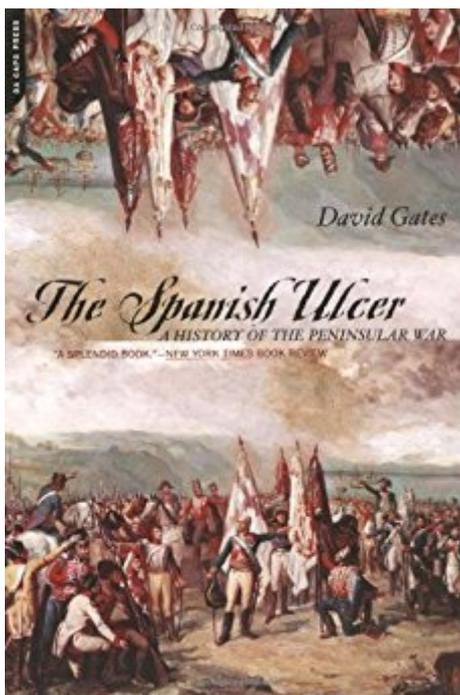


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The Spanish Ulcer: A History Of Peninsular War



Synopsis

The Peninsular War in Spain and Portugal was the most bitterly fought contest of nineteenth-century Europe. From 1808 to 1814, Spanish regulars and guerrillas, along with British forces led by Sir John Moore and the duke of Wellington, battled Napoleon's troops across the length and breadth of the Iberian Peninsula. Napoleon considered the war so insignificant that he rarely bothered to bring to it his military genius, relying instead on his marshals and simultaneously launching his disastrous Russian campaign of 1812. Yet the Peninsular War was to end with total defeat for the French, and in 1813 Wellington's army crossed the Pyrenees into mainland France. What Napoleon had called "the Spanish ulcer" ultimately helped bring down the French empire. Michael Howard of Oxford University hailed this book as "a major achievement...the first brief and balanced account of the war to have appeared within our generation." Illustrated with over a hundred maps and fifty contemporary drawings and paintings, this is a richly detailed history of a crucial period in history that resonates powerfully to this day; and figures prominently in Bernard Cornwell's internationally acclaimed novels of the Napoleonic era.

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Customer Reviews

Most military history books quickly become embedded in politics and economics, and in the process

fail to complete their analysis of the military aspects of the history. In this book Gates has maintained his focus all the way through the book, on the Military campaigns. Any politics or economics are introduced only to explain logistical difficulties or broad trends in strategic direction. In most English focused histories Wellington is portrayed as some kind of superman who went out to Spain and roundly defeated one French army after another. Gates shows how far this is from the actual truth. He highlights the crucial role played by Peninsular forces, who fielded one army after another to keep the French busy. He demonstrates how the partisan guerilla war prevented the French from concentrating against Wellington to drive him out. At the same time he demonstrates just why Wellington was the greatest soldier of his age. How he used intelligence and patience as his weapons. How he always selected his preferred battleground to gain maximum advantage against the French, who were after all, masterful foes. Wellington was the master of Soult, Ney and Massena, but not by much. He admitted that he would have lost if Napoleon had been there himself. Gates lavishes praise on the abilities of the French to survive in the harsh environment of the Peninsula, and at the same time extolls the mastery of the British use of naval support to outflank their gallic rivals. From an Irish perspective it is interesting to note the large number of Irish named Generals fighting for the Spanish, the English and the French. Blake, Clarke, O'Donnell, Lacy and O'Neill to name only a few. If I had any criticism of this book it would be on the way maps are presented. You always have to check which way is north. I prefer when North is the top of the page! Otherwise the large numbers of maps of all scales are a very useful tool in interpretation of the movements in the battles. Gates is also helpful in giving the reader a brief introduction to the tactics of Napoleonic armies, explaining the purpose of line, column and square, the flanking manoeuvre, use of the reverse slope, the use of Cavalry V Infantry etc. A really wonderful book!

Gates' Spanish Ulcer is a one-volume history of the Peninsular War waged by France in Spain from 1808-1814. It covers all operations in this complicated conflict and contains a map every three or four pages. There is plenty here for the academic doing research, the professional military person learning the origins of guerilla, or 4th generation warfare, or the war gamer who wants to know the terrain and order of battle for a particular engagement. For the casual reader such as myself, however, the narrative is too dense and the descriptions of operations too detailed. I would have personally preferred an account that either focuses biographically on Wellington or the French marshals, or gives a smoother narrative of developments. Such was not Gates' goal, so I won't subtract any stars just because I chose the wrong book on the Peninsular War for myself. The Spanish Ulcer certainly deserves five stars for hitting the mark for those more specialized purposes.

I bought this book as an introduction to the Peninsular War. Gates' text was great - covered all aspects of the war, went into enough battle detail to understand the action, but not so much that the story bogged down. I also felt his approach was balanced - Gates' theme wasn't all about Wellington beating down the French at every turn, but how each side gained advantage and disadvantage through various actions. The book's short fall was the maps and diagrams. Frankly, I felt they were of poor quality, and didn't add to the text. Maps were not used to illustrate the often complex strategic moves, but just show where cities and commands were located. Maps were often oriented in a strange manner (ie, north seeking arrow facing one of the sides) which was confusing. Battle maps were very hard to decipher, didn't illustrate troop movements, and just didn't have a professional feel. Bottom line - great text, with poor supporting diagrams and maps. Suggest having a quality atlas of the Peninsular War handy when you read it!

In reading the Richard Sharpe series by Cornwell, one is left with an incomplete understanding of just how complex, difficult and messy the Peninsular War really was. Richard goes here - problem solved. Richard goes there - problem solved. This excellent book places all of the players in chronological and historical perspective giving the full picture of the military actions in this war. It gives scant attention to the political machinations of the adversaries; but does tie in the ebb and flow of Napoleon's commitment to this open wound on his southern flank. Well written and researched this book is well worth it.

Really well written book. Good examination into the background of the Peninsular War, and the evolution of the conflict there during 1805-1809 especially.

An engaging summary of a terribly chaotic phase of the Napoleonic Wars.

Excellent narrative of the Napoleonic War in Spain and Portugal from mainly a military point of view. Covers Spanish involvement too. Has good maps.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. New angles and places the Anglo-Portuguese actions into perspective.

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