

Portugal and the Great War:

between the memory of the past and the challenges of the future

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We live in difficult times today, just as we lived a century ago on the eve of the outbreak of the Great War.

In the early 20th century Portugal was living in a period of crisis, as it does now at the beginning of this 21st century.

Ideally, now that we are marking the start of the commemorations of Portugal's participation in the Great War, it would help if the memory of the past helped us confront the challenges of the future.

Portugal's entry into the 20th century was marked by two matricial events: the first was the founding of the Republic in 1910 and the second Portugal's participation in the Great War of 1914-1918.

These are two distinct moments which have in common the same historical significance: Portugal's entry into the new century and its adaptation to the developing international dynamics and in particular to European dynamics.

At the start of the 20th century Portuguese strategic thinking saw Portugal as a country whose vocation was exclusively maritime – both Atlantic and colonial – and with no strategic interests in the European continent. This thinking persisted throughout the century and remained unaltered until the double post-authoritarian and post-imperial transition in the second half of the 1980s.

As a result of geopolitical conditioning factors and long-lasting historical movements, from the point of view of its place in the world and of its international position Portugal experienced a strong anti-European current. This historically predominant current had its reflections in a long political and diplomatic tradition and also in the formulation of strategic military thinking.

This anti-European matrix was based on two or three fundamental ideas: in the first place, a contradictory and in certain historic moments even dilemmatic perception between Europe and the Atlantic; in the second place, and as a result, the idea that Portugal had no strategic interests in Europe because its vocation was maritime and never continental; and lastly, in the third place, that that maritime vocation was expressed in two almost exclusive vectors in the strategic orientation of the country's international position: the Atlantic and the Empire.

However, if there was no political and diplomatic interest or even a military tradition in Portugal's participation in European theatres, this is a legitimate question: why did Portugal enter the First World War and in particular the European war?

We will never understand this if we do not take into account the political and international context of the young Portuguese republic.

The Republic's international situation was extremely fragile, both in Europe and in the colonies.

On the European front, between October 1910 when the Republic was installed and September 1911, Portugal was governed by a republican regime that was not recognised internationally by the major European powers. Neither *de facto* nor *de jure*. That is, for almost one year, between October 1910 and September 1911, Portugal was not formally recognised from an international point of view. After September 1911 the Portuguese republican regime was formally recognised but not politically or diplomatically accepted by the other European powers. It was not accepted, as was the expression in those days, "in the Concert of Nations". Portugal then underwent a long period of international marginalisation that grievously affected the credibility of the Portuguese Republic, which was also threatened twice on the Iberian Peninsula, in 1911 and in 1912, by monarchist incursions from Spain with the tolerance of the Spanish monarchy.

The situation on the colonial front was no easier either. In Africa, too, and on two occasions, in 1898 and in 1912, England and Germany had forged secret agreements about the partition of the Portuguese colonies. For various political and diplomatic reasons and finally with the outbreak of the war itself in 1914, these were never finalised. But the spectre never faded and so people in Portugal were aware of the risk being run by the sovereignty and integrity of the Portuguese colonial territory.

Neither was the situation easy on the home front, both as regards governing stability and the very political legitimacy of the regime. Since the implantation of the Republic in 1910 the country was living under a political regime marked by democratic instability. Suffice it to say that between 1910 and 1914 the average duration of a government was approximately eighteen months. And that in the war years and precisely because of the war, between 1914 and 1916 the average duration was about six months. In addition to the issue of instability was the issue of legitimacy. The Republic had been established by the revolution. It had revolutionary legitimacy but had not gain full national legitimacy. Not everyone agreed with the regime and the Republic's progressive radicalism left untouched large swathes of Portuguese society to its right and to its left. Obviously none of this strengthened the regime or even consolidated the Republic.

It is in this context of extreme fragility that the republican government decided on Portugal's intervention in the Great War. There was the political fragility of the regime on the home front and the country's international fragility on the foreign front: threatened by Germany in the colonies; threatened by Spain on the Iberian Peninsula, and aware of the transience of England, its faithful ally and guarantor of its sovereignty vis-à-vis Germany and Spain.

It is hard to imagine a more serious situation or a deeper crisis; it was not only the survival of the regime that was in question but also the sovereignty of the State.

The decision regarding Portugal's intervention in the European war was made, then, according to an interventionist strategy, that is, a diplomatic strategy that deliberately forced our entry into the war. A strategy that took advantage of a favourable international situation and forced England against its will and possibly even against its own interests to accept Portugal's entry in the Great War.

How was this possible? 1915 saw the start of submarine warfare, heavily affecting the British fleet. Consequently, England began to suffer from a huge lack of vessels both for logistic and for operational effects. When it asked the Portuguese government to requisition the German vessels anchored in Portuguese ports, Portuguese diplomacy took the opportunity to say: "Yes, but...", that is, yes, Portugal would requisition the ships, but only on condition that this was done under the terms of the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance.

According to the Portuguese government's interventionist strategy, by joining the war on the side of the Allies and under the terms of the alliance with England, Portugal would in one fell swoop strengthen this Anglo-Portuguese alliance, neutralise German and Spanish claims and achieve its objectives, both in the colonies and in Europe.

In the colonies, it not only ensured the integrity of the Empire under British protection but at the same time managed to achieve the possibility of England hazarding the fate of the Portuguese colonies on the future peace negotiation table.

In Europe, diplomatically it diversified the strategic position of belligerent Portugal in opposition to neutral Spain. It hoped with that to gain the desired recognition of the Concert of Nations.

Ultimately, it would also achieve an unconfessed intention of its domestic policy: the consolidation and national legitimisation of the regime.

At the Versailles Peace Conference Portugal achieved its colonial objective in full: the Empire remained intact. On the other hand, however, it completely failed its European objective: its recognition by the Concert of Nations meant, in post-war international politics, a seat on the Executive Board of the League of Nations, which belligerent Portugal never achieved, whilst neutral Spain did. It was Portugal's major defeat. Worse was to come, however, on the internal front, as not only did the regime not become consolidated but it did not survive the devastating consequences of the war: the economic and financial crisis and its social consequences; the party political disaggregation and the delegitimisation of the democratic institutions; the demoralisation of society and its divorce from the regime.

When Portugal joined the war there was consensus in society, the political forces and Portuguese public opinion as to our military intervention in Africa. Because Portuguese territory and national sovereignty were at stake.

But there was no consensus about our military participation in the European theatre; on the contrary this caused deep divisions in Portuguese society. These divisions can be summed up in three major fractures:

- The first was at the heart of the republican regime, between the moderate non-interventionist republican parties and the interventionist more radical party of republicanism;
- The second fracture line was outside the political system to the right of the republican regime, with monarchists divided into *Alliedophiles* and Germanophiles.
- Finally, the third fracture, which was also outside the political system but to the left of the republican regime, with the workers' movement, the socialist movement and the anarchist movement divided between pro-war factions and pacifists.

Added to these divisions in society were the divisions within the political system. During the war years the Republic was run by many governments. All with different positions regarding the war. Furthermore, the governments fell because of the war and came to power to change the war policy. All with different aims. All with different strategies. And without Portugal being able to have a national strategy, for that very reason.

So, this was the context in which Portugal joined the war in May 1916, in which the Portuguese troops reached the trenches of Flanders in January 1917 and in which the country participated in the war until the armistice in November 1918.

In the political thoughts of the time it was difficult to see how defence of the homeland was being played out in the trenches of Flanders. This was not a traditional mission to defend the territory but was *avant la lettre* a mission in support of the State's foreign policy, in everything a precursor of the type of international military missions which we now call peace-keeping missions.

Portugal's presence in the Great War is the mark of Portuguese military intervention in the European theatre of the early 20th century, to which it would only return at the end of the century with a mission of the same nature to support external policy, now under the aegis of the United Nations and within the framework of peace-keeping operations in the Balkans.

I will not say that history is the teacher of life. But I will say that the knowledge produced in the academy must not be enclosed in the ivory tower of the universities. It

is a “public asset” which must be at the service of society. What better moment than the commemorations?

The commemorations are lay ritualisation liturgies of history in which, through public rituals, national communities celebrate memory, update the past and project the collective future. They are symbolic moments reproducing and reaffirming the national identity.

At a time when Portugal needs so much to believe in itself and to project its collective future, let us seize this moment. I am convinced that the government will know how to do so by articulating the scientific agenda and the civic ritual at this time that must and shall be one of affirmation of the national identity.

Looking at the past and thinking of the future, perhaps what historians have written about Portugal’s experience in 1914/1918 can at least help us to reflect on the errors we committed in the First World War which we should perhaps avoid committing in peace-keeping operations.

In the first place, we should not take part in an international intervention of this nature without major political consensus and the support of public opinion.

In the second place, we should not embark on an international intervention of this nature without complete military training and equipment as per the international standards of the armed forces with whom the Portuguese forces will be operating.

In the third place, the country’s political position must remain constant just as the relation between politicians and the military chiefs must remain close, in their support for the forces on the ground. In other words, there must be a national strategy.

Finally, on their return, it is important not to forget the material and symbolic recognition of combatants, in particular in memory of those who fell for their country.

Realising an international military mission as an instrument in support of the State’s external policy was what decided Portugal’s participation in the European war in the early 20th century. Once again, today it is what decides Portugal’s military participation in international missions out there, where international security and peace in the world are decided.

The contexts are different. Yesterday, they were war campaigns. A war between nations. Today, these are peace-keeping operations. Often, to bring an end to war between nations. Yesterday, like today, the values for which Portugal fought are the same: peace, freedom and democracy.