

Post-war Political Consequences (Portugal)

By [Maria Alice Samara](#)

This article will address the key political features in the post-war years of the Portuguese First Republic (1919-1926). Although the strategy of participation in the First World War opened a significant political crisis that extended its consequences into the last years of the republican regime, in this period, alongside political questions inherit from the pre-war times, there were new agents in play and new political dynamics at work. This period brought different solutions and new approaches to economic, social, and cultural problems in the new world partly forged by war.

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Introduction

The historiography of the Portuguese First Republic (1910-1926) has been a very prolific and controversial field of research and investigation in the last forty years, although it has “over the course of a recent past, lost many historians to the New State.”^[1] It was only after the 1974 revolution that this subject entered academic circles.^[2] It is possible to find a “large number of competing multi-volume histories of Portugal”^[3] that include the republican period. Furthermore, there are several academic investigations on different republican themes, namely, in political, economic

and social history.

In 2010, following the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the implantation of the regime on 5 October 1910, with the work of CNCCR (National Committee for the Commemorations of the Centennial of the Republic), a large number of academic (primarily new research) and non-academic works were published, contributing to existing on-going debates in the field.^[4] A historical dictionary that includes the participation of a large numbers of researchers and academics from the different universities and investigation and research centres is currently being developed.

Nevertheless, there are fewer investigations about the third period of the First Republic, from 1919 to 1926.^[5] The post-war period was the object of two very important works in the late 1970s and early 1980s: *A Sociedade e a Economia Portuguesas nas Origens do Salazarismo* (*Portuguese Society and Economy in the origins of Salazarism*), written by Fernando Medeiros and *Decadência e Queda da Primeira República* (*Decadence and Fall of the First Republic*), by António Telo. In spite of this, there is still a historical gap concerning this period, whose importance has been underlined by a recent academic trend that challenges the argument that this republican period, traditionally called the “new old republic”, is a continuation of the first one (1910-1914) trying, instead, to analyse its specific features.^[6]

From Sidónio Pais to the monarchical restoration

One of the most important political objectives of republican interventionism was the creation of a consensus on the home front. After 1916 and the declaration of war by Germany, Portuguese society was torn apart by the political cleavages and the social and economic consequences of the war. Although this crisis was not the only cause of the post-war period's political problems, it did disrupt the political system in significant ways.^[7] Pre-war problems became more severe.

In December 1917, the “War Party”, also known as the Democratic Party, led by Afonso Augusto Costa (1871-1937), was overthrown by a military coup led by the former Portuguese minister in Berlin, Sidónio Bernardino Cardoso da Silva Pais (1872-1918). At that time, it seemed that legal opposition was a dead-end and the only way to reach power was by resorting to violence. Until December 1918, Sidónio Pais' “New Republic” experimented new political solutions that differentiated this political experience from former republican governments, displaying “(...) certain features of pre-fascist modernity.”^[8] Sidónio Pais was a charismatic leader, elected by universal suffrage (in an election with no opponents), and he used the masses in carefully choreographed political events. Sidónio Pais' semi-presidentialist regime laid the foundations for the idea of a single-party political system and attempted a corporatist experiment in the Senate, negating the parliament in favour of a strong and interventionist government. A political police force was also created.

In spite of its brevity, this political regime, born of the war crisis, was an important lesson for a number of right-wing agents and political groups. These groups began to realise in the years

following the last monarchical attempt in 1919 that they should abandon the increasingly irrelevant divide between monarchists and republicans in favour of achieving unity around the idea of “order”, an idea that would become central to Portuguese political culture in the 1920s. And of course, the menace of the “red threat” would help to consolidate the right-wing alliance, which defended a strong government to secure order in the streets and in the parliament, and to secure a balanced budget. The financial and economic crisis in the post-war years would deepen political consensus around the necessity for there to be a strong government capable of giving the country the necessary stability for the implementation of a long overdue modernization process that would develop the country.

After Sidónio Pais’ assassination on 14 December 1918, the country was in political chaos, with different groups trying to reach and maintain power. The most immediate danger for the republican regime was the monarchist conspiracy. In Porto (and the northern provinces), Henrique Mitchell de Paiva Cabral Couceiro (1861-1944), who was the chief of the monarchist incursions of 1911 and 1912, restored the monarchy for a very brief period time (19 January to 13 February 1918) while the corresponding movement failed in Lisbon, defeated by a coalition of civilian and military republicans. The storming of the monarchist positions at the hill known as Monsanto, which overlooks much of Lisbon, became an important mark in the history of the republican movement. This is not just because of the immediate political consequences, but also because it allowed for the creation of an alliance between several republican groups and a number of popular and working class elements, temporarily restoring one of the fundamental pillars that ensured the stability of the republican regime.^[9]

Key Political Features in the Post-war Years

After this period of quasi civil war, the “historical” republicans who had been overthrown by the Sidónio Pais coup believed that with the new political legitimacy forged in the fighting against the monarchists, they could rebuild the regime as it had been before 1914. The republican political scenario, however, had undergone an important change. The historical leader of the Democratic party, Afonso Costa, the most important defender of the participation of Portugal in the First World War, chose never to return from Paris. Although his party remained a hegemonic and dominant force, it suffered several splits throughout the coming years, namely, from groups organized by politicians like Álvaro Xavier de Castro (1878-1928) and José Domingues dos Santos (1885-1958).

The two other so-called historical parties (the Evolutionist and the Unionist parties) fused themselves, creating the Liberal Party, and different coalitions of centre and centre-right political forces were tried.^[10] In this context “(...) small but highly ideological parties appeared in both the parliamentary arena (the CCP^[11] and the Democratic Left) and the extra-parliamentary arena (the Communist Party and the Sidonists from 1919 on)”.^[12] Furthermore, there was a new generation of politicians who defended new political strategies and agendas, responding to post-war problems. In short, these problems reflected the conflicts born out of the new political modernity,^[13] or the

radicalization of political and ideological extremes.^[14]

Portuguese politics became more polarized. The 1917 [Russian revolution](#) had a powerful impact on the workers movement, and in 1921 the Portuguese Communist Party was created. The anarcho-syndicalist workers founded the General Labour Confederation (CGT), in order to respond to mounting social problems. It was their golden age, “marked by a wave of strikes”^[15]. At least in the immediate post war, until 1922-1923, a social revolution seemed possible.

The right-wing agents and groups (notably the group known as *Lusitanian Integralism*) became more organized and, by the end of this period, actively conspired against the Democratic Party, now led by [António Maria da Silva \(1872-1950\)](#). Some of these new political groups were very redolent to other European [fascist](#) movements but in Portugal the war combatants were not the key participants in those movements, instead “(...) veterans were rapidly absorbed into rural society, or they opted for emigration”^[16].

Another significant development during this period was that Catholics separated their political agenda from the monarchist cause, focusing instead on renewing their own religious organizations, and thus becoming more actively engaged in political life, even engaging in the parliament. The [religious issue](#), which had had a powerful impact on pre-war politics, was partly solved during the Sidónio Pais regime, thanks to modifications to the most problematic features of the Law of Separation of Church and State (April 1911) and the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

The formation, in 1924, of the *União dos Interesses Económicos* (UIE), a coalition of the most important economic forces (from the agricultural, industrial, commercial, and financial sectors), that elected four representatives in the 1925 election, was the most tangible sign of the new political agents, some of whom pushed anti-liberal positions in the political arena. The *O Século* newspaper was a powerful instrument for the political sensibilities of the UIE.

One of the key political actors in this period was the army. Despite the Portuguese [defeat in La Lys](#) (April 1918), the military, legitimized by their “sacrifice”^[17] in the battlefields, were seen at this time as a guard against the possibility of disorder, and for this reason their intervention in the political field was requested by some political agents. In fact, a “(...) new, militaristic ideology emerged”^[18]. After the events of 19 October 1921, the so-called “Bloody Night” in which several conservative politicians were assassinated during a radical republican coup, many politicized military officers began organizing different conspiratorial networks within the army. The military had several reasons motivating their intervention: corporative reasons, for example, the reinforcement of the National Republican Guard as a “Pretorian” paramilitary corps; economical reasons, for example, the decline of the purchasing power of the officers^[19] and lastly, political reasons. After 18 April 1925 right-wing attempted coup “appeals for a military interregnum had reached a fever pitch.”^[20]

Cabinet instability was, however, an obstacle to the implementation of republican public policies. It has been argued that political instability “increased fragmentation of the party spectrum and daily

parliamentary squabbles”, and destroyed “whatever remained of Republican legitimacy”.^[21] The problem of legitimacy was particularly acute in this regime, unable to democratize, or at least to initiate the democratization of the political system.

António Reis argues that it is important to debate the political cultural milieu and the cultural crisis of the post-war years in order to understand why the regime was overthrown. Left and right wing intellectuals “lost faith” in their political leaders and embraced new doctrines. Republican culture was losing its hegemony and new political ways of thinking were gaining terrain. Fascism seemed new and appealing and republicanism was losing its allure.^[22]

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge the influence and importance of the crisis opened by the Portuguese participation in the First World War and its political consequences in post-war years. The objective of achieving unity through a common patriotic goal and the existence of a “providential enemy” was not fulfilled. The republicans, having their strongholds in the urban areas and middle and lower classes, had to conquer the “hearts and minds” of vast segments of the Portuguese population. Republicans did not consolidate the new regime, and failed to build a “Sacred Union” to foster the “republicanisation” of the new country they had imagined. Overthrowing the monarchy had been relatively easy. Difficulties arose when the republicans were in power, with the monarchical enemy, the catholic enemy and with the organized workers’ movement.

As the more recent studies have shown, the political consequences of the war should be analysed in this specific post-war political context and can only be fully understood if the period’s specific political dynamics are taken into account. In the “new world” forged by war, the regime faced an economic and social crisis and a radicalization of the political field, with opposing views on how to solve this crisis and, once more, “regenerate” Portugal. The republican response, led by the dominant party (the Democratic Party of António Maria da Silva), lost its appeal and had enemies from both the right and the left of the politic spectrum. The opposition created a united front, made of different political agents, to overthrow Silva’s government. The military coup on 28 May 1926 ended the Portuguese First Republic.

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Citation

Samara, Maria Alice: Post-war Political Consequences (Portugal) , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.10514](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10514).

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