

Portuguese India

By [Célia Reis](#)

Summary

Although not directly involved in military operations, Portuguese India was linked to World War I through the capture of German and Austrian ships and the imprisonment of their crewmen. This period was also one of internal political turmoil and there was some change in Portuguese India's foreign trade.

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The Political Situation

The war coincided with a moment of political change in Portuguese India: the replacement of Governor [Couceiro da Costa \(1870-1925\)](#) by [Freitas Ribeiro \(1868-1929\)](#) in 1917. After the passage of the Portuguese decentralization laws of 1914, the [colony](#) was supposed to have been permitted more autonomy through an Organic Letter (statute). However, the statute was only published in July 1917 and suspended before entering into force, as in other Portuguese colonies. Ribeiro had intended to implement the statute but changed his position with the intention of reducing local participation in the Government Council. This led to conflict with the local population and accusations of nativism. Ribeiro was replaced as governor after the war.

Economy

Portuguese India was usually in commercial deficit during the war and, between 1914 and 1918, total exports were only 35.2-38.4 percent of imports. This was due to an underdeveloped and unproductive agricultural sector, though the majority of Portuguese

India's exports were mainly agricultural products. Salt was particularly important and the years 1915 to 1917 saw an increase in its export. Climate conditions hindered production from 1918-1919. There was a surplus of rice in [Rangoon](#), but a lack of means of [transport](#) prevented the import of supplies. The Portuguese Governor sensed danger of a famine and the consequent possibility of a revolt.

The value of re-exported goods grew during the war. At first, these were [German](#) goods forwarded to [British India](#); later, British Indian goods were exported to [Portuguese Africa](#), as coal was being re-exported from Bengal to Basra in 1918.

Beyond this moment, the observed inflation led to an increase, as elsewhere, of the subsidy to the state employees. This period also coincided with a shortage of silver in India, forcing the issuance of cedula currency in 1918-1919.

German Ships in Mormugão (1914-1916)

In August 1914, six ships, five German and one [Austrian](#), were moored near Mormugão. Some were unloading goods in Bombay, others at sea. Due to the unfolding conflict, the ships sailed to the Portuguese port and remained there.

Portuguese authorities were concerned about maintaining their [neutrality](#), despite continuing to regard [Britain](#) as a friendly country. Thus, the Ministry in Lisbon ordered the governor to watch the ships' crews, preventing any action against the English. One of the most pressing issues was [communications](#), preventing information from reaching crew members. Therefore, the use of radiotelephone was forbidden. Trouble also arose concerning the ships' cargo which originated from England or other friendly nations. Companies complained, demanding the return of the cargo or the prevention of sale.

Some of the crewmen were from places like Djibouti or Italy, which forced the Portuguese governor to negotiate their return or to solve problems related to their relationship with the Germans.

Portugal in the War

The Ships and Their Crews

On 23 February 1916, [Portugal](#) seized German ships in all of its ports. It also captured the five German ships (Lichtenfels, Marienfels, Brisbane, Kommodore, and Numantia) in the port of Mormugão. On 26 June the Austrian ship Vorwaerts was requisitioned. Portugal renamed the ships, respectively, Goa, Diu, Damão, Mormugão, Pangim and Índia. Germany subsequently declared war on Portugal.

The ships' cargo continued to be a problem for the Portuguese authorities. Some perishable goods were sold. Due to a lack of storage space, three ships left for Bombay after difficult negotiations with the English. Their goods were sold there, the proceeds going to the [Portuguese government](#). In 1919 laws were passed to reimburse the companies' losses, though several companies only acted upon these years later.

The ships' crew were initially held on land. Under pressure from the British, the Portuguese authorities later [imprisoned](#) them in the fortress of Aguada and in the military quarters of Bicholim and Pangim. They were joined by other Germans who worked for an English company. The Portuguese authorities had difficulty supplying basic goods and guarding the prisoners, as military forces were limited. This motivated complaints from the governor.

Many prisoners became ill and needed to be transferred. At the insistence of the governor, the Portuguese government decided to send some to Angra do Heroísmo in the Azores, others to Portugal. The remaining prisoners stayed in India even after the end of the conflict due to a lack of transportation. It was only in October 1919 that the Austrian prisoners returned home. The Germans had to wait until the end of the same year.

Defence and Censorship

Portuguese India did not face an immediate military threat, although the German corsair ship Wolf passed through its waters in February 1917. As a means of defence, the British Indian government requested a surveillance post and the Portuguese installed a [telegraph](#) station in Cabo de Rama. Without the proximity of a greater danger, however, the military forces available in the colony were very limited.

Lines of communication passed through British India. The governments of British and Portuguese India agreed to [censor](#) correspondence in the Portuguese colony.

Conclusion

World War One impacted Portuguese India in different phases. First, the colony experienced the conflict as a neutral country, though one which reflected pro-English positions due to the interests associated with its neighbouring colony. After 1916, the main problems were due to the nationalization of the German and Austrian ships in the port of Mormugão.

One of the reasons Portugal participated in the war was to defend its colonies against the interests of other countries. However, the conclusion of the war did not eradicate the threat. During the [Paris Peace Conference](#) in 1919, there were rumours about [French](#) interest in Portuguese India, forcing Portugal to launch a diplomatic effort to maintain its colony.

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External Links

- [Barreiros, Eduardo / Barreiros, Luís \(in Portuguese\): I Guerra Mundial 1914-1918. Índia Portuguesa. Prisioneiros de guerra Alemães e Austríacos em campos de concentração em Goa, 4 October 2009 \(Clube Filatélico de Portugal\) \(Article\)](#)
- [O Estado da Índia Portuguesa na Grande Guerra \(in Portuguese\) \(Marinha 1914-18\) \(Article\)](#)

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