

War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Portugal)

By [Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses](#)

Portugal's wartime governments never formulated a concrete set of war aims. The nature of the country's intervention did not lend itself to this kind of debate. With a long-defined border with Spain, and more colonial territory than it could administer, Portugal was satisfied territorially. However, the open-ended commitment to the Allied war effort made by the Sacred Union governments meant that a growing imbalance between sacrifices made, and potential rewards, became an inescapable issue in Portuguese wartime politics. What debate took place regarded the extent to which Portugal could rely on its Allies to respect its existing interests after the war. The omens, however, were not good.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 The Nature of Portuguese Intervention in the First World War](#)
 - [2.1 João Chagas, Republican Sentiment and the War](#)
 - [2.2 Portugal Goes to War](#)
 - [2.3 Explaining Belligerence](#)
 - [2.4 A Popular Awakening](#)
 - [2.5 The Official Account of Portugal's Intervention](#)
- [3 The War's Impact](#)
 - [3.1 Public Doubts](#)
 - [3.2 The "Kionga Triangle"](#)
 - [3.3 The Secret Sessions of Parliament, July 1917](#)
 - [3.4 Sidónio Pais seizes power](#)
- [4 Conclusion](#)

Introduction

The Portuguese case should, at an initial glance, be of special interest to the debate on [war aims](#) not only because metropolitan [Portugal](#) was - [U-boats](#) aside - safe from the military attacks of its enemy, but also because its leaders, beginning with [Afonso Costa \(1871-1937\)](#), had early on decided that military intervention would be in the country's best interest, working hard afterwards to bring this intervention about. In other words, Portugal chose to enter the war and it was safe from invasion or even major retaliation throughout the rest of the conflict. It was free to determine the scale of its involvement in the war. This, then, should have allowed for a serious public debate about war aims. Closer reading of the Portuguese case shows that reality was very different indeed. Portugal's entry into the conflict was driven by the ideological motives and by the desire to protect its [existing territory](#), notably in [Africa](#) – not by a desire for territorial expansion. Portugal had practically no [irredentist](#) aspirations. The town of Olivença (Olivenza in Spanish), captured by [Spain](#) in 1801 and never returned, was one bone of contention – but Spain's wartime [neutrality](#) precluded Olivença from becoming a war aim. The "Kionga Triangle", a small German-occupied stretch of land on the southern shore of the mouth of the Rovuma river, which separated German [East Africa](#) from Mozambique, was another territorial issue that Lisbon wanted resolved, and Kionga was captured early on in the war, remaining in Portuguese hands until the end of the conflict. There was nowhere else for Portuguese territory to grow. Portuguese politicians and interventionist intellectuals paid lip service to the rights of small nations and the destruction of [militarism](#), seen as the international extension of their domestic triumph in the republican revolution of 1910, but did not turn these aspirations into a precise programme. This being the case – and given the nature of Portugal's entry into the conflict – there never was a proper public debate on war aims. With the coming to power of the anti-interventionist [Sidónio Pais \(1872-1918\)](#), in December 1917, the matter was further buried, the new government's policy being to adhere strictly to the wishes of London to ensure that Portugal would be accepted as a legitimate nation internationally.

The Nature of Portuguese Intervention in the First World War

João Chagas, Republican Sentiment and the War

The clearest expression of the reasons for Portugal's entry into the conflict can be found in the diary of [João Chagas \(1863-1825\)](#), Portugal's politically appointed Minister in Paris throughout most of the conflict. For Chagas, a veteran of republican politics, the real enemy in the war was [Great Britain](#), which had grown accustomed to seeing Portugal as a form of protectorate. Portugal had to participate in the ongoing European war in order to extricate itself from this subordinate position.

Portuguese republicanism was steeped in Anglophobia, dating back to the 1890 British ultimatum

over control of the territory between Angola and Mozambique – today's Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi – which both countries were claiming as their own. Not surprisingly, given the disparity of the forces at the disposal of the two governments, Portugal backed down, which led to a chorus of protests at home and a boost to republican fortunes. Indeed, a line in *A Portuguesa*, the patriotic call to arms written in the aftermath of the ultimatum, and selected as the national anthem after the 1910 revolution, had originally called on the Portuguese to march against the "*Bretões*" (Britons), a word later replaced by the more generic "*canhões*" (cannons). The passing of time and, later, the realities of government, made abundantly clear the reasons for the continued existence of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance, which stretched back to the 14th century. This softened republican anglophobia, but it was still present even in the highest spheres of government, as attested by the surviving minutes of pre-war and wartime Council of Ministers meetings. Presciently, Chagas noted in his diary that this desire to emerge from Britain's shadow and stand tall among the nations could not be confessed publicly.^[1] That such a silence would lead to a propaganda disaster should have been foreseen, but was not.

Portugal Goes to War

João Chagas was, of course, writing in abstract terms about Portugal's lowly position within Europe's pecking order. This inability to speak openly about the reasons for Portugal's belligerence continued to develop. Portugal's intervention in the World War came about as a result of the sudden seizure of German merchant ships in Portuguese harbours across the world. The antecedents of this move, however, could not be explained to the public, because they showed both that Britain did not hold Portugal in high regard, and that the government, through its actions, was seeking out conflict with Germany. Early in 1916 the Portuguese government was informed by its British counterpart that henceforth British merchant shipping – on which Portugal relied for its survival – would be reserved for those nations participating in the struggle against Germany. Portugal, despite its long-standing alliance with Britain, was being lumped with the other neutrals. The obvious answer was to make use of the German ships waiting out the war in Portuguese waters, but there was a fear in Lisbon that if the ships were seized, and Germany declared war on Portugal, then Britain might feel responsible for helping Portugal ward off German attacks. Afonso Costa despaired:

If we are asked why we are going to war, I cannot say that it was asked of us, because I would have to publish that document [the British note], and that document is ignominious! I would prefer to declare war by our own initiative. We would be carrying out an act of dedication to our ally, against its will but with a moral case. And then we would requisition the ships.^[2]

One of Costa's colleagues discerned an Anglo-Spanish plot to deprive Portugal of its colonies. There was only one way out: for London to ask, under the terms of the alliance, for the German shipping to be seized; if this led to a German declaration of war, then Britain would indeed protect Portugal. To the government's intense relief, London agreed, eventually, and the way was open for the Portuguese to act.^[3]

Explaining Belligerence

By surprising Germany with the seizure of the ships, a well-coordinated military operation, instead of negotiating their use, Afonso Costa's government ensured that war did in fact ensue. The Portuguese economy's overriding need for these ships (most of which were later made available to Great Britain) provided a first layer of explanation for the country's belligerence, but it could not be sufficient. Why had there been no attempt to negotiate the ships' use with Germany? This line of argument was quickly supplanted, however, by a twin approach. On one level, the British alliance (and through it, the links with Britain's wartime allies) was played up: Portugal simply could not refuse a request for help from Britain, under the terms of the alliance, and by acting in accordance with this principle, Portugal was demonstrating its status as an honourable nation.^[4] On another level, however, the Portuguese Republic, a progressive nation, was joining in the fight against reaction and militarism, helping to defeat once and for all the enemies which it had already put to flight in Portugal itself. As President Bernardino Machado (1851-1944) put it:

It is our mission to struggle always in the vanguard of civilization, that same civilization which we were the first to take to the whole world through seas never before sailed. This civilization is called, today, democracy. It is the motto which is inscribed [...] on the flag which we have entrusted to our brave army. Fighting for democracy we are fighting for ourselves, for our kind, for our language, for our past and our future.^[5]

On both counts, then, the war was presented to the Portuguese – without much enthusiasm and constancy, it must be said^[6] – as a selfless gesture, an act of generosity that was its own reward, since it would improve the country's international standing and give it a prominent place in any postwar settlement.

A Popular Awakening

What João Chagas couched in terms of international relations, others saw in terms of culture. In order for the Republic's actions to be understood, the cultural dimension of its project must also be taken into account. For republicans, part of their mission was to arrest Portugal's "decadence" by freeing the people from the forces, which they identified as reactionary and obscurantist. The first of these, the monarchy, had been dispatched in October 1910; but others remained in place, notably the Catholic Church. The war was seen as a way of hurrying this process, launching the Portuguese on a journey of self-discovery, gaining confidence and pride in their history along the way. This much was clear in *Cartilha do Povo* [The People's Primer], an attempt by Democratic deputy, historian, and doctor Jaime Cortesão (1884-1960) to connect with a wide audience in order to explain Portugal's belligerence.^[7] This was also evident in the writings of feminist interventionist Ana de Castro Osório (1872-1935), who wanted to extend this process to Portugal's women, ignorant, she claimed, of the vital contribution their predecessors had made:

She is called to the responsibilities of the present hour, reminded of what she was once, in the past, names which she was never made to learn and memorize are mentioned and she, surprised and hurt, asks, "What is my name? What is my name? I can no longer remember it...I have lost my name in the darkness."^[8]

The Official Account of Portugal's Intervention

This selfless attitude was enshrined by the official explanation for Portugal's participation in the conflict. Incredibly, this was published only in January 1917, as the first troops were set to leave for France, and in the official gazette, the *Diário do Governo*, as if it was a decree. As far as this text was concerned, Portugal's intervention in the conflict had been the result of a coherent and linear diplomatic process stretching from August 1914 until the German declaration of war on Portugal, in March 1916:

The country – the whole world – knows what our attitude has been and knows the events which shaped it. The Portuguese Government hid nothing from the nation it represents; it hid nothing from friend or foe alike, and as a result has nothing new to add.^[9]

That this was manifestly not the case was, for the moment, set aside. The anti-interventionism of a variety of parties and factions was ignored, as were events such as the Pimenta de Castro government, and the violence of the 14 May 1915 that put paid to it. German treachery and aggression, notably in Africa, was contrasted with Portuguese rectitude, while the seizure of German shipping was described as a lawful measure, accepted as a possibility in the commercial treaties signed between the two countries. As far as benefits for Portugal, this explanation stated that it was too early to tell what these might be, apart from the appearance on the world stage of, "a people worthy of its past traditions and its hopes for the future, worthy of its freedom and independence, worthy of the noble civilization to which it belongs and in which Law and Justice are sacred and inviolable notions." No-one was convinced by this rhetoric, and not even the departure of troops for the [Western Front](#) resulted in a political and social truce.

The War's Impact

Public Doubts

The lack of any specific guarantee from London and Paris regarding this postwar settlement – the lack, in other words, of a guaranteed material reward for Portugal's intervention in the conflict – was quickly seized on by opposition forces, be they anti-interventionist republicans, revolutionary syndicalists, or monarchists. Afonso Costa and others were accused of negotiating with the nation's most precious resource – its blood – without receiving any tangible return for what seemed an open-ended investment, considering the military stalemate on the Western Front. Given the nature of the conflict, this was a damaging line of attack, made more credible by the Sacred Union's insistence on sending an expeditionary corps to France, rather than concentrating on the defense of Mozambique

and, if possible, the defeat of German forces still operating in East Africa. There seemed to be no end to the Sacred Union's commitment to the Allied cause. Moves were being made to develop an independent heavy [artillery](#) corps, to fight alongside the French army, while the recruitment of Portuguese workers by the [British](#) and [French](#) government was also given the go-ahead, despite protests from Portuguese economic interest groups. When, it was repeatedly asked in the press, would the government put Portugal first? When would it begin to prepare the country for the challenges of the post-war period?

The "Kionga Triangle"

The East African campaign was to generate the only Portuguese territorial war aims. In April 1916, Portuguese forces occupied – without firing a shot – the disputed territory of Kionga. Their rather unspectacular action was celebrated at home like a major military victory, and the retention of Kionga immediately became a war aim for the Portuguese. As more forces gathered in northern Mozambique for an assault on German East Africa, and as enormous political pressure was placed on their commander, General [Ferreira Gil \(1858-1922\)](#), to advance into enemy territory before it was completely occupied by the advancing British, it seems as if the Portuguese government was seriously entertaining the idea of benefiting from an expected share-out of the German colonies. The spectacular defeat at Newala, and the sad plight of the surviving members of the expedition, quickly disabused the Portuguese of this notion. From then on, the preservation of Portugal's existing African territory became the priority. While some Allied governments (South Africa, France, and even Belgium) could barely disguise their desire for some of this territory, it was also the case that Europe's socialists were thinking about the creation of a large "neutral" state in central Africa, whose territory would encompass, among other colonies, Angola and Mozambique. This, at least, was the view they put forward in London, in 1917. News of this plan came as a shock in Portugal, and added fuel to the political fire.^[10]

The Secret Sessions of Parliament, July 1917

Tensions surrounding the scale of the commitment to the Allied war effort, and the lack of visible rewards, reached a peak in the summer of 1917, when Minister of War [José Maria Norton de Matos \(1867-1955\)](#) explained that he envisaged the dispatch of 4,000 soldiers per month to the Western Front to make up for losses. Given that there were some 55,000 soldiers in the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps, this entailed a predicted casualty rate of over 85 percent per year. What if, critics asked, in a great offensive, the entire force was wiped out? Would it be reconstituted from scratch? Would there still be no reward for Portugal's sacrifice? The response from the government (by then the second Sacred Union cabinet, led by Afonso Costa) was a deafening silence, both publicly and in the context of the secret sessions of parliament that quickly followed Norton de Matos' words. There was nothing more to be said on the issue aside from questioning the motives, and the patriotic sentiment of the critics. This was clearly insufficient.

Sidónio Pais seizes power

In December 1917, Sidónio Pais, Portugal's former Minister in Berlin, led a small military force, which, capitalizing on widespread apathy in Lisbon, overthrew Afonso Costa's government and proclaimed the establishment of a "New Republic." The motives behind the coup remain to this day a source of contention among historians, but what cannot be denied is that the same timing that eased the coup's success was poor, from a diplomatic point of view, given that with Portuguese forces were fighting alongside their allies in both France and Mozambique. In order to ease the natural suspicions of the Allies, Sidónio Pais, eager to cut back on the Portuguese military commitment on the Western Front, was to comply strictly with every British request and suggestion; that the British viewed the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps (CEP) with skepticism, considering it a weak-point in their lines, made the relationship all the more fruitful. In such circumstances, developing an independent line on war aims was out of the question. Sidónio Pais celebrated Portuguese sacrifice, and was present as ship after ship returned home with wounded and ill soldiers, to ensure that the human cost borne by Portugal might be acknowledged by the Allies; but that was as far as he went.

Conclusion

Portugal's position in the First World War was unique. As the recently installed leaders of a small and poor country with a considerable colonial empire coveted by others, republicans like Afonso Costa felt that they could not ignore the opportunity to participate in the First World War; they saw it as a shortcut to a number of domestic and international ends. However, the nature of the intervention led to a lack of real debate on the reasons for entering the conflict, and in any case, Portugal's contribution to the Allied cause was not of a sufficient magnitude to allow it to generate war aims that cut across the interests of its larger partners. As a result, the gap that separated sacrifices made from potential rewards never ceased growing as the war continued – to the extent that, in December 1917, the Sacred Union was overthrown by an armed movement that was clearly anti-interventionist in nature, without any of the republican regime's traditional defenders intervening. Although there were many factors involved in the fall of the Sacred Union in Portugal, the lack of a serious discussion of war aims beyond the simple preservation of the colonial status quo, or the recognition of Portugal as a "progressive nation," was certainly one of these factors. In this respect, it is worth remembering the words spoken at the July 1917 secret sessions of parliament by Unionist deputy Moura Pinto, for whom Portugal's intervention in the conflict had: "provoked one of the greatest confusions registered in our national history and was the sole source of hatreds which will never be extinguished among the present generation."

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Notes

1. † Chagas, João: Diário [Diary]. Vol. 2, Lisbon 1986, pp. 276-277. Regarding Chagas and his role in the formulation of Portuguese foreign policy, see Novais, Noémia: João Chagas. A Diplomacia e a Guerra [João Chagas: Diplomacy and War], 1914-1918, Coimbra 2006.
2. † de Oliveira Marques, A. H. (ed.): O Segundo Governo de Afonso Costa, 1915-1916. Actas dos Conselhos de Ministros [The Second Afonso Costa Government, 1915-1916. Minutes of the Council of Ministers], Lisbon 1974, p. 124.
3. † The diplomatic exchanges between London, Lisbon, and, to a lesser extent, Berlin, can be followed in the first volume of the Portuguese white book on the First World War: Portugal na Primeira Guerra Mundial Vol. 1. As Negociações Diplomáticas até à Declaração de Guerra, Lisbon 1995.
4. † See, for example, the Democratic party's call to arms, published in O Mundo, Lisbon, 1 April 1916. According to this document, failure to go to Britain's aid would have earned Portugal "the entire world's scorn."
5. † Boletim Patriótico da Universidade Livre [Patriotic Bulletin of the Free University], Lisbon 1917.
6. † See de Meneses, Filipe Ribeiro: 'Sacred Union or Radical Republic? The Dilemmas of Wartime Propaganda in Portugal, 1916-1917', in: Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies 5 (1999), pp. 77-92.
7. † Cortesão, Jaime: Pela Pátria: Cartilha do Povo [For the Fatherland: The People's Primer], Oporto 1916.
8. † de Castro Osório, Ana: A Mulher Heróica [Heroic Woman], Lisbon 1916. Osório also wrote an account of Portugal's participation in the conflict aimed at young readers, De Como Portugal Foi Chamado à Guerra: História para Crianças, designed to instil pride in their country, beginning with its vast colonial empire.
9. † Diário do Governo [Official Government Gazette] , Lisbon, 17 January 1917.
10. † Criticism of the government on this matter can be found in late September/early October editions of newspapers such as O Dia (Lisbon), Pátria (Oporto), and A Capital (Lisbon).

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Citation

Meneses, Filipe Ribeiro de: War Aims and War Aims Discussions (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 2014-12-08. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10440.

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