



THE BATTLE OF VITORIA 1813



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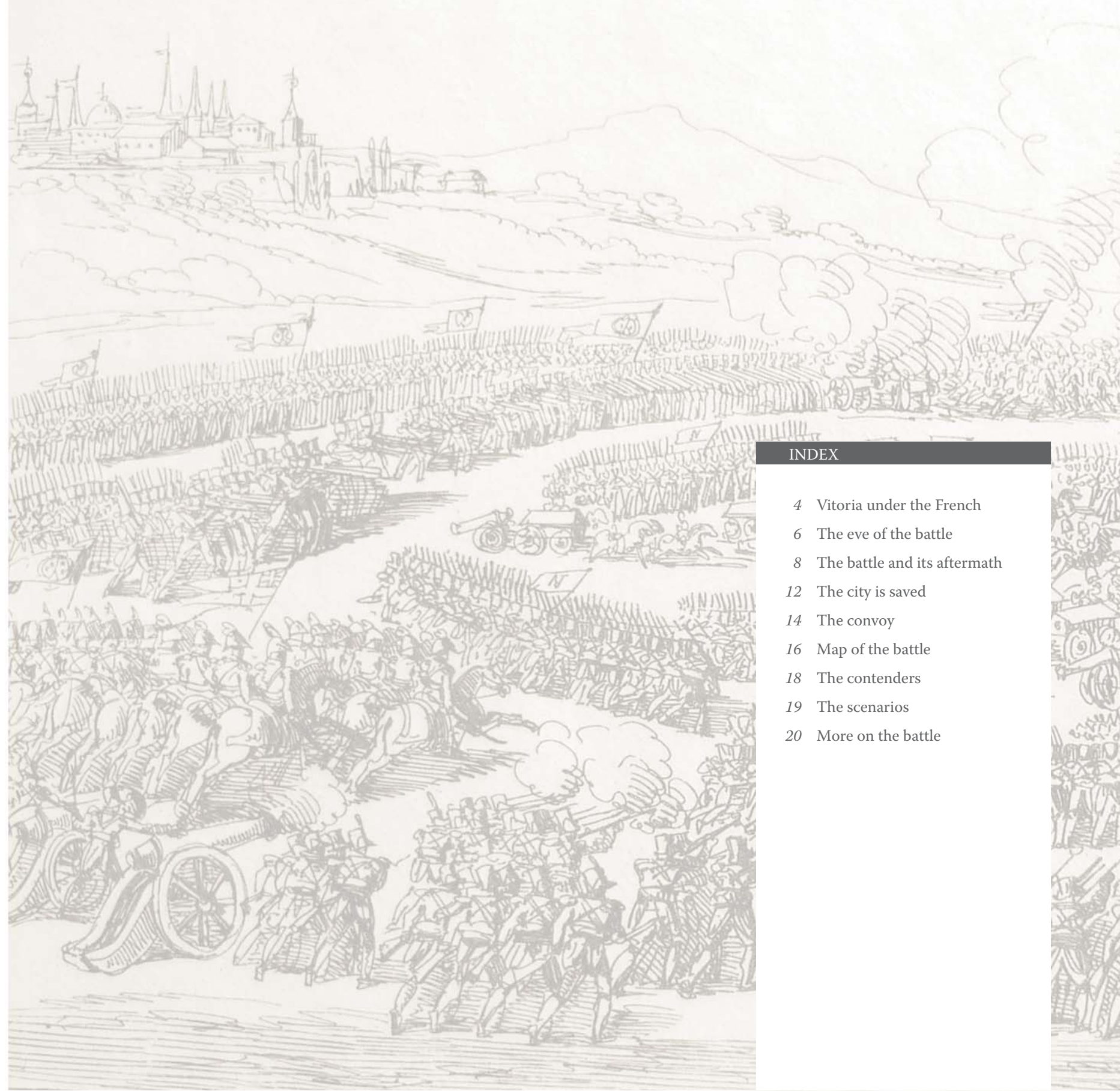
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The Main Square of Vitoria, Roberts, David.

Vitoria under the French

In the evening of June 21st, 1813, the city of Vitoria played a leading role in European history. It was the day that Joseph Bonaparte, the brother of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, was defeated in a Battle that took place in a small, little-known city only 100 kilometres from the French border. The battle had unimaginable repercussions in Europe.

News of the defeat in Vitoria spread instantly throughout Europe, and Ludwig van Beethoven even wrote his Overture No. 91 to commemorate the battle. The Overture, performed for the first time in December of the same year, was a tremendous success in Vienna drawing rooms. Apart from its undeniable quality, the symphony convinced the citizens of Vienna that they could defeat Napoleon at last, after twenty cruel years of war across the European continent.

For Vitoria, everything began seven years earlier, when the city and its 6,500 inhabitants – dedicated to trade, crafts and farming – was occupied by Napoleon's troops. In 1807, Spain and France had signed a treaty to invade Portugal. Thus, the French started to arrive as 'friendly' troops in October that same year.

Vitoria was chosen for its strategic location. Five roads radiated from the city, the most important of which was the road that linked Irún to Madrid. The city was located in the rich farmlands of La Llanada, and afforded good facilities that Napoleon's army could use as barracks, depots and official residences.

French influence on the capital of Alava province was not limited to military occupation. The ideals of the Enlightenment made a deep impression on many sectors of Vitoria's society. It is worth noting that during that period a single adminis-

tration for the three Basque provinces was created for the first time in history, with the capital in Vitoria. The seat of the government was in the house of the Echanove family. The town of Treviño and the region of La Rioja also became part of administration in Alava.

At the same time, the French modernised the tax system so the rich would pay more taxes on their properties. In fact, according to historians, the province collected more revenue during that period than in any other.

Public libraries were created throughout the Basque Country, such as the first library for lending books, which opened in Los Arquillos. A wide-spread vaccination campaign was carried out. Burials were encouraged in cemeteries on the outskirts of the city rather than outside the churches, as in the case of the Santa Isabel cemetery.

The night-life in some streets of the old medieval quarter became very lively, with parties, dance galas and fine dinners. Meanwhile, the populace were dying of hunger. They were forced to pay onerous taxes and their produce was frequently confiscated. Food was scarce among the population and the resulting rise in prices ended up destroying the local economy.

Furthermore, during the French occupation there was a strong internal resistance movement, headed by several guerrilla leaders, including Sebastián Fernández de Lezeta (alias Dos Pelos), the brothers Eustaquio and Fermín Salcedo, and Francisco de Longa. In the opinion of many historians, it was a very harsh occupation, although there were no large-scale executions of rebels.



Plaza de Vitoria Square, Giles, J. W.



Vitoria-Gasteiz 1813, James Wyld, Geographer to the Queen, London.



The French enter Vitoria, Branche, S.C.

The eve of the battle

On Saturday, June 19th, 1813, the imperial troops and civilian refugees arrived in Vitoria, with their enemies, the 'allied' army, closing in on them. They camped outside the city while awaiting reinforcements by General Clauzel, who would fail to arrive in time. The convoy comprised an army of 60,000 men under the command of Marshal Jean-Baptiste Jourdan; more than one hundred pieces of artillery, one thousand carts with logistics corps, military papers, and around five and a half million gold "duros" (a duro was worth five pesos).

Two thousand civilian carriages laden with gold and jewellery travelled with them. These were members of Joseph Bonaparte's Administration, as well as many Spanish civilians who collaborated with his government (known as *afrancesados*, or "Frenchified" persons), accom-

panied by their families and servants. There were more than 10,000 people in all.

Joseph I and his entourage found accommodation in the city, in the palace of Montehermoso, which was sold to Bonaparte by María del Pilar Acebedo y Sarria, marquise of Montehermoso, who was rumoured to be Bonaparte's lover. In the meantime, his right-hand man, Marshall Jean Baptiste Jourdan, lay prostrate with a bout of high fever.

On Saturday the 19th, Joseph Bonaparte ordered the wagons to depart for France, leaving the civilians camped in Arana. However, he did not change the positions of the imperial army, nor did he check the enemy's position.

They were followed at a short distance by the British General Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, with his army of British, Portuguese,

German and Spanish troops, who were joined by a large number of former Basque guerrillas. The allied forces approached Vitoria from several angles: by the road from Murgia to Bilbao; arriving at Lapuebla from Pobes; at Nanclares de Oca from Subijana-Morillas; and at Hueto Arriba by crossing the Badaia mountains.

A few days before the battle, Wellington, together with his collaborator and friend, Vitorian-born Miguel Ricardo de Álava y Esquibel (General Álava) advanced until they arrived at the Morillas mountains, from where they would have a birds-eye view of the scene of the upcoming battle. The British strategist quickly realised the weakness of the French deployment in the area. He could discern large gaps between the French divisions. Moreover, the French had not taken the precaution of destroying or duly protecting the 12 bridges that led to the battleground.

According to the chronicles, at five a.m. on Monday, June 21st, Marshall Jourdan felt strong enough to mount his horse and review his positions. First, he went to the palace of Montehermoso, where he literally hauled Joseph Bonaparte out of bed. Together they went to the Heights of San Juan de Jundiz. Historians record that the Marshall was horrified by what he saw. His forces were divided into several weak lines and not a single bridge was protected. He immediately ordered the troops to form a single line, but most of his generals obeyed the orders as they saw fit

According to the historians, from the end of May 1813, Marshall Jean-Baptiste Jourdan tried to leave Spain in an attempt to get Joseph Bonaparte's court out of danger.

Meanwhile, the Duke of Wellington had already planned to attack from the southwest in a classical pincer, thereby blocking their escape route to Bayonne and French territory. Wellington ordered his troops to position themselves following the course of the Zadorra River. The centre of the deployed allied armies was under his direct command, totalling 78,000 men and nearly 100 cannon.



Joseph Bonaparte.



Marshall Jean Baptiste Jourdan.



Duke of Wellington.



Illustration by Luis Alemany.

The battle and its aftermath

The battle was fought on the western end of the plains of Alava, in a terrain that was very different from what it is today. The towns were separated from each other by communal forests and fields surrounded by stone walls. There were also many streams crossed by roads and towns. The land was not very adequate for cavalry, which was very numerous in the Emperor's army.

Furthermore, the King's Road, which went through Vergara and led to the French border, had the right surface for the wagons. All the other roads were narrow dirt tracks that had turned to mud in the recent heavy rains.

At dawn on the day of the battle, the French troops were camped in the vicinity of the city, where they were overcome by the thrust of the allied army. After crossing the bridges at Villodas,

Nanclares and Trespuentes, it took Generals Álava and Wellington only a few hours to gain control of the city and ride into España Square, in the heart of the city.

The battle – which took place in three different scenarios – continued from early morning to around 8pm. The total number of casualties from both factions amounted to 12,800. The imperial troops retreated to the French border as fast as they could.

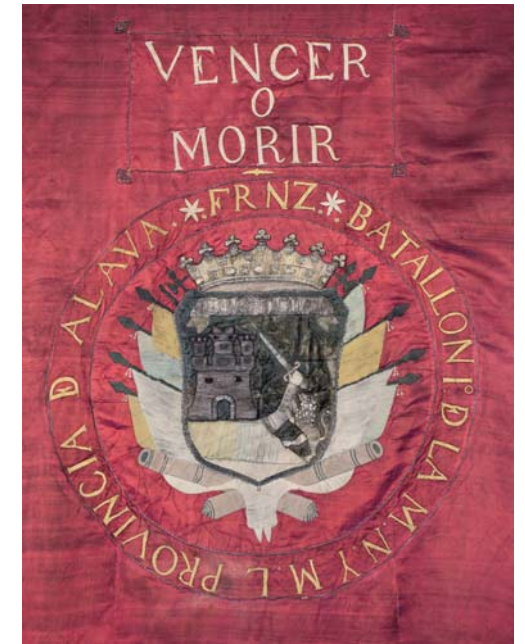
Joseph Bonaparte, who bore overall responsibility for the army of occupation, escaped via Portal del Rey Street. Napoleon's brother abandoned his entire military train and managed to reach Salvatierra late at night. He continued his escape towards Pamplona on the following day.

The French army was in a chaotic state after the battle, with the soldiers retreating in disorder

in an attempt to reach the border. In their hurry, they left behind an astonishing amount of weapons and artillery on the battlefield. It is estimated that they left behind 170 cannon, more than 400 wagons of ammunition, almost two million cartridges, thousands of firearms and more than 15 tonnes of gunpowder, as well as many valuables.

The news of the defeat of his brother Joseph Bonaparte in the small, little known capital of Alava spread throughout Europe and had a devastating effect on Napoleon's plans. Austria, Russia, Sweden and Prussia immediately broke off negotiations with Napoleon to rise up against the Emperor again. He was defeated in the colossal "Battle of the Nations" in October, at Leipzig.

The Battle of Vitoria also forced Napoleon to return Spain's crown to Fernando VII, thus putting an end to the Peninsular War. In any case, it was an unusual battle, in which manoeuvring troops was replaced by attacks on towns and fixed positions. The dénouement was also atypical; few prisoners were taken because the booty abandoned by the French in their flight aborted the main goal of destroying the invading army.



Flag of the Alava battalion created by Sebastián Fernández de Leceta "Dos pelos".



Battle of Vitoria, 21st June 1813, Heath, W.



Coat of a grenadier officer in Napoleon's army, Alava Armoury Museum



Tea service belonging to the Duke of Wellington, Alava Armoury Museum.



Fan with a picture of the 2nd of May 1808, Alava Armoury Museum.



Hat of an officer in Napoleon's army, Alava Armoury Museum.



Diorama of the Alava Armoury Museum.

The city is saved

Realising that the city was about to be plundered, General Álava obtained Wellington's permission to advance, expel any French troops who still remained in Vitoria, and close the gates to the city in order to save it from an aftermath of pillage. The City Council acknowledged the gesture with a gift of a beautiful ceremonial sword, now exhibited in the National Army Museum in London.

General Álava, who came from a noble, military Vitorian family, has come down in history for having participated in the three battles that marked the transformation of 19th century Europe: Trafalgar (1805), Vitoria (1813) and Waterloo (1815). Miguel Ricardo de Álava was ambassador in France, Speaker of the House, ambassador in the United Kingdom and Ireland, minister of the Navy and Chairman of the Council of Ministers,

among other positions. Historians assert that, apart from being an extremely competent military man, he was also distinguished for his qualities as a diplomat and his exquisite sense of humour.

In the years of the French occupation of Vitoria, General Alava was a member of "the Commons" for his province (the equivalent of today's ombudsman). Although at first he appeared to accept Joseph I Bonaparte and even represented the Navy in the Assembly that drafted the Bayonne Constitution that granted the Spanish Crown to Napoleon's brother, in the end it was not so. Álava travelled secretly to Madrid to join the patriotic. It was not long before the general from Vitoria became the Duke of Wellington's right-hand man.



Sword given by General Alava as a gift to the city of Vitoria National Army Museum, Lord Raglan deposit.



Portrait of General Alava.



Anonymous illustration, Municipal Archive.

The convoy

Although the soldiers were unable to plunder Vitoria owing to the intervention of General Álava, their reward was even greater, for King Joseph Bonaparte fled from the city leaving behind all his gold and jewels. The soldiers even made off with his famous silver chamber pot. Jourdan lost his Field Marshal's baton.

In addition to what the imperial army jettisoned in its chaotic retreat, 2,000 wagons were trapped in Vitoria, full of jewellery and other valuables belonging to civilians who were loyal to Napoleon. In their retreat from the fighting, they had been forced to take the road to Pamplona, which was unsuitable for wagons in those days. They gathered there to crown Santa Lucía hill, which once stood at the end of what is now Santiago Street. The street was narrow, short and steep, and rainy weather had turned it to mud.

The horde and panic caused the first wagons to tip over, followed by an inevitable jam of wagons and carriages 18 kilometres long. The imminent arrival of the enemy drove the king's treasurer to order the coffers to be opened so the soldiers would stop to plunder them.

And so it was. Thousands of soldiers dashed to the considerable booty that the king's followers had tried to take with them to France: gold, silver, jewellery, silk, valuable clothes, gold and silver work, oil paintings and tapestries. The allies, and the British, in particular, abandoned any attempt to pursue the Frenchmen and plundered the baggage train instead. This angered Wellington so much that he wrote, "The British soldier is the scum of the earth, enlisted for drink".

According to some historians, Wellington's anger was also caused by the fact that he only managed to take 275,000 francs from the plentiful



The British Legion, Giles, J. W.

booty, when he had expected to be given all the money that had been seized, at the very least. Shortly after, King Fernando VII gave him 300 paintings by great masters retrieved from the royal convoy. They are now on exhibition in his London mansion (Apsely House).

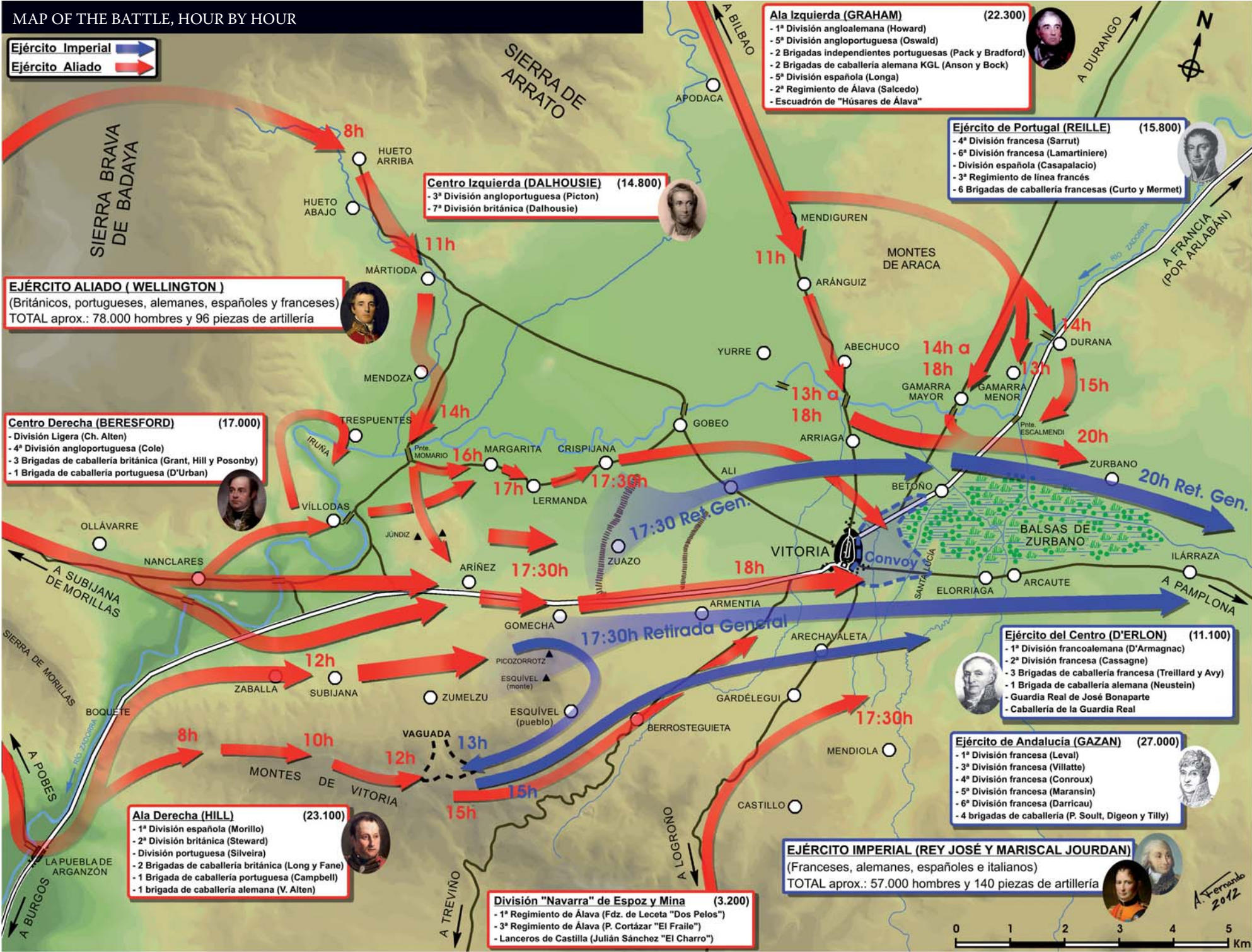
An impromptu street market was held on the following day to sell hundreds of works of art, jewellery, dinnerware and all sorts of valuables. Up to seven street markets were held with the spoils all along the Frenchmen's escape route. Thus ended what has gone down in history as the Battle of Vitoria.



Coins of Napoleon and Joseph Bonaparte
Diorama of the Alava Armoury Museum.



The plains of Alava after the Battle of Vitoria,
Alava Armoury Museum.



Bicorne and rifle from the Napoleonic period, Alava Armoury Museum.



The contenders

The Imperial army:

> Napoleon's army was called "the imperial army" because it included "Frenchified" Spaniards from the Marquis of Casapalacio; Germans from the Confederation of the Rhine; Joseph I's Royal Guard, composed of Frenchmen, Spaniards and Italians (mostly from Naples), Polish, Swiss and men from the Balkans.

> The army was made up of 57,000 men and 140 cannon, under the command of Joseph I and Marshall Jean Baptiste Jourdan.

> It was divided into:

- The Andalusian army (commanded by Gazan; 27,000 men).
- The Centre Column (under Count Drouet d'Erlon; just over 13,000 men).
- The Portuguese army (commanded by Reille; 15,800 men).

The Allied army:

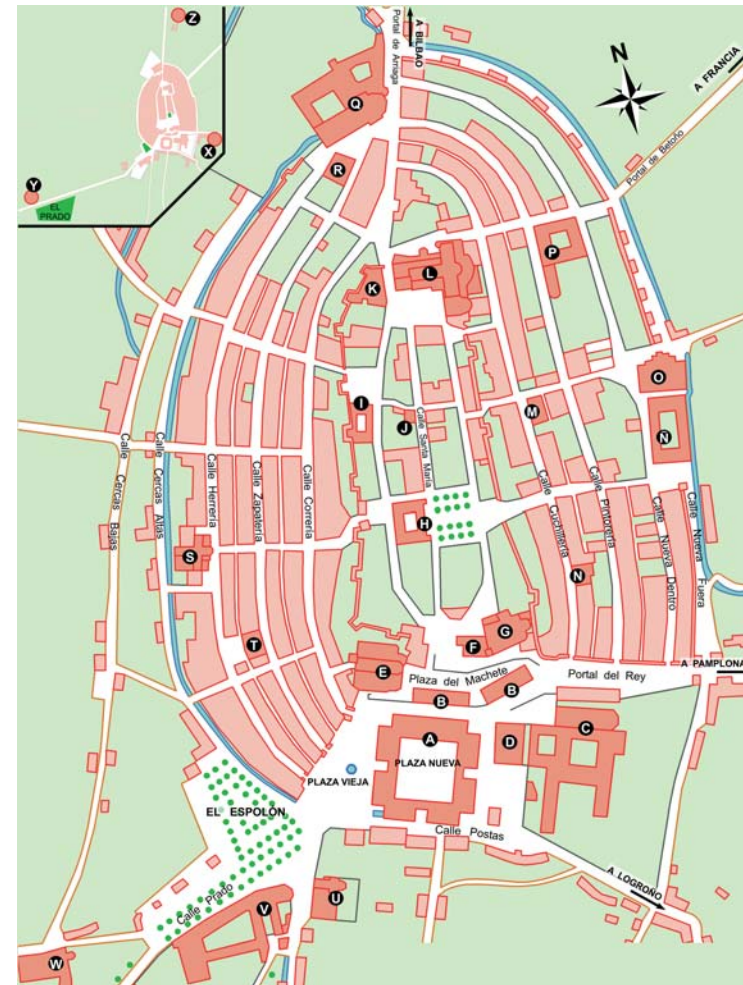
> Composed of troops from England, Portugal and Spain. A large number of Portuguese, Germans and a battalion of French monarchists also fought alongside the British, English, Welsh, Scots and Irish.

> In all, there were 78,000 men and around one hundred cannon. The army was under the command of Sir Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, and his collaborator, General Álava.

> It was divided into:

- Right Column (commanded by General Hill; just over 23,000 men, including 4,550 Spaniards under General Morillo).
- Right Centre Column (commanded by Wellington in person; 18,000 men).
- Left Centre Column (under Count Dalhousie; with around 14,800 men).
- Left Column (led by Sir T. Graham; 23,200 men, of which 4,500 were Spaniards under Colonel Longa).

> VITORIA IN 1813



- A Plaza Nueva
- B Los Arquillos
- C Convent of San Francisco
- D Hospital of Ntra. Sra. del Cabello
- E Church of San Miguel Arcángel
- F Municipal prison
- G Church of San Vicente
- H Palace of the Monterhermoso family
- I Palace of the Escoriaza-Esquivel family
- J Echanove House
- K Hospital of Santa María
- L Santa Maria Collegiate Church
- M Palace of the Bendaña family
- N Casa del Cordón
- N Hospice
- O Church of San Ildefonso
- P Convent of Santa Cruz
- Q Convent of Santo Domingo
- R Palace of the Marquis of Legarda
- S Church of San Pedro
- T Palace of the Álava-Esquivel family
- U Convent of San Antonio
- V Convent of Santa Clara
- W Convent of the Brigadiers
- X Hospital of Santiago Apóstol
- Y Etxezarra
- Z Santa Isabel Graveyard

The scenarios

> Vitoria-Gasteiz:

Montehermoso Palace: Joseph Bonaparte's occasional residence and the place where the victorious Wellington passed his nights in the city.

> La Puebla de Arganzón:

Where the fighting started; the Longa House; inscriptions by Napoleon's troops on La Antigua shrine.

> West Jundiz:

The point from which King Joseph commanded his arm.

> Subijana de Álava:

The first town to be assaulted. Itinerary to the Momario bridge and the Margarita and Lermenda area.

> Zuazo ridge in Vitoria:

The position of the great imperial battery and scene of the allied advance.

> Gamarra Mayor:

The scene of fierce combat.

> Durana:

The loss of the town cut off the imperial army's retreat.

> Santa Lucía Heights:

Convoy, looting and end of the battle.



Award for the Battle of Vitoria, Alava Armoury Museum.

The British Navy's Gold Cross for historical battles, Vitoria among them, awarded to Lord Raglan, National Army Museum.

More on the battle

- In all, the Battle stretched out over 25 kilometres, from La Puebla to Durana, and lasted around 12 hours.

- On June 21st, 1815, as an award for those who took part in the confrontation, Fernando VII commissioned a medal with the inscription IRU-RAC-BAT ("Three in One", in the Basque language), in reference to the three Basque provinces, on one side, and on the other: "Award for the Battle of Vitoria").

- The flags of 38 English regiments bear the name VITORIA to commemorate the Battle.

- Several women also fought in the Battle of Vitoria. General Morillo issued Agustina de Aragón a certificate stating that she had fought under his command in Vitoria. The Biscay-born guerrilla and bandit Martina Ibaibarriaga fought in the

Iberia Division, the guerrilla force lead by Francisco de Longa. Some historians disagree as to whether the two women actually took place in the battle, however.

- Although Joseph Bonaparte has gone down in history as "Pepe Botella" (Pepe Bottle), in actual fact he was abstemious.

- The European dimension of the Napoleonic campaigns give rise to many "civil wars". In Vitoria there were three of these: "Pro-Napoleon" Germans against "pro-British" Germans in the town of Lermanda; French "revolutionaries" against French "realists" in the town of Margarita; and Spanish "patriots" against "pro-Joseph" Spaniards in Durana.

- A citizen of Trespuentes named José Ortiz de Zárate came before Wellington to alert him to the fact that the bridge to his town was unprotected. The Duke hurried to send troops there

to cross the bridge and take the Iruña hill. José Ortiz de Zárate died there from an isolated shot.

- The monument to the Battle of Vitoria, inaugurated in 1917, is the work of Gonzalo Borrás.

- A canon named Dragon: The canon was casted at the Royal Artillery Factory in Seville in 1790. According to some chronicles, on the day after the battle a group of Vitoria youth from the hospice found the Dragon abandoned on the outskirts of Vitoria and dragged it into the city. In acknowledgement of the feat, the city's coat of arms was engraved on the canon, with the following caption: "I am the dreaded Dragon that was liberated from bondage to Napoleon and brought into glorious freedom by Vitoria's youth".

- According to the Book of Christenings in the town of Berrosteguieta in 1813, when the French tried to take five cannon up Mount Zaldiaran, "They were guided by a sinister, deceitful local man who led them along the road to Ezquibel. Although at first the road appeared to be wide, it ended in an ambush". Apparently, the peasant secretly fled when he saw the Frenchmen caught in an awkward situation".

Replica of the Dragon cannon, Alava Armoury Museum.



Monument to the Battle of Vitoria, Virgen Blanca Square.





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