

Goya: The Disasters of War

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Goya is an artist who tells his stories over a period of time, working his way into them, tuning up his technique and sharpening his focus as he goes along. At a certain point, the drama and intensity of the scenes become perfectly integrated with the expressive possibilities of his technical means, and his ideas form themselves into images of unforgettable power. The set of prints that he devoted to *The Disasters of War* is a classic example of this way of working. It is also the most outspoken and moving of all his series of original etchings.

Goya was born in 1746, in the Spanish province of Aragon, a region with extremes of climate that produced a proud and independent people, passionately devoted to their homeland that lay far to the east of Madrid, the royal capital. He was the son of José Goya, a skilled gilder who worked in Saragossa, and of Gracia Lucientes who was connected with the minor provincial aristocracy. Later, as an ambitious artist with a promising career in Madrid, first under Charles III and later under Charles IV and Queen María Luisa, he would no longer be content simply to combine his parents' names in the customary way and call himself Francisco Goya y Lucientes; he took to adding the particle, signing, in his vigorous, rhythmical hand (with his first name in abbreviated form) *Fran.^{co} de Goya*.

The artist spent most of his working life in Madrid and died in exile in Bordeaux in 1828, at the age of eighty-two, leaving a remarkable body of work in every field: painting, drawing and printmaking. Goya's career spanned one of the most complex and eventful periods in Spanish history, and his art reflects his concern for the major issues of his day.

From an early age, Goya trained with an excellent local artist in Saragossa, and he also worked in the studio of Francisco Bayeu, a fellow citizen who became an important court artist in Madrid and whose sister he later married. But the most important formative influence on his art, as he himself made clear, was his journey to Italy as a young man of twenty-five and the works - both ancient and modern - that he studied in Rome and elsewhere. On his return to Spain in 1771, he gave proof of his artistic ability by painting frescoes and altarpieces for churches in and around Saragossa. Called to Madrid in 1775, to work on tapestry designs for the court, he found there the intellectual stimulus and collections of great art that formed his taste and moulded his ideas and that would inspire his very individual approach to his work as an artist.

Spain under Charles III was responding to the ideas of the Enlightenment and to the King's programme to modernise the country and bring it into the mainstream of European economic and cultural activity. One of the ways in which this could be done was to make foreigners aware of Spain's cultural heritage and of the great art collections in the country, many of them brought together by the King in his new royal palace in Madrid. Goya's first series of prints was made with this aim in mind. He decided to engrave the paintings by Velázquez in the royal palace and although he had to struggle with a technique that he had not yet fully mastered, he was able to etch and publish eleven prints, mainly after portraits by his admired master. It was in this series that he began to experiment with aquatint, a recently invented method of obtaining tone, rather than line, in etched prints.

The advantages of this technique are seen in the set of eighty satirical prints that Goya etched some twenty years later and which he called *Los Caprichos*. In these, Goya made use of dramatic effects of aquatint to convey his ideas about the society of his day, and to give graphic expression to the struggle between good and evil, rational and irrational behaviour, moral beauty and the ugliness of vice. The prints reveal Goya as a champion of human rights in his attacks on a lazy and corrupt clergy, on a frivolous and burdensome aristocracy, on ignorance and superstition and every kind of moral degradation. In this series, he brought his mastery of the expressive possibilities of

etching and aquatint to a point that has rarely been surpassed. Yet, in *The Disasters of War*, etched in the early nineteenth century, Goya abandoned the subtleties and perfection of an essentially eighteenth-century manner for a much more direct and less polished way of making his statement about the barbarity of war.

The eighty-two etchings made for Goya's series were never published in his lifetime. He gave to his friend Juan Agustín Ceán Bermúdez a complete, bound set of the prints with captions written by him as a guide for a professional engraver (the album is now one of the British Museum's most prized possessions). The captions suggest that Goya must have intended to publish the prints, probably during or soon after the war, as a homage to the Spanish resistance and an inspiration to his fellow countrymen. Two of Goya's greatest paintings in the Prado show the popular uprising of the *Dos de mayo*, the second of May 1808 in Madrid, and its aftermath in the immortal scene of the *Tres de mayo*, the mass execution of Spanish patriots and innocent civilians by French troops the following night. These huge canvases were painted after the war was over, in 1815, but Goya began work on his prints in 1810, the date that appears on some of the earliest, signed copperplates in the series (plates 22 and 27).

The series depicts the horrors that resulted from the Napoleonic invasion of Spain. Napoleon Bonaparte's aim was to bring Spain within the orbit of his Empire, and to this end he planned to install his brother Joseph as its new monarch. However, he failed to reckon with the strength of Spanish patriotism and his generals met with violent and heroic attempts to expel the foreign troops and restore to the throne Ferdinand VII, the hereditary monarch who had been lured into exile in France. Goya's original title for the series was: *Fatal consequences of the bloody war in Spain with Bonaparte*. The initial inspiration may have been the journey that Goya made to Saragossa in the early stages of the war. Aragon was one of the most fiercely defended provinces, with an active guerrilla opposition to Napoleon's armies. In the summer of 1808, the French laid siege to the provincial capital Saragossa whose defence was brilliantly led by General Palafox. He succeeded in repelling the French forces, and immediately invited Goya to come and see for himself and record the devastation suffered by the city and its inhabitants. Goya made the long and dangerous journey across country to Saragossa that autumn, but was forced to leave the city when the French returned to set up a second siege. He spent the rest of the war in Madrid, no doubt following the news reports as they reached the capital and witnessing at first hand the terrible 'year of the famine' in 1811-1812, when 20,000 of the city's inhabitants died of starvation. Although Goya never worked directly for the 'Intruder

King', as Joseph Bonaparte was known, and did not draw his pay during the war, he continued his career as an official court artist, painting portraits of French generals and figures connected with the new régime. He kept his real views to himself and embarked on his set of prints as a personal response to the events of the war.

In 1863, years after Goya's death, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Madrid published eighty of Goya's prints with the title *Los Desastres de la guerra*. They fall into three principal groups: scenes of the war that had begun in 1808, of the famine in Madrid in 1811-12, and some allegorical subjects that were the latest to be etched. The most substantial group is concerned with the war and its effects, and the earliest prints (which are not arranged in the sequence in which they were made) are those that are signed and sometimes dated 1810 (plates 18, 22 and 27). They are characterised by relatively small-scale figures in open landscape settings, and they show the horrors faced by the civilian population after a battle: bodies, often stripped of their clothing, strewn over the ground and finally tipped into a common grave or simply a ravine. Goya's sympathies were directly engaged, as is seen in a plate to which he gave the title *I saw this* (plate 44). It shows terrified villagers fleeing from a still invisible enemy, with a fat parish priest in the vanguard, clearly unwilling to do anything to help the young mother struggling with her baby and a child - a reminiscence of the ironic, satirical vein in the earlier prints of *Los Caprichos*.

Goya's strong motivation, his overwhelming desire to create this series of war scenes, is strikingly demonstrated by four prints that he made on the backs of two of his most beautiful etchings, large landscapes with aquatint from which he had pulled only a few proofs. Desperately short of materials in Madrid, due to the fact that everything was turned to use for the war, he cut each copperplate in half, destroying his landscapes for ever, and etched four harrowing scenes on their versos, including the extraordinary image of the falling figures in their shattered home (plates 13, 14, 15 and 30). Goya made preparatory drawings for his prints, transferring them on to the copperplates as a guide for his etching needle. But as he advanced in the series, his hand and eye gained in assurance and he began to use a broader, more expressive style, limiting the preparatory drawings to a summary indication of the composition and often making radical changes as he worked out the design on the plate. (Almost all the preparatory drawings for Goya's prints are preserved in the Prado.)

The subjects of the prints fall into several categories of which one of the most impressive is Goya's presentation of Spanish women, the wives and mothers who fought 'like wild beasts' (plate 5) to resist rape and slaughter or who, like the heroic

Agustina of Aragon, fired a cannon when those who manned it had all fallen to the ground (plate 7): Goya does not name her - her deed was legendary and celebrated in many popular prints - but comments simply: 'What courage!'. His manuscript captions on the unique bound volume were faithfully transcribed on to the copperplates as published by the Academy. They are brief, the sort of outraged, despairing or ironic comments that the artist might have made as he watched a friend turn the pages of his prints: 'And there's nothing one can do about it' (plate 15), 'One can't watch this' (plate 26), 'Why?' (plate 32), 'Barbarians!' (plate 38) or the ironic 'What a feat! With dead men!' (plate 39). Although Goya was passionately patriotic, he does not overtly take sides. The dead are unidentified; the fate of French soldiers at the hands of the Spanish is evoked with the same sense of pity as he expresses for his countrymen (plate 16). In the famine scenes, Goya shows a plump Spanish girl walking past a group of starving people, including a famished, skeletal child, on her way to a rendezvous with a foreign soldier (plate 55), leaving it to the viewer to draw the conclusion.

It is the cruelty within all human nature, the instinct for survival, the desire for dignity and the betrayal of a people's sense of its own humanity that Goya reveals in this extraordinary series of prints. He makes use of every kind of etching technique, from the most delicate effects of line heightened by thin washes of acid in the early plates to rich, dramatic aquatints in many of the later famine scenes (plates 50 and 51). It is enlightening to compare the latter, full of subtle, original effects, with the inexpressive, mechanical aquatint grain that was added posthumously to plate 7, to conceal a number of defects in the background before publication. Perhaps the finest examples of his mature use of the etched line in combination with aquatint are found in the terrifying series of plates devoted to atrocities and summary executions (plates 32-39). Drawing on a store of images rooted in classical antiquity and the Italian masters, Goya presents almost symbolic images of war. Men hanged, shot, tortured and dismembered are seen in compositions structured as surely as the greatest masterpieces in oils. Naked torsos and limbs that evoke antique marble fragments - a reminiscence of his Roman stay - are combined with blasted trees and distant evocations of more horrors to come. The economy of Goya's line and the sober reticence of expression in these terrible scenes serve to make these images all the more telling.

Goya went on to complete his war and famine scenes with a group of strange allegorical 'caprichos'. These lie outside the images of the war itself, but one such later plate was designed as a frontispiece to the whole set (plate 1). Before moving into this final chapter - a return to the *Caprichos* through which he had expressed his earlier opposition to ignorance, cruelty and oppression - Goya designed a print probably intended to complete his series on the war. Its original title was so inescapably pessimistic that the Royal Academicians felt obliged to alter its meaning. In place of Goya's manuscript: *Nada. Ello lo dice - Nothing. That's what he is saying* - the Academy substituted, in the engraved version, *Ello dirá - Time will tell or We shall see* (plate 69).

The return to Spain of Ferdinand 'the Desired', an intolerant bigot who seized absolute power, brought with it the overthrow of all liberal ideals and aspirations and made it impossible for Goya to publish his reflections on the war and its aftermath. However, his will to create never left him, and he completed a new set of prints on bullfighting in 1816, while another planned series of large allegorical prints, which he entitled *Disparates*, was only abandoned when he left Spain for voluntary exile in France. When the Spanish Academy of Fine Arts published Goya's *The Disasters of War* in 1863, it restored to the world a work whose message is timeless and universal, and whose relevance is as strong today as it was in the circumstances of his time.

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