

Women's Mobilization for War (Portugal)

By [Maria Alice Samara](#)

Summary

The participation of Portugal in the First World War opened up a very important discussion in the political field, dividing those who defended Portuguese intervention and those who questioned this option. In March 1916, shortly after Germany's declaration of war, a group of Portuguese women founded the Portuguese Women's Crusade (Cruzadas das Mulheres Portuguesas - CMP), aiming to support the Portuguese war effort. This article will contextualize this organization, both in the Portuguese political scene and in the context of feminist activism.

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Introduction

Women's studies is a relatively new field in Portugal. Although there were some initiatives in the 1960s, it was only after the 1974 revolution¹ that significant attention to and interest in the theme developed.² Today, women's studies is a flourishing field of investigation with a wide variety of academic works and differing theoretical approaches. Women's studies and women's movements and activism in the late 19th and beginning of the 20th century in particular have been the subject of several academic inquiries.³

The Portuguese Women's Crusade (CMP) movement was the most tangible example of women's mobilization during the war. To understand it, two key issues must be addressed: firstly, women's activism in the early 20th century; secondly, the political division brought about by the question of intervention and the CMP's role in defending one side of this debate.

Women's Mobilization for War

Women's Activism before the Portuguese Women's Crusade

Although it is possible to find the roots of women's movements in the 19th century, it was only in the first decades of the 20th century that the first feminist organizations (understood as a plural movement)⁴ were created and that women's activism became more important in society. João Esteves argues that it is not possible to disassociate the initial feminist phenomenon from [pacifist](#) ideals.⁵ However, this intimate connection would not continue during the war period.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the most active women's organization was the *Liga Republicana das Mulheres Portuguesas* (Republican League of Portuguese Women, founded in 1909). At this point, the feminist movement was clearly politicized and it can be understood as part of a cultural strategy, or "revolution," which shared common ground with freethinkers and republicans.

Part of the women engaged in the League shared political space with, and fought similar battles to, those in the republican movement. While it is certainly the case that not all women who examined their own role in society were republican, it nevertheless remains true that the most influential among them, like the journalist [Ana de Castro Osório \(1872-1935\)](#), the teacher and journalist [Maria Veleda \(1871-1955\)](#), the physician [Carolina Beatriz Ângelo \(1877-1911\)](#) and [Adelaide Cabete \(1867-1935\)](#) also a physician, had particularly close relations with republican politics. These four women, though they had different backgrounds, played key roles in several political and civic fields. Carolina Beatriz Ângelo was the first woman to vote in the 1911 elections, after a legal battle in the courts, arguing that, because she knew how to read and write, was the "head of the family" (she was a widow) and was of age, she could not be deprived of her political right to vote. Adelaide Cabete was one of the most important names in women's organizations and in the diffusion of feminist ideals. She defended the need for equal rights even in Freemasonry. Maria Veleda advocated for the extension of emancipation ideals to working class women. Finally, Ana de Castro Osório, a renowned writer, famously supported the Divorce and Family Laws promulgated by the Republican regime.

Part of the republican movement imagined an ideal "Republican Woman", fighting alongside in their common causes. Consequently, feminists expected to acquire in the new republican regime the civil and political rights that they had been denied during the constitutional monarchy. These expectations were ultimately not fulfilled but there was a close relationship

between republicans and the most politically, socially and culturally active women. In spite of their own internal divisions (on the issue of the universal suffrage, for example), these women supported the republicans during the regime's early crises, such as the monarchical incursions of 1911 and 1912.

Despite the divisions in the feminist movement, there were still signs of organizational vitality. New organizations appeared which did not have a close connection with the republicans: in 1912, the Union of Socialist Women was created and 1914 saw the appearance of the *Conselho Nacional das Mulheres Portuguesas* (Portuguese National Council of Women 1914-1947), a non-partisan organization without a political or religious orientation which was the Portuguese branch of the International Council of Women.

Portuguese feminism across the political spectrum was a moderate movement without radical actions which defended women's social, political and cultural emancipation as well as their civil and political rights (namely, the right to vote). In a country with high female illiteracy rates, women fought for the right to a better and more comprehensive education. The Portuguese feminist movement was also concerned with the working conditions of women, with the defence of a woman's right to freely chose her professional occupation, the abolition of [prostitution](#) and with other social causes such as the fight against alcoholism.

Apart from personal relations between individual Portuguese women and other international feminist intellectuals and activists, Portuguese feminist organizations established relations with other women's organizations, namely with the International Women Suffrage Alliance and the International Council of Women. Adelaide Cabete, the founder of the Portuguese National Council of Women, was present in two international feminist meetings, in Rome in 1923 (organized by the International Women Suffrage Alliance) and in Washington in 1925 (organized by the International Council of Women).

Political Division in Portuguese society

Participation in the First World War opened a very important debate in Portuguese society and a cleavage between its supporters and the vast and heterogeneous group of political agents and groups who, for different reasons, stood against intervention in the war, namely on the [Western Front](#).

[Portugal's](#) participation in the war was principally defended by the Democratic Party, led by [Afonso Costa \(1871-1937\)](#), the Evolutionist party of [António José de Almeida](#), part of the Socialist party and the anarchist movement, as well as some economical agents. The "war coalition" needed to enlist different groups and agents to aid in the task of mobilizing a divided society that was, in politicized circles, pro-Entente but which, as a result of war-

related difficulties, needed to understand why Portugal was going to fight in [France](#).

One of the most important voices defending Portuguese participation in the First World War was that of Ana de Castro Osório who was extraordinarily active during this period (particularly for the Propaganda and Work Organization Committee of the CMP). Ana de Castro Osório, alongside other women, founded the *Pela Pátria* women's committee in 1914. It was "...the first attempt to unite the Portuguese to the war effort. This organization collected donations, clothing and materials for deployed soldiers and victims of war, working alongside municipalities, female schoolteachers and other women's associations."⁶

The Portuguese Women's Crusade

The Portuguese Women's Crusade was an organization of the so-called first wave of Portuguese feminism⁷ founded in the context of the Portuguese First Republic (1910-1926). It has been studied as a key feature of the history of Portuguese feminism.

In 1916, after the German declaration of war on 9 March, it became necessary to congregate all putative agents to help maintain the [home front's morale](#). The Portuguese Women's Crusade was founded on 20 March by a group of women led by [Elzira Dantas Machado \(1865-1942\)](#), wife of the then President of the Republic [Bernardino Machado \(1851-1944\)](#). Elzira Dantas Machado was an important agent of women's activism, one of the founders of the League of Republican Women and president of the Portuguese Association of Feminist Propaganda (*Associação de Propaganda Feminista*). Among the CMP's several founding members could be found the wives and daughters of important politicians and military officers deeply involved in war policy such as [Alzira Costa \(1875-1970\)](#) – wife of the Democratic Party leader Afonso Costa –, [Esther Norton de Matos \(1866-1941\)](#) – wife of the military and republican, at that time War Minister, [José Maria Norton de Matos \(1867-1955\)](#) – and [Amélia Lêote do Rego](#), wife of the [Jaime Daniel Leote do Rego \(1867-1923\)](#), military and republican, at that time the commander of the Naval Division). Ana de Castro Osório, one of the most important voices for interventionist strategy, was also a founding member and she would be the second and last president of the CMP after 1920. The Republican League of Portuguese Women and the Association for Feminist Propaganda joined these efforts.⁸ However, the CMP was a heterogeneous organization with several non-republican members. It did not want to be perceived as a "political" organization and brought together women of different political and cultural backgrounds.⁹

According to its statutes,¹⁰ the CMP was a patriotic and humanitarian institution, aiming to provide material and moral assistance to those in need due to the state of war with [Germany](#).

These women wanted to mobilize efforts to assist both the soldiers at the front and their families back home (assuming, for example, the responsibility for the organization *Obra Maternal* to help the war orphans). The CMP was organized in different commissions (all elected every three years) with distinctive tasks such as [propaganda](#), donations, hospitalization, nursing and assistance to deployed military personnel, their wives and families. Members' fees and other initiatives like "patriotic" lotteries financed their activities. The organization also relied on donations, some of them from [Brazil](#) and the [Portuguese colonies](#).¹¹

The CMP launched several initiatives and projects, the majority of which were closely linked to the idea of women as caregivers. Nevertheless, the women from the Crusade rejected the idea that their work was restricted to the field of charity. The CMP was involved in the management of [hospitals](#) (the president of this committee was Alzira Costa). In Lisbon, the CMP was responsible for the Campolide Hospital which was the training centre for the Crusade nurses and also for the Portuguese Military Hospital of Hendaye. The Crusade was responsible for the Military Institute for the Re-education of Disabled Veterans in Lisbon. Furthermore, led by medical doctor [Sofia da Conceição Quintino \(1879-1964\)](#), the CMP organized the training of [nurses](#) who would work in the military hospitals in Portugal and with the [Portuguese Expeditionary Corps](#) in France. Female nurses (called "lady nurses" because the majority of them were from the upper echelons of society) were also accepted in the Portuguese [Red Cross](#) and a nursing school was founded. In July 1918, twelve nurses were incorporated into the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps (CEP) in the 1.^o Auxiliary Group of Lady Nurses (1.^o Grupo Auxiliar de Damas Enfermeiras).¹²

The nurses from the CMP, according to Decree 3306,¹³ had to comply with several conditions: age between twenty and thirty years old (although during wartime, the age limit was extended to forty years); physical robustness and the absence of any contagious disease; literacy (second degree primary instruction exam or a literacy education recognized by the CMP); "good civil behaviour and perfect moral dignity";¹⁴ Portuguese, or that of an allied country, nationality (providing that the candidate was a long-term resident in Portugal). The CMP gave preference to those candidates who had prior nursing practice, were studying in medical school and knew French or English. Given these requirements, the recruitment of CMP nurses could only be made within a minority group in Portuguese society.

The Crusade, influenced by other countries' initiatives, would also adopt the idea of "[War Godmothers](#)", although the earliest organization of this kind, presided by Sofia Burnay de Melo Breyner (1875-1948), was not connected to the Crusade.¹⁵ The CMP created a "War

Godchildren" section, designed for providing support and comfort (namely epistolary communication) to the troops.

The organization participated in the effort to help the Portuguese military and civilian [prisoners of war](#), working closely with the Committee to Aid Military and Civil Portuguese Prisoners of War.¹⁶ In 1918, the Committee for the Protection of the Portuguese War Prisoners was created in Lisbon, mobilizing mothers, daughters and sisters in response to the appeal made by Livia Fachada, wife of a war prisoner.¹⁷

There were also more politically conservative women's organisations, such as *Assistência das Portuguesas às Vítimas da Guerra* (Portuguese Women's Assistance to the War Victims - APVG) which had ties to the old monarchic aristocracy. APVG had delegations in major Portuguese cities, provided assistance to soldier's families and sent warm clothing to the frontline. Its intention to train war nurses was frustrated by the government, but a group of at least twenty women from the ranks of APVG would later become lady nurses with the Red Cross and were stationed in Ambleteuse (France).¹⁸

During *Sidonismo*, an authoritarian political experience led by President Sidónio Pais (1872-1918) in 1917-1918, CMP activity decreased due to the political opposition of the regime and there were accusations made regarding financial issues against women of the CMP. Pais and his entourage encouraged the charitable participation of different women in the war effort but not in a way politically related to the interventionist republicans. In January 1918, by the Decree 3732,¹⁹ all of the hospital institutions of the CMP fell under the supervision of the War Ministry and the CMP's patriotic lottery was cancelled. After the end of the First World War and the return of the Portuguese prisoners, the activity of the CMP decreased even further. The CMP was formally abolished in 1938 (during the *Estado Novo* period) and its assets transferred to the League of Combatants of the Great War.

Conclusion

In Portugal's divided wartime society, some of the most politically active women collaborated in the war effort alongside the majority of republican male politicians. The formation of the CMP congregated women already engaged in feminist movements and others who wanted to help in a context of severe difficulties and crisis. Without making any feminist claims, the women of the CMP felt that this was an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to work – for example, the experience of war nurses was very important for the development of the legitimacy of secular women in this professional occupation – as well as their organizational skills and capacities. In spite of not having achieved immediate gains, namely the right to

vote, women's mobilization during World War One was a way women could have a voice in the public sphere and demonstrate that they should and could play a more active role in society.

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Notes

1. Vaquinhas, Irene: Linhas de investigação para a história das mulheres nos séculos XIX e XX. Breve esboços [Lines of research into the history of women in the XIXth and XXth centuries. Brief Sketches], in História. Revista da Faculdade de Letras III série, vol. 3 (2002), pp. 201-221. [↑](#)
2. The Committee of the Feminine Condition (Comissão da Condição Feminina), created in 1977, had a significant role in the development of women's studies. In the 1980s, there was a growing interest in women's studies and, in 1985, two influential interdisciplinary conferences were held in Lisbon and Coimbra. In 1991, the Portuguese women's studies association was created. It has published since 1999 the journal *ex-aequo* (Women's Studies, Gender Studies and Feminist Studies). One of the most important milestones for women's studies was the creation of the MA at the Open University in 1995 and Faces of Eve (Faces de Eva) in 1997, today a working group within the I&D unit CESNOVA in School of Social and Human Studies with an academic journal (founded in 1999). [↑](#)
3. Some of the most important authors are Anne Cova, João Esteves, Maria Regina Tavares da Silva, Vanda Gorjão, Paulo Guinote, Irene Vaquinhas, Cecília Barreiras, Natividade Monteiro, Isabel Lousada and Fátima Mariano. Fernando Catroga also wrote about the organized feminist movement in the beginning of the 20th century and its relation to other cultural and political movements. João Esteves and Zília Osório de Castro coordinated a very important dictionary on the subject. [↑](#)
4. Cova, Anne: Mulheres e Associativismo em França, Itália e Portugal (1888-1939) [Women's Associativism. A Comparative approach. France and Portugal (1900-1918)]. In: Villaverde, Manuel / Wall, Karin / Aboim, Sofia / Silva, Filipe Carreira da (eds.): Itinerários. A Investigação nos 25 Anos do ICS, Lisbon, Imprensa de Ciências Sociais 2008, pp. 583-602. [↑](#)
5. Esteves, João: Os primórdios do feminismo em Portugal. A 1ª década do século XX [The beginnings of Feminism in Portugal. The first decade of the XXth century], Penélope 25 (2001), pp. 87-112. [↑](#)
6. Osório de Castro, Zília / Esteves, João (eds.): Dicionário do Feminino (séculos XIX e XX) [Dictionary in the Feminine (XIX- XX Centuries)], Lisbon 2005, pp. 224-225. [↑](#)

7. In English, material on the League is available in Ribeiro de Meneses, Filipe: Portugal 1914-1926. From the First World War to Military Dictatorship, Bristol 2004. [↑](#)
8. Monteiro, Natividade: Pela Pátria e pela República. As Mulheres Republicanas na 1ª. Guerra Mundial, in: Pinto, Teresa (ed.): Percursos, Conquistas e Derrotas das Mulheres na 1ª. República [For the Fatherland and the Republic. Republican Women in the First World War], Lisbon, Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, Grupo de Trabalho para as Comemorações Municipais do Centenário da República—Biblioteca-Museu República e Resistência 2010. [↑](#)
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10. Estatutos da Cruzada das Mulheres Portuguesas, Lisbon, Imprensa Nacional 1916 apud Mariano, Fátima: As Mulheres e a República. Casal de Cambra 2011. [↑](#)
11. Interview with Elzira Dantas Machado, A Capital, 21 April 1917. [↑](#)
12. Fraga, Luís Alves de: Organizações Femininas Portuguesas [Portuguese Women’s Organizations], in: Afonso, Aniceto / Gomes, Carlos de Matos: Portugal e a Grande Guerra, Porto 2010. [↑](#)
13. Diário do Governo, n.º 139, 21 August 1917. [↑](#)
14. Decree 3306, Diário do Governo, n.º 139, 21 August 1917. [↑](#)
15. Moura, Lúcia de Brito: Madrinhas de Guerra [War Godmothers], in: Fernanda Rollo, Maria (ed.): Dicionário de História da Primeira República e do Republicanismo, vol. I, Lisboa 2013, pp. 744-746. [↑](#)
16. Mariano, Fátima: Os esquecidos da Guerra. O apoio das mulheres aos prisioneiros da 1.ª Guerra, Revista Militar 5 (1912), pp. 527-543. [↑](#)
17. Ibid. [↑](#)
18. Moura, Lúcia de Brito: Assistência das Portuguesas às Vítimas de Guerra [Portuguese women’s assistance to the victims of war], in: Fernanda Rollo, Maria (eds.): Dicionário de História da Primeira República e do Republicanismo, vol. I, Lisboa 2013. [↑](#)
19. Diário do Governo, n.º 8, 8 January 1918. [↑](#)

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External Links

- [Carolina Beatriz Ângelo \(in Portuguese\) \(Centro de Documentação e Arquivo Feminista\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Correia, Rosa de Lurdes Matias Pires \(in Portuguese\): O Conselho Nacional das Mulheres Portuguesas: A Principal Associação de Mulheres da Primeira Metade do Século XX \(1914-1947\), 2013 \(Universidade Nova de Lisboa\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Lousada, Isabel \(in Portuguese\): Pela Pátria: A Cruzada das Mulheres Portuguesas \(1916-1938\) \(Universidade Nova de Lisboa\) \(Article\)](#)
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