the king of Spain.

But despite establishing a French monarch in Spain, the Spanish resistance did not come to an end. Small bands of guerrilla soldiers continued to harass the French for years to come. These fighters were ordinary Spaniards, not professional soldiers, who fought with anything they could—farming tools, axes, wooden sticks, even roofing tiles—and kept the forces of Napoleon busy for seven or eight years. These years of war in Spain—known as the Peninsular War—lasted until 1814.

In part, these peasant guerrilla forces fought a war of liberation, but they also fought against the perceived cruelty of the occupying army. When Napoleon's forces—including the Mamelukes, who were Egyptian Muslims loyal to Napoleon—beheaded Spaniards to terrorize their opposition, the peasants were outraged and fought ferociously. (When the Spanish peasants captured one French general, they boiled him alive.)

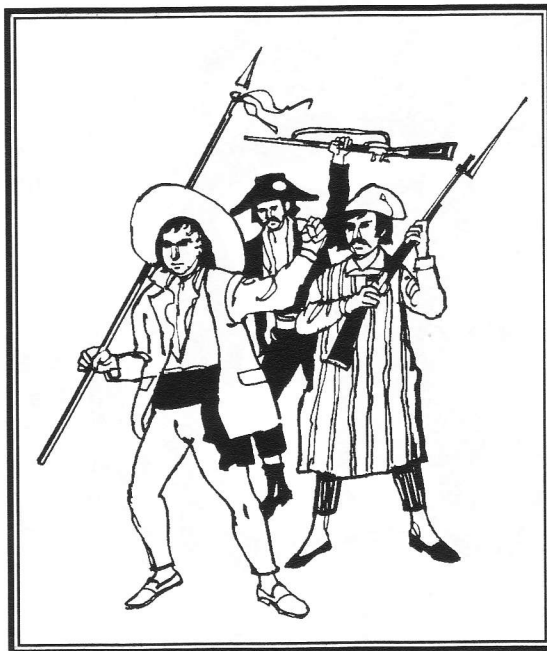
By the summer of 1808, a Spanish force defeated a French army (one not directly under Napoleon's field command) in southern Spain. This victory proved that French soldiers could be beaten. In August, other French forces were defeated by an English army in Portugal. Following these losses, Napoleon himself led an army into Spain and captured the city of Madrid before the end of 1808. But resistance in Spain and Portugal continued. This resistance caused Napoleon to waste many men and francs, which he could ill afford.

With the successful resistance to French forces on the Iberian Peninsula, other powers reentered the wars. In the spring of 1809, the Austrians ordered a war of liberation to free the German states under Napoleon's control. But Austria was doomed to fail in this campaign, falling to the French following a short campaign carried out by Napoleon. When peace followed, Austria lost over 30,000 square miles of territory, mostly to France.

In 1808, Napoleon faced another type of resistance, this time from the Church. The Concordat of 1801 had established the relationship between the Catholic Church and the French government. But the Roman papacy never agreed to the Continental System. Napoleon responded harshly to the pope, and, in 1808, the French marched on the city of Rome, taking Pope Pius VII prisoner. Then the French emperor annexed the Papal States to France. All the pope could do was excommunicate Napoleon.

Other problems beset Napoleon. His heavy-handed policies toward the papacy and the Church caused Napoleon to lose the support of many Catholics at home and abroad. Catholics in Spain fought that much harder against the French. The British navy took control of French colonies in Africa and Asia.

Napoleon was even having trouble within his own family of new rulers. When Napoleon attempted to force the Dutch to enforce the Continental System, one of his brothers, Louis Bonaparte (1778–1846) surrendered his throne in protest. (Louis had been installed as the king of the Dutch.) Napoleon was not swayed from his own will and responded by annexing Holland to France. For Napoleon, events were beginning to spiral out of control.



Review and Write

List the problems Napoleon was facing by 1808.

Of Muskets and Cannons

During the 1790s and the early years of the 1800s, Napoleon Bonaparte was recognized as the most brilliant military commander in all of Europe. But how did his armies fight? What weapons did they and the soldiers and sailors of other countries use to do battle with their enemies? What techniques and strategies were commonly employed? How were wars fought?

Compared with the weaponry of the 20th century, the weaponry used during the Napoleonic Wars was quite primitive. The basic field weapon was the flintlock musket, which had been around since 1700 or so, having replaced the matchlock variety.

The flintlock musket featured a lock mechanism that held a piece of flint which, when fired by a trigger, struck a metal plate. This caused a spark to ignite gunpowder lying in a pan near a touch hole which fired from the musket's barrel a ball of lead weighing about an ounce. Under the best of conditions, such a weapon could be fired two or three times a minute.

All of the armies of Europe in 1800 used muskets. These weapons were notoriously inaccurate. Soldiers firing such muskets could usually not hit a man-sized target from a distance of 80 yards. (Accuracy tests carried out by the Prussian army revealed that a platoon of infantrymen firing at a ten-foot-square target from a distance of 120 yards could only hit the target slightly more than two out of five shots.)

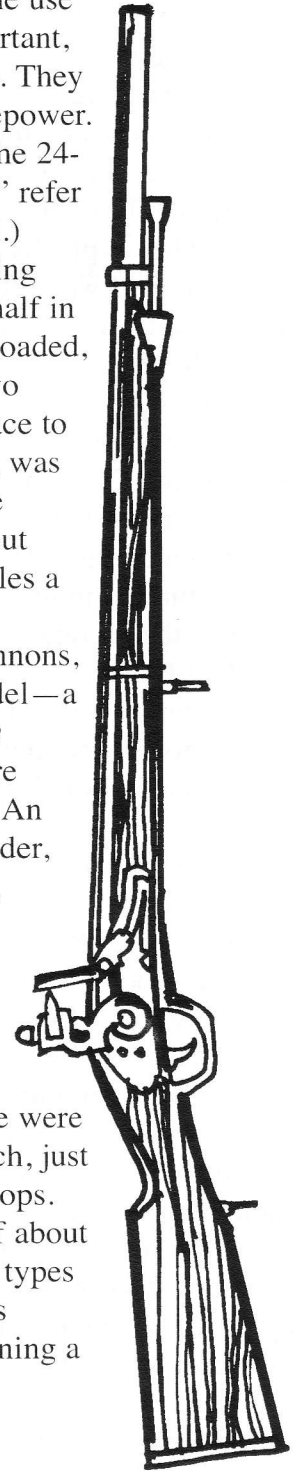
Although a ball fired from a musket might travel a total distance of 700 yards, hitting a specific target at any distance was always unlikely. A British rifleman named George Hanger, in 1814, said it best: "As to firing at a man at 200 yards with a common musket, you may as well fire at the moon and have the same hope of hitting your object."

To compensate for the musket's inaccuracy, European armies in 1800 fired their weapons in volleys, or simultaneously, increasing their unit's potential to hit something. Soldiers generally lined up in massive columns to provide for volley fire. However, such lines not only could produce great firepower, they also made inviting targets for the enemy.

Land battles also featured the use of artillery. Cannons were important, but generally difficult to handle. They also failed to produce much firepower. The heaviest land cannon was the 24-pound siege gun. (The "pounds" refer to the weight of the cannon ball.) Such a piece was capable of firing an iron ball up to a mile and a half in distance. The cannon could be loaded, aimed, and fired about every two minutes. Moving them from place to place, due to their great weight, was difficult. Five pair of oxen were required to pull a 24-pounder, but they could only travel seven miles a day on a good, dry roadbed.

The armies used smaller cannons, as well, such as the French model—a 12-pounder known as the *belles filles*. These artillery pieces were half the size of the 24-pounder. An even smaller model, the 9-pounder, was commonly used in combat, capable of firing three shots a minute. This model fired canister shot and grape shot.

Canister shot involved a tin can or canister which held hundreds of musket balls. These were shot out of cannons in a low arch, just over the heads of advancing troops. Grape shot utilized a canister of about nine golf ball-sized shots. Both types of projectiles sent multiple balls shattering into an opponent, turning a cannon into a large shotgun.



Review and Write

How were the tactics and mobility of armies limited by the weapons of 1800?

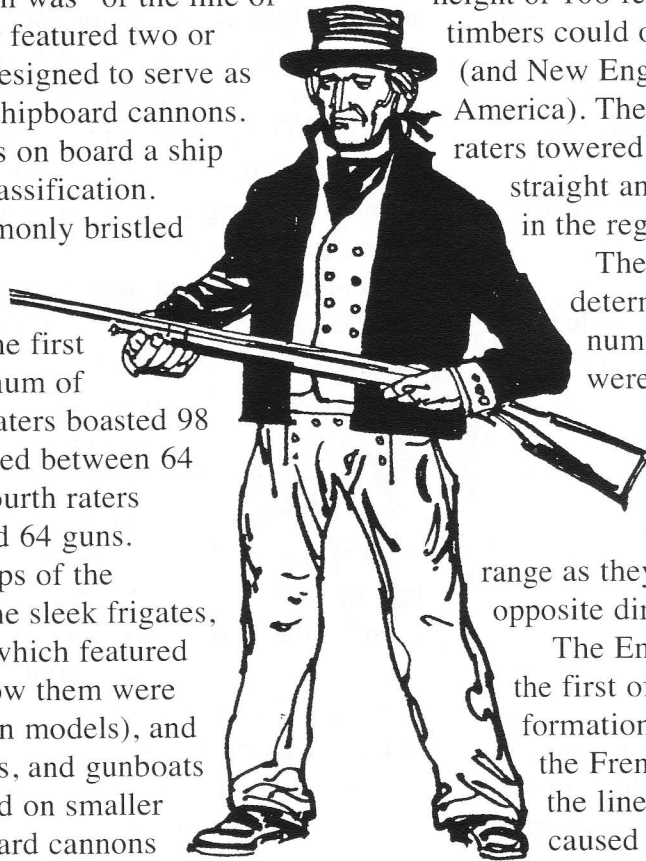
Fighting at Sea

During the Napoleonic Wars, the two largest navies in the world were the French and the British. Both featured naval vessels, which were commonly separated into two basic designs.

The larger models were called ships of the line (the original designation was “of the line of battle”). They typically featured two or three decks and were designed to serve as floating platforms for shipboard cannons. The number of cannons on board a ship determined its naval classification. These great ships commonly bristled with cannons. Ships of the line were divided into four categories. The first raters featured a minimum of 110 guns; the second raters boasted 98 guns. Third raters carried between 64 and 80 cannons, and fourth raters sported between 50 and 64 guns.

The smaller warships of the Napoleonic era were the sleek frigates, known as fifth raters, which featured 32 to 44 cannons. Below them were the sixth raters, (28-gun models), and finally the sloops, brigs, and gunboats which were often found on smaller seas and lakes. Shipboard cannons generally were mounted on wooden carriages, called sea services which featured four wheels for maneuverability. A system of ropes and pulleys held the gun in place and was designed to absorb the cannon’s recoil after firing, keeping it from rolling across the deck.

European warships of the period often served many years at sea. Some of the ships under Admiral Nelson’s command at the Battle of Trafalgar were as old as 40 years, including the *HMS Victory*. It is good that warships lasted as long as they did, since they required great quantities of materials, especially seasoned oak. A typical third rater of the day (64–80 guns) required nearly 2000 loads of oak, with each load equal to one large oak tree (approximately 50 cubic feet of lumber). In addition, a third rater



*Sailor in the British
Royal Navy*

required nearly 600 loads of elm, 139 of fir and 2500 of deal—board planking of either pine or fir.

These great ships were capped with tall masts which rose high above the decks of the war vessel. A third rater’s mainmast extended skyward to a height of 108 feet with a diameter of 3 feet. Such timbers could only be found in Norway or Russia (and New England or New Brunswick in North America). The masts needed for first and second raters towered at 120 feet, and such trees, straight and strong, could only be harvested in the region of the Baltic Sea.

The battle tactics of these ships were determined by the positions and numbers of their guns. Since cannons were mounted on both sides of a ship, they were often maneuvered into the line of battle, with the ships of both sides lining up parallel to each other and firing at close range as they passed, usually sailing in opposite directions.

The English Admiral Nelson was one of the first of his day to break out of this formation. At Trafalgar, he broke the line of the French ships in two places, breaking the linear formation of the enemy. This caused the fight to proceed in a helter-skelter fashion, something which Nelson wanted. He was certain his crew’s superior seamanship would give them victory against the confused French. He was right.

Despite the considerable firepower of these great ships, they were still only able to move as the winds blew. Naval operations ceased when sea breezes calmed, stranding ships in the water. A warship of 1800 might meet its fate at the hands of nature, not of an enemy. During the years of the Wars of the Coalitions, the British navy lost 32 ships. Nineteen of them were wrecked or capsized at sea in violent storms. Of the remainder, eight were burned accidentally and only five were captured by an enemy vessel (three of which were recaptured later.)

The Napoleonic Wars: A Map Study

The Napoleonic Wars constituted a worldwide conflict. The fighting took place across not only the European landscape, but at sites around the globe. Between 1792 and 1815—the year of Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo—nearly every nation and state in Europe saw fighting. With the exception of the small nation of Montenegro, every state in Europe was involved at one time or another in the wars, allied to either France or England—the two great rivals of the Napoleonic conflicts.

Outside of Europe, fighting took place as far

away from the Continent as South America, South Africa, the Middle East, the eastern Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Far East. Much of this long-distance fighting involved European colonies overseas or naval engagements between sea-roaming warships. Yet the concentration of military power always remained on the Continent. Through long campaigns, Napoleon advanced across the European landscape, establishing his dominion over vanquished states and kingdoms. By 1811, his conquests stretched from Spain to Scandinavia to the central Mediterranean.

Map Exercise

Using the map shown here, locate the following places: Norway, Sweden, Great Britain, Spain, Portugal, France, the kingdom of Italy, the kingdom of Naples, Prussia, the Confederation of the Rhine, the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, Austria, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia. Also, identify the locations of the following cities: Paris, London, Madrid, Rome, Naples, Palermo, Brussels, Amsterdam, Munich, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, and St. Petersburg.

1. The French Empire, by 1811, included what territories and states?

2. What nations and states were under direct French rule?

