

Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Portugal)

By [Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses](#)

Summary

Establishing the attitude of Portuguese soldiers towards the First World War and their role in it is a difficult task. Largely illiterate men left relatively little trace of their opinion in the shape of letters and diaries – while officers, politically divided, portrayed soldiers' attitudes largely in order to suit their own immediate aims. Surviving accounts and official records suggest that while soldiers accepted the necessity of the conflict, they were increasingly angry at what they deemed to be their unfair treatment. The impossibility of leave was the soldiers' most serious complaint. Extreme refusal was exemplified by various mutinies in 1918.

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Introduction

The soldiers who made up the [Portuguese Expeditionary Corps](#) (CEP) arrived in [France](#) over the course of 1917. [Portugal's](#) entry in the conflict had been a matter of considerable controversy and so too was the decision to dispatch a military force to France, to fight on the [Western Front](#). There was little or no consensus in regard to this action, and nowhere was this truer than in the Portuguese army, wherein professional officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were in many cases at odds with the [government](#) on this issue. Their opposition, or indifference, to the war, affected the performance of the CEP and was a constant source of worry for the British military authorities, who attempted to impose strict limits on the Portuguese forces' growth and autonomy – even while admiring the fighting qualities of the average soldier, badly served, they believed, by those who commanded him.

There have been numerous attempts over the past few years to understand the frame of mind of Portuguese soldiers in the trenches. By and large, however, these depend overwhelmingly on Portuguese sources. Alternatively, British historians who include the CEP in their field of study rely almost exclusively on British sources. This article is intended as an attempt to blend both.

Conscription

The Army Gears up for War

The Portuguese army was meant to have undergone great reforms as a result of the Revolution of October 1910, which ushered in a Republic. A plan was unveiled in 1911 to transform a largely hostile (or at the very least apathetic) professional force into a Swiss-style nation-at-arms militia. This new army would also act as a school of republican virtues and citizenship in order to transform a population which remained indifferent, or even hostile, to the new regime.¹ To this end, citizens would undergo preparatory military instruction at the age of seventeen, be mobilized at the age of twenty, and, from then on, undergo regular refresher training. Little of this actually transpired, however, and the old officer corps survived, largely intact but wary of its future.² Positions of greatest responsibility were, as can be expected, attributed to officers who showed unambiguous support to the regime and its principal formation, [Afonso Costa's \(1871-1937\)](#) Democratic Party; these men were generally referred to as the "Young Turks". Portuguese citizens were henceforth called up for military service every year, but this was by no means a universal experience. The net was cast wider once war had been declared by [Germany](#), in March 1916. Portugal's belligerence saw a number of units gathered at Tancos for intensive training and large-scale manoeuvres – twelve [infantry](#) battalions, forming two brigades; three [artillery](#) groups; and one [cavalry](#)

regiment. This "Instruction Division" would form the basis of the 1st Portuguese Division, which began to be sent to France in January 1917, and which were joined by a third Brigade which had also trained in Tancos.

Popular Opposition to Recruitment and to Fighting in France

The recruitment process was by no means trouble-free. Anti-war [propaganda](#) began to be spread across Portugal from the moment the German declaration of war was delivered, and concentrations of troops such as the one at Tancos were prime targets for those who distributed it.³ On the one hand, anarcho-syndicalist elements recruited in cities such as Oporto and Lisbon were brought face to face with troops from [rural areas](#), and took the chance to spread their ideas; on the other, the activities of German-run agents should not be discounted.⁴ Attempts were also made to prevent troops from leaving their barracks for Tancos, as occurred on 22 May 1916 at the city of Covilhã, an important textile centre and the home of the Infantry 21 Regiment.⁵ Serious disturbances in Oporto in 1916, which involved shooting between troops and the police, were blamed by the military authorities on the effect of the soldiers' stay in Tancos, which had allegedly transformed them.

One possible response to military mobilization was desertion, made tempting by the lax controls over the border with [Spain](#), where those who fled were given the status of political exiles, deemed morally acceptable by virtue of the fact that there was a lack of widespread affection for the new republican authorities. Desertion became a real problem, especially on the eve of battalions' departure for Lisbon, in order to board the transports that would take them to France. This in turn served to fuel British frustration with the Portuguese military authorities, who were failing to ensure that those precious transports were being used to capacity. General [Nathaniel Barnardiston \(1858-1916\)](#), the head of the British Military Mission in Lisbon, reported on 10 August that 1,067 men had been missing from the latest levy to be sent to France.⁶ This tallied more or less with the numbers provided in the radically interventionist newspaper *O de Aveiro*, which reported the absence of 1,102 privates and corporals, thirty-seven NCOs and six officers from the latest shipment, before calling for radical measures against desertion.⁷

Criticism

Lack of Leadership

Criticism of the government's war policy was rife in Portugal, but it is difficult to pin it down when it comes to the CEP's soldiers, who were largely illiterate and who, once in France, had

few outlets for their feelings. Conversely, it is also the case that once in France they were cut off, for the most part, from anti-war propaganda, and entrusted with a mission which they had to perform to the best of their abilities, or face annihilation. Still, it seems to be the case that the professional officers' hostility to the conflict remained in place in many cases and constituted a serious barrier to good morale. [João Ferreira do Amaral \(1876-1931\)](#), who commanded a battalion (Infantry 15) of the 1st Division, noted in his memoirs how officers ridiculed soldiers they overheard in the trenches lamenting their fate, telling them that it was their fault they found themselves in France.⁸ General [Fernando Tamagnini de Abreu e Silva \(1856-1924\)](#), in his unpublished memoirs, confirms this sad fact, noting that:

many officers went to war against their will, and one can surmise the effects of their actions on the minds of the soldiers, from whom they did not hide their feelings. They continued in the war zone the old custom, unfortunately present in our Army, of criticizing everything and speaking ill of others irrespective of who heard them [...].⁹

In February 1918, each of the 1st Division's brigades was ordered to produce a report on the troops' morale, it having been noted, through intercepted correspondence and overheard conversations, that this had recently fallen – and that not all officers had tried to reverse the trend.¹⁰ Tamagnini's overall verdict was not too different from that of General Sir [Richard Haking \(1862-1945\)](#), commander of the XIth Corps, to which the CEP was attached for much of its active participation in the fighting in France. In an extensive report on the 1st Portuguese Division produced in August 1917, he noted that: "The moral [sic] of the whole force can only be described as bad, and in my opinion the division is quite unreliable, and if heavily attacked would break, simply for want of good leaders".¹¹

Political Awareness

The Illiterate Army of an Illiterate People

Under the electoral laws of the Portuguese Republic, only literate men could vote. What this meant in terms of political awareness is not immediately clear; what we do know is that the propaganda produced by the Sacred Union government and its supporters was insufficient in quantity and badly targeted, essentially preaching to the converted.¹² What the soldiers made of the causes of the war, and the enemy they were fighting, is thus hard to describe with much precision. While levels of education, political participation and political awareness were relatively high in the [cities](#), for most of the Portuguese population, rural in nature, the reality was very different. This population reacted against the wartime situation through

time-honoured practices such as the seizure and distribution of foodstuffs at what it considered to be a fair price, or through the reaffirmation of its Catholic identity. Many young men, as has been stated, deserted, and went into hiding within Portugal or in Spain. Jeffrey S. Bennett views the events at Fátima, where the final apparition on 13 October 1917,¹³ and the accompanying “sun-dance”, were witnessed by tens of thousands of pilgrims, as a genuine popular response to the Republic’s anticlericalism and the mounting apprehension over the war. These pilgrims, mostly drawn from Portugal’s peasant class, and their faith (so evident on that day), were viewed with disdain, if not horror, by the Republic’s leadership and local representatives.¹⁴ At Fátima, two worlds collided, and so too did they collide within the CEP, in the face of the enemy.

A Growing Sense of Abandonment

Whatever they thought about the politicians who had sent them to France, Portuguese soldiers were quickly made aware of developments at home when, in December 1917, [Sidónio Pais \(1872-1918\)](#) overthrew Afonso Costa’s government, arresting Costa and driving [José Maria Norton de Matos \(1867-1955\)](#), the former minister of war, into exile. For a time the mood changed; as one CEP chaplain put it in an intercepted letter, “There is no need to tell you that satisfaction with the success of the 8 December movement was general. May God illuminate our new leaders so that they may raise Portugal from the degrading state it was in”.¹⁵ For some time the CEP had received no reinforcements from home, British transport ships having been withdrawn from that service by the Admiralty. This had led to a widespread feeling of abandonment, while the numbers of men and of officers available for active service plummeted – at a time when the two Divisions were deployed side-by-side on the Western Front, as part of an autonomous Portuguese Army Corps. The impact on morale was great, not least because only officers were allowed to travel home on leave, and after Pais’ coup the numbers returning to the front plummeted. Bereft of a solid political power base, Pais turned to the army for the manpower – including the CEP’s officers – with which to run the country.

Mutiny

Increasingly convinced they had been offered up as a sacrifice and then forgotten, and struggling to endure the [Flanders winter](#), the mood of the Portuguese soldiers soured. In March, the decision was taken to remove most of the 1st Division from the frontline, the 2nd being assigned to General Haking’s XIth Army Corps; soon after, the 2nd Division’s withdrawal was also decided. During this period a first set of serious insubordinations took place. General Tamagnini mentioned in his memoirs an attempt to murder officers in Infantry 34, without

providing dates;¹⁶ he also mentioned the more serious episode involving Infantry 7, which when ordered to return to the line, mutinied and refused to move.¹⁷ According to a well-informed British observer, the men of the battalion had been promised six weeks of rest well behind the lines, but were suddenly told to the front, to take up a reserve role. Confronted by their divisional commander, General [Manuel de Oliveira Gomes da Costa \(1863-1929\)](#), they complained of the lack of leave, which did not affect officers; and when he withdrew, nothing having been resolved, they fired on his car. They only abandoned their guns when confronted with artillery.¹⁸ In April 1918 another mutiny broke out, this time in England, at the Siege Artillery School in Horsham. British forces were deployed to quell the mutiny, but fortunately Portuguese officers were able to restore order. Further mutinies broke out in the autumn of 1918 when, with the blessing of General [Tomás António Garcia Rosado \(1864-1937\)](#), the CEP's new commander, a number of officers tried to prepare their battalions for a return to the frontlines, from which the Portuguese infantry had been absent since the crushing defeat at the [battle of La Lys](#) (9 April 1918). The same British source mentions four acts of collective disobedience or actual mutiny between 26 and 29 September 1918, before concluding,

The men's point of view has undergone little change during the past 6 or 8 months. They still complain that all promises made to them by the Portuguese Government or by their officers have been broken, and in particular the promises as to leave and replacement. They very justly complain that the officers get leave and replacement, while they do not. There is no sympathy between them and their officers, and the majority have no intention to serve under their officers in battle. If units could be got up to the front, desertion would increase very rapidly.¹⁹

[Augusto Casimiro dos Santos \(1889-1967\)](#), one of these officers intent on taking up the fight once more, described other mutinies, which ended with loss of life, affecting his unit, Infantry 23 (which did return to the front in the very last days of the war in October).²⁰

Trench Life

Censored Correspondence

The sector in Flanders occupied by the Portuguese forces, because of its high water table, required that the shallow trenches be complemented by sandbag walls to give the soldiers more protection. It was hard to defend, as a result, but, until March 1918, it was spared the full attention of the German army, receiving only the occasional raid. Like all other soldiers on the Western Front, the men of the CEP had to adapt to this new reality, having undergone supplementary training once in France. Their time in France was of course difficult, and their

censored [correspondence](#) allows us a glimpse into their principal preoccupations.²¹ As stated already, the first was the unavailability of [leave](#), which meant that soldiers consumed by the desire to return home were forced to adopt a number of stratagems, which mainly involved feigning illness, or finding a sympathetic medical officer. However, there were other concerns. One involved the quality and – after April 1918 – the quantity of [food](#). Haking wrote despairingly of the Portuguese that they did not wish for as much meat and cheese as was contained in the British rations: “They want to fill their stomach everyday with vegetables as they do at home”²². Another was the cold, the effects of which preoccupied both the troops and the British High Command.²³ Last, of course, was battle itself. The ferocity of [modern warfare](#), the Germans’ skill at waging war, and, after a time, the lack of leave and reinforcements, fed into a growing collective sense that no-one would return home intact, if at all. Many found it simply impossible to convey the experience of battle to their families at home.

Relations with Civilians and Allied soldiers

There were other factors that should be kept in mind. One was the very small number of chaplains, distrusted by the anticlerical Republic and accepted only after a large and well orchestrated campaign by the Catholic [Church](#) and the laity (even if the army refused to pay their salaries). Existing accounts and the available [historiography](#) suggest that the chaplains’ presence brought great comfort to what was, overwhelmingly, a Catholic force – and that it was these chaplains, rather than the army authorities, who made an effort to provide the troops with leisure activities during their time away from the trenches.²⁴ Another was the generalized contempt felt for General Staff officers, who, it was felt, rarely came to the trenches and, when they did, were greeted with a specially composed song, the *Hino dos Caxapins* (The Caxapins’ Anthem), “Caxapins” referring to those who had found a comfortable niche far behind the frontlines. A third factor was the difficult relations that evolved with both French civilians (for whom the badly paid Portuguese were not as an attractive a guest as the British) and other Allied troops. Relations with British soldiers seem to have varied greatly (worsening after the 9 April defeat),²⁵ although most accounts refer to an absolute incompatibility with the Australians. It should be noted, however, that one of the best-selling works on Portugal’s war experience, Major [André Francisco Brun’s \(1881-1926\) A Malta das Trincheiras](#), painted a very positive view of the soldiers’ relationship with both civilians and fellow combatants. Brun, who had a regular column in the interventionist republican newspaper *A Capital*, depicted his soldiers as brave, stoic, good-humoured, and easily adaptable men, who understood the historical importance of the mission they had been handed and whom others found it impossible to dislike. Other accounts, published at

the time or much later, paint a very different picture.²⁶

Casualties

Until 9 April 1918, combat-related [casualties](#) were relatively light, the product of the occasional German raid and regular shelling. Many of the losses suffered by the CEP had been incurred from illness or through accident. On the eve of the CEP's defining battle, losses stood at 1,044 killed, 2,183 wounded, 1,594 gassed, 403 injured in accidents, 102 taken [prisoner](#), and ninety-four missing – a far cry from the 4,000 monthly casualties that Norton de Matos had predicted in the summer of 1917. The losses incurred on 9 April, however, tell a very different story, one which clearly illustrates the state of mind of the force. Casualties on the day included 398 killed (including twenty-nine officers) and 6,585 prisoners taken (including 270 officers).²⁷ The disproportion between killed and taken captive is most eloquent, and speaks not only of an inability to react to the new tactics deployed by the German army in its [Spring offensives](#), but also an unwillingness to fight on once the communication to the rear had been cut off.

Conclusion

On 30 April 1918 Sir [Lancelot Douglas Carnegie \(1861-1933\)](#), British Minister at Lisbon, was informed by the Foreign Office that: "Our military authorities absolutely decline to employ Portuguese troops as a fighting force [...] they regard them not only as useless, but dangerous". It was envisaged that they might serve as a labour corps, or, at most, "as drafts under British officers".²⁸ A close observer of the CEP since early 1917, the British High Command now decided to use the disaster of La Lys to bring to an end what had always been, in its eyes, a source of apprehension. Ignored by a regime that claimed to act in the people's name without ever consulting it, badly led, and their needs ignored by an officer corps increasingly at war with the government (and in many cases uninterested in the fight at hand), Portuguese soldiers were in an unenviable position, their focus lying primarily on survival.

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- [1914-1918. We Know This War by Heart. Portugal and the Great War \(Universidade Nova de Lisboa\) \(Online Exhibition\)](#)

- [Amaral, João Ferreira do \(in Portuguese\): A Mentira da Flandres e... o mêdo! Lisbon 1922 \(Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal\) \(Book\)](#)
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Key Person(s)

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