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THE UNITED KINGDOM AND THE PORTUGUESE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY, 1974-75

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The UK is not usually mentioned as one of the foreign actors whose actions influenced the outcome of the Portuguese transition. After all, the Carnation revolution took place at a time when Britain was still coping with the effects of the great reduction of her economic power and international status. She was now, in the words of the famous Duncan Report (1969), 'a major power of the second order'. The literature on the international dimensions of Portugal's revolution – the testimonies of statesman, politicians as well as the academic accounts – has for obvious reasons tended to emphasize the role played by the two superpowers or the impact of countries such as the Federal Republic of Germany, whose economic power and particular interest in the détente process led her to play an active role in Lisbon.

Nonetheless, I believe there are good reasons to include the UK's involvement in any comprehensive assessment of the international dimensions of Portugal's transition to democracy. Although there were substantial limits to its capacity to influence events on the ground, one should not underestimate London's diplomatic leverage in a country like Portugal.

The resilience of the 'old alliance'

The main reason for this is, needless to say, the continued existence of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance. Even if Britain's post-war decline gradually undermined her ascendancy in Portugal, economic, diplomatic and sentimental ties among the elites of both countries were still significant in the last quarter of the 20th century. Of course, one could argue with some logic that in the context of a left-wing revolution this might not be such an advantageous thing, but in fact the strains under which the bilateral relationship operated since the 1960's, due mainly to divergences related to Portugal's colonial policy, would prove to be beneficial to the UK in 1974-75, as we shall see in a moment.¹

Lisbon's involvement in one of the 'left-over's' of Britain's decolonisation, Rhodesia's unilateral independence in 1965, was also a major irritant. Salazar's unwavering support to the Smith regime was at the root of several diplomatic clashes between the two countries which further damaged their relationship. Things improved a little after the installation of the apparently more liberal and flexible Caetano, who the British initially believed to be someone capable of leading Portugal into Western Europe's mainstream democratic politics. This would prove to be an illusion, of course, but

¹ The evolution of Anglo-Portuguese relations after the Second World War, with special reference to the colonial dimension, is covered by my book, *Os Despojos da Aliança. A Grã-Bretanha e a Questão Colonial Portuguesa, 1945-1975*. Lisboa: Tinta da China, 2007

nonetheless it is significant that in 1973, under a British Conservative administration, Caetano got to be invited to take part in the celebrations of the 600 years of the first Anglo-Portuguese Treaty of Alliance in London. Eventually, the visit turned out to be a major public relations fiasco for the Portuguese premier, who was received by hostile demonstrations in the streets of London and had to face the full impact of the press disclosure of a horrific massacre of civilians in Mozambique by Portuguese troops.

Caetano's visit was significant in two other aspects. On the one hand, it allowed the Labour Party to dissociate itself clearly from the Estado Novo's policies: in a parliamentary debate, Harold Wilson made the pledge that should he returned to Downing Street he would take steps to propose Portugal's expulsion from NATO; in its annual conference and electoral manifesto, Labour also made strong commitments to the liberation movements of Portuguese Africa, in contrast with the party's cautious stance when it held office in the 1960's. On the other hand, Caetano's visit helped to strengthen the ties between the Labour Party and the leader of the new Portuguese Socialist Party, Mário Soares, who was staying in London with a fellowship of the Bevin foundation and took an active part in the protests organised against the Portuguese prime-minister.

It was therefore with immense relieve that the second Wilson government, formed after Labour's victory in the March election of 1974, received the news of the military coup in Portugal. The recognition of the Portuguese National Salvation Junta by London was quick. It happened after a visit paid by Mário Soares to London in the first days of May, in order to assure the British government that the new regime would honour Portugal's international commitments, and would take steps to liberalise the country's domestic and colonial policies.

These announcements were very well received, particularly the latter. The prospects of a colonial policy more in line with the United Nations' resolutions immediately removed one of the major irritants from the bilateral relationship. Although my paper will not elaborate on this aspect, it is important to note that in the early stages of the Revolution the colonial issues were very much on the top of the Anglo-Portuguese agenda, with London advising their Portuguese counterparts that the only realistic way to restore democratic freedoms in Portugal depended on their ability to put an end to the colonial wars, even if this meant sacrificing some liberal niceties in the agreements negotiated with the liberation movements. To facilitate Portugal's colonial disengagement from the African continent, the Wilson government offered her some diplomatic assistance and logistic support, which included, among other things, the participation of several British military planes in the evacuation of the large Portuguese

community from Angola in the summer of 1975, a gesture which was much appreciated by the Portuguese authorities.

In terms of domestic politics, we can identify the 28th of September as the event which concentrated the minds of British diplomats and decision-makers regarding the future of the Portuguese revolution. After the fall of Spínola the balance of power in Lisbon tilted to the Left, but this was not seen as something which enhanced the prospects of freedom and democracy in Portugal. Nigel Trench, British ambassador to Lisbon, wrote in the aftermath of the 28th of September that the events had given a 'foretaste of the efficacy and lawlessness of a Communist Party controlled mob', bringing the country closer to a civil war². From then on, senior ministers and the Foreign Office began to monitor much more closely events in Lisbon and tried to come up with something resembling a policy or strategy towards Portugal.

Democracy, NATO and the fate of the British subjects

British diplomatic documents reveal that there were three main preoccupations guiding the Wilson government attitude in the following months.

First and foremost there was Portugal's democratic future. Given the economic underdevelopment and social inequalities inherited from the dictatorship there was a general feeling that any future regime in Portugal would probably have to adopt a more interventionist policy in the social and economic sphere, even if this threatened the position of some foreign capitalist interests operating in the country. However, this 'Socialist' approach, which at the time was subscribed by nearly all the legalised political parties in Portugal, should not be confused with any sort of 'popular democratic' experience similar to the one which had taken place in Eastern Europe after the Second World War. British officials were relieved to realise that what the leaders of the moderate parties had in mind was a 'Social Democratic' consensus, in which an economy based on free enterprise might be combined with a strong public sector, generous welfare provisions and a genuine pluralistic democracy. Therefore, the holding of the free elections scheduled for April 1975 and the implementation of the constitutional principles that would hopefully enable Portugal to become an open democratic society, firmly aligned with the West, became the top priority of the British government.

² Nigel Trench's dispatch 'The Fall of Spínola' (2 October 1974), in Keith Hamilton and Patrick Salmon (editors), *Documents on British Policy Overseas. Series III, Volume II. The Southern Flank in Crisis 1973-1975*. London: Routledge, 2006, p. 376.

The means which London possessed to influence events on the ground, however, were somewhat limited due to the mediocre condition of the UK's economy. As one document put it: 'We are too poor to do much ourselves. Logically, we should leave it to others to make the running. But our special links to Portugal lay a certain responsibility on us. We should therefore be ready to encourage our allies to help. The Germans and the French are the key'³. British initiatives therefore assumed a predominantly political and diplomatic nature. These included contacts with Portuguese political and military leaders whereby British representatives could expose their view of the relevance of democratic freedoms; the promotion of closer ties between parliamentary parties in the UK and their counterparts in Portugal; the establishment of a modest technical assistance programme covering a wide range of social and economic issues; and, as the above quote suggested, concerted action with the EEC partners to study ways of providing financial assistance to Portugal, although subject to certain political conditions. At a non-governmental level, it is also important to mention Harold Wilson's involvement in the Committee of Solidarity and Friendship with Portugal, established in Stockholm in August 1975, which included several European Social Democratic parties, and was chaired by the former West German chancellor, Willy Brandt.

After the events of the 11th of March, however, the UK and the Western allies faced a dilemma. On the one hand, they wished to strengthen the prospects of the moderate forces which took part in the provisional governments and were desperately asking for foreign financial assistance; but, on the other hand, they sensed that there was a clear danger of the democratic process being confiscated by the radicals of the MFA in collusion with the communists and the extreme-left, and if this happened the West could well end up financing the construction of a totalitarian society in Portugal. There were a few moments of anguish and disbelief among British leaders and diplomats throughout the spring and summer of 1975, but eventually the 'optimists' carried the day. The democratic parties and the moderate elements of the MFA proved themselves capable of countering the challenge of the radical left and their resolve was probably encouraged by the combination of inducements and threats put forward by the Western powers.

The other issue which left the British authorities anxious with the outcome of the revolution had a more geopolitical quality to it. This was Portugal's position within NATO, a subject of some concern to the decision makers and military planners in the Western capitals. In an early stage worries centred on the security of the information

³ Submission from Baker to Goodison, 22th of August 1975, *Ibidem.*, p. 480.

regarding NATO's nuclear planning, a fear that sprung from the presence of communist elements in the Portuguese governments, and the possibility that these might leak confidential or secret documents to the Soviet Union. This was dealt with in a more or less tactful manner, with President Costa Gomes, an old 'NATO hand', taking the decision to withdraw Portugal from the Nuclear Planning Group by the end of 1974 as soon as he realised the sensitivity of the question; later on, the allies could also rely on the cooperative attitude of members of the Portuguese armed forces and foreign service who deliberately refrained from attending the meetings which might provide them with access to more sensitive information.

However, with the radical twist of the 11th of March, Portugal's membership of NATO was suddenly open to question. Several assessments produced by the Chiefs of Staff and the Joint Intelligence Committee in the aftermath of those events discussed the possibility of Portugal leaving the alliance. From a military point of view this was not considered a very damaging outcome, since Portugal's contribution in this field was 'unimpressive'; however, the loss of bases and other facilities would be a serious setback given its repercussions to the Alliance's posture on the Southern Flank: NATO's surveillance capability in the Eastern Atlantic Area would be much diminished and American plans for the reinforcement of the southern region would have to be reviewed. Needless to say, this scenario could further be aggravated if the facilities which the West enjoyed in Portuguese territory were conceded to the Soviet Union.⁴

Interestingly, there was another scenario, taken very seriously by the Americans, which anticipated a more ambiguous development: Portugal would remain in the Alliance but with a neutralist stance. This would set a dangerous precedent for member states with large communist parties (France, Italy), while Lisbon's advocacy of neutralist policies would encourage similar tendencies in other countries (such as the Scandinavians, Holland, Greece and 'perhaps' Turkey). As one report put it in May 1975, 'For the time being it probably suits the Russians for Portugal to remain an awkward, divisive and insecure member of NATO'.⁵ But while the Republican Administration in Washington favoured a more confrontational approach to Portugal in this matter, London took the line that any display of open hostility towards the Revolution would probably backfire and produce a more undesirable outcome. They only agreed to make a more robust approach during the 5th provisional government brief tenure, and the moment chosen for this was the Helsinki CSCE summit when there was a concerted effort by the major

⁴ See 'Note by the Defence Policy Staff of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, A Preliminary Assessment of the Military Consequences if Portugal withdraws from NATO', 26 Marh 1975, *Ibidem*, pp. 409-415

⁵ Report by the Joint Intelligence Committee, 26 June 1975, *Ib.*, p. 456.

NATO powers to make the Soviets realize that their conduct in Portugal would be taken as the test of their compliance with the spirit of détente.

Finally a third preoccupation of the Wilson government regarding Portugal, which I can only mention very briefly, was the security of the British community and of its properties and investments. After the 11th of March, detailed contingency plans had to be drawn for the complete evacuation of British residents and tourists, and embassy officials devoted a significant amount of time and energy to attend requests put forward by some hard-pressed members of the community, particularly those who had their farms in Alentejo occupied or were faced with demands by workers committees in their firms or hotels. Needless to say, this didn't make life easy for the Wilson government when it decided to lend its full support to the 6th provisional government. In the House of Commons and in the press, for instance, members of the Tory opposition questioned the wisdom of this policy when British subjects in Portugal were still being harassed by left-wing militants.

Final remarks

Documentary evidence seems to suggest that, notwithstanding the modesty of its means, the UK was still able to exert a certain amount of influence on the Portuguese transition to democracy. The coordinated actions taken with European countries at critical moments, some timely interventions with the Americans and the Soviets, the counsel given to the moderate elements of the political and military factions in Portugal, its helpful role in assisting Portugal's difficult disengagement from Africa, and even its 'shadowy' involvement in the events of the 25th of November (MI 6's alleged role in the preparation of the moderate's strategy for the final showdown with the communists and the radical left), all this seems to have contributed to the desired outcome of the Revolution in Portugal. The fact that the British government was not particularly tainted by its association with the Estado Novo dictatorship, and the respect and admiration which Britain's parliamentary democracy inspired in Portugal, appear to have been important factors in facilitating the dialogue between London and key figures of the moderate parties and of the MFA. And if it's fair to assume that the triumph of democracy in Portugal had also something to do with the prospect of the country's accession to the European Community, then one must conclude that there was a significant symbolism in the fact that in 1977 Soares chose London as the first stop in his tour to present Portugal's formal application to the EEC.