

Portuguese Macau

By [Célia Reis](#)

Summary

During World War One, Macau's main problem was its relationship with China. This stemmed from the consequences of its internal tensions and the lack of recognition of the Portuguese borders. However, its defence was weak, mainly based on local elements.

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War in Europe and Tensions in China

The impact of the Great War on Macau was rooted in the colony's former issues: its relationship with and vicinity to [China](#), involving both the indefiniteness of Macau's borders and the political agitation in China. From the beginning of the war, many Chinese [refugees](#) came from Hong Kong to Macau. At the beginning of September 1914, the governor estimated the town's inhabitants at 120,000, many of whom were likely pirates or revolutionaries. This required more surveillance; however, military and police forces were not enough. Thus, the governor created the Volunteer Corp, with many adhesions.

Simultaneously, there was substantial unrest in southern China due to internal problems, which also impacted the colony Macau. For instance, in October 1914 authorities caught wind of a plan intending to cause trouble that was linked to Macau. They took measures to avoid it by forbidding any type of manifestation or [propaganda](#). Then authorities increased surveillance in the Chinese neighbourhood, contracting Chinese police and using military troops. In December 1915, when agitation increased after the proclamation of the monarchy in China, surveillance was expanded to cover the whole town.

[Germany](#) declared war on [Portugal](#) in March 1916, when China was in the midst of great turmoil as a result of the newly announced monarchy. During this time, the governor of

Macau feared an invasion. Now the situation was linked with the enemies in Europe: according to his information, 400 Germans lived in Guangdong and spread propaganda against foreigners. He thought this could provoke a revolt hostile to the Portuguese, as in Hong Kong, where three conspiracies were discovered. Later, more refugees, especially from Guangdong, came to Macau. Naturally, it resulted in more intensive surveillance and increased control of people entering and leaving Macau. Meanwhile, he began [censoring](#) mail and [telegraph wires](#). However, it proved difficult to carry out due to the necessary translation of Chinese letters.

The War as a Possible Resolution of Border Disagreement

Despite the agreement between the [Portuguese](#) and [Chinese governments](#) in 1887, Macau's borders were not established, and instead postponed for a future agreement. However, Chinese claims, especially in Guangdong, never permitted it. Now, in October 1914, the governor sought to resolve the issue, suggesting that since Portugal supported its ally, [Great Britain](#), it could benefit from delimiting the territory, which would end the agitation over Macau. In 1916, there were developments in this matter: while the Portuguese authorities had plans for a Pacific occupation of Lapa, one of the contested islands, Chinese forces dominated the same; there were some problems with Chinese ships in Portuguese waters, too. After that, conversations with the Guangdong government took place and its representative went to Macau.

Necessity of Troops

This situation made it necessary to deploy more troops, since the Macanese garrison was very limited and vulnerable. In response to demands to Lisbon for more forces and military equipment, the Portuguese government asked for justifications for the request. A small contingent came from [India](#). Thus, the solution was to transform the Volunteer Corp into active troops. In March 1916, the governor asked permission to impose police service on all Portuguese inhabitants, but the minister refused. Only in the summer of 1917 did the ministry in Lisbon consider it essential to send troops to Macau to protect the territory. However, it was very difficult to arrange [transportation](#); in the beginning of 1918 military forces assigned to Macau were fighting in Mozambique and authorities did not permit their transfer.

Other Aspects of Local Life

As in other warring nations, inflation made it necessary to increase salaries in Macau; local markets did not have enough goods, but other aspects of the economy and finance were

maintained without significant changes. Local authorities offered 30,000 pounds to the “Mother homeland”, especially to help [hospitals](#) and soldiers’ families. To overcome students’ inability to travel to Portugal, the local high school implemented a higher level of education.

Conclusion

At the [Paris Peace Conference](#) following the war, Portuguese delegates tried to discuss Macau’s borders, but without success. In conclusion, in spite of its distance from the war, Macau was affected to a certain degree, but was unable to use the conflict to solve pre-existing problems, which remained largely unchanged after the war.

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