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# Dehumanized Prisoners

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

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**F**rancisco Goya's *Third of May, 1808, in Madrid: The Executions on Principe Pio Hill* depicts the mass execution of Spanish prisoners by Napoleon's troops on that date. It is one of numerous compositions the artist painted between 1810 and 1815 to decry the French occupation of his homeland Spain.

The Spanish royal family, which had been officially allied with France, was corrupt. In 1807, the Spanish king Charles IV was forced to abdicate the throne and was replaced by his son Ferdinand. In the following year, taking advantage of this internal weakness, French forces invaded Spain, deposed Ferdinand, and put Napoleon's brother, Joseph Bonaparte, on the Spanish throne. At first many citizens hoped that the "enlightened" French leaders would help them bring political reform; however, soon they became disillusioned. A group of rebels in Madrid began an uprising that spread through all of Spain within days and lasted six years.

Goya's painting, completed in 1814 after Joseph Bonaparte had been deposed and Ferdinand reinstated, commemorates the first of many events in which the occupying French troops dehumanized their Spanish prisoners. The rebels depicted here had been captured the day before (in an event depicted in a companion painting by Goya), and now have been taken outside the city walls of Madrid to be executed.

The picture is huge – more than eleven feet wide – and very different in tone from the previous artistic style of Neoclassical history painting, which emphasized the themes of nobleness, morality, and strength. Goya's *Third of May, 1808* introduced the world to the spontaneous, highly emotional style of Romanticism and illustrated the themes of violent punishment, death, and the senseless brutality of war.

Goya's portrayal of the French soldiers as faceless shooters in a sharp, linear formation, which recedes diagonally from the front center to the right background, contributes to the theme of the anonymity of war. The lantern in front of them illuminates the rebel about to be killed at point blank range. If that light were to be extinguished, there would be nothing else – no stars, no light, no relief from the city in the distance. This central prisoner wears a white shirt and yellow pants – the colors of the papacy – and stands in the pose of Christ on the cross. A wound is visible on his open, right hand sug-

gesting a stigmata, or open wound that resembles Christ's woundedness. These prisoners are not Christian martyrs, however; they are fearful of the torture and death that is about to happen to them. A church building is visible in the background, but it is in darkness both compositionally and in the minds of those awaiting certain death. The foreground contains a heap of bloody corpses, which further affirms this is a mass execution in a drastic attempt to stop the Spanish uprising.

The anonymity of death is apparent on both sides of this scandalous event, among the Spanish rebels as well as the French soldiers. Both groups are imprisoned by what they think is their duty to the modern nation state – to save and defend Spain, or to serve France and its brutal expansionist policy.

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