

# Press Censorship (Portugal)

By [Noémia Malva Novais](#)

**When we think of the press and journalism in Portugal under the First Republic (1910-1926), and especially during World War I (1914-1918), we necessarily consider whether they constituted, at this time, an instrument of power or a field of struggle for freedom. There are historical arguments for both sides of the internal debate. We analyse both sides in this brief article, which seeks to respond to this central issue within the domain of the press and journalism.**

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## Introduction

To understand the [press](#) and journalism in [Portugal](#) under the First Republic (1910-1926), and especially during World War I (1914-1918), we have to answer the question of whether they constituted, at this time, an instrument of power or a field of struggle for freedom. Both sides of the internal debate have arguments in their favour, but we note that, in the summer of 1914, when war broke out, in Portugal and most other European countries, the press maintained a dialectical relation with the various systems and political regimes. Sometimes this relationship was an instrument of power, and at others it was as a space wherein a struggle for freedom of speech was carried out. The press lived, or survived, associated with politics.

In Portugal, in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the activity of the press was no different from that of the press throughout the rest of Europe and even in the [United States of America](#). The Portuguese press was regulated by a law passed on 28 October 1910, promulgated by the provisional [government](#) of the republic, which established, under article 1, “the freedom of expression of thought in the press” and determined that journalistic activity was “free from the need to provide security through any sort of censorship or prior authorization”.

This law, which replaced what became known as the “repressive” press law of 1907, was the only law that, in the period from 1910 to 1926, covered the main aspects of freedom of expression of thought by the press; it was so liberal that it allowed, as stipulated in article 13, the criticism “of legislation, political and religious doctrines, Government acts, corporations and of all those who exercised public functions”.

Such permission was justified, on the one hand, by the need to “prepare the public opinion for the necessary reforms” and, on the other, to allow newspapers and, consequently the public, to monitor the implementation of the laws and standards of public

administration. Along the same line, in order to ensure respect for the rights of citizens, this law determined that all crimes of abuse of freedom of the press had to be tried by jury. This way, republicans paved the way for a wide level of freedom of the press.

As had been the case during the monarchy, during the First Republic the newspapers of the party apparatuses continued to exist – in fact, nearly all parties had their own daily newspapers. The three new parties emerging from the split in the Portuguese Republican Party had their unofficial organs: *O Mundo* was the newspaper of the Portuguese Republican Party (PRP)/Democratic Party, of [Afonso Costa \(1871-1937\)](#); *República* was associated with the Evolutionist Republican Party of [António José de Almeida \(1866-1929\)](#); and *A Luta* was the daily newspaper of the Republican Union of [Manuel de Brito Camacho \(1862-1934\)](#). [António Machado Santos \(1875-1921\)](#) himself, a hero of the revolution largely responsible for the implementation of the republic, while not aligning with these three main parties, had his own partisan group and his newspaper – *O Intransigente*.

Therefore, the party divisions, which occurred after the presidential elections of 1911, brought with them new republican newspapers. In fact, republican newspapers committed to the parties of the political apparatus prevailed, while enjoying freedom of expression. One can say there was freedom of the press, albeit limited by the choices of the promoters, whether they were directors, editors, or contributors.

The degree of press freedom, however, became gradually tighter. On 28 December 1910, just two months after this first legislative action, and due, essentially, to the danger of restoration of the monarchy, the government promulgated a decree with the force of law. This defined both the crimes and the penalties to be incurred by those who attempted to “restore the monarchical form of government, or otherwise destroy or change the republican form of government”, or who “out loud or by published writing, or by any other means of publication” disrespected high officials and the symbols of the fatherland, as well as those who spread false rumours.

On 9 and 12 July 1912, due especially to the royalist incursions from neighbouring [Spain](#), but also to the [social disorder](#) triggered by permanent agitation, the government enacted laws which enabled the seizure of “newspapers, posters, announcements, notices, [...] either printed, or in the form of manuscripts, drawings or publications” by the administrative, judicial, and police authorities. And, in 1913, the ordinance of 29 August was published, allowing tight government surveillance over the press.

## Before Preventive Censorship

In 1914, the Portuguese press kept, theoretically, the right to free expression as defined under the law of 28 October 1910 and enshrined in the constitution of 1911. This right was, however, restricted by the legislative measures of 1912 and 1913.

In that same year, some cases of suspension and seizure of newspapers occurred. The reasons, however, did not always relate to the armed conflict. Sometimes, newspapers were suspended or seized on charges of contributing toward insecurity, domestic disorder and unrest, or the discredit of republican institutions.

The newspapers suspended under this type of prosecution included *Diário da Manhã*, which, after being seized four times in six days, and having its head of the newsroom arrested, voiced its indignation through a letter sent to other newspapers, dated 17 August 1914, which stated: “we have two solutions: either we conform to writing for the police and the Government, or we suspend our activities until there is once again [...] freedom of the press in this country”.

Another of the cases illustrative of the situation of the press by 1914 was that of Brito Camacho’s newspaper *A Luta*. This was one of the first newspapers prevented from being distributed on the streets of the capital (in December 1914, only five months after the commencement of the armed conflict), for intending to publish an article unfavourable to the interventionist policy of the democratic government headed by [Victor Hugo de Azevedo Coutinho \(1871-1955\)](#). Brito Camacho was responsible for the paper and was head of the Republican Union, a traditional opponent of the PRP/Democratic Party of Afonso Costa. In the planned issue, he had attempted to explain his position vis-à-vis the participation of Portugal in the war, but was stopped by the police, who surrounded the headquarters of the unionist newspaper. Unable to print *A Luta*, Brito Camacho ordered the printing of *A Notícia*, a replica of *A Luta*, but without the article on the war.

Still, Brito Camacho was able to write another article titled “Preventive censorship and the law of the press”, which held that,

despite the law prohibiting press [censorship](#), the democratic government was now exercising preventive censorship. In the same issue of *A Notícia*, but in another place, he alleged that the measures taken by the government, through the use of police intervention to prevent the publication of *A Luta*, amounted to “ripping up the Constitution”. While Brito Camacho asked “under what right, under the shadow of which law” was the press “subject to prior censorship”, the government continued to formally ensure the existence of press freedom in complete obedience to the 1910 law of the press and the constitution of 1911. The truth, however, is that the suspensions and seizures of newspapers had started to create unrest in the milieu, as it was leaving dozens of professionals (journalists, printers, distributors, etc.) unemployed.

Therefore, in a first phase of the war, from August 1914 to March 1916, the Portuguese press only theoretically retained its freedom of expression since, in practice, this right was limited by the possibility of suspension; seizure; custodial sentences applied to newspaper directors, reporters, and printing-press owners; and the enforcement of financial penalties.

Even so, in this period, the press kept following parliamentary sessions, providing an account of the heated discussions between the government and the opposition watching the preparation of military contingents for the war, as well as reflecting on the [diplomatic](#) negotiations now underway, particularly between Portugal and [Britain](#) and between Portugal and [France](#).

The newspapers also provided accounts of the reports arriving from the battlefield via the news agencies. The interventionist newspapers, such as *O Mundo*, *República* and *O Século*, advocates of Portugal's participation in the war alongside the Allies, had an easier day-to-day life, while the anti-interventionist ones, such as *A Luta*, *O País*, and *Portugal*, opponents of the Portuguese war policy, were subject to rigorous surveillance.

## Preventive Censorship

In a second phase, from March 1916 to December 1917 – from [Germany's](#) declaration of war on Portugal and the presence of Portuguese troops in Flanders, to the [Sidónio Pais \(1872-1918\)](#) coup – the national press suffered a heavy blow to its freedom of expression through the introduction of prior censorship: a wartime censorship, as Arons de Carvalho notes.<sup>[1]</sup>

In Portugal, after the German declaration of war, as in other warring countries at the start of hostilities, a return to the absolutist conception of censorship was discernible, that is, “what matters is public safety, not opinion, which is by nature eminently contradictory”.<sup>[2]</sup> Preventive censorship was presented as a guarantee of national defence, and public opinion was viewed as a kind of helpless target of a press supporting hidden interests that worked toward misinforming the public and leading the crowds astray.

Certain political and doctrinal rules proclaimed the duty not to “abandon the public opinion to itself” or to the forces that perverted it, proposing the use of censorship (often associated with state [propaganda](#)) “as an everyday governance tool, usable for purposes which go remarkably beyond the circumstances of war”.<sup>[3]</sup>

In this context, the press, controlled by the censorship authorities, directed and mobilised public opinion, allegedly in defence of the national interest, not only against the external enemy, but also against those accused of being Germanophiles, who were considered internal enemies.

Accepting that Germany's declaration of war on Portugal had forced the government to restrict the freedom of the press, the major newspapers of the time also accepted with relative ease the decree of 12 March 1916, in which the legislator conferred powers on the police and administrative authorities to seize publications that violated national security and endangered the country's defence, had a negative effect on war operations or published anti-war propaganda.

However, the authorities soon extended these punitive actions to repress the coverage of social unrest and even discussions in parliament. This abuse stirred strong protests from newspaper directors, who felt harmed by having their newspapers seized after printing, or through the actions of the authorities, were denied use of the post office, making it impossible to deliver the newspapers to readers in good time.

Facing this kind of abuse, the government chose to establish a system of preventive censorship, explaining that this decision meant no “hostility against newspapers”. Rather, it aimed to “reduce, as far as possible, the damage caused to them by the strict oversight” exerted on all periodicals.

Most newspapers accepted the censorship established by Law n.º 495, of 28 March 1916, regulated by decree three days later (decree of 31 March 1916). Some expressed satisfaction with the new measure, others just acquiesced, but all of them made it abundantly clear in their pages that they preferred preventive censorship to seizure. Others, however, clarified that only the war circumstances justified the adoption of preventive censorship, trusting the “loyal purposes of the government”.

That trust, however, eventually wore off. Committees for censorship were created: in Lisbon in 1916, followed by those of Porto, Braga, Évora and Viseu, in 1917. Enforcing article 2 of Law n.º 495, these district censorship committees eliminated everything related to internal and external security: the interests of Portugal in relation to foreign nations; the preparation of military defence; and anything that might alarm the public or cause losses to the state, or that offended republican institutions and public morals, or contained defamation or threats to the president of the republic or to foreign personalities. Given this variety of possibilities, almost anything could be censored.

During the first year of the censorship law of 28 March 1916 the press evidenced numerous cuts, especially in news relating to military matters, social unrest, public disorders, parliamentary discussions, and economic matters, which shows that the action of censorship was more extended than the law provided for. However, the newspapers could continue to publish articles critical of government activity and sometimes even dared to criticise the action of censorship.

The newspapers' discontent regarding the censorship law increased as the cuts became more numerous and expanded to new domains. Initially, *A Luta* led the criticism of censorship, denouncing the abuses of power; however, from April 1917 – when a single-party government led by Afonso Costa succeeded that of the sacred union – such criticism became widespread.

In fact, over the following months, newspapers organised a protest movement against censorship which resulted in a meeting, held in August 1917, between representatives of the newspapers from Lisbon and Porto, with the exception of *O Mundo*, the unofficial newspaper of the governing party. This meeting was sponsored by *O Jornal do Comércio e das Colónias* with the aim of “addressing the irregular way in which censorship determined by the State of war has been exercised”.<sup>[4]</sup>

At that meeting, a motion was approved that, among other things, reminded the government and the public alike that censorship should only be applied to “news or considerations detrimental to the operations of war, and never serve as an instrument for governments to prevent the political debate whose excesses, if they occur, may only fall under the Law of the Press”.<sup>[5]</sup> In this motion, the newspapers stated that they considered

humiliating to their mission and outrageous to their patriotism the enforcement of censorship outside the strictly defined cases of inconvenience of the publication of news or considerations of military nature or propaganda against the war, to which the whole country is committed.<sup>[6]</sup>

Finally, they claimed that they would

employ every effort to make the institution of the press duly respected in Portugal, as in all countries it is considered to be an indispensable guarantee of the people's rights and of the prestige of the regimes in existence in these countries.<sup>[7]</sup>

The government of Afonso Costa took a few days to react but eventually responded gracefully to this problem, which was snowballing – on 6 September 1917, a new law was published, maintaining press censorship, which was common in other Allied countries, but establishing that the censorship committees could only cut news or ideas that were “harmful to national economic or military defence, or to war operations”, or that involved anti-war propaganda. This new law, which was the result of a project presented by two members of the Republican Union (José Barbosa (1879-1959) and Luis Derouet (1880-1927)), immediately resulted in a decrease in the number of cuts and a consequent appeasement of the journalistic milieu.

## From Censorship to Increased Repression

Tranquility, however, lasted for no more than two months. The dictatorship established after Sidónio Pais' coup d'état (8 December 1917) set out, demagogically, to abolish preventive censorship. The end of censorship did not mean a return to freedom of the press. In fact, some newspapers were attacked on the day of Sidónio Pais' coup: for instance, *O Mundo's* headquarters was destroyed. Police violence against newspapers became constant, evidencing “the prevalence of administrative repression in situations of authoritarian political power”.<sup>[8]</sup>

The government itself dropped the mask when it published, as soon as 28 December, three ordinances from Machado Santos' ministry of the interior, restricting the freedom of the press. The first imposed preventive authorization for the creation of new newspapers; prevented the re-establishment of suspended newspapers; and banned the propaganda by the PRP/Democratic Party. The second prohibited the dissemination of news about the movements of ships and troops. The third required the administrative authorities to prevent the publication of news about changes in public policy that did not have official confirmation. On 9 January 1918, the government of Sidónio Pais published a fourth ordinance that posed a new threat to the press since it ordered civil governors to suspend "all the periodicals that seek to disturb public security with reckless language".

This type of governance, to which one could add the manifesto of the Junta of Public Salvation, could only stir protests from the newspapers. In response to the protests, at the end of March 1918, the government allowed the reappearance of some newspapers, among them *O Mundo*. However, it restored censorship (Decree No. 4082 of 13 April 1918), and returned to the enforcement of the laws of 9 and 12 July 1913, and 28 March 1916, that both the Sidonistas and unionists had previously criticised.

With this measure, news items concerning military affairs, war, internal and external security, and public order were back under the attention of censors. Censorship became more rigorous, and seizures and quarrels about anti-Sidónio Pais media outlets increased, especially after June 1918, due to increased political instability that allowed the government to arrest a large number of people. Only the Sidonistas newspapers, such as *A Situação* (Lisbon, April 1918), *A Voz Pública* (Porto, March 1918) and *Liberdade* (Catholic, Lisbon, 1914), worked normally, a privilege granted as a result of their support to Sidónio Pais.

The number of cuts multiplied, as did the corresponding blank spaces in the pages of newspapers, which rendered many of the published articles utterly incomprehensible, and the discontent among newspeople grew stronger. The government eventually backed down, publishing a new decree (No. 4436, 17 June 1918) that ordered a decrease in censorship in terms identical to the one that had resulted from the September 1917 legislative measure enacted by Afonso Costa. This decree took some time to be enforced, but turned out to produce the desired effect: it reduced the cuts to newspaper content. On the other hand, the government invested in the seizure of periodicals. Newspapers protested. *O Mundo* wrote: "such a system does not preserve popular consciousness – it either dissolves or is dissolved by it". In September 1918, the government ordered the seizure of *O Mundo* and *República*.

## Censorship After the War

As explained above, these were difficult times for the Portuguese press. The end of the war did not bring about an immediate end to censorship. Despite the protests of newspapers and members of parliament, Sidónio Pais maintained the censorship of news about troops, revolutionary attempts, and [strikes](#). The blank spaces continued to increase, sometimes reaching a significant portion of the papers.

Even after the assassination of Sidónio Pais (14 December 1918), censorship remained in force and rather strict, with cuts increasing both in size and number. As an illustration of the above, the first half of page four of the January 1919 issue of *Diário de Notícias* appeared blank.

The re-establishment of the monarchy in the north of the country (19 January 1919) also served to justify the maintenance of press censorship, which was only abolished by the government of [José Relvas \(1858-1929\)](#). In February 1919, it was considered that "the causes that determined its operation" had ceased to exist, and in the following April the government published a package of legislation that restored the constitution of 1911 and thus fully restored press freedom. This was again limited after the military coup of 28 May 1926 that paved the way to the end of the First Republic.

## Conclusion

The press in Portugal during World War I was no different from the press of other countries throughout the same period. It stands as a typical case of wartime press, published under the effect of various restrictions and under wartime censorship, introduced by the law of 28 March 1916, a few days after Germany's declaration of war on Portugal.

Until then, journalistic activity had been regulated by the press law of 1910, the most liberal of all press laws in Portugal since the liberal revolution of 1820. Moreover, even when compared to the press laws adopted after 25 April 1974, the 1910 press law

continues to be considered one of the most liberal laws of all times.

However, between the utopia of liberal republicans, excited about the establishment of the republic on 5 October 1910, and the reality of governing a country with profound economic and social problems, in a hectic political context, there lay a great difference with which republicans soon were forced to come to terms. As a result, some amendments were introduced to this law, though without abandoning the liberal spirit that animated it.

It is therefore hardly surprising that only the outbreak of war, and particularly Germany's declaration of war on Portugal, forced the replacement of this 1910 liberal law by the law of 28 March 1916 that introduced censorship. This was initially accepted by the majority of newspaper directors, but would garner growing discontent from directors and journalists as the war continued and the cuts increased.

The actions of the censorship committees were at the root of this discontent of the press, as the former, given the broad spirit of the law, exercised censorship, according to the press, in matters well beyond the war-related subjects. The spaces left blank in the pages of newspapers, the postal distribution missed out on by periodicals, and the losses incurred as a result of decreased sales and seizures created a climate of tension between the successive wartime governments and the press.

Irony was often the "weapon" of choice for newspapers to criticise, challenge, and even dodge the action of the censors, sometimes even using them to their advantage. Still, and although with different intensities, censorship did prevail until the end of the war and remained in force for a few months after the end of the conflict. The press was only given back its freedom of expression with the reinstatement of constitutional normality as envisaged under the 1911 constitution, in April 1919, by the government of José Relvas.

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## Notes

1. ↑ [Carvalho, Arons De: A censura à Imprensa na Época Marcelista \[Censorship of the Press in the Marcelist Period\], Coimbra 1999, p. 14.](#)
2. ↑ [Barreto, António / Mónica, Maria Filomena: Dicionário de História de Portugal \[Dictionary of Portuguese History\], volume 7, Porto 1999, p. 275.](#)
3. ↑ [Ibid.](#)
4. ↑ [O Jornal do Comércio e das Colónias \[Newspaper of Colonies and Trade\], Lisbon, 17 August 1917.](#)
5. ↑ [Ibid., 18 August 1917.](#)
6. ↑ [Ibid.](#)
7. ↑ [Ibid.](#)
8. ↑ [Tengarrinha, José Manuel: História da Imprensa Periódica Portuguesa \[History of the Portuguese Periodic Press\], Lisbon 1965, p. 54.](#)

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