

Texto enviado a: *Napoleonic Scholarship. The journal of the International Napoleonic Society* (Washington)

**Friends? or enemies?
Deconstructing the enemy. The Wooden Virgin**

María Zozaya Montes*
University of Valladolid

Abstract:

An analysis of a part of the Peninsular war that has been little studied, that of the Spanish prisoners in France, is here presented. Within the scope of a needed revision, how the image that some military engineers had of the French people (as friends) will be shown, which does not correspond to the official version (as enemies) normally accepted.

1. Historical Context, the Fontainebleau Treatise

According to the treatise of Fontainebleau, signed in 1807, Spain and France agreed to invade Portugal, which was a key for the British trade with Europe. Thus, theoretically, Napoleon's Army entered Spain to occupy Portugal. Actually, what the French were doing was to silently invade their ally's country. The Spanish people and part of the Army were not in the mood to accept this situation, and conspired to fight the French. Within this context the insurrection of Madrid in May 1808 took place. After Madrid's defeat, in June 1808 a few Professors of the Royal Academy of Military Engineers at Alcalá de Henares went to Valencia and Saragossa to organise their defences¹. Those engineers and their adventures when they were captives will be the centre of our research.

Almost at the same time the popular and military insurrection took place. Which was the reason for the Spanish insurrection? Between October 1807 and May 1808 the French weakened the Spanish population. The Napoleonic army's system of living off the land depleted the provisions of the towns it passed through. Its troops often committed outrages when they got drunk or took advantage of the women of the areas they occupied. This situation was compounded by the rumours of the kidnapping in France of the rightful king Ferdinand VII. José Bonaparte, who had been placed on the

throne after the so-called “Bayonne Abdications”, was seen as an intruder. For these reasons considerable ill-will was generated among the Spanish population against the Napoleonic soldiers in 1808 and 1809. In most parts of the Iberian Peninsula the vision of “the other”, the Frenchman, soon became the incarnation of “the enemy”. This opposition was strengthened as the war went on, which was also due to the religious campaigns against Napoleon as the Antichrist, with his image being compared to that of the devil in the company of the ambassador of evil such as Talleyrand.²

2. “The wooden virgin”. The difference between Spain and France in 1808.

This image of “the other” is in my opinion summarised perfectly in the words of one of the military men who was in Zaragoza at the time. This was Baltasar Blaser, a treasury officer in June 1808,³ who at that time was to be the father of the soldier Anselmo Bláser (the future War Minister in 1853-54). He held out during the whole of the first siege of the city of Zaragoza “with my weapons in my hand”, as he would remember years later on requesting the corresponding military crosses before his superiors.⁴ He was taken prisoner by the French, from whom he escaped once he was taken to France. Before that, The French interrogated him and I consider his comments to be of great interest in demonstrating the gulf that existed between the Spanish and the French at the time.

He was interrogated about the treatment of the General in Chief, José de Palafox: “*The enemy generals asked me various questions about the conduct of Your Excellency; they asked me how Your Excellency treated the French prisoners. I replied very well [...]*”. Subjected to the court of ridicule, the French questioned the valour and patriotism of the Aragonese. Baltasar Blaser continued concerning the attacks on Palafox and his men: “*they also asked me what that prize idiot was thinking of not to surrender under the Imperial Eagles, to which I replied saying that both General Palafox and the city of Saragossa would defend themselves down to their last drop of blood*”. At that point their religion was made fun of. On this subject Blaser declared that “*the French gibed at him*” that the Aragonese had “*a lot of faith in the Virgin of el Pilar, which is made of a piece of wood*”, saying “*that they would soon demolish her church and reduce the city of Saragossa to ashes*” with their bombs, grenades, and cannons, “*and that the miracles of the virgin of wood would then be seen*”.⁵