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Civil-Military Relations during World War I (Portugal)

By [Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses](#)

Portugal went to war in March 1916 with a government and an army that did not sit comfortably with each other. The young republican regime's relationship with its armed forces was difficult despite its popularity among a small number of officers and a larger number of non-commissioned officers (NCOs). The Republic was seen as essentially hostile to the existence of a powerful officer caste. Matters were made worse by Portugal's controversial intervention in the Great War and the subsequent decision to send an expeditionary force to France. Many within the army saw themselves as a sacrificial offering made by politicians for purely partisan gain. Unsurprisingly, the army was a mainstay of the anti-interventionist Sidónio Pais, who took power in December 1917 and held it until his murder one year later.

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Introduction

Like all other aspects of [Portugal's](#) experience in the First World War, the key issue of civil-military relations was to a large extent shaped by the youth of the Portuguese Republic, proclaimed in October 1910, and its leadership's resulting inexperience. This leadership stormed into power, to a large extent thanks to the army's indifference, as the events of 4 October 1910 showed. Militarily, the new government had only an ill-defined plan for establishing a nation-at-arms style of defence, proscribing the existing professional officer corps.^[1]

Not surprisingly, such a plan, although never implemented, indisposed the officer caste. Relations between civilian politicians and military men got off to a bad start. The war, and certain crucial decisions, would worsen them. It left the two sides at odds and set the scene for the 1926 coup that brought the republican experiment to its end. After a period of indecision, this paved the way for [António de Oliveira Salazar's \(1889-1970\) New State](#).

The purpose of this article is to examine the nature of the relationship between the professional army and the republican regime it served, and to trace how this relationship evolved during the course of the First World War, culminating in the army-backed presidency of [Sidónio Pais \(1872-1918\)](#) in 1918. The article will also establish a link between wartime events and the 1926 military coup which overthrew the Republic. Given the fact that 20th-century Portugal is defined by two military coups – the one in 1926 and the one that brought the New State to an end in 1974 – civil-military relations constitute an issue that has long been of interest to historians. José Medeiros Ferreira pioneered the field, but others, such as Nuno Severiano Teixeira, António Costa Pinto, and [Pedro Aires Oliveira](#) have followed suit.

From the Proclamation of the Republic (October 1910) to Germany's Declaration of War (March 1916)

The Republic and Its Army

Although it did not necessarily share in the republican creed of its new political masters, the Portuguese army accepted the regime unveiled in 1910. Only a handful of officers resigned and

followed Henrique de Paiva Couceiro (1861-1944) into exile, with the goal of restoring the monarchy. Even the famously intransigent Paiva Couceiro, whose reputation had been built in the colonial "pacification" campaigns and a successful spell as governor of Angola, and who often wrote eloquently about his friendship with Carlos I, King of Portugal (1863-1908), had for a time been willing to give the Republic a chance.

Most officers, tied to the state for economic reasons, sat back and watched events unfurl, hoping that the republicans could indeed deliver on their promises of energizing Portuguese life and restoring Portugal's good name, especially in the colonial sphere. Republicans, however, had spoken of the need to carry out a deep transformation in the armed forces, moving away from a professional officer caste and to a Swiss-style "nation-at-arms" arrangement. This had naturally indisposed officers, but nothing had come of it. A permanent army was kept in place, albeit one where relations were frayed. Republican officers – nicknamed the "Young Turks" – rose quickly; others were left behind, appalled by their subordinates' newfound effrontery and by having lost the monopoly of violence, now shared with the committees of armed civilians that backed the Portuguese Republican Party.^[2]

War in Europe Begins

If after 1911 steps were taken by successive governments and the military commanders to mend fences, these efforts would be undone, very quickly, by the eruption of the European war. At the heart of this new development were two decisions by the Democratic Party, the Republic's ideological engine room: to become a belligerent, and to send a Portuguese Expeditionary Corps (*Corpo Expedicionário Português*, CEP) to France. This article focuses on the second decision, because of its controversial, divisive, and open-ended nature. The creation and dispatch of the CEP threatened the existing military structure with complete annihilation without any guaranteed compensation for Portugal. Officers felt like they were being forced to bet chips in a high-stakes game of bluff being played by the republican leadership, and resolved to strike back.

The apprehension generated in the officer corps by the looming belligerence had led, in October 1914, to a monarchist/anti-war uprising in the military town of Mafra. In 1915, a peaceful protest by a large number of officers followed. The officers, angered at political interference in military affairs, presented their ceremonial sword to the moderate president of the Republic, Manuel de Arriaga (1840-1917). Arriaga responded by inviting a senior military man and personal friend, General Joaquim Pimenta de Castro (1846-1918), to form a **government** capable of organizing free and fair elections, a relatively unknown phenomenon in Portugal. Pimenta de Castro surrounded himself with fellow officers, but was overthrown by the Democratic Party and its supporting organizations on 14 May 1915. The army was conspicuous in its absence from the revolt, but chose not to halt it. Pedro Aires Oliveira writes:

The Pimenta de Castro interregnum was one of the crucial moments that defined the way that the Democratic Party's hawks viewed the regime's immediate future, not least because it confirmed their worst doubts about the disloyalty of the professional army

officers.^[3]

In the same essay Aires Oliveira goes as far as to posit the war as a solution for the terrible state of relations between the government and the army. What the republican leadership did not understand, however, was that military intervention, given its own weakness, would leave it at the mercy of that same army that it increasingly viewed as a rival.

Portugal at War

Africa or Europe? Or Both?

With the fall of Pimenta de Castro, the way was open for military intervention in the conflict, but only when this intervention was requested by [Great Britain](#). This important condition would delay the process until March 1916. It was no surprise when belligerence did come; it was quickly followed by the dispatch of a large military contingent to Mozambique. The new Sacred Union government hoped that this force might be able to deliver a significant victory capable of enthusing the country and earning the Allies' appreciation, some of whom – notably the Union of South Africa – were very open in their criticism of Portuguese colonialism and their desire to supplant it.^[4] Most officers supported this expedition, seen as necessary to secure Portugal's colonial empire. But for the Sacred Union – composed of Afonso Costa's (1871-1937) Democratic Party and António José de Almeida's (1866-1929) Evolutionist party – the Mozambican expedition could not represent the limit of Portugal's participation in the conflict. The ideological drive behind Portuguese interventionism demanded that the country's armed forces be present at the very epicentre of the war – the Western Front – protecting [France](#) from the reactionary and militaristic enemy, [Germany](#). Only then would Portugal – and the young Republic – receive the accolades its leadership believed necessary for the regime's stabilization.^[5]

The Army's Objections and Their Consequences

There was an obvious problem, however. The Portuguese army was small and antiquated. Its training only began in 1915 at Tancos. Although it led to an improvement in the army's operational capability (described by interventionists, in a terrible exaggeration, as a "miracle"), it could only go some way towards overcoming the gap between the Portuguese forces and their future enemy. Worse still, however, was the enterprise's essential pointlessness. A Portuguese force, no matter how large, would only ever constitute a tiny percentage of the Allied armies on the [Western Front](#). However, given the scale of the battles being waged in France, it could be completely destroyed in a single day's fighting. Officers thus viewed their presence on the front lines as a sacrifice – one in they were not willing to offer. So while they went along, for the most part, with the preparations for active duty at Tancos, their actual commitment to the Western Front was a different matter. There could be no consensus in relation to it, as the Democrats' political enemies knew perfectly well. Recalcitrant officers were aided by the reluctance of the Allies, notably the British, to accept a

substantial Portuguese force on the Western Front.^[6] Numerous officers were involved in a December 1916 plot to overthrow the government, led by Machado Santos (1875-1921), the one popular hero thrown up by the October 1910 revolution. However, it failed and led to widespread arrests.^[7] The following month, other officers refused to march to Lisbon, where they were due to board ships taking their units to France. Claiming that their refusal was born of solidarity with their imprisoned comrades, they were detained and forced to embark. To the puzzlement of the British, their prison term was served while en route to France, after which they were returned to their posts.

The Mood of the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps in France

The CEP, despite much speculation on the issue, left for France. Officers resigned themselves to their fate – although many of the eyewitness accounts of their demeanour at the front are far from positive and reveal the scale of the gulf that increasingly separated them from their political masters. This was especially evident when President Bernardino Machado (1851-1944) and Afonso Costa toured the Portuguese front in October 1917.^[8] The CEP's commander, General Fernando Tamagnini de Abreu e Silva (1856-1924), complained bitterly in a posthumously published memoir of the splits among his officers, notably among Francophiles and Anglophiles. The former resented the level of control exercised by the British army over the CEP.

One officer's correspondence with his politically well-connected family reveals another source of complaint: a press campaign, in republican newspapers, which concentrated on the achievements of hastily trained volunteer officers (*milicianos*) over those of their professional counterparts. It was because of this campaign, he argued, that British officers were highly praiseworthy of Portuguese soldiers, but not their officers.^[9] While undoubtedly wrong when it came to the reason for this negative attitude by British officers, who complained above all of the lack of concern that their Portuguese counterparts showed for the wellbeing of their men, this officer identified one important source of complaint: the attention paid by the republican press to the hastily trained temporary officers, whose enthusiasm for the interventionist cause and commitment to victory was contrasted with the sullen apathy of the professionals. Rightly or wrongly, officers concluded that the Republic did not like them, had sent them to France to die, and was using the war to replace them with more loyal officers. To add insult to injury, it denied them a star role in the coverage of the fighting. This question would rumble on in the future.

The Secret Sessions of Parliament (July 1917)

It was not just the war in France that affected civil-military relations in Portugal. The [East Africa](#) campaign was equally a source of tension. The sentiment here too was that the army was being bled dry for political gain. Unprepared and under-equipped troops had been sent in great haste to a difficult theatre of operations and were forced to engage a battle-hardened enemy before they had acclimatized, or even, in the case of some units, learned the most rudimentary aspects of warfare. The result was the disaster at Newala in 1916 and enormous loss of life.

All of the accumulated tension burst forth during the secret sessions of parliament, held in July 1917. Opposition deputies capitalized on the inadequacies of Portugal's military effort, spelling out away from the public gaze what this meant in terms of loss of resources and especially of lives. Charges were made regarding the performance of politically appointed officers, loyal to the regime but incompetent, the lack of care taken with the provision of medical supplies, political protection at the front, which resulted in inequality of sacrifice in accordance with political views, and the preference in all things shown to the CEP over the African expeditions. Most damaging of all, however, were the allegations laid at the feet of General Pereira d'Eça (1852-1917), who had commanded the 1915 expedition to Angola and who was now military governor of Lisbon. Given the suspension of constitutional guarantees in the capital – the result of a construction workers' strike turned violent – Pereira d'Eça had complete control over the city's population. Yet within parliament his performance during that expedition was being questioned on the basis of sworn affidavits that suggested he was either responsible for, or complicit with, atrocities of the worst kind against the local population.^[10]

The Government's Dilemma

For Afonso Costa and his government, notably Minister of War José Maria Norton de Matos (1867-1955), himself an officer, the secret sessions of parliament were a political disaster. With the country at war, there could be no investigation of any aspect of Portugal's military performance, in Africa or France, until after the conflict. All they could do was question the patriotism of the opposition deputies who were raising such damaging issues and appeal for unity in a time of crisis. This appeal fell on deaf ears. The government was especially vulnerable when it came to Pereira d'Eça. One opposition deputy, Alberto de Moura Pinto (1883-1960), put the matter bluntly:

It is absurd for the minister of war to want to maintain in a very sensitive post – as is that of supreme governor of Lisbon during a suspension of constitutional guarantees – a general against whom documents, so far unchallenged, were produced in this parliament, which showed that the column under his command committed savage atrocities, possibly in accordance with his orders, atrocities which no state of war can justify, barbarous acts so stupidly cruel that only with amazement, indignation and repulsion was the Chamber able to hear of them.

For Moura Pinto, there could be only one explanation for the government's action – that it approved of Pereira d'Eça's methods and looked forward to their application in the capital. But once again the opposition's call for a parliamentary investigation into what had happened in Angola was thwarted by the majority, leading the opposition to abandon the secret sessions, announce to the country that the tyranny of numbers in parliament was complete, and that all forces not represented in it should unite and make their feelings known.^[11] The July 1917 secret sessions' importance – apart from the light that they shed on aspects of Portugal's military performance during the First World War – was that they revealed Afonso Costa's Sacred Union government to be powerless before the army that it had sent, against its will, to war. It was as if leading ministers understood that they had gone as far as they possibly could in pushing the army and were now forced to acquiesce to its sensibilities for fear of a backlash. Pereira d'Eça was undoubtedly a prestigious officer, but to suspend him from his

duties and launch an investigation, however discrete, into precisely what had occurred in southern Angola in 1915 might just provoke a violent reaction, to be avoided at all costs. This sign of weakness did not go unnoticed by the government's enemies.^[12]

The Consequences of the Civil-Military Split

Sidónio Pais in Power

Sidónio Pais [overthrew the Afonso Costa government in December 1917](#). Over the course of 1918, he attempted to recast the Republic, returning it to a purity that he believed had existed in 1910, only to be extinguished as a result of party political strife. His actions and rhetoric very quickly alienated the three main republican parties, and the formation devised to provide him with political support, the *Partido Nacional Republicano*, had only a feeble organization and very little penetration of Portuguese society. With resurgent monarchists of doubtful loyalty providing, for the moment, a parliamentary opposition, Pais' "New Republic" needed other sources of support, during and after its initial dictatorial period. The army was undoubtedly one of them, with Pais – an officer in the reserve – having courted it from the start, donning his uniform at the start of the revolt and wearing it for most of his time in power. He rewarded the units that had helped him come to power by transforming them into a Lisbon Garrison Corps, a move which drew comparisons with the Praetorian Guard of old.

But his relationship with the army went further than that. While on the one hand Pais, who had dissolved the entire political apparatus of the state, from the presidency of the Republic to parish assemblies, relied on officers to staff the new administration (thus ensuring that many who returned from France on leave did not have to return to the trenches), on the other hand he endlessly celebrated the army's sacrifice on the battlefields of Africa and France.^[13] The CEP was described as a force that, dispatched to the front for party political reasons by the Democrats, was now fighting on for the country's honour, thus forming an important component of the national regeneration that the New Republic wanted to usher in. This attitude – combined with a news blackout preventing the Portuguese public from knowing what was actually happening in France – was continued in the aftermath of the [Battle of the Lys](#) on 9 April 1918, when a major German offensive destroyed the CEP as a fighting unit.

Portugal in Chaos as the War Ends

The wooing of the army and the soldiers who composed it continued until the end of Sidónio Pais' life. The president greeted ships arriving from France bearing the wounded and infirm. This was in sharp contrast, it should be said, to what would happen after Pais' death. The symbolism was clear: while the Democrats, it was said, had done everything in their power to send an unprepared army to France (and documents were read out in parliament by Sidónio's war secretary showing how Norton de Matos and Afonso Costa had cut corners in their search for men and officers,^[14]) Sidónio Pais was bringing them home as fast as he could while respecting Portugal's international commitments.

But not even the army's protection could save Pais from an assassin's bullet in December 1918, after the war's end. By then, judging the president's hold on power to be weakening, senior officers in Oporto and Lisbon had formed military juntas, ready to take power and maintain order should Sidónio fall. The Oporto junta had a strong monarchist composition, and would form the backbone of the attempt to restore the exiled Manuel II, King of Portugal (1889-1932) to the throne in 1919, an episode known as the "Northern Monarchy". The confused series of events that began with Pais' assassination and ended with the restoration of the "Old Republic" showed that the army still did not possess a unified outlook and had turned on itself after the war's end. Such an outlook would develop, however, in the years that followed, as government followed government at dizzying speed without resolving the country's economic and financial difficulties, social protest increased, veterans and their problems were generally ignored, the *milicianos* were rewarded with incorporation into the professional army, foreign threats to Portugal's colonies remained alive, and post-war Europe threw up new models of political organization in the shape of the dictatorships under Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) and Miguel Primo de Rivera (1870-1930).

Conclusion

The reasons for the 1926 coup that toppled Portugal's First Republic is the subject of a long-standing historiographical discussion.^[15] But it was not the first time that elements within the armed forces had sought to achieve this end. They had come close the year before, in April 1925; more significantly still, the perpetrators had not only been found innocent, they had in fact been applauded for their actions by the court-martial established to try them. The men who failed in 1925 and succeeded in 1926 held very diverse political opinions, ranging from moderate republicanism through to monarchism or [fascism](#). However, they were all officers, most of whom had been directly affected by Portugal's participation in the First World War. Their actions since the conflict, as well as the way they sought to celebrate their wartime service, reveal just how different their view of the war was from the republican interventionists' view. Officers – and some civilian supporters – came to believe that thanks to its sacrifice, the army was now imbued with a unique legitimacy to act on the national stage, to the detriment of civilian politicians. A divided political class was powerless to halt the army when it moved against the regime.

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Notes

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