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HALF MAST

**HITLER'S DEATH 1945
OR WHEN PROTOCOL WAS THOUGHT TO BE MORE
IMPORTANT THAN POLITICAL REALITY**

by Paulo Lowndes Marques

“La compétence, c'est se tromper selon les règles”

Paul Valéry

The news apparently broke on May 4th in *The Times*. The Foreign Office telephoned the British Embassy in Lisbon:¹

“Today's Times contains message from its Lisbon correspondent to effect that Portuguese Government have ordered all flags to be flown at half mast today in mourning for Hitler.

Can this be true?”

Apparently it was. Hitler had committed suicide on April 30th 1945 and the news had been broadcast on May 1st. The all powerful Secretary General of the Portuguese Foreign Ministry, Teixeira de Sampaio,² “in a moment of inattention” according to Franco Nogueira's biography of Salazar³ had ordered that protocol to be carried out although in a mitigated form, when a Chief of State of a country with whom Portugal had diplomatic relations, had died. Portugal was after all, neutral during the war and the fact that Germany was collapsing was no excuse. So the Portuguese flag was ordered to be placed at half mast in all public buildings including military buildings in the Azores where there was a British and American military presence.

The British Embassy on the same May 4th sent the following telegram to the “Senior British Offices Azores” (copy to the F.O.):⁴

"It is the result of a general order. Whilst we view it here with disgust we have no grounds for protest since Portugal is still in diplomatic relations with Germany.

Exception should have been recommended in Terceira out of regard for our presence there and I think they would probably have made it if they had thought of it. I will let the Portuguese Government know immediately what we think of it."

The British and Americans were using the Azores bases as a special facility, the old alliance between England and Portugal being invoked in 1943.

And the following day, May 5th, the Lisbon Embassy sent a telegram to the same recipients:⁵

"I saw Secretary General this evening and told him I could conceive of nothing more tactless than to fly flags at half mast under the eyes of British and American forces in Terceira and that if any incident occur the responsibility would be with the Portuguese Government. M. Sampayo replied that it was the result of a general order addressed automatically to all Portuguese similarly and that the special situation obtaining in Terceira must have been overlooked.

2. On the general question I told him that words failed me to describe the impression created on all British subjects in Portugal by the sorry spectacle of the flag of their ally mourning the death of the man recognised by practically the entire world as war criminal number one — a man who was responsible for tens of millions of lives and was a common murderer to boot. Were the Portuguese Government moreover certain when and how he had died or even that he was really dead. We had been receiving I added, incessant telephone calls all day from private Portuguese persons dissociating themselves from the action of their Government.

3. M. Sampayo said that although he did not dispute my description of Hitler, he was none the less the head of a state with which Portugal was still in relations.

Regulations prescribed a salute of guns; personal calls of condolence by the head of the State (or representative) the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Secretary General. All that had been cut and formalities reduced to the leaving of cards and flying of flags at half mast. This was the bare minimum and he did not see how it could have been further reduced.

4. I need not burden you with my further remarks which left M. Sampayo looking very unhappy but sticking to his guns."

After this confirmation a lot of trouble ensued. There was a press campaign against the Portuguese Government and Salazar in particular, in the British press. Some Portuguese diplomatic representatives were insulted. Local embassy employees resigned. The Portuguese Ambassador in London, the Duke of Palmela⁶ sent anguished telegram from London. The reaction then spread to the United States and Bianchi,⁷ the Portuguese Ambassador in Washington also requested instructions.

On May 6th the British Embassy sent the following telegram to the F.O.:⁸

"Far be it from me to defend an action which to us seems inexplicable. I would merely say in extenuation that Dr. Salazar is the world's greatest stickler in matters of form and of established procedure. He is so remote from the world that he probably expected us to view his action in the same detached way in which he viewed it himself.

2. He was clearly surprised by the violence of our reaction, and is trying to make amends by responding more completely than I had expected to our representation in regard to the German Legation and other establishments. I have never known the Portuguese Government act with such rapidity.

3. In the circumstances I would recommend that the B. B. C., having expressed in lucid terms the British reaction to the flag episode, should not continue to rub it in.

This telegram on May 7th received the following comment in manuscript from a F.O. official (I.P. Garra):⁹

*"I think there are two possible further explanations of Dr. Salazar's "ludicrous gesture". He wants to show us, at the moment of our victory that Portugal has a mind of her own. Secondly Dr. Salazar has always regarded Germany as the bulwark against Bolchevism and I think that Dr. Salazar had a feeling that he was in a way putting Portugal in mourning for a Europe overrun by the Bolchevik hordes. I think he is impressed not only by the violence of our reaction but also by the violence of the reaction of the Portuguese people themselves."*¹⁰

There was talk about retaliations against Portugal but we observe the British Ambassador¹¹ recommending caution. The American Ambassador Baruch¹² took a similar line.

Teixeira de Sampaio by then had taken a clever initiative after conferring with Salazar and responding with some alacrity to a British Government request as referred to in n.º 2 of the telegram above. On a Sunday he summoned the German Ambassador Von Halem¹³ expressing great urgency. The Ambassador was informed that the Portuguese Government considered that with the visible collapse of Germany it concluded there was no such thing as a German Government and therefore the situation imposed only one possible conclusion which was that as from that moment diplomatic relations had ceased between the two countries. He then added that all German state property — Embassies,¹⁴ Consulates, the German School,¹⁵ etc. — were going to be closed and sealed and held by the Portuguese Government until the time came for such properties to be handed over to the allies. At that moment the police were seizing the buildings. Von Halem protested to no avail and was dismissed. Sampaio said later: "As it was surely his last visit to my office instead of the usual two steps outside my room which I usually concede to a Minister saying goodbye, I walked three steps."¹⁶

By May the 8th the War was over. Salazar and Sampaio (separately) formally visited the British and U.S. Embassies to congratulate the victorious allies.

On this same day Richard Law,¹⁷ Minister of State in the Foreign Office, sent Churchill the following memo:¹⁸

"The Portuguese Ambassador called on me this afternoon to express the warmest congratulations on this great day of his Govern-

ment, of himself and of his staff in London. He said that he would never forget the scene in the House of Commons, nor the demeanour of the crowds through which he had passed on his way to the House of Commons. It would not have been possible to have had such scenes in any other country except this. The Ambassador said that he hoped that there would be the closest association between our two countries from now on.

I thanked the Ambassador very much for his congratulations and good wishes. With regard to future co-operation, I, of course, shared his view, but it did seem to me that Dr. Salazar had made an unfortunate start with his Hitlerian obsequies. I pointed out that the action of the Portuguese Government in this matter had created a very deep impression upon the public mind, and I said that it might take some time to eradicate it. The Ambassador said that Dr. Salazar had done the minimum that he had thought possible. What had been done for Hitler was not to be compared to the attitude of the Portuguese Government towards the death of President Roosevelt.

The Ambassador agreed, nevertheless, that it was a most unfortunate incident.

The Ambassador hoped that our public opinion had been more favourably impressed by the action of the Portuguese Government in sealing the German Legation and the Consular posts.

At the appropriate time the contents would be made over, intact, to the Control Commission in Germany. He was sure that we would find a great deal of interesting matter. His impression was that the Germans has not had time to destroy very much.

The Duke of Palmela talked for some time about the Far Eastern war, and said how anxious Portugal was to participate in it. He said that the Americans had agreed to provide the shipping for 5,000 men when the European war was ended."¹⁹

The Prime Minister, Churchill commented on this memo on May 10th somewhat condescendingly:²⁰

"I think it would be wise to let them play around and not be too

much down on them. Remember they ran a great risk in giving us the Azores when we could not give any corresponding pledge to defend them from a land attack by Germany. After all if you are a 400 year-old Ally, you must be allowed to kick about sometimes as you choose. I should treat them like well-loved children who make absurd grimaces”.

The “sometimes” in line six is inserted in manuscript!

Large public demonstrations greeted the Allies’ victory in Lisbon. Of course, for many it was an excuse to express criticism of Salazar and his regime. Some groups marched with four flagpoles in front, three of them with the British, American and French flags and the fourth flagless which, of course, represented the Soviet Union whose flag was forbidden to be flown by the police.

On May the 9th the British Embassy in Lisbon sent the following telegram to the Foreign Office:²¹

“While streets of Lisbon, especially those where British and American Embassies are situated, were filled with demonstrators waving flags, Dr. Salazar yesterday briefly addressed National Assembly on occasion of announcement of Allied victory in Europe. Speech was punctuated by enthusiastic and prolonged applause.

2. Portugal he said, passed unharmed through the war without sacrificing her national dignity, interests or friendships. When it had been necessary to take up an attitude in favour of friends or Allies she had done so serenely accepting risks and sacrifices involved. She had maintained her position without subservience to the powerful or disregard of the weak or oppressed who needed help and refuge.

3. One of the principal grounds of satisfaction was that Great Britain was in the front rank of the victorious powers. Many had claimed to have read in the book of the future: he himself confessed humbly his hopes had only been changed to certainty by contemplation of the war effort which, although within the extraordinary capacity of the British people, had probably never been equalled in the history of humanity.

Portugal had never ceased to regard her national interest as bound up with the position of Great Britain (and indeed of the British Commonwealth) as it would result from the conflict. It was evident to all that British victory and that of United States (in which Brazil had actively collaborated) would have the effect so far as the West was concerned of transferring to the Atlantic the centre of gravity of international politics.

4. “Although bleeding from countless wounds” he concluded “Great Britain rises amid great ruins not only victorious but invincible; and having strengthened the links with the various parts of the Empire she can appear before the world and among the greatest as a veritable educator of peoples, a mother and a leader of nations.”

And Peter Garran on May 11th comments on this telegram in manuscript:²²

“Para 2 is Dr. Salazar’s justification of the policy he has consistently pursued during the European war. I think the praise of Great Britain in paras 3 and 4 is genuine. He undoubtedly has great admiration for us and regards us as the hope of the future to save the world from what he regards as the forces of darkness. But I think he is equally sincere in regretting the complete downfall of Germany”.

However the incident of the flags was not forgotten. When Salazar sent a congratulatory telegram to the British Government on the Allies’ victory, Garran comments:²³

“The attached telegram of congratulations from Dr. Salazar on the occasion of the Allied victory in Europe, or, as he prefers to put it, the end of the war in Europe, is couched in warm terms, — all the warmer no doubt because of our unfavourable reaction to Dr. Salazar’s tactless step in putting his flags at half mast at the report of Hitler’s death.

We are taking Dr. Salazar’s blunder about the flags seriously. The Ambassador in Lisbon, has spoken seriously to the Secretary General at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Portuguese Ambassador in London has been called to the Foreign office and told the unfortunate impression which the Portuguese action has made. In

the circumstances I suggest that the Secretary of State's acknowledgement should be reserved in tone and should not go further than the rules of diplomatic courtesy demand."

It is of course difficult to recapture the heat and emotion of this rather ridiculous incident 50 years later. But it is a good instance where someone with some imagination and the power to do so should have set aside what the law said. I started this article by quoting Paul Valery's well known quotation whereby he who is competent in a bureaucratic cenário is he who gets it wrong by following rules. In the English language there exists the expression "The Law is an Ass" which I think fits this example.

On a historical basis did it have any repercussion? I think not. Dr. Salazar suffered none of the opprobrium and boycotts Franco received from the victorious Allies after the war. His move on the Azores ensured much good will. Also, Timor was handed back although with some difficulty. Portugal was one of the founding members of NATO one will remember, and also of OECD. I think the historical conclusion is that the matter of the flags at half-mast was a silly incident with no long-term or even medium-term effects. Today it is an amusing footnote of historical trivia.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

We are indebted to the late Dr. Carlos Teixeira da Mota who as a Portuguese Diplomat with the Embassy in London collected the Foreign Office documentation quoted in this article.

1. FO 371/49527Z5617.
2. Dr. Luis Teixeira Sampaio (1875-1945). He was not a career Diplomat. Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1929 until his death. During the war Dr. Salazar occupied the office of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Dr. Sampaio was very much his right hand man. He died at the Hotel Aviz in the presence of Queen D. Amélia, Portugal's last Queen when she visited Lisbon in 1945.
3. Salazar Vol. III — As Grandes Crises (1936-1945), Atlântida, Ed. Coimbra (1978) by Franco Nogueira, p. 565.
4. FO 371/49527Z5617.
5. Idem, Idem.
6. D. Domingos de Sousa Holstein Beck (1897-1969), 5th Duke of Palmela. Portuguese Ambassador in London (1943-49). Curiously the Decree appointing him Ambassador of the Portuguese Republic in London expressly referred to his title of Duke of Palmela. Director of The Bank of Portugal and of the Gulbenkein Foundation.
7. João António de Bianchi (1884-1969). Entered the Portuguese Foreign Service in 1915 when he was appointed to London. Participated in the Versailles Treaty talks. Ambassador in Washington 1933-1947.
8. FO 371/49527Z5640.
9. Sir (Isham) Peter Garran K.C.M.G. Born 1910. Australian by birth. Son of Sir Robert Randolph Garran. Entered Foreign Office 1934. Posted in Lisbon 1941-44.
10. FO 371/49527Z5640.
11. Sir Ronald Hugh Campbell (1883-1953). A British Diplomat. Participated in the Versailles Treaty talks. He was Ambassador in Paris and came to Lisbon after the fall of France (1940) where he remained until 1945. Although there were moments of great tension with Dr. Salazar they mutually respected and admired each other.
12. Herman B. Baruch (1872-1953). A medical doctor. Belonged to the Baruch banking family. U.S. Ambassador in Lisbon (Feb. 1945-1947). Was then Ambassador to the Netherlands. He received the Grand Crown of the "Ordem de Cristo" in 1950.
13. Dr. Gustav Adolph Von Halem. Born 1899. Entered German Consular Service 1927. German Ambassador in Lisbon, February 1945.
14. Situated at Rua Pau da Bandeira, 11, in Lapa.
15. Situated at Praça de Palhavã, next to the Spanish Embassy where the Teatro da Comuna is now installed.

16. *Salazar* by Franco Nogueira, op. cit., p. 567.
17. Richard Kidston Law (1901-1983). Youngest son of the Prime Minister Bonar Law. Conservative M.P. (1931-1954). Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Foreign Office (1941-43), Minister of State (1943-45), Minister of Education (1945). Created Baron Coleraine (1954).
18. FO 371/49497.
19. Reference to Timor. Timor was occupied by the Japanese and Portugal was keen to be militarily involved in its liberation.
20. FO 371/49497.
21. FO 371/49474Z5712.
22. *Idem, Idem.*
23. FO 371/49474Z6032.