

The British Labour Government and Portugal in the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution

This article examines the role that Harold Wilson's Labour government played in Portugal in the 17 months immediately after the overthrow of the *Estado Novo* by the Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974. It analyses the economic, political and diplomatic measures employed by Britain to try to establish parliamentary democracy in Portugal.

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Introduction

This article examines the role that Harold Wilson's Labour government played during the political crisis that followed the Carnation Revolution, focusing on the period between the military coup on 25 April 1974 and the failed revolt led by left-wing sectors of the Army in November 1975, which can be argued to have facilitated the enactment of a new constitution in April 1976. This short period witnessed a considerable upheaval that affected all the political, social, and economic structures of Portugal. These 17 months can be divided into three periods. The first, from May to September 1974, was dominated by the disagreements between the new President of the Republic, António de Spínola, and the Armed Forces Movement (*Movimento das Forças Armadas* - MFA) over decolonisation in Africa and democratisation in Portugal. The MFA was calling for a speedy departure from Africa's Portuguese colonies, while Spínola advocated the establishment of a federation. Spínola also supported a moderate political transition, which would reduce the power of the MFA. In this struggle, the MFA came out on top and Spínola resigned at the end of September 1974.

The second period, from October 1974 to March 1975, was taken up by competitive efforts to define the social model to be implemented in Portugal. While the MFA held power in the country, it was not long before disagreements emerged. The existence of differing political aims in the MFA led to the creation of factions that were supported by various political parties. Some of the military supported the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), which was in favour of a Soviet-type social model, while others, allied to the Socialist Party and other centrist parties, advocated the establishment of a Western-type pluralist democracy. There were also revolutionary military units that favoured a popular revolution.²

The final phase of Portugal's Revolution began with the failure of a *coup d'état* staged by right-wing forces on 11 March 1975. This phase was characterised by fierce clashes between the different factions of the MFA and their respective political and social branches, with the intense anti-communist mobilisation the country experienced during the summer of 1975 tipping the balance in favour of the pro-Western forces. Victory for the pluralist model was only achieved, however, with the failure of the ultra-left-wing military coup on 25 November 1975. The holding of elections and the enactment of a new constitution during the first half of 1976 established a parliamentary system. Nevertheless, the emergence of Western democracy in Portugal had not been a foregone conclusion.³

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² Rezola, Maria I. *Os militares na revolução de Abril: O conselho da revolução e a transição para a democracia em Portugal (1974–1976)*. Lisbon: Campo da Comunicação, 2006.

³ Grugel, Jean. *Democratization. A Critical Introduction*. New York: Palgrave, 2002. pp. 12-32

Background to British involvement

A few months before Harold Wilson's general election victory of February 1974, Marcelo Caetano, the Portuguese *Presidente do Concelho* (Prime Minister) and successor to the dictator, António de Oliveira Salazar, went to London to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance. This caused a great deal of controversy in the UK, because it followed massacres perpetrated by the Portuguese army in Mozambique. On 10 July 1973, *The Times* had reported that 400 people had been killed by Portuguese forces battling against FRELIMO, the Marxist liberation movement.⁴ Wilson, then leader of the Labour opposition, demanded that Caetano's visit be suspended, using the term 'genocide', and called for Portugal's expulsion from NATO. Other well-known members of the Labour Party, including James Callaghan, who would later become the British Foreign Secretary, also criticised the visit. As part of the activities against Caetano's presence in London, Callaghan held a meeting with Mário Soares, leader of the newly created Portuguese Socialist Party (PS), under the auspices of German Social Democrats and with the support of the British Labour Party. While Labour's aid to its sister party in Portugal was modest, it was a significant morale booster for the PS. It also served to forge ties that both parties cemented for the future.⁵

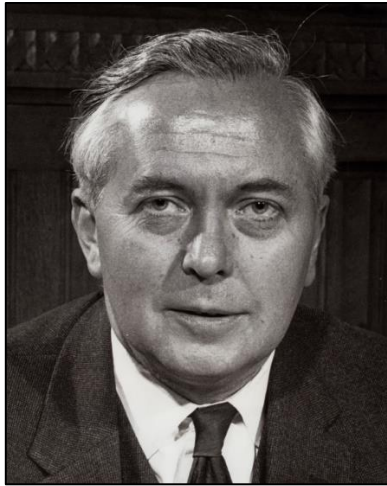
A few months later, Labour's manifesto for the UK general election in February 1974 expressed solidarity with the national liberation movements in the Portuguese territories in Africa and committed itself to the promotion of democracy in southern Europe. During the election campaign, Wilson condemned the Conservative government's complacency towards dictatorships in Chile, Spain, Greece and Portugal. In the months leading up to the Carnation Revolution, British Labour repeatedly declared its support for the democratisation of Portugal and the decolonisation of its possessions in Africa. This meant that, despite Britain's past conciliatory attitude towards the Portuguese dictatorship, the new Labour government that emerged from the elections of early 1974 was in a favourable position to influence the processes of political and colonial transformation that followed the military coup in Portugal in April of that year.

The public position held by Labour prior to April 1974 gave Wilson room for manoeuvre when, as Prime Minister, he needed to adopt a position regarding the new authorities in Lisbon. Having previously supported anti-Salazar activists, he was in a more favourable position than other Western allies during Portugal's crisis, particularly the United States, whose reputation had been tarnished by its collaboration with undemocratic regimes as part of its Cold War ideology. Moreover, Caetano's fall took place in a context where the UK was struggling to find a new global role as its Empire was being gradually wound down, and also because entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) was seen to be the only option if Britain wanted to retain its international influence as a regional power.⁶

⁴ MacQueen, Norrie and Pedro Aires Oliveira. *Grocer Meets Butcher: Marcello Caetano's London visit of 1973 and the last days of Portugal's Estado Novo*. *Cold War History* 10 (2010): 29–50.

⁵ Granadino, Alan. *Democratic Socialism or Social Democracy? The Influence of the British Labour Party and the Parti Socialiste Français in the Ideological Transformation of the Partido Socialista Português and the Partido Socialista Obrero Español in the mid-1970s*. Doctoral thesis, European University Institute, 2016, pp. 65-66. Fonseca, Ana M. *The Federal Republic of Germany and the Portuguese Transition to Democracy (1974–1976)*. In *Journal of European Integration History*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 35-56. Oliveira, Pedro A. *Generous Albion? Portuguese Anti-Salazarists in the United Kingdom, c. 1960–74*. In *Portuguese Studies*, Vol 27, No. 2, 2011, pp. 175–207.

⁶ Turner, Michael. *Britain and the World in the Twentieth Century: Ever Decreasing Circles*. London: Continuum International, 2010. pp 178-80



Harold Wilson



Mário Soares

British–Portuguese Relations

The *Estado Novo* held power for 48 years, making it the longest-lasting right-wing dictatorship in Europe. The regime was authoritarian, followed traditional Catholic values, and was imperialist in nature. Despite its politics, Portugal's neutrality during World War II allowed Salazar to be part of the post-1945 international community. The start of the Cold War and Portugal's membership in the newly formed NATO consolidated the regime's international position. Besides his anti-communism, Salazar offered his allies the use of military bases in the Azores, Madeira, and the Cape Verde Islands, as well as the naval base at Lagos in the Algarve and air bases at Espinho, near Porto, and Montijo, near Lisbon.⁷

Anglo-Portuguese relations were good during the 1950s. In 1959, both countries became founding members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA). However, Salazar's determination to stand against the "winds of change" referred to in a speech to the South African parliament in February 1960 by the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, and Britain's move to give independence to its major colonies, starting with Ghana in 1957, caused disagreements between the two countries. In an international context in which the Third World seemed to be emerging as an important new actor, the UK facilitated self-government and racial equity in Africa in an attempt to preserve its liberal image as a moral leader of the Commonwealth and the "Free World". Portugal, however, viewed Britain's withdrawal from its colonies as playing into the hands of radical African nationalists and communists, and as further isolating Portuguese colonialism. Salazar's determination to retain Portuguese territories was ideologically supported by the nationalist dogma of 'Lusitanian pluricontinentalism'. Portugal's territories were not viewed as colonies, but as provinces belonging to an indivisible state.⁸

The different approaches of the two countries towards colonialism caused several disagreements, especially over Lisbon's military actions in Angola and Goa. However, the main cause of tension came in 1965, with Southern Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). In the struggle between Britain and the white-minority Rhodesian government, Portugal sided with the latter, violating the economic sanctions imposed by the Wilson government. In general, though, in contrast to the more aggressive stance taken by the US, the British adopted a moderate position towards Portuguese colonialism, being reluctant to put too much pressure on the country, as it feared Portuguese withdrawal

⁷ Oliveira, Pedro Aires. *Os Despojos da Aliança: A Grã-Bretanha e a Questão Colonial Portuguesa, 1945–1975* [Great Britain and the Portuguese Colonial Issue, 1945–1975]. Lisbon: Tinta-da-China, 2007.

⁸ MacQueen, Norrie. *Portugal's First Domino: "Pluricontinentalism" and Colonial War in Guiné-Bissau, 1963–1974*. *Contemporary European History* 2 (1999): 209–230.

from Africa could leave a dangerous power vacuum.^{9,10} In addition, London was reluctant to complicate relations with a NATO member or to jeopardise the considerable British investments in Portugal.

Relations between the UK and Portugal improved from the beginning of the 1970s. This can be attributed to Salazar's incapacitating accident in 1968 and the fact that Marcelo Caetano, his successor, was considered more of a reformist. In June 1970 the Conservative Party returned to power under Edward Heath, and both he and Sir Alec Douglas-Home, his Foreign Secretary and a Lusophile, adopted a more tolerant position regarding the speed of Portugal's exit from Africa, believing that it would gradually withdraw from its colonies. Such a gradual withdrawal was seen as benefiting British interests in the region.¹¹ This tolerance of Portuguese colonialism partially accounts for the failure of the British Foreign Office to foresee the military coup in Portugal.

The British Response to the Portuguese Revolution

Harold Wilson had only just begun his second term as Prime Minister in March 1974 when he was faced with the 25 April military coup in Portugal. The events of 25 April generated new expectations for British foreign policy in Southern Africa and Southern Europe. The fall of the dictatorship raised unusual winds of decolonisation and democratisation in Lisbon, offering Harold Wilson's government the possibility of aligning its Portuguese policy with the international commitments of Labour's electoral manifesto.¹² Unlike some other policy approaches during the Cold War, the protection of British strategic interests and the struggle against communism were compatible with the championing of democracy. This emphasis on democracy allowed Wilson's government to reconnect with the basics of Labour policy, such as socialist internationalism, cooperation, and the defence of universal moral norms, which had been ignored during the *realpolitik* pursued between 1964 and 1970.^{13,14} Consequently, British diplomacy towards Portugal focused on two goals: first, to support the moderate and peaceful establishment of a liberal democracy in Portugal, and second, to encourage the rapid and orderly dissolution of the Portuguese overseas empire, as this provided London with the opportunity to address the thorny situation in the former British possession of Southern Rhodesia.¹⁵

The Portuguese Socialist Party (PS) became a key ally of the British government in achieving these objectives. While General António de Spínola, the Chair of the Junta of National Salvation, the first government after the revolution, was in favour of a gradual transition to a federalist Lusophone Commonwealth, the PS advocated a rapid and direct transfer of powers, in line with the British views.¹⁶ Indeed, the PS combined radical rhetoric with a realistic and moderate political practice, being committed to the establishment of a parliamentary democracy. Since the fall of the authoritarian regime, Labour leaders saw in the PS a strategic asset to contain the growing influence of the communists led by Álvaro Cunhal and to guarantee the establishment of a Western-style political system in Portugal.¹⁷

⁹ Stone, Glyn. *Britain and Portuguese Africa, 1961–65*. *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 28 (2000): 179–184.

¹⁰ Coggins, Richard. *Wilson and Rhodesia: UDI and British Policy Towards Africa*. *Contemporary British History* 20 (2006): 363–381. DOI: 10.1080/13619460500407061

¹¹ Oliveira, Pedro Aires. *Live and Let Live: Britain and Portugal's Imperial Endgame (1945–75)*. *Portuguese Studies* 29 (2013): 186–208. DOI: 10.5699/portstudies.29.2.0186,

¹² Cooke, Simon. *The Response of the Labour Government to the "Revolution of Carnations" in Portugal, 1974–76*, p. 37. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1452985/1/Simon_Cooke_-_PhD_-_November_2014.pdf

¹³ Young, J. *Britain and LBJ's War, 1964–1968*. *Cold War History* 2 (2002): 63–92.

¹⁴ Vickers, Rhiannon. *Labour Party and the World: Labour's Foreign Policy Since 1951*. Manchester University Press, 2011.

¹⁵ Coggins, Richard. *Op cit*.

¹⁶ MacQueen, Norrie. *The Decolonization of Portuguese Africa. Metropolitan Revolution and the Dissolution of Empire*. London: Longman, 1997, pp. 75–95; Oliveira, Pedro A. *Live and Let Live*, *op cit*; Oliveira, Pedro A. *Os Despojos da Aliança: A Grã-Bretanha e a Questão Colonial Portuguesa, 1945 – 1975*. Lisbon: Tinta-da-China, 2007.

¹⁷ Granadino, Alan, *op cit*. p. 72. See also Sablosky, Juliet A - *O PS e a transição para a democracia. Relações com os partidos socialistas europeus*. Lisbon: Editorial Notícias, 2000.

Shortly after the military uprising, Mário Soares was invited to London by Ron Hayward, the General Secretary of the Labour Party, to hold a meeting with Wilson and Foreign Secretary Callaghan. The meeting outlined the two main paths that would characterise British policy towards Portugal during the revolution. First, to assist the PS through non-governmental channels, especially through organisations of the Labour movement, Callaghan suggested sending financial, technical, training and organisational assistance to the Portuguese socialists through the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). The latter had more room for manoeuvre than the Government, which could not appear to be interfering in an increasingly volatile internal situation in Portugal. Second, it was agreed to foster bilateral cooperation with the new authorities in Lisbon on issues of common interest. Additionally, British cooperation with the Portuguese government was proposed in several areas, especially in decolonisation.

The Portuguese plans for decolonisation relieved Britain of the stumbling block that existed in its relations with Portugal. Portugal's exit from Africa offered new opportunities for Britain to again play a leading role on the international stage, as Lisbon believed that Britain's experience in dissolving its former empire offered the best model for the solution of its own colonial problems. Callaghan offered Soares the possibility of sharing Britain's experience in decolonisation to both safeguard Britain's considerable interests in Rhodesia and bolster the West's efforts to contain the Soviet Union's increasing influence in the region. Anglo-Portuguese collaboration in this area gained momentum following the appointment in mid-May 1974 of Mário Soares as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the First Provisional Government headed by Adelino da Palma Carlos. In late May and early June Callaghan had two meetings with Soares, at which "Portuguese plans for decolonisation in Africa" were discussed.¹⁸

The Foreign and Commonwealth (FCO) view was that decolonisation required stability of the process of internal political change in Portugal. However, the British Ambassador in Lisbon, Nigel Trench, soon began to report his misgivings about the new Portuguese authorities' ability to contain the unrest that followed 25 April. According to Trench, the rebellion had opened the door to an uncontrollable "general feeling of liberation".¹⁹ The Carnation Revolution was immediately followed by the release of political prisoners, the dismantling of the political police force, the occupation of government buildings and mass strikes by students, civil servants, military personnel, and farm workers. Hundreds of organisations were set up to represent workers and students.²⁰ The resulting power vacuum led to an explosion of popular feeling, which turned a military coup into a grassroots revolutionary movement that was spiralling out of the control of both the Communists and the Socialists.²¹ Ambassador Trench was concerned by Spínola's fall in September 1974 and the apparently unstoppable strikes and demonstrations that he thought were plunging Portugal into "conditions very close to anarchy".

In view of the disturbing developments, the FCO Permanent Under Secretariat of State for Foreign Affairs met at the end of October 1974 to address the situation in Portugal. At that meeting it was decided that to achieve the "secure establishment of a pluralist democracy in Portugal" it was necessary to strengthen the "political parties broadly corresponding to those in our Parliament" through programmes and visits that would facilitate "their access to the organisational experience of the [British] parties and enhance their international status". Thus, while Labour's assistance continued to focus on

¹⁸ *Visit by Dr Mario Soares, Portuguese Minister of Foreign Affairs, to UK, 25 May 1974*, FCO 9/2073, UKNA.

¹⁹ This, and other quotes not referenced, are based on material available at The National Archives of the UK. For full details, see Óscar José Martín García, *The End of the Carnival: The UK and the Carnation Revolution in Portugal*. Contemporary British History, April 2015

²⁰ Brinca, Pedro and Etelvina Baia. *Memórias da Revolução no distrito de Setúbal*. Setúbal na Rede, 2000.

²¹ Maxwell, Kenneth. *Portugal: "The Revolution of the Carnations", 1974–75*. In *Civil Resistance and Power Politics*, edited by Adam Roberts, and Timothy Garton Ash. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

the PS, the British government extended its support to the weak centre-right organisations, in particular the *Centro Democrático e Social – Partido Popular* (CDS), a conservative-leaning formation whose existence had been called into question after the fall of Spínola. In late January 1975, the FCO told the US that Wilson’s government “had encouraged direct relations between British political parties and their Portuguese counterparts”.

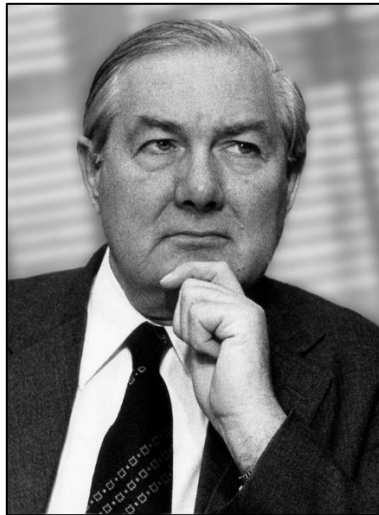
Labour and Conservative politicians cooperated closely on the issue of Portugal. Callaghan maintained regular contact with Geoffrey Rippon, Conservative spokesman on Foreign Affairs, during the latter’s voyage to Porto to participate in a conference of the CDS. Rippon was accompanied by Michael Young, Conservative Party Research Officer, who had previously visited the country to identify “groups and forces in Portugal that [the] Conservative Party might guide and help in [the] democratisation process”. In late December 1974, the CDS leader, Freitas do Amaral, visited Britain as a guest of the Conservative Research Department. In October 1975, Amaral, a Christian Democrat, returned to the UK, invited by the Federation of Conservative Students, to speak at the Conservative Party Conference in Blackpool, when he expressed his gratitude for the “help and assistance British Conservatives had given his party”. Such visits were not just limited to the Portuguese political class.

Over the next few months, FCO officials grew deeply concerned by the appointment of Communist ministers in Lisbon. The US shared the same concerns, telling London that it saw the situation as “proof of a shift towards the left in European politics, which could lead to neutralism”. According to British Intelligence, this could lead to Portugal’s exit from NATO, which would have a negative “psychological effect” on an alliance whose southern flank was already militarily weak. It could also have a ‘contagious’ effect on other countries where there was growing anti-NATO sentiment. These dangers led the US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, to point out that a non-aligned government (even a democratic one) was less compatible with NATO’s aims than the right-wing dictatorship had been.

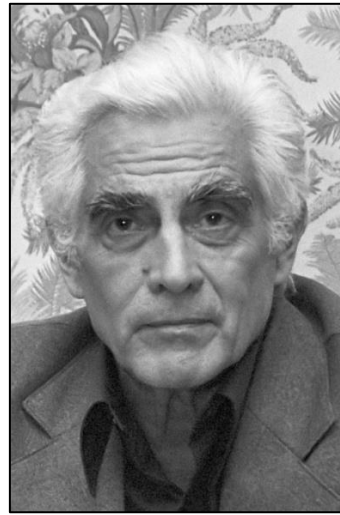
Unlike other NATO members, the British government reacted calmly to the growing grip of the Communist left on the process of political change in Portugal. British officials considered “the situation was confused and murky”, but that “it would be ill-advised and counterproductive to consider Portugal a lost cause”. It was argued that, in view of the collapse of the Portuguese economy, a severing of ties between that country and the Free World would be exploited by the Soviet Union to provide financial aid and increase its presence in Lisbon. British diplomacy considered that the economic chaos in which Portugal was immersed made economic aid an effective means of persuasion to steer the course of the revolution. If the chance existed to establish democracy in Portugal, then it was worth responding positively to the Portuguese authorities’ requests for economic assistance, even though the government included Communists, as collaboration with Lisbon would increase Britain’s ability to influence the decisions made by Portugal.

Consequently, Callaghan visited Portugal in February 1975 to meet with President Francisco da Costa Gomes, Prime Minister Vasco Gonçalves, and the Communist leader Álvaro Cunhal. He announced that a British mission would visit Lisbon to study how London could give economic aid and technical assistance, in order to offer British “support and encouragement” to Portugal in its “progress towards a stable, pluralist democracy”. However, only a few months later, during a visit to London by the Portuguese Foreign Minister, General Ernesto Melo Antunes, Callaghan admitted that “there was a limit to what the UK could do on its own to provide aid and assistance to Portugal”.²² The economic problems that the UK was facing meant that it could only pursue a programme of “modest proportions”. This highlighted Britain’s difficulties in matching the level of bilateral aid provided by other allies such as West Germany and the United States.

²² <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=150882&dt=2476&dl=1345>



Jim Callaghan



Álvaro Cunhal

Despite limited resources, the British thought that its economic and technical initiatives could act as a lever to the advantage of the pro-West groups that existed in the MFA. At the end of May 1975, Callaghan remarked to Kissinger and US President Gerald Ford that the MFA was “a microcosm of all kinds of opinion and not beyond redemption”. British plans, therefore, involved providing moral support, political guidance and financial help to those groups that represented an “ideological and democratic alternative” to the radical military leaders. Wilson’s government advocated increasing contacts and strengthening relations with those inside Portugal who could counter the increasing communist control over the revolutionary process.

The political polarisation in Portugal was heightened after the attempted coup by a right-wing group, led by Spínola, on 11 March 1975. According to Ambassador Trench, the failure of the *putsch* meant that Portugal’s political development “took a sharp turn to the left”. The failure of the right-wing revolt provided the radical officers of the MFA and the Communists with an opportunity to strengthen their grip on the country. During the next few weeks, the Communist Party’s presence in the government grew, the banking system was nationalised, and one purge followed another.²³ In response, Callaghan asked the BBC to increase broadcasts on its Portuguese service to compensate for the increasingly pro-communist views of the Portuguese media. At the same time, however, Winston Churchill, grandson of the former prime minister, decried the fact that the BBC’s Portuguese Service had a “clear pro-Communist bias”. Because of his intervention, greater editorial control was imposed, recording sessions were supervised and the FCO published a memo stating that the BBC did not have editorial freedom, but was obliged to consult the FCO so as not to damage national interests.

Political changes in Portugal led to an increase in the occupation of land and factories by landless peasants and workers commissions,²⁴ which, among others, affected the holdings of British landowners in the south-central region of Alentejo.²⁵ The increasing number of factories that were being taken over worried the British business community and caused difficulties in the management of several companies with British capital. The sudden lurch to the left resulting from the abortive coup caused growing

²³ Costa Pinto, António. *Political Purges and State Crisis in Portugal’s Transition to Democracy, 1975–1976*. *Journal of Contemporary History* 43 (2008): 305–322.

²⁴ Bermeo, Nancy. *The Revolution Within the Revolution: Workers’ Control in Rural Portugal*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

²⁵ Lind-Guimarães, George (ed.). *Eyewitness Accounts of the Portuguese Revolution (1974–76)*. British Historical Society of Portugal. 2009

concern among Portugal's NATO allies. Kissinger complained about European passiveness, which, as he saw it, was facilitating the establishment of a left-wing and communist dictatorship. Certainly, the occupation of land and takeovers of companies challenged the logic of the Cold War, thus endangering the stability of the international status quo.²⁶

In the Spring of 1975, the FCO believed that the communist and other radical sections of the MFA controlled the political situation in Portugal. However, it considered that moderate groups still enjoyed widespread support, both in the Portuguese army and in civil society. The key was to hold elections to the Constituent Assembly, which were scheduled for 25 April 1975, as this would shift the source of legitimacy of the political apparatus from the military to elected representatives. To achieve these objectives, Callaghan asked Trench to initiate meetings with Portuguese leaders to express Britain's wishes for elections to be held in a "stable and balanced" atmosphere as an "important step towards the consolidation of democracy". Additionally, efforts were made to improve the organisational and propaganda structure of the PS. A short time earlier, members of that party and centre-right organisations had been invited by the British government to witness the snap October 1974 election to learn how to organise (and win) elections.

The PS victory in the elections at the end of April 1975 was well-received by the British diplomats. In the Ambassador's opinion, the results represented an encouraging sign for the establishment of a democratic system in Portugal. However, Kissinger downplayed the importance of the election results, which he doubted would change the course of the revolution. In the following weeks, the PS, the centrist parties, and the Western powers came to realise that there was some merit in Kissinger's view and that the election victory would not be sufficient to establish a democratic system. At the end of June 1975, a report by British Intelligence warned that the distribution of political power in Portugal was still inversely proportional to the electoral results, with there being an intense struggle for control of the Revolution between the radical left and the moderate parties.

During the summer of 1975, Portugal was plunged into an intense social conflict that threatened to escalate into civil war. Despite the gravity of the situation, the British government opted to continue with a pragmatic attitude, which was based on maintaining contact with and supporting the non-communist sectors of the Portuguese political spectrum. At this critical juncture, British leaders felt that it was crucial to continue to assist the non-radical Socialists led by Soares. However, the unwavering British backing for Soares' reformist Socialist Party attracted criticisms from within the Labour movement. In September 1975, for example, two MPs, Judith Hart and Audrey Wise, who had recently visited Portugal, argued that "it was wrong for the Labour Party to attach itself lock, stock, and barrel to the Socialist Party and it alone". They believed that "much of the pace of the Revolution was being made by the people, not the parties, through neighbourhood councils, work councils, and industrial and agrarian takeovers". Similar criticisms were also expressed during the 1975 Labour Party Conference in Blackpool. In addition to supporting the PS, British strategy also included cultivating constructive relations with the Fifth Provisional Government and with moderate members of the MFA.

²⁶ Horn, Gerd. *Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956–1976*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.



Judith Hart



Audrey Wise

Throughout the summer of 1975, the Western allies pursued a diplomatic effort to prevent Portugal from adopting State socialism. Nigel Trench was told to increase pressure on the prime minister to reduce the increasing communist influence in the government and the administration. During the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in Helsinki in August 1975, Wilson expressed his deep concerns about political trends in Portugal to Costa Gomes. Wilson also discussed Portugal with the Soviet premier, Leonid Brezhnev, expressing the West's fear over possible Soviet support for a communist coup in Portugal. He even threatened a breakdown of the prevailing détente between the USSR and the West if the former backed Álvaro Cunhal's Communist Party.²⁷

After the CSCE, Wilson and the leaders of seven other European Social Democratic parties moved on to Stockholm, where they founded the Committee of Friendship and Solidarity with Democracy in Portugal. In addition to offering economic aid, the members committed themselves to visiting Portugal in support of the PS. According to British Intelligence, it was doubtful whether the Russians would support a “new Cuba”. Moscow was more interested in intervening in the decolonisation of Angola and Mozambique. Nevertheless, Portugal's apparent drift towards communism rang alarm bells in Western capitals. The need to ward off this threat led the Western powers to support the counter-revolutionary movement that spread throughout the north of the country from August 1975. This anti-communist movement, which saw the active participation of sectors of the PS, the landowning class, the Catholic Church and the extreme-right wing, was one factor that tipped the balance in favour of the forces advocating western-style parliamentary democracy.²⁸

During August and September 1975, known as the *verão quente* (hot summer), there was a genuine struggle for control in the streets of Portugal, bringing the country to the brink of civil war. At the end of July, Soares asked the British government and the Socialist International for “money and even weapons” in case civil war broke out.²⁹ Finally, the anti-communist mobilisation unleashed in Portugal's north brought about the fall of the Fifth Provisional Government at the end of August 1975. This facilitated the setting up of a new government, which was made up primarily of social democrats and centrists. According to *The Times* (10 September 1975), after that change of government, Portugal had “taken the first few steps on the road back to a pluralist democracy”. Callaghan felt it essential to build on this change with a show of support for the new authorities. This led to the offering of economic

²⁷ Wilson, Harold. *Final Term. The Labour Government, 1974–1976*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979. pp 168-172

²⁸ Palacios, Diego. *Confrontación, Violencia Política y Democratización. Portugal 1975* [‘Confrontation, Political Violence and Democratization. Portugal 1975’]. *Política y Sociedad* 40 (2003): 189–213

²⁹ Hamilton, Keith, and Patrick Salmon. *Documents on British Policy Overseas. The Southern Flank in Crisis*. London: Whitehall History, 2006. 425

aid to Portugal, but with the condition that there should be a halt to experiments with “direct democracy” that were incompatible with the liberal tradition. The British ambassadors in other European capitals asked their hosts to provide continued assistance to Portugal, and October 1975 was marked by the announcement of various multilateral and bilateral aid programmes. This support helped the moderate government to recover from the failed ultra-left-wing revolt of November 1975.

After that, the Communists joined the democratic consensus, which culminated in the enactment of a new constitution in April 1976. Thus ended the complex and convulsive period of regime change, in which British intervention had played an important stabilising role. The UK and fellow members of the EEC offered a safety net that facilitated the establishment of a Western-style democracy in Portugal. The trade-off was that the options for political participation were considerably restricted, the desire for social transformation largely ignored, and economic austerity imposed.

Conclusions

Pluralist democracy was not the inevitable outcome of the turbulent events in Portugal in 1974–76. Indeed, its establishment would not have been possible without the intervention of several international players. The outcome was closely linked to the international context, which was witnessing a move away from the ideological principles upon which the Cold War had been founded. An example of this is that US policy on Portugal was finally adopting the position of its European allies, implicitly accepting the ineffectiveness of Cold War solutions. The European model thus played an important role in achieving political restraint in Portugal, with the close links between the USA and the UK not enough to give the former control over the British government’s policy towards Portugal.

British intervention helped facilitate a stable outcome to Portugal’s political crisis. It also helped to tie Portugal to the Western world, halting the spread of a neutralist or non-aligned position within the country. The Wilson government deployed various initiatives in Portugal, involving economic aid, technical assistance, and political pressure, all of which helped prevent the establishment of a communist dictatorship or the return to a right-wing one. London’s promises of modernisation assisted a transition to a representative system that would rein in the social experiments carried out during 1974–75 and would also prevent the spread of the “revolutionary bug” from Portugal to other countries in the region.

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