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Making Sense of the War (Portugal)

By [Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses](#)

A latecomer to the war, Portugal underwent a long and divisive debate about whether to participate in the conflict. This debate was essentially carried out within its relatively small literate minority; for the greater part of the population, the war only hit home as a result of military mobilization or mounting economic difficulties. It is not an easy task to reconstruct how this largely silent segment of the Portuguese population made sense of the war, since its support was claimed by both contending factions, those who either favoured or opposed intervention in the conflict.

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Introduction

[Portugal](#) went to war in March 1916, after a long and acrimonious debate agitated public opinion. The decision to seize the German merchant vessels at anchor in Portuguese waters since 1914, which provoked [Germany's](#) declaration of war, was initially presented by Prime Minister [Afonso Costa \(1871-1937\)](#) as arising out of economic necessity. Soon afterwards, however, Portugal's belligerence began to be ascribed to the obligations arising out of the country's ancient alliance with [Great Britain](#), a more consensual explanation. This article examines the ways in which different factions attempted to explain the war and Portugal's participation in it, and what effect, if any, such explanations had on wider public opinion, be it among civilians or within the army.

Explaining the war

The Official Explanation for the War

Portugal's official explanation for its participation in the conflict was published in the official gazette, the *Diário do Governo*, on 17 January 1917, on the eve of the departure of the first units of the [Portuguese Expeditionary Corps \(CEP\)](#) to [France](#). The document, signed by the president of the republic and the entire cabinet, is usually ascribed to journalist [Mayer Garção \(1872-1930\)](#), who wrote for *O Mundo*, the official organ of the Portuguese Republican Party (PRP). Generally referred to as the Democratic Party, the PRP was the country's strongest political formation. Framed as a report, the explanation claimed that "the whole world" knew and understood the Portuguese position regarding the war, and the steps which had brought the country to war; nothing had been hidden from the nation, so that there was nothing new to reveal. The conflict was described as "fundamentally a war of alliances". These diplomatic arrangements were necessary for the preservation of nationalities, and Portugal could not stand by and watch its ancient ally, Great Britain, fight on without its help. The report categorically restated the importance of the British alliance and detailed the steps taken since August 1914 to ensure that Lisbon collaborated to the fullest possible extent required by London. This had forced Portugal to swallow its pride and not enter the war when Angola and Mozambique, its prized [African colonies](#), were attacked by German forces. The desire to help Great Britain had led to the seizure of German ships in Portuguese waters in February 1916, which in turn had precipitated Berlin's declaration of war; subsequently, another British request had led to the organization and subsequent despatch of the CEP (a very simplistic explanation). Germany, meanwhile, was portrayed as a belligerent nation, which had ripped up its treaty obligations regarding [Belgian neutrality](#). This was not, for Portugal, a war of conquest, an enterprise embarked on in the search for material gain:

The sight that this small nationality offers up to the world, considering the treaty of alliance that has bound it for six centuries to a friendly nation as a bronze chain that neither the passage of time nor the violence of men can break, will be for Portugal a badge of glory, which no-one will ever be able to strip from it.^[1]

It was very difficult for those in power to deviate from this description of Portugal's participation in the conflict, with its emphasis on the importance of the alliance with Great Britain, given the generalized

lack of public enthusiasm for military intervention in Europe. The link to Great Britain introduced an element of finality to military intervention that suited the [government](#) well; very few in Portugal were willing to argue against agreeing to a British request. When deputy [António Macieira \(1875-1918\)](#) stated in parliament, on 20 August 1917, that “the *Pátria* is at war because it wanted, and chose to be, as a result of moral and material circumstances”, his words were immediately turned against him by the monarchist press. Portugal had been told that it was at war because of its alliance with Britain. The emphasis on the British alliance also allowed the Sacred Union governments an explanation for the material sacrifices made by the country. As Afonso Costa put it in parliament, in January 1917, “we have never denied her [Great Britain] any request concerning her state of war when she invokes the alliance”.^[2] The emphasis placed on the old alliance served as well to obscure the difficulties experienced by the Portuguese in obtaining permission from London to become a belligerent and to send an expeditionary force to France.

Political and Cultural Elites

The overwhelming majority of those who defended Portugal’s involvement in the Great War belonged to the republican governing and cultural elite, whose access to power had been opened by the [revolution](#) of October 1910. For these men – and some women – the conflict was understood in two principal ways. In a wider sense, it was an obstacle placed by reactionary forces in general – and Prussian militarism in particular – before “Humanity’s” progress. Evolutionist party leader [António José de Almeida \(1866-1929\)](#), speaking in parliament on 21 November 1914, put it bluntly:

This war is the bloody and *à outrance* struggle between despotism and the law, between barbarism and justice. Unleashed by a common criminal on whose head destiny placed an imperial crown, it has been simultaneously a war of treason, of espionage, of cowardice, and of cruelty.^[3]

Writing in the intellectual review *A Águia*, Mayer Garção described the war as a clash between two ideas and cultures. On one side stood law; on the other, force.^[4] In the same issue, philosopher [Leonardo Coimbra \(1883-1936\)](#) called it a clash between spirit and matter.^[5] Germany was considered a voracious predator, desirous of becoming the most powerful country in the world by any means.^[6] Poet [Guerra Junqueiro \(1850-1923\)](#) told departing soldiers that they would be fighting “for Humanity and for the Fatherland; for us and for the world”.^[7] This republican opinion was relieved in 1917 by the passing of the Tsarist regime, presented as evidence of the transformation that the conflict was having on the political map of Europe. A similar outcome was expected, and soon, for Germany and Austria-Hungary.

The war was also interpreted as the means through which the Portuguese republic would consolidate itself domestically and internationally, earning the world’s applause and gratitude for a sacrifice endured in the name of all. The regime’s enemy, at home and abroad, was the same: reactionary politics. That was the view, for example, of President [Bernardino Machado \(1851-1944\)](#).^[8] It was

also the view held by [João Chagas \(1863-1925\)](#), Portugal's minister at Paris, whose diary remains one of the most important expressions of Portuguese interventionism. Very active behind the scenes, Chagas' official role limited his public exposure, although a resignation in 1915 allowed him to publish a pamphlet on the subject.^[9]

There were, of course, variations within these themes. Some authors reproduced the widely circulating ideas of an enormous clash of civilizations, between the Germanic and the Latin (or Anglo-Latin) worlds, which Portugal could not witness with indifference.^[10] And while some authors followed the official line, stressing the importance of the British alliance to Portugal, the pillar of [Portuguese diplomacy](#), others still emphasized the need for Portugal to find an independent voice, transcending the British alliance and finding new strength in its colonies, the enduring link with [Brazil](#), and Portuguese emigrant communities across South and North America.^[11] The war was presented as the means by which Portugal could emerge from hibernation into full nationhood.

Outside this closed circle of republican interventionists, the conflict's true meaning was interpreted differently. Catholics tended to view it as a tragedy, or a test, for the nation; the Cardinal-Patriarch of Lisbon described it as a "mournful and bloody struggle, which has for a long time been oppressing and devastating the principal nations of Europe".^[12] From the right and the left of the political spectrum came denunciations of the war's commercial origins, which essentially exculpated Germany, denying that Berlin had started the conflict deliberately.^[13] Such views, for the most part, were driven underground once Portugal found itself at war, but they could surface from time to time. In July 1917, for example, the monarchist daily *O Dia* established a not-very-subtle link between the minister of war's announcement that the CEP's monthly reinforcements would add up to 4,000 men and the British and French decorations he had received during his recent visit to London. This innuendo helped to fuel a slanderous accusation that government ministers were profiting from the "sale" of soldiers to the Allies.^[14] In direct contradiction of the republican line, conservatives saw in the course of the war proof that regimes built on "order" would emerge strengthened from the conflict. Many considered Germany unbeatable and expected the Allies to crack first. Portugal's [trade union](#) movement, the *União Operária Nacional*, and independent anarchist opinion, was generally set against the war and Portugal's participation in it.

Public Opinion

The Army

A number of republican politicians and intellectuals were mobilized and participated in the fighting, in France more so than in Mozambique. These intellectuals' wartime writings were marked by a transparent attempt to make universal their own beliefs and attitudes, ascribing to officers and especially to soldiers (portrayed as genuinely patriotic and unsullied by destructive affectations) an important stake in the common enterprise of intervention. Poet [Augusto Casimiro \(1889-1967\)](#), in a letter to a Lisbon [newspaper](#), noted that all saw their first trip to the trenches, under British army

supervision, as a “spiritual” moment.^[15] His patriotic spirituality led him to view soldiers as Christ-like figures, from whose sacrifice would result a greater Portugal. Another officer, journalist [André Brun \(1881-1926\)](#), described the war as necessary to allow Portugal to stand tall among the nations; his poem, *Sant’Ana e Portugal*, published in the Lisbon press on 25 June 1917, contained the lines:

My Portugal! Do you see, yonder, that line
Of fire and slaughter? There should you be,

It is there, Portugal, that you will find

Your right to a place in the world,

The world of tomorrow, being made,

To the roar of the cannon, their tremendous noise.

A number of senior officers, beginning with General [Fernando Tamagnini de Abreu \(1856-1924\)](#), the CEP’s commander, believed that the war could have a regenerative effect on the nation, imbuing soldiers with a set of values they would develop at the front and propagate at home, once victorious. War Minister [José Maria Norton de Matos \(1867-1955\)](#), a recent but important convert to the republican creed, was keen on the development of a museum that might commemorate the army’s wartime experience, precisely because of the powerful effect it would have on the country’s regeneration.

The opinion of common soldiers about the conflict is, however, harder to pin down. If during the war allegations were made that before departing for France mobilized soldiers had been subjected to intense anti-war propaganda, then some postwar memoirs blamed many of the CEP’s shortcomings on the government’s failure to carry out, at national level, an intense campaign to prepare the population for the coming sacrifices. As one officer put it, “the war was not popular, because it was neither felt nor understood by the mass of the country.”^[16] This, of course, was the same mass from which were drawn the CEP’s soldiers.

The Population at Large

The population at large never really bought into the official vision of the war, despite the interventionist press’s assurances that patriotism, and an understanding of Portugal’s intervention, were widespread. Other voices were heard from the start, urging caution, but to no avail. *Educação Nacional*, a newspaper aimed at the country’s primary school teachers, noted in the wake of the

German declaration of war that “the bulk of our people has no idea of what is bearing down on us; the popular mass has little knowledge of international relations, and only considers matters in the light of its material well-being or of its immediate and present misery.”^[17]

In fact, rumours swirled about the “real” reasons for Portugal’s participation. Of these, the most often repeated, and most damaging, was, as has been mentioned, that ministers were receiving a fixed sum for every soldier sent to France. The monarchist press fed these allegations, one newspaper stating that, “For Mr Afonso Costa and his *free men* the war has been an ultra-profitable mine, an inexhaustible source of wealth and promotion.”^[18] There was also anti-war propaganda from anarcho-syndicalist sources, which depicted the war as a money-making exercise by the wealthy at the expense of the poor, one in which the Portuguese bourgeoisie was as guilty as that of any other country. One Madeira newspaper was able to publish a severe indictment of the conflict shortly after the German declaration of war:

We are being pushed towards the slaughter? Damned be those who lead us towards such a catastrophe! [...] We are going to war? But not without a protest! Not before we should our aversion to the killing, our horror of the uniform, our anathema against the fratricidal engines which have devastated Europe!^[19]

As shortages of food became pronounced while a black market flourished, this narrative became more and more popular.^[20] The most telling example of the shortcomings of the wartime mobilization around the official account of the conflict came via the Marian apparitions at Fátima, from May to October 1917. Taking little comfort from the government’s explanation for the causes of the conflict, and the promise of a better future for Portugal held out by interventionism, the broad mass of rural Catholics looked for divine protection and were comforted by the Virgin’s message of peace, as retold by the three children who acted as intermediaries.^[21] Some thirty to forty thousand people travelled to Fátima for the final apparition, to hear that the war was over and the soldiers would soon be home.

Few republicans understood the popular mood, and fewer still attempted to overturn it. One exception was Jaime Cortesão (1884-1960), a medical doctor, intellectual, and Democratic Party deputy. Cortesão warned government ministers of their failure to instil in the population an understanding of the war and the need to intervene. His *People’s Primer*, a dialogue about the causes and nature of the war, was meant to serve as a basic tool for a mass propaganda campaign. But little came of it, despite regular assurances that the government was set to make a fresh start on the propaganda front.

Crisis point: December 1917

In December 1917 Sidónio Pais (1872-1918), Portugal’s prewar minister in Berlin, took power after a quick military struggle on the streets of Lisbon. A number of leading interventionists, beginning with Prime Minister Afonso Costa, were detained; others sought shelter aboard British ships at anchor in

Lisbon. The *coup* represented a shock to interventionist opinion, which cast Pais in the role of a German agent, doing Berlin's bidding against the Allies – a Portuguese Lenin of sorts. Pais moved swiftly to exile a number of figures, beginning with President Bernardino Machado; he then closed down parliament and municipal chambers. For the interventionists, the war now took a backseat to the struggle to recapture power, undoing Pais' attempt to establish a "New Republic." Pais and his supporters, meanwhile, concentrated on securing their hold on the country. While they paid lip service to the ongoing war effort, and professed their support for the Allied cause, there is no doubt that the war meant a lot less to them than to their displaced predecessors. Pais understood that as close an alignment as possible with Britain would allow him to wind down the CEP gradually; in the meantime, its officers provided him with the administrative staff necessary to replace previously elected local officials.

Abandoned to their fate, interventionist officers were left with a choice: remain in France or return to Portugal to fight the nascent "New Republic." This choice was made easier by the military defeat suffered on 9 April 1918 at the battle of La Lys, after which the CEP disappeared from the front lines. André Brun, for example, returned to Portugal, where he decried publicly the road taken by the new authorities; a participant in the Democratic plot to overthrow Pais, which burst into the open in October, he was arrested and held in the border town of Elvas. Augusto Casimiro, however, stayed in France, where he would participate in the final act of the CEP's troubled life, the return to the trenches of a few battalions in the final days of the conflict. Agreed on by the British military authorities and the CEP's new commander, General [Garcia Rosado \(1864-1937\)](#), it was achieved only at the expense of a round of mutinies and their violent suppression, which suggests that it was not a popular initiative among the troops. In Casimiro's subsequent writings, however, this return to the front, however limited, was imbued with a profound meaning: through it the country's honour, besmirched by Pais and his "treason," was saved.

Postwar Settlement

Versailles did not allow for any retrospective attribution of meaning to the war. Little sense could be made of such a fractured experience, and the treaty did not provide any good news, in the shape of considerable material rewards or any justification for the sacrifices endured. News that the cost of waging war would not be included in reparations came as a shock to the Afonso Costa-led delegation, while [Spain's](#) invitation to sit on the Executive Council of the newly established League of Nations was received as an insult. In the immediate postwar years there were some attempts to settle wartime scores as the Democrats returned to power in the wake of Pais' murder in December 1918, but even these faded quickly as new problems arose. The most powerful retroactive interpretation of the war was that of the bulk of the officer corps, according to which unworthy politicians had been willing to sacrifice the army for their own political aims: this sacrifice, however, carried out in country's name, had imbued the army with the legitimacy to guide the country. In this way the CEP's presence in France and the Battle of La Lys, with the resulting death and capture of so many Portuguese, became the opening act of the so-called "National Revolution," by which the

army took power on 28 May 1926.

Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses, National University of Ireland Maynooth

Section Editors: [Ana Paula Pires](#); [Maria Fernanda Rollo](#)

Notes

1. † Diário do Governo (Lisbon), 17 January 1917, 1st Series, n. 9, Presidência do Ministério.
2. † Diário da Câmara dos Deputados (Lisbon), 24 January 1917.
3. † Diário do Congresso (Lisbon), Session of 21 November 1914.
4. † Garção, Mayer: O Direito e a Força [Law and Might], in: A Águia, April 1916.
5. † Coimbra, Leonardo: O Sentido da Guerra [The Meaning of the War], in: A Águia, April 1916.
6. † See, for example, A Grande Guerra [The Great War], in: Educação Nacional, 28 November 1915.
7. † Junqueiro, Guerra: Aos Soldados que Partem [To the Soldiers who are leaving], in: Boletim Patriótico da Universidade Livre 1, July 1917.
8. † Machado, Bernardino: Pátria e Exército [Fatherland and Army], in: Boletim Patriótico da Universidade Livre 1, July 1917.
9. † Chagas, João: Portugal Perante a Guerra. Subsídios para uma Página da História Nacional [Portugal confronts the war. Contributions towards a page of national history], Porto 1915.
10. † See, for example, de Pascoais, Teixeira: Portugal e a Guerra e a Orientação das Novas Gerações [Portugal, the war and the direction of the new generations], in: A Águia, December 1914.
11. † See de Meneses, Filipe Ribeiro: Introduction. The Lusophone World at War, 1914-1918 and Beyond, in: E-Journal of Portuguese History 15/1 (2017).
12. † Ao Clero e Fiéis [To the clergy and the faithful], in: Vida Católica (Lisbon), 20 March 1916.
13. † See, for example, Pimenta, Alfredo: As Responsabilidades da Guerra [Responsibility for the War], in: O Dia (Lisbon), 3 January 1916, and again on 11 January 1916.
14. † Para Onde Vamos? [Where are we headed?], in: O Dia (Lisbon), 7 July 1917.
15. † A Capital (Lisbon), 16 May 1917.
16. † de Carvalho, Major Vasco: A 2^a Divisão Portuguesa na Batalha de La Lys (9 de Abril de 1918) [The 2nd Portuguese Division in the Battle of the Lys], 2nd Edition, Lisbon 2016 (first published 1924), p. 65. See also do Amaral, João Ferreira: A Mentira da Flandres...e o Medo [The Flanders Lie...and Fear], Lisbon 1922, p. 128.
17. † Pátria. A Guerra e o Professorado [Fatherland. Teachers and the War], in: Educação Nacional, 12 March 1916.
18. † O Descalabro [The Ruin], in: Pátria (Porto), 1 November 1917.
19. † Portugal na Guerra [Portugal in the War], in: Trabalho e União (Funchal), 18 March 1916.
20. † See, for example, O Sacrifício [The Sacrifice], in: A Greve (Lisbon), 19 August 1917.

21. ↑ For a recent account of the Fátima phenomenon, see Bennett, Jeffrey S.: *When the Sun Danced. Myth, Miracles and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Portugal*, Charlottesville 2012.

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