

Portugal in the Great War of 1914-1918

Nuno Lemos Pires

“The unknown soldier from Africa is far more unknown than the one from Flanders” (Arrifes, 2004: 27)¹



Portugal took part in the Great War on five different fronts: Angola, Mozambique, Flanders, the sea and internally². In Angola and Mozambique there was consensus, the defence of our colonies being seen as a priority by the various political alignments; in Flanders there were strong divisions as to Portugal's participation, both internally and externally. On the seas we did what we could with the means available. Internally, the problems were immense and the

conflictuality, unfortunately, was enormous. The sum of these five fronts was translated into a “gigantic” effort for Portugal. We will argue about what was probably the least but yet no less important effort of them all, occurring in Angola.

Portugal entered the Great War but was never actually ready to take part in it. The military reorganisation decided in 1911 was leagues away from being

¹ Image available on http://hemerotecadigital.cm-lisboa.pt/OBRAS/IlustracaoPort/1914/N456/N456_master/JPG/N456_0001_branca_t0.jpg (consulted on 2 January 2013)

² According to Nuno Severiano Teixeira we can also mention another front: the front of the “chanceries” (Nuno Severiano Teixeira in Arrifes, 2004: 15) – in which case there would be “six” fronts in the Great War.

completed³. The Navy also thought up ambitious plans but those also took their time coming into being⁴. The internal divisions continued in the years following the implantation of the Republic: between royalists and republicans, between royalists and between republicans. There was instability, military impreparation and internal conflictuality. These were all bad omens on the eve of entering a great war, and the priority was Africa, but priority does not translate into preparation.

The African Front

Africa had four German colonies: Togo, Cameroons, Southwest Africa (Namibia) and East Africa (Tanganyika). The last two had common borders with Angola and Mozambique, both Portuguese territories. For Portugal, the war in fact began in Africa and the first campaign took place in Angola.

As we have already stated, there was internal but also external consensus regarding the defence of the Portuguese colonies. London expressed its willingness to help Portugal in case of attack and “recommended that Portugal maintain its own forces to defend the territory in Africa”⁵. The British colony of the Union of South Africa mounted an intelligence-gathering system which kept the German colony of “Damaraland” (as “German Southwest Africa” was commonly known - *Deutsch-Südwestafrika, DSWA*) under constant surveillance. As we can read in the many documents available at the archives in London, the United Kingdom was very worried that the Germans might attempt to move between their two colonies (east and west) although such movements were unlikely to take place across Angola⁶.

The Portuguese government appointed a former minister of war, General Pereira de Eça, to Angola. Lieutenant Colonel Alves Roçadas was appointed to the first Portuguese expeditionary force which arrived in Moçâmedes on 27 September 1914⁷. The problem is easily described: in southern Angola there

³ See the chapter: Reorganização militar de 1911: Fraga, in Afonso e Gomes, 2010: 27-29.

⁴ See the chapter – Armada Portuguesa – Planos e realidades: Telo in Afonso e Gomes, 2010: 27-29.

⁵ Telo, 2010: 306.

⁶ AM – project GG, cota: NA-PRO DO119910

⁷ One battalion from Infantry 14, one machine gun platoon, one mountain artillery battery, one squadron from Cavalry 9 and members of various services” (Pires, 1997: 73). Image available on: <http://hemerotecadigital.cm->

existed an important Boer and German colony which tried to raise the local populations against Portuguese dominion; the German colony had some forces near the border⁸ (not many, as most of the 3.000 soldiers were concentrated in the south from whence the biggest threat was expected to come, from South Africa).

The Boers were naturally sympathetic to the Germans and so the South African offensive would take longer than the Portuguese could foresee. However, Portugal had taken precautions and had decreed mobilisation in August 1914, giving rise to an expeditionary force of 1525 men supported by a structure from the 14th Infantry Regiment (Viseu)⁹. The southern part of Angola had been the last to be pacified, so the setting in which the operations would take place was not the most favourable to the Portuguese



forces. In other words, in addition to the danger from the Germans, at any moment there could be an uprising by the populations in that area.

This was precisely the Germans' strategy for Angola; should there be any Portuguese provocation to the north of its colony Germany would respond by encouraging the populations to rebel. The greatest threat for the Germans was

lisboa.pt/OBRAS/IlustracaoPort/1916/N540/N540_master/JPG/N540_0001_branca_t0.jpg (consulted on 02JAN2013).

⁸ About 7.000 European settlers lived there. There was a garrison of 3.000 men whose mission was to defend an enormous, under populated and semi-desert territory" Martelo in Afonso e Gomes, 2010: 138.

⁹ Telo, 2010: 425.

a possible intervention to the south by South Africa so they concentrated most of their military force in that region.

The “causus belli” began in Naulila, at a frontier post where 3 Germans were killed, whilst the interpreter who accompanied them was taken prisoner (everything points to a badly conceived Portuguese provocation although no-one exactly knows if orders were received “from above” or it was on local initiative)¹⁰. The German response was immediate: they attacked the post at Cuangar causing the death of 21 soldiers¹¹ and the attacks on various border posts continued. Roçadas’s expedition thus concentrated in Naulila, which was the setting of an important battle (69 dead and 76 injured)¹². The Portuguese withdrew, General Pereira de Eça assumed command of the forces on the terrain, but in the end the Germans also withdrew.

The military defeat of the Germans by the South African forces ended the German threat (on 9 March 1915)¹³. However, the presence of Boers and Germans in southern Angola had led to the desired effects and consequently two more years of pacification ensued in that region. Successive national expeditions were thus sent here (for a description of the operations see Pires, 1997:73-74)¹⁴.

At the end of the Great War Portugal and the United Kingdom renewed their negotiations on the demarcation of the southern border of Angola. Among other details up for discussion was the supply of water from the Ruacaná Falls which would supply both sides of the border¹⁵.

The conflictuality in this southern region of Angola neither began nor ended with the Great War. But the difficult relations between possible opponents and allies gave rise to various combats and successive military expeditions being dispatched to the region, accompanied in many of the European chanceries by “almost” permanent negotiations, in particular between the British and the Germans.

¹⁰ See description in Pires, 1997: 73, Telo, 2010: 426 and Oliveira, 1994: 169-171

¹¹ “...killing 8 military and 1 civilian”, Telo, 2010: 426; “In this action Lieutenant Ferreira Durão (...) Lieutenant Machado, 1 European sergeant, 5 European soldiers and 13 natives were killed, as well as the shopkeeper Nogueira Machado” Oliveira, 1994: 171

¹² Telo, 2010: 426 and also listed by categories and origins in Oliveira, 1994: 175

¹³ Martelo in Afonso e Gomes, 2010: 138

¹⁴ Total dead and wounded in campaigns in southern Angola: 1.493 (not including bearers), Oliveira, 1994: 191

¹⁵ AM – Project GG, cota: NA-PRO FO608217.

It is only possible to understand the Angolan front in the Great War if we analyse it from the point of view of the African problem in general and as part of a global policy to defend the various interests in dispute throughout the world. To understand the Angolan front is also to try to understand the factors of conflictuality before and after the Great War, for that is the only way we will understand the true motives behind the various combats which took place long after the Germans had abandoned the territories in dispute. It is really worthwhile studying and analysing Angola in the Great War!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Academia Militar – Projeto de Investigação “O Exército Português na Grande Guerra (1914-1918”.

Afonso, Aniceto e Carlos de Matos Gomes (2010), *Portugal e a Grande Guerra 1814.1918*, Lisbon, Quidnovi.

Telo, António José (2010), *Primeira República I – Do Sonho à Realidade*, Lisbon, Editorial Presença.

Arrifes, Marco Fortunato (2004), *A Primeira Grande Guerra na África Portuguesa: Angola e Moçambique (1914-1918)*, Lisbon, Edições Cosmos and National Defence Institute.

Costa, Gomes da (1936), *A Guerra nas Colónias*, Lisbon, Edições Portugal Brasil.

Cidade, Hernâni (1933), *Portugal na Guerra Mundial: 1914-1918*, in *História de Portugal*, dir. Damião Peres, Vol. VIII, Barcelos;

Fraga, Luís Alves (1990), *Portugal e a Primeira Grande Guerra. Os objectivos Políticos e o Esboço da Estratégia Nacional 1914-16*, Lisbon, Universidade Técnica de Lisboa.

Martins, Ferreira (Dir.) (1934-1938), *Portugal na Grande Guerra*, II vols, Lisbon, Edições Ática.

Martins, Ferreira (1956), *Portugal na Guerra de 14/18*, Porto, Tipografia Modesto.

Pires, Nuno Lemos (1997), *Roteiro Histórico da Escola prática de Infantaria*, Mafra, edições EPI.

Oliveira, Ramires de (Coord) (1994), *História do Exército Português – Terceira Parte: a Grande Guerra*, Lisbon, Edições EME.