

CHAPTER I – TRAFALGAR, THE END OF AN ERA

Godoy and the International Situation

The permanent British hostilities against the shipping, trade and interests of Spain in America and the failure of European states to restore the monarchy in France, prompted Prime Minister Manuel Godoy to look for a peace treaty with the revolutionary government of Paris: the 'San Ildefonso Treaty' of July 1795 was interpreted by Great Britain as a Franco-Spanish alliance against its overseas interests.

The British reaction came swiftly and another war erupted between England and Spain but, once again, an uncomfortable symbiosis was arranged as Spain needed the French army on the one hand and France required the services of the Spanish Navy on the other. In this way, the first cycle of this Spanish-English War, was very disturbing for our economic interests due to the blockade that the British squadron imposed on Cádiz, isolating it from the traffic to and from the American colonies. A Spanish fleet commanded by Juan de Lángara who was then in the Italian coasts contributing to the successes of Napoleon's army, was sent to the Atlantic theater of operations. José de Córdoba was appointed commanding officer but such an urgent change ended up being quite unfortunate and so, on February 14 1797, Córdoba met a smaller English fleet under command of Admiral Jervis. They fought off Cape San Vicente but Córdoba was not only defeated, but 4 of his ships were captured by the enemy. He was subsequently court-martialed and was deprived of honors and future commands.

After the battle, the English had free access and continued threatening the Andalusian coasts and more specifically the port of Cádiz. Mazarredo was sent to that city and quickly and effectively defended the garrison, above all, with the help of gunboats. The city was attacked this time by Nelson but he was brilliantly repelled after several days of violent combats.

Nelson then proceeded towards the Canary Islands where he intended to land in Tenerife but was, once again, repelled by the Spanish governor's defense forces. In the heat of the battle Nelson lost one of his arm.

Assets, Commands and Crews

At the beginning of King Charles IV's reign, the navy was reinforced with 6 ships of the line and 16 frigates, and the official list of ships was enhanced and made up of the following units: 79 ships of the line, 54 frigates, 8 corvettes, 10 xebecs, 13 hulks and 34 schooners, in addition to a series of smaller auxiliary vessels totaling 289 units. In order to properly man all those ships, the navy required the impossible number of 112,000 men. In peace time, the Spanish Navy could have a certain number of ships in full readiness: normally 5 ships of the line, 20 frigates, 5 corvettes, 5 xebecs 9 hulks and 22 schooners, but not more.

Navy personnel was also numerous: 90 flag officers, 589 senior and 1,318 junior officers. Apart from the ships' crews, the workforce included doctors, artillery men, engineers, priests and supply and quartermaster officers totaling 85,000 servicemen, in any case not enough to man off the vessels.

Conscription was a long-lasting problem. The hardship of the profession put many people off, and some incentives had to be worked out like the 'Matrícula de Mar' a kind of sea register based on the French 'Système des classes'. More efficient were the 'Ordenanzas' or Royal Ordinances issued in 1748 intended to organize and manage the life on board ships and issue rules for all seamen.

However there was always a shortage of sailors for the mentioned harsh living conditions, and compulsory enrollment for naval military service was effected once again and, at times, infantry soldiers had to be enrolled to man the ships, with poor results given their lack of maritime training.

The Battle of Trafalgar

Trafalgar was a naval defeat of Napoleon although Spain was involved for its alliance with France. In August 1805 the Franco-Spanish fleet was in Cádiz under command of the hesitant and irresolute Admiral Villeneuve. Spurred by Napoleon's orders and against the criteria of the Spanish commanders, he set sail on October 21st with 33 warships: 15 Spanish and 18 French. Near Cape Trafalgar 27 British ships under command of Admiral Nelson were sailing downwind in two rows.

Nelson advanced at full sail in two parallel columns; one under his own command and the other under command of Collingwood. Their idea was to crush the Spanish rearguard right between Cisneros' ship 'Santísima Trinidad' and Villeneuve's flagship 'Bucentaure'.

The clever maneuver was not anticipated by the French admiral. On the other hand Gravina did see Nelson's intentions and requested permission to intervene through the Code of Signals, but received no answer.

The 'Santísima Trinidad' was attacked by 4 British ships, 'Leviathan', 'Africa', 'Neptune' and 'Conqueror', which caused great damage. By mid-afternoon there were more than 10 French and Spanish warships knocked out and many eminent sailors died in combat like Alcalá Galiano, Churruca and the astronomer and expert hydrographer Francisco Alsedo.

The battle concluded in the evening and Nelson, mortally wounded, died. Gravina managed to lead the shattered Spanish fleet to Cadiz but, as he had also been wounded, died five days later.

With this important defeat, the long cherished dream of Napoleon of invading Great Britain, was definitively dismissed. For Spain, this defeat was an important setback and accelerated the decline of its empire.

The decay of the Royal *Armada*

Upon the death of the last Habsburg king, Charles II, the navy had already started its decline and the Battle of Trafalgar proved to be its deathblow. It was not only a defeat, but the end of the Spanish influence in Europe and elsewhere and the vacuum was occupied by the, now, more powerful British fleet. Other significant factors contributed to this unending decline; among them, lack of maintenance, the poor educational and training system which had been carefully coddled and mastered by previous ministers. The final blow was the appointment of Godoy as Admiral of the Fleet, a man who knew nothing of naval issues.

A year after Trafalgar, the Royal *Armada* had just 38 ships of the line, half of the fleet the Navy boasted between 1793 and 1797. In 1808 five old ships from the French fleet left behind by admiral Rosily in Cadiz were commissioned after an intense overhaul. Five other ships were confiscated during the Spanish Peninsular War.

However, despite the new additions, and because of the above-mentioned causes, namely lack of training, indolence and incompetent politicians, the Spanish Navy ceased to be a useful operational instrument at the disposal of the nation.