

# The Spanish Tercios 1536–1704



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Illustrated by Gerry & Sam Embleton

Men-at-Arms • 481

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## INTRODUCTION



**Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba (1453–1515), a Spanish veteran of the final campaigns of the Reconquista, was given the title of the 'Great Captain' at the battle of Atella in July 1496 by Neapolitan soldiers, who saw how their king and nobles relied upon his counsel. His historic victory at Cerignola on 25 April 1503 was achieved by a counter-attack from a defensive position. This was contrary to the medieval idea that still reigned in most of Europe, whereby success was to be gained by gallant cavalry charges and massive assaults by pikemen. Córdoba's versatile generalship was underlined on 29 December 1503 by another victory, at the Garigliano – a victory achieved by skillful preparatory engineering work, allowing an audacious surprise attack across the swollen river. (Spanish Army Museum, Toledo)**

**'E**veryone fought, from the Duke of Alba, a Spanish grandee, to Pizarro, a swineherd.

*They all fought: noblemen and labourers, shepherds and burghers, scholars and magnates, clergymen and rogues, clerks and knights. Every region of Spain sent its sons to fight. Garcilaso, Ercilla, Cetina, Alcázar, Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Calderón fought. An entire people fought, without differences of class, loyalty, duty, profession or wealth.*

*'They fought over the Andes and in the Alpine foothills, on the plains of the Po and on the Mexican plateau; beside the Tiber against the Pope, and beside the Mapocho against Arauco; on the banks of the River Plate and the Danube, the Elbe and the Tagus, the Orinoco and the Escalda; at Pavia and Cuzco, in the Alpujarras and in the Amazon jungles, in Tunisia and in Amberes, in the Gulf of Lepanto and off the English coast, at Navarino and Terceira, in La Goleta and La Habana, in Algeria and in the Philippines, in Lombardy and in Naples; at all four points of the compass in France, from Provence to Brittany, from the banks of the Bidassoa to the banks of the Marne and from Rousillon to Normandy; in the Netherlands, in Portugal, in Africa and in Ireland...'*

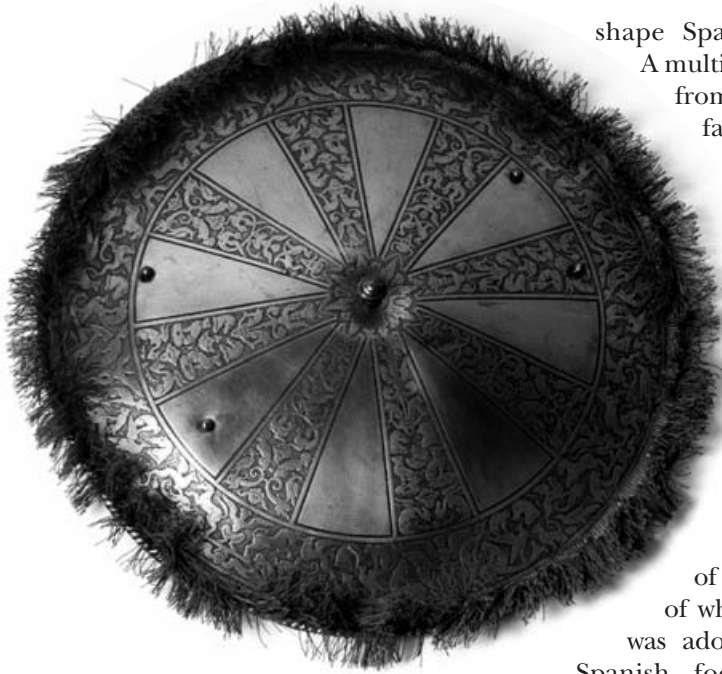
(Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, *España, un enigma histórico*)

### The Ordinances of the 1490s

In January 1492 Granada, the last Muslim enclave on the Iberian Peninsula, surrendered to the 'Catholic Monarchs' Ferdinand and Isabella. In the varied terrain of a peninsula cut by mountain ranges, the infantry had always been a fundamental element of the Christian armies; unlike the case in the rest of Europe, they had never ceded the predominant role to the heavy armoured cavalry.

Several years before this successful conclusion of the *Reconquista*, contingents of Swiss soldiers had arrived in Castile to serve not only as mercenaries, but also as instructors in a new form of fighting that was particularly effective against heavy cavalry. Renowned throughout the continent, the Swiss infantry fought in dense formations of pikes, not only on the defensive but also manoeuvring in the attack, supported by small numbers of crossbowmen and handgunners. The successful employment of these tactics required strict discipline and training, to harness the individual fighting men into a co-ordinated group.

With the end of the *Reconquista*, the opening up of new fronts in Italy – which would be, for generations, the cockpit of Franco-Spanish rivalry – permitted the Spanish monarchy to realize an old dream: the creation of a standing army, backed by regional militia. For this purpose legal decrees known as 'ordinances' were issued, and these began to



**A finely decorated and fringed example of a buckler. Used at the turn of the 15th to 16th centuries by the *escudados* who made up one-third of the Spanish infantry, bucklers were later discarded except for particular types of actions – assaults on or the defence of fortifications, and other occasions of hand-to-hand fighting both on land and at sea. (In the Imperial armies a minority of sword-and-buckler men still had a place in infantry tactics well into the 1630s.) Some Spanish bucklers bore engraved decoration of the Pillars of Hercules with the Latin motto *Plus Ultra* ('Further Still') – the national symbol of Spain, signifying that the king's power extended from Europe out across the 'Ocean Sea'. (Spanish Army Museum)**

shape Spain's emerging military organization. A multitude of details were now to be regulated, from the fines to be paid by towns that failed to provide the necessary arms, to the accounts that were to be kept by the armies.

The 1493 Ordinance defined the *capitanía* (the future company) as the basic infantry unit; it was to be commanded by a captain, seconded by a lieutenant who was also the standard-bearer. The company was divided into 'squadrons' (from *cuadrado*, 'squared'), led by sergeants or *cuadrilleros*. Initially the numbers in these companies were not fixed.

The 1497 campaign, against the army of Roussillon, saw the embryonic creation of what would become the Tercios; the pike was adopted in important numbers, and the Spanish footsoldiers were divided into three categories. One-third of the infantry carried pikes; one-third

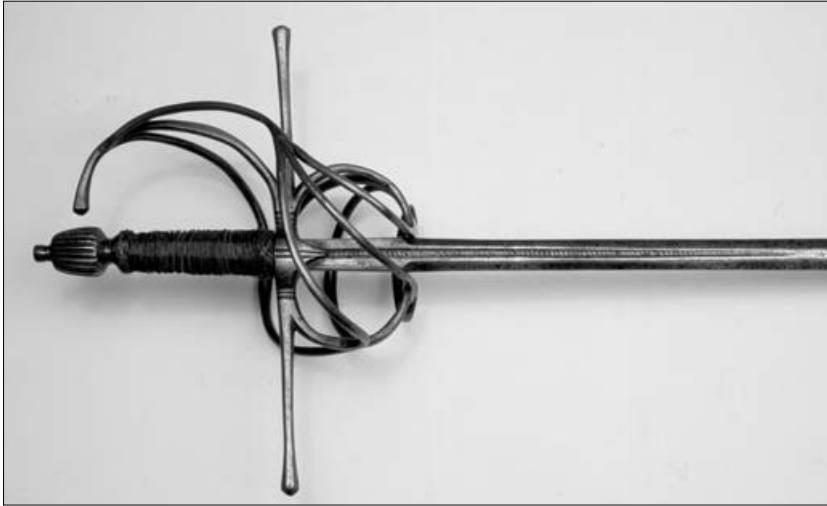
bore the old name of *escudados* (sword-and-buckler men); and the final one-third consisted of crossbowmen and handgunners. The adoption of a cuirass to protect the pikemen had already been regulated in an ordinance of two years previously. The task of the sword-and-buckler men was to try to reach the enemy, making their way through the mass of their own and the enemy pikemen. Meanwhile, support would be provided by the marksmen with missile weapons, although crossbows were at first more trusted than the fairly primitive firearms of the day.

The sword-and-buckler men had a major impact during the first Italian campaign against the French in 1494–98, when they won the battle of Atella practically singlehanded. Protected by their shields, they cut their way into the mass of King Charles VIII's hired Swiss pikemen, breaking up their formation and putting the famous mercenaries to flight. The subsequent North African campaigns (1509–11), and above all the renewed Italian wars (1501–04, and 1521–26), served as experimental laboratories for Spanish military reforms. During these conflicts, which coincided with the extension of military science during the Renaissance, Spanish military organization evolved from a medieval to a modern form.

### **'El Gran Capitán' and the Italian Wars**

One of the chief promoters of reform was Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, 'the Great Captain'. The Catholic Monarchs gave this veteran the command of the Spanish expeditionary corps that travelled to Italy to fight against a French invasion, in support of King Ferrante of Naples.

At Seminara (28 July 1495), Córdoba disagreed with the Neapolitan nobility's eagerness to go into battle against the French, as he was aware of the enemy's superiority, but he had no option but to agree. Mistaking a tactical withdrawal by the Spanish horsemen for a retreat, the Italian infantry gave way to panic and fled the battlefield. Only the Spanish



**A 16th-century Spanish sword with *gavilanes* or 'bows' at the hilt, providing greater protection to the hand; a skilled swordsman could even use them to catch and snap the blade of his opponent. The sturdy, two-edged blades of such weapons measured between 35.5in and 40in (90–105 centimetres). As time passed the sword hilts used by officers and wealthy soldiers became even more complex in design, and styles spread across Europe. (Spanish Army Museum)**

infantry formation stood firm, before beginning an orderly retreat under pressure from Swiss pikemen and French heavy cavalry *gensdarmes*. This event exemplifies one aspect of the reputation earned by Spanish infantry over the coming centuries – their imperturbability. Ignoring everything around them, the Spaniards managed to retreat from the field of Seminara in good order, protected by their pikes from any approaching enemy. The French, content to have taken the ground, decided not to contest their withdrawal.

From then on, free from interference, Córdoba assumed command of operations, and began to lay the foundations of future Spanish military doctrine. The central characteristic of what would be known as 'war in the Spanish mode' was watchfulness and realism; Córdoba would fight only when it was in his interest to do so, never when it would favour the enemy, so his troops gained experience and confidence. He also employed mixed troops and tactics in ways long familiar to Spanish commanders: 'He agreed to... set up ambushes for the French cavalry in the way used in Spain against the Moors, a true novelty for the people there'. A main tenet of his doctrine was: 'Never bring your warriors to battle unless you are sure of their hearts and know that they are fearless and orderly; never test them if you do not see that they expect to win' (Inspección de Infantería, *La infantería...*).

Additionally, his infantry were extremely mobile; the varied terrain favoured them and placed the French heavy cavalry at a disadvantage. This mobility allowed the Spanish to give the impression that they were everywhere, repeatedly surprising enemy garrisons. All these factors, together with the massive use of artillery to take strongholds so as to avoid long sieges, changed the face of the campaign.

His experience in the Kingdom of Naples encouraged Córdoba to organize *coronelías*, field commands inspired by the Roman legions. He ordered that each *capitanía* should consist of 500 men: 200 pikemen, 200 sword-and-buckler men, and 100 arquebusiers with firearms. Ten mixed companies, plus another two of pikemen alone, formed a *coronelía* commanded by a *coronel* (colonel), with a total of 6,000 men. This would also have two attached cavalry squadrons, one with 300 'men-at-arms' (heavy cavalry) and the other with 300 'horsemen' (light cavalry).