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**THE AFFECT ON ANGLO-PORTUGUESE  
RELATIONS OF THE NORTH  
AMERICAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE  
1775-1783.**

**by L.M.E. Shaw**

The Anglo-Portuguese alliances date from Medieval times. In 1775 the Anglo-Portuguese treaties of 1664, 1661, 1703 and 1715 were still acknowledged by both countries to be current. Most valued by Portugal was the Secret Article of the 1661 Treaty wherein Charles II promised that England would protect Portugal and all the conquests or colonies belonging to the crown of Portugal against its present and future enemies.<sup>1</sup> Britain valued the alliance because it gave her warm water ports where her ships could be victualled and repaired when sailing to and from her overseas interests, but also because it gave her access through Portugal to the Brazil trade. A large part of the goods sent to Brazil were re-exported down to the Spanish La Plata area and to Buenos Aires, where rich Jewish refugees from the Inquisition controlled the administrative posts and paid for the goods they bought with silver and gold from Potosi in Peru. That local trade was much valued by the English, French and Dutch. Not only was the trade very profitable but freights and dues in Lisbon were lower than those charged in Spain.<sup>2</sup>

By 1775, Britain's North American colonies had prospered and their economies had been incorporated into Britain's trading system. Their products of rice, wheat, indigo, cotton and fish were valued by both Great Britain and Portugal. Above all, they had large supplies of timber, necessary for the building of ships for the navy and merchant

vessels. There was regular trade between America, Great Britain, Portugal, Madeira, the Azores and West Africa. Officially, of course, under the accepted colonial system of the time, all colonies had to trade through their mother country. Portugal had always been extremely particular about ensuring that only Portuguese ships took cargos to and from Brazil, enabling her to charge import and export taxes on every cargo. That was especially so after the discovery there of gold and, later, in the eighteenth century, diamonds.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, the British merchants had become the wealthiest group of foreign merchants in Portugal. The Portuguese merchants had played a very minor role in Portuguese trade since the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In 1750, Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo came into power. He had been made Conde de Oeiras in 1759 and Marquês de Pombal in 1770. Pombal had long before determined that he was going to put Portugal's trade back into the hands of Portuguese merchants and to that end he had made a particularly intensive study of Britain's mercantile methods when he was Portugal's envoy in London from 1740-45. By 1770 he had succeeded in doing that.<sup>4</sup>

Relations between Portugal and Britain were not always easy. Each country was free to have its own diplomatic policy. For example, England fought the Spanish War, the War of the Austrian Succession and the Jacobite Succession between 1739-48. Portugal was not involved. Britain was at war with France between 1756-63 and Portugal was not involved until, at French instigation, in 1762, Spain invaded northern Portugal. Britain immediately sent troops to Portugal. At the same time the French were also inciting the Spanish to attack Portugal in South America

and threatening to invade the Amazon area from Cayenne.<sup>5</sup> It will be remembered that the kings of Spain had been French Bourbons since the death of King Carlos II in 1700. The Franco-Spanish agreement known as the Bourbon Family Compact was published in a supplement of the Paris Gazette on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1761.<sup>6</sup> While Spain was attacking Portuguese territory in South America, and cutting off the lucrative coastal trade in the La Plata area, Choiseuil, the French Foreign Minister, informed Portugal that France wished to negotiate a commercial treaty with her. The object of the treaty was to stipulate that Portugal would buy French woollens instead of British.<sup>7</sup> The definitive peace treaty of the Anglo-French war of 1756-63 was signed in Paris on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1763. Meanwhile because of slow communications, it became known that during the peace negotiations Spain had captured Nova Colônia near the River Plate. It was returned to Portugal later, but Spain did not return Rio Grande do Sul.<sup>8</sup> The war in South America therefore continued in spite of the peace and remained one of Pombal's chief concerns. Pombal maintained that it was impossible for the Portuguese to negotiate with Spain and that Portugal expected English support in any war over matters in Brazil.<sup>9</sup> In England, however, Pombal's requests for help were not well received because Pombal had, for a long time, been ignoring the agreed rights of English merchants under Anglo-Portuguese treaties, dismissing their grievances as irrelevant.

When thirteen of Britain's North American colonies rebelled in 1775, Portugal naturally feared that the revolutionary doctrines being propounded in those colonies would spread to Brazil and Portugal but at the same time, it was also appreciated that a large amount of dried fish, grain and naval stores were regularly imported from North American colonies by Portugal, Madeira and the Azores as

well as Brazil. Those imports were paid for in specie which enabled America to import in return a large part of the wines produced in Madeira, some cotton and woollen cloth, and spices, as well as goods from England and Europe. New England whaling vessels frequently used the Azores and Cabo Verde islands as supply stations. Skilled whale men from those islands were often recruited to crew New England ships.<sup>10</sup>

News of the North American revolt in July 1775 had only reached Portugal in August, but two events persuaded Pombal to continue pressing Britain for help in South America. In spite of the 1763 treaty, Spanish forces in South America had overwhelmed the Portuguese settlements in Santa Catarina and Colônia in 1774. Further, Spain had been weakened by a disastrous defeat in its expedition to Algiers in July 1775.<sup>11</sup> Pombal therefore wrote again asking Britain, as Portugal's guarantor in the 1763 peace treaty, to provide help against Spanish attacks in South America. Interestingly, in a dispatch of 25<sup>th</sup> November 1775, he emphasised that it was in Britain's interest to prevent Spain from gaining an ascendancy over Portugal. He said that based on Portugal's experience in defeating the Dutch in Brazil in 1654, he predicted that Britain would not achieve military victory over the American colonies. He suggested that George III should cede to the colonists' demands for representation by creating an American Parliament, which the London Parliament could then co-opt through the distribution of offices and other forms of patronage. Rather than sending the letter through the normal diplomatic channels, he sent it through the mails, presumably in the hope that the censor would read it and relay the contents to those people in England who were against the war in North America.<sup>12</sup> He probably had doubts about the Spanish leanings of the

Portuguese envoy in London at the time, Pinto de Souza Coutinho, who later became the Visconde de Balsamão. As a minister in Portugal later in the century, he was strongly suspected of being pro-Spanish, as were many of the Portuguese nobility whose families had intermarried with those of Spain. Alternatively, he might have hoped to assist the group in Parliament led by Charles Fox that was opposed to the war in America.

To understand Pombal's reactions to the events in America in 1775 they must be viewed against a backdrop of Spanish-Portuguese relations at that time. Spain had for long been a danger to Portugal, not only as a neighbour in Europe, but also in South America. Since João IV had fought for and obtained Portugal's independence from Spain in 1640, Spain had always been looking for a means to re-incorporate Portugal into Spain. In 1668 Portugal had won her independence after a war that had lasted 28 years but Portugal had lost Olivença in the peace treaty. The ruler of Portugal at that time, King Pedro II, had been married twice, once to a French princess and then to a German, who was the mother of Portugal's next king, João V. The latter married an Austrian princess, but in 1728 he arranged the dual marriages when they were only children of his son, José, to a young Spanish princess, Mariana Victoria, and of a daughter, Barbara, to the brother of that princess, Ferdinand, who later became King Ferdinand VI of Spain. Thus whilst Pombal was in office, King José's wife, the Queen of Portugal, was a Spaniard. The heir to the throne was Princess Maria. Pombal arranged her marriage to her uncle Pedro, in order to prevent further involvement with Spain. However, after Pombal left office, their son, later João VI, was married to Carlota Joaquina, a sister of Ferdinand VII of Spain, whose intervention in affairs was to lead to a

revolution in Portugal in the nineteenth century, and to the eventual independence of Brazil.

In May 1776, when members of the American Continental Congress announced that they were considering separation from Britain, Pombal realised that the trouble in North America would make it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain British help in South America. In an attempt to assist Britain, he, therefore, issued an edict that no American ships were to have 'pratique' or entry into Portuguese ports. All North American vessels currently in port had to leave within eight days.<sup>13</sup> That reaction pleased George III.<sup>14</sup> The edict against American shipping resulted in many English vessels, having left Portuguese ports, being taken by American privateers. The privateers, however, continued to use French and Spanish ports as their bases. Information obtained from prisoners taken was that there were 150 American privateers at sea. American vessels blockaded Oporto. So effective were the privateers that English merchants were sending their money home on neutral Dutch vessels, instead of using the regular packet boat that was unarmed.<sup>15</sup>

While Portuguese ports were closed to North American shipping, Spain, having recovered from her defeat in Algiers, had decided to make a final effort to obtain control of the La Plata region in South America. A large force of 116 ships, including 20 war ships, 10,000 troops and 8,500 sailors and six months' supplies was sent out there under D. Pedro de Cevallos. He had been secretly nominated governor of the region. Santa Catarina and Colônia were captured but not Rio Grande, because of a very bad storm that scattered the fleet.<sup>16</sup>

In July 1776 Silas Deane, Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee, members of the North American Congress appointed as revolutionary diplomats, were sent to France to represent the rebel states. Beaumarchais, the French representative to Congress in North America, declared that Pombal's action was a great blunder. Congress should declare War on Portugal and send a fleet to help the Spanish in South America. Spain would then ally with North America and invade Portugal with the support of France.<sup>17</sup>

In 1776, because Britain was subordinating all her policies to waging the war in the thirteen colonies, it was essential to prevent France and Spain becoming involved in the fighting in North America. Pombal's invoking of Portugal's treaty rights, the loss of shipping and the complaints of merchants, made the situation increasingly difficult for Britain. However, during the period August - October her campaign in America had gone successfully. An appeal from America for help was taken to Portugal by a man named Castrioto and was received by the Portuguese Foreign Minister, Ayres de Sá e Melo. The latter merely replied, through the Portuguese Minister in Paris, that any act which might be construed as recognition of American independence, would violate the Anglo-Portuguese treaty.<sup>18</sup> But in any case, merchants in Portugal had circumvented the act banning American vessels from Portuguese ports by sending neutral ships to foreign ports to collect the grain and other American goods they wished to import.

In the midst of those problems, on 4<sup>th</sup> December 1776, King José I had a paralytic stroke and his daughter, Maria, was proclaimed Regent. The king died on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1777 and Maria I became queen.<sup>19</sup> Pombal was dismissed after 27 years in office.<sup>20</sup> During that time, he had

done much for Portugal's economy. He had put Portuguese trade back into the hands of Portuguese merchants and with the aid of his brother Paulo when the latter was Inquisitor General, the Inquisition had been brought under Royal control. He banished all the Jesuits from Portugal and its dominions, thereby offending many powerful churchmen. He organised the rebuilding of Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake and gradually began the long-needed building of a Portuguese navy. However, he was also very overbearing, offending many aristocrats of better family than his own. Most of all he is remembered for his cruelty to the Tavora family.<sup>21</sup>

On Pombal's departure from office, orders were given to suspend the fighting in Brazil and frequent and close contacts were developed between Portugal, Spain and France, to the detriment of the British alliance. In October 1777, the North Americans won the battle of Saratoga and this encouraged France to declare war on Britain. On 11<sup>th</sup> March 1778, Queen Maria of Portugal and Charles III of Spain signed the Treaty of San Ildefonso; a defence alliance between their two countries, which settled the war in South America.<sup>22</sup> In June 1779 Spain declared war on Britain.<sup>23</sup> Although Queen Maria said that she would remain strictly neutral,<sup>24</sup> British complaints to the government of Portugal went unheeded and the Queen released captured American seamen, refusing to take payment for their keep.<sup>25</sup> All privateers were banned from Portuguese ports but despite this, extensive damage continued to be inflicted on British trade and shipping, in particular by Spanish war-galleys operating from Portugal.

As early as October 1778, Benjamin Franklin had written to a Mr. Boniface, a French protestant merchant in Lisbon, wishing to appoint him consul. But as a consul's

emoluments were tied to the amount of shipping and goods entering or leaving Portugal, it is difficult to see how he could be paid when American vessels were officially still banned. That request was not allowed by Portugal. However, an American Agent, a German named Henry Dohrman, was appointed in Lisbon in 1783 seven months before Britain officially granted independence to her former colonies,<sup>26</sup> indicating that the ban on American vessels was not being observed.

Although the Queen may have said she was neutral, when Spain informed all courts in August 1779 that it was blockading Gibraltar and that reprisals would be made on vessels bound there, even neutrals, Maria issued instructions that no effects or provisions were to be sent there. The governor of Faro sent for the English Consul, Mr Lemprier, and in the presence of the French and Spanish consuls, gave him two orders: a) no vessels were to go to Gibraltar, and b) no privateer was to leave Faro as long as another vessel was in sight. Lemprier said that in view of the large number of vessels entering and leaving the Mediterranean, privateers would be confined to harbour. Complaints by Walpole, Britain's envoy, elicited the reply that that was not a prohibition but an act of neutrality.<sup>27</sup>

While Pombal was in power he had actively assisted Britain even though Britain was not able to help Portugal at that time in South America. Queen Maria I claimed to have adopted a more neutral stance between Britain and North America but after France and Spain entered the war on the side of America she found it difficult to remain strictly neutral. One of Britain's main reasons for wanting to maintain the alliance with Portugal, in the face of provocation, had been the need for warm water ports. By allowing Spanish war-galleys into Portuguese ports and

harbours England suffered not only loss of her merchant shipping, but also of sailors, who were a very valuable commodity.

Despite all difficulties, however, events during the American War of Independence greatly strained but did not undermine the basic strength of the long-standing Anglo-Portuguese alliance. This was to be proved at the end of the eighteenth century when Spain persuaded Portugal into the "War of the Oranges", followed later by the horrors of the French invasion, when Britain was called upon to rescue not only the Portuguese royal family but also Portugal itself.

#### Notes

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20. P.R.O. S.P. 89/84 f.117, 19 March 1777, Walpole to Weymouth, Lisbon, 19 March 1777.
21. See K.Maxwell, op.cit. for a comprehensive biography of Pombal and his times.
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27. P.R.O. S.P.89/86, ff, 248-266, Walpole to Weymouth, Lisbon, 3 October 1778.

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