

Elvas and the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance

By Pedro de Avelaz

Since the beginnings of the Independence of Portugal in the 12th Century, Portuguese diplomatic policy has been vitally concerned with the establishment of military alliances with other European countries for the defence of the country. By maximising defensive power for Portugal, these alliances help guarantee the maintenance of the independence of this medium-sized European country, given the territorial ambitions of the larger European countries, and in particular the aggression of other nations of the Iberian Peninsula.

Throughout the nine centuries of its history, being a maritime country and living mainly off its trading and colonial activity, Portugal always sought the support of countries with similar interests, which is why its Alliance with England, thereafter Great Britain, was naturally the most sought-after and lasting relationship.

British soldiers fought in support of Portugal during the conquest of Lisbon from the Moors in 1147, at the battle of Aljubarrota in 1385, during the long War of Restoration of 1640 to 1668 and the War of Spanish Succession from 1704 to 1715. They also served alongside Portuguese forces during the European Seven Years War in 1762 to 1763 and the great Peninsular War against French Napoleonic aggression from 1807 to 1814, and as volunteers with the Liberal forces in the Civil War from 1832 to 1834, and, finally, in support of the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps in Flanders during World War I, in 1917 and 1918.

The military role of the fortified town of Elvas and its outlying fortresses, the largest Portuguese fortified town, and currently the largest walled fortifications in Europe, was particularly important in the conflicts of 1640-1668, 1704-1715, and 1807-1814. However, it was during the latter, the Peninsular War fought against the invading

Napoleonic forces in Portugal and Spain, that our British Allies left more archaeological testimony to their numerous combats.

Firstly, because these combats, although fought far from its homeland, were of paramount importance for Britain's own survival as an independent nation, and secondly, because the number of British soldiers involved in the Peninsular War was very high, both in relation to the armies involved in the conflict, and also in relation to the total size of the then small British army.

The Prince-Regent, D. João, adhered to the policy of neutrality that had been started by D. Maria I. However, when in November, 1807 he was informed of the invasion by French and Spanish troops at the border, the Prince-Regent, the Royal Family, and the Government and the Regency Council embarked for the Portuguese colony of Brazil on 55 ships that had been loading the archives and belongings of the Government and the Royal Family since September.

These 55 ships include 24 ships of the Portuguese Navy carrying the *Escola de Guarda-Marinhas* (the School of Marine Guards) and the *Brigada Real de Marinha* (The Royal Navy Brigade), who were the only troops that left for Brazil, accompanied by magistrates, artists, workers and archivists, as well as the necessary belongings for the continuation of the governance of the legitimate Portugal. The only people authorised to embark with their immediate families were the essential Court officials, Ministers, and the 19 members of the Regency Council. Counting also the crew these ships, approximately 15,000 people sailed in these transport ships to Brazil, escorted by a squadron of the Royal Navy, which was a necessary protection for the heavily-loaded and helpless naval convoy.

This bold decision caught Junot and Napoleon by surprise, preventing the implementation of the Treaty of Fontainebleau, which had been secretly agreed between Napoleon and the Spanish Court, in October, 1807, whereby Portugal was to be split into three different regions, which would have led to the end of Portugal's independence.

With the absence of the Prince Regent and the Royal Family, and with the official organs of the Government of Lisbon otherwise occupied, Napoleon was left as an illegal and unauthorised aggressor in the eyes of Europe. The Prince-Regent, D. Joao, future King João VI of Portugal, came to an agreement with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, which also sought to weaken the power of the Napoleonic Empire in Europe, as Napoleon was a threat to its independence and economic freedom. This was a Military Alliance, for the defence of European Portugal.

As support, it was agreed in 1809 that British officers would serve in the re-constructed Portuguese Army, which was to be organised by the Secretary of the Regency, D. Miguel Pereira Forjaz, according to the reformation plans that had been approved in 1806, and that the re-constructed Army would be commanded by General William Carr Beresford. In 1809 and 1810, sizeable British funding was authorised by the Parliament in London for the creation of an important Portuguese and British Allied Army, under the command of the future Marshal Wellington¹.

The Anglo-Portuguese forces managed to expel the Armies of the three Napoleonic invasions of Portugal: the Army of General Junot in 1807-1808 (Roliça, Vimeiro, and The Convention of Sintra); the Army of Marshal Soult in 1809 (Porto and the North of Portugal); and the Corps of Marshals Massena, Ney and Soult and of Generals Reynier and Junot in 1810-1811 (Buçaco, The Lines of Torres Vedras, the combats during the French Retreat up until Fontes de Oñoro, and Albuera).

The Campaigns of the Anglo-Portuguese Army of Marshal Wellington against the Napoleonic forces continued in Spanish territory during 1812 (the siege and conquest of the city-fortresses of Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz, the Battle of Salamanca, the Entry to Madrid, and the Retreat from Burgos) and the Battles of Vitoria, the Pyrenees and S.

¹ Editor's Note: '*Marechal*' of the Portuguese Army.

Marcial, and the siege and conquest of San Sebastian) in 1813. This constant fighting against the forces of Napoleon helped the liberation of a new "rebellious Spain", a Spain that in 1808 had initiated a popular revolt against its French "allies-occupiers", and against the imposed King Joseph Bonaparte and his designated French-speaking collaborators. The Anglo-Portuguese Army commanded by Wellington invaded Southern France (the Battles of Nivelle, Nive, Orthez, Bayone, Toulouse, and the Occupation of Bordeaux) in 1813 and 1814, avenging the cruel Napoleonic invasions of Portugal on French soil, although the invasion of the South of France was carried out with total respect for the local population and civil property.

The progressive defeat of the Napoleonic occupation of the German countries and the invasion by the Allied Armies of the North of France in 1813 and 1814 was practically simultaneous with the expulsion of the republican-king Joseph Bonaparte of Spain and the invasion by the British, Portuguese and Spanish forces of the South of France. Both military advances resulted in the end of the European adventure of the Napoleonic Empire and the abdication of Napoleon Bonaparte in April 1814.

It is true to say that winning the war against Napoleon, the destruction and death caused by the French Invasions, the Peninsular Campaigns and the Invasion of France which culminated in the final defeat of the Napoleonic Empire, as well as the costs and sacrifices associated with the needed British military and financial aid, would all prove to be catastrophic for the economy of Portugal, which was to also lose the monopoly of trade with Brazil during this conflict. However, the Portuguese accepted to pay these costs and necessary sacrifices, and to suffer, in order to guarantee the maintenance of the Independence of Portugal!

During these terrible years of war, Elvas was the most important Portuguese stronghold, and was never defeated by the besiegers. It was an important base for the joint anti-Napoleonic operations of the Portuguese, British, and Spanish allied armies in the lands bordering

the Alentejo border of Portugal and Spain. The whole of the fortified town of Elvas and its important fortresses served as a refuge for the fighting soldiers and convalescents of the allied armies of the three countries. Its privileged position and military works also provided dignified burial sites for brave Portuguese and British soldiers. These cemeteries are still visited today and they celebrate the testimony of the common struggle of these allied peoples in the defence of freedom.

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