How the French Revolution struck the Portuguese

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'Letters from Portugal say, that the measures resolved on by the Supreme Council to preserve the kingdom from the principles now prevailing in France are observed with the greatest rigour. It is prohibited to read French newspapers, pamphlets, etc. Several persons, both foreigners and natives, have been seized for transgressing these laws'.

Gloucester Journal, 24 October 1791

The bicentenary of the French Revolution provides a good opportunity for looking at the evidence in the Foreign Office archives, held at the Public Record Office in Kew, concerning the Portuguese response. The most important point to make is that the initial response was muted and that the Portuguese government became more concerned only when the developments within France took a more radical turn in 1791 and when the prospect of a major European war loomed large. The vast bulk of the British diplomatic correspondence continued to be devoted to commercial and consular issues throughout this period.

The Bastille fell on 14 July 1789, and the first reference to the disorders in France came just over a fortnight later on 1 August when the Hon. Robert Walpole, son of Horatio first Lord Walpole and British Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary in Lisbon since 1772, wrote to the Foreign Secretary, the

Duke of Leeds, 'The news of the disturbances from France, is not much discoursed upon at Court here: and the assistance of the Etats Generaux to the Sovereign Power seems to have occasioned a great deal of seriousness at Court[1]'. The apparent contradiction was not explained, but what is interesting is the impact that the disobedience of a representative assembly had in Portugal, where the Cortes had not met since 1698 and was not to do so again until 1820. Clearly the government was concerned about the reaction within Portugal. In September 1789 Walpole noted, 'This Court has forbid the writer of the Portuguese Gazette to insert in his Paper any more accounts of the present transactions in France: which it is said, had produced some shrewd observations from the lower class of persons here[2]'.

The first political approach arising from the Revolution came from the Portuguese foreign minister, de Pinto, a former envoy in London, who had a conversation with Walpole on 23 November 1789 after they had both dined at the Spanish Ambassador's,

> 'The Conversation turned upon affairs of France; and he referred himself to me, to confirm him in his opinion, that the King of Great Britain and his ministers would be glad of an opportunity of breaking the Family Compact — that from his (Monsieur de Pinto's) disposition towards Great Britain, with which this Country must be always connected; he looked upon a measure which would unite Great Britain with Spain, as an additional Benefit to the connection between Great Britain and Portugal; as well as a means for procuring a respectable alliance for the defence of their several interests and professions: and the friendly inclination of the Court of Spain towards Portugal, as well as the disapprobation of that Court of what was transacting in France: and the uncertainty what turn the Revolutions in France were likely to take, made him confident that a separation of the Court of Spain from the Family Compact, might be effected; that such a measure might begin by a Defensive alliance between the three Powers of Great Britain, Spain and Portugal. This idea of the Chevalier de Pinto, was so far from being discouraged by me; that he said he should be able in a few days to open himself more fully upon the subject; and would accordingly appoint me an hour for a further explanation ... I have observed the conservation of the Spanish Ambassador, to have been frequently contrary to the French connection; and this is the more to be depended upon; as I believe he is very well apprized of the present political sentiments of his court[3]'.

Walpole was encouraging and the Portuguese government accordingly approached Spain, but the Spanish government refused to abandon France[4]. Anglo-Spanish relations occupied the central place in Anglo-Portuguese relations in 1790 because of the possibility of war between the two powers over contested claims to the fur trade of modern western Canada. These led to the Nootka Sound incident on the western shore of Vancouver Island and major British and Spanish naval armaments. Portugal was a source of valuable naval information for Britain and the Portuguese provided details of Spanish armaments. The British sought permission for the entry of their warships into Lisbon[5], though they were unwilling to accept the Portuguese offer of mediation expressing rather a preference for good offices[6]. The crisis of 1790, which ended with a Spanish climbdown, thus both fostered good Anglo-Portuguese relations and reiterated the importance of Spanish policy for these. France scarcely featured in the reports of Walpole that year, apart from the mention of her weakness as a reason why the Portuguese government thought that Spain would not fight Britain[7].

The following year witnessed a marked increase in the Portuguese fear of revolutionary contagion. In April Walpole reported, 'A young Spanish officer, who came from England in the last packet and had been in France, is taken into custody; and though it is not known for what offence, it is suspected to have been, for his indiscreet conversations in favor of the French Revolution'. Three months later he reported the reaction of Maria I to the flight of Louis XVI to Varennes, 'The Queen when she received the authentic account from her ambassador at Paris, of the French King's being taken, was considerably affected'. It was followed by an increase in governmental concern with the views of foreigners, Walpole writing in August 1791, 'This Court is as diligent as its neighbour, in the prevention of strangers, especially Frenchmen arriving here without passport of satisfactory recommendations to persons of credit at this place. Several Frenchmen have been sent away without being permitted to come ashore'. He added the following month, 'The Department of Police of this Court, is still very vigilant in regard to suspicious persons; and several Frenchmen have been shipped off to different parts, as vessels have offered; their passage being paid by the Police on their being received on board[8]'.

Though keen to keep revolution away from Portugal, the Portuguese government made it clear later that year that it not interested in participating in a counter-revolutionary crusade, but that, instead, it wished to follow the British lead of neutrality.

> 'Some conversation was had upon the affairs of France, on which Monsieur de Pinto observed, that it did not occur to him, that any extensive measures could be adopted by the junction of the several courts of Europe, supposing the Princes of Germany should endeavour to support their pretensions against the National Assembly; that he had observed, that Great Britain was acting a neutral part; and that this Court had not put itself forward as they should be governed entirely by the conduct of Great Britain'.

Pinto added that Spain could not be trusted. Leeds' successor as Foreign Secretary, William Lord Grenville, instructed Walpole to informe Pinto that Britain indeed sought neutrality and, in turn, the Portuguese government reiterated its determination to follow Britain's lead.[9]

Maria's insanity occupied the Portuguese government in early 1792, the help of Doctor Francis Willis, who had treated George III in 1788-1789, being sought. Nevertheless, the government did not ignore developments in France. In January 1792 Pinto both denied that Portugal would contribute any money to the French emigré princes and reiterated Portuguese neutrality.[*] The following month the government instructed its envoy in Paris to indicate that Portugal would not accept any replacement of the French envoy.

> 'This is stated as a measure of firmness and resolution in this court, against the intentions of the National Assembly, of sending here a person who might inculcate their own principles in this country, and as the present ambassador here was connected by his family and friends with the favourites of the French queen, and conducts himself with prudence at this court, the measure abovementioned may have been adopted, not only by the motives abovementioned but probably in consequence of the sollicitations to this ministry, by the friends of the French ambassador, who reside with him here, to contribute to his being continued in this employment, which I understand he is now assured of[10]'.

On 21 February Walpole had a conference with Pinto arising from a conversation between Grenville and the Portuguese envoy in London. In it Pinto set out Portuguese policy clearly,

> '... he had two principal objects to communicate to me; the first of which related to the amicable conversation which your Lordship had had some time ago with Mr. Freire, upon the state of the French affairs, from which it appeared that His Majesty was determined to pursue a perfect system of neutrality, in respect to the government of that country — that in answer to this friendly communication from your Lordship, he was authorized to inform me that the very same system would be adopted here, and that nothwithstanding the Court of Spain had been very pressing with this court, for eventual measures to be adopted, without coming to any explanation, what such measures were to be: Monsieur de Pinto was to authorize the Portuguese minister at Madrid to assure the Count de Florida Blanca of the system which this court was determined to pursue, without provoking the French to any hostile measure; and without apprehending any such from that nation: and that there seemed to be no particular reason for this court to interfere, in the interior government of that country: and that the present topics of discussion in France with regard to the measures of foreign courts, seemed to be reduced to the explanation required from the Emperor[12], and the claims in respect to the Lorrainers and Alsacians; neither of which, could in any respect concern Portugal; and seemed to be particularly confined to the negotiations of the courts of France and Viena, since the late letter of the Most Christian King[13] to the National Assembly. He then said, that the Queen of Portugal, had not been able to answer the Most Christian King's letter, communicating his acceptance of the Constitution; as it was to be written in her own hand, which she had attempted at different times, without having been able to complete it. That the Prince of Brasil, would now send an answer, giving the reasons of Her Most Faithful Majesty's State of Health, not permitting her to do it before: and that it would be confined merely to expressions of attention to the Most Christian King. ... Monsr de Pinto then acquainted me, that the Imperial Minister had imparted him, the letter from Monsr de Kaunitz[14], in regard to measures to be taken upon certain contingencies ... that the answer from hence, will be conceived in general terms, without entering into any discussion upon the several

parts of the letter, the objects of which do not relate to this country. He added, that the Count de Florida Blanca, had expressed some suspicions, that the government of England was entering a negotiation with the National Assembly[15]'.

In March 1792 Portugal rejected the Austrian approach for participation in the league against France, an answer that was communicated to Spain, albeit with the proviso that help would be provided if Spain was attacked[16]. While the goverment remained resolutely neutral there was increasing concern about signs of radical activity within Portugal. In May 1792 Walpole reported that,

'A considerable number of French pamphlets and copies of the French constitution, have arrived in one of the ports of this country.
A spirit very much in opposition to the accustomed spirit of education in this country in theology, as well as politics, has been discovered among some of the students at the University of Coimbra; and although the government here, was disposed not to take notice of what was at first represented as childish acts of imprudence; it having since appeared, that some chapels had been stripped of their ornaments and images; the offenders are said to have been brought down to Lisbon, for a further examination: but this proceeding is carried on without any eclat[17].

Already on 5 January 1792 the London newspaper the *Morning Chronicle* had reported that 'All French papers, and all in which mention is made of French affairs, are so strictly prohibited at Lisbon, that the bulk of the people are as profoundly ignorant of what passes in Frnce as if it were removed to another planet'. June 1792 brought a clear sign of mounting anxiety.

'An idle report, of some persons being hid in the channels of the common sewers, and that barrels of gunpowder had been placed there for an evil design, on Thursday last, on the day of a great procession, when the Prince of Brasil was to have walked; with the absence of the Prince, who being in his way from Queluz, had sent word that he was taken ill, had been augmented into an attempt of a serious nature: and the magistrates have been employed on taking up the pavement of some of the principal streets, in order to discover, whether anything of the nature has been the cause of these suspicions'.

The suspicious were, however, misplaced, 'It does not appear what could have been the foundation of such a report, except that some persons suspected of being thieves having escaped from the pursuit of the night watch; these latter, not having accurately observed which way the thieves had taken, imagined, that they had hid themselves in the channels of the sewers, and the thereupon conclusions of a very extravagant nature were hastily adopted'.

Despite this it was decided to use bars to prevent people entering the sewers[18]. War had broken out between France and the alliance of Austria and Prussia in the spring, but Portugal resisted pressure to join the alliance, and was supported in this course by Britain[19]. In November 1792 Pinto told the Spanish envoy, the Marquis d'Oyra 'that their resolution of adhering to the Court of England and of observing the same neutrality which that power had adopted was a measure suggested to the Portuguese government by their own prudence, and by the strict union and friendship which subsisted between the two crowns: but that it ought not to be construed into a servile dependance on the court of England'.

The Spanish government regarded that of Portugal as excessively pro-British and this led, later in November, to 'a disagreeable conversation ... between the Portuguese ambassador and Count d'Aranda', Floridablanca's successor as Spanish first minister, 'The Portuguese ambassador had, it seems, represented to the count that the armaments in the French ports might threaten the Portuguese coasts as well as those of Spain: that the intimate connexion of the two kingdoms made Portugal expect from Spain that assistance which treaties had stipulated and friendship required: to which the Court d'Aranda, answering in a very rough manner and expressing himself in terms very unusual from one minister to another, told the ambassador for any assistance the Portuguese might apply to England under whose protection they were[20]'.

However, the basis of Britains's neutrality had already been challenged by a surprising revival in French fortunes. On 20 September 1792 the Prussian invading army was halted at Valmy. Opportunity and the influence of Belgian revolutionaries led to a French invasion of the Austrian Netherlands (modern Belgium) at the beginning of November. On 6 November the Austrian army was defeated at Jemappes. Most of the Austrian Netherlands had been overrun by the end of the month and a French invasion of Britains's ally, the United Provinces (modern Netherlands) appeared imminent. France declared open the river Scheldt, hitherto closed to trade by international treaty. On 5 December Grenville signalled a change of policy in a letter to Lisbon.

'His Majesty saw with great satisfaction that the conduct of Portugal was regulated on the same principles of strict neutrality as were adopted here. It is no respect from any wishes to deviate from these principles that His Majesty feels himself obliged now to put himself in a state of preparedness. But he cannot avoid feeling that since the recent success of the French, their whole conduct has appeared to indicate a fixed determination of hostility against this country, and the Republic of the United Provinces, as well as of a system of conduct which must excite the jealousy of every neutral nation ... The King's sincere desire to avoid if possible, the calamities of war, will render him anxious to adopt any means of maintaining peace, consistent with the honour, and interests of his crown'.

Portugal was seen as a valuable ally because of her position and her navy, which had recently been growing in size. Grenville ordered the envoy both to encourage Portugal to make naval preparations and to obtain from her information concerning the passage of French ships to and from the Mediterranean[21]. The Portuguese response was a firm indication of a wish to stay out of the war combined with a wish to retain British friendship. On 23 December Walpole's replacement, Ostervald, waited on Pinto and reported,

'He[22] said that the vigorous measures adopted by England were in the present circumstances the safest: that Portugal would ever shew that friendship and attachment to England which England had a right to expect: that, indeed, Portugal was a weak power: that no more ought to be expected from them than they could perform; that if England were to enter into a war on account merely on the navigation of the Scheld, Portugal had never guaranteed that stipulation and would remain neutral: that, in the manner, if Spain were to attack France, Portugal would certainly join them, and take an active part in the war: that, in the mean while, Portugal would arm, in order to shelter themselves, at all events, from insult ... Pinto promised that he would inform me of every intelligence be might receive about ships of war entering or sailing out of the Meditterranean[23]'.

However, as Anglo-French relations deteriorated, Grenville sought more from Portugal. On 29 December he ordered Ostervald to press her to arm her navy and on 9 January he replied to Pinto's point about the Scheldt and made it clear that Portuguese support for an anti-French alliance was sought,

'there are many circumstances independent of the desire for opening the Scheld which are considered by His Majesty as calling for vigorous and decisive measures on his part. In the resolution therefore which His Majesty has adopted of putting his force in a state of respectable preparation, the King's views are by no means confined to the single object of the Scheld. If indeed this were the only point in question, his Majesty's regard to the faith of treaties would certainly never permit him to see the unquestionable rights of his allies wrested from them by menace, or by violence. But this act is considered by the King as according one instance only of the general system adopted by the present rulers in France for overturning all existing governments, for carrying their principles into all different countries of Europe, and for extending their own dominion by acquisitions of the utmost value and importance. This system it is equally the interest of every country in Europe to oppose according to the extent and nature of its force'.

Grenville suggested that a French declaration of war was likely because Britain was unwilling to accept the legitimacy of the republican government in the person of its designated envoy. He added,

'His Majesty has no doubt that the Court of Lisbon would be perfectly ready to distinguish a war originating in any such aggression on the part of France against this country from one in which His Majesty might be obliged to take part in consequence of treaties to which Portugal is not a party'. Grenville also claimed that it would be good for Portugal if she concurred 'in a general system ... between the leading powers of Europe for their common interest and security[24]'.

The Portuguese government, however, was not happy with developments. Though Pinto assured Ostervald on 22 January that Portugal would take an active part in the war and that her navy would arm, Ostervald had earlier written, 'I can entertain but little doubt that the Portuguese ministers would adopt, almost, any measures to avoid taking an active part in the war'. On 2 March 1793 he added, 'it appears that this Court do not wish to join the coalition unless such assistance and succours were stipulated in favour of Portugal as might effectually shelter this kingdom from the consequences of a war'. In the same letter Ostervald made it clear that Portuguese hesitation did not spring from a sympathy for revolutionary France, 'The general detestation

of the Portuguese for the French break out every day in acts of personal insult against the individuals of that nation, not only in Lisbon, but in the provinces also[25].

Portugal had to be coaxed into the anti-French camp and this did not happen until the summer convoy was in from Brazil. The Portuguese sent a squadron to cruise in the Atlantic with the British Channel fleet, but it was not until 10 September that a treaty of defence was signed between the two powers. The Portuguese declared themselves an 'auxiliary' ally in accordance with the existing treaties of mutual defence, but they did not declare war on France. Portuguese ports were closed to the French and trade with France was restricted in line with British requests, while mutual convoy protection was promised[26].

The Foreign Office reports throw considerable light on the nature of Anglo-Portuguese relations period and on the Portuguese response to the Revolution. In the latter case political hostility was combined with diplomatic caution. As far as the British handling of Portuguese views was concerned it is clear that it was more sensitive than is sometimes realised. The British government appreciated Portuguese sensitivity to Spain and sought, as far as possible, to obtain co-operation between the two powers in any anti-French alliance. This would avoid the danger of having to defend Portugal against Spain, a danger that had led Walpole to write during the War of American Independance, 'but if we by be these methods keep ourselves quiet, it cannot but of service to Great Britain; for it cannot be the interest of the latter to take the additional burthen of this country on its back[27]. The claim of British imperiousness made in 1787 by the French chargé d'affaires in London, albeit with reference to commercial matters[28], does not appear substantiated. The Revolution opened a diplomatic scene that was to become steadily more difficult for Portugal. Walpole had written from Lisbon in 1773, 'we have here so little connections with quarrelsome powers, that we are contented with the events, and do not trouble ourselves much with speculations: Jesuits and trade were the only objects of politics in this corner[29]'. Twenty years later a more alarming age was in prospect.

Notes

1. Walpole to Leeds, 1 August 1789, London, Public Record Office, Foreign Office Reports (hereafter PRO.FO.) 63/12.
2. Walpole to Leeds, 19 September 1789, PRO.FO. 63/12.
3. Walpole to Leeds, 25 November 1789, PRO.FO. 63/12.
4. Walpole to Leeds, 5, 10, 24 December 1789, 28 April 1790, PRO.FO. 63/12-13.
5. Walpole to Leeds, 6 March, 26 May, Leeds to Walpole, — June 1790, 1789, PRO.FO. 63/13.
6. Walpole to Leeds, 9, 20 June, Leeds to Walpole, 24 August 1790, PRO.FO. 63/13.
7. Walpole to Leeds, 26 May 1790, PRO.FO. 63/13.
8. Walpole to Leeds, 13 April 1791, Walpole to William, Lord Grenville, Leeds' replacement, 23 July, 29 August, 24 September, 1791, PRO.FO. 63/14.
9. Walpole to Grenville, 1 October, 2, 12 November, Grenville to Walpole, 18 October 1791, PRO.FO. 63/14.
10. Walpole to Grenville, 14 January 1792, PRO.FO. 63/15.
11. The Spanish first minister.
12. Leopold II.
13. Louis XVI.
14. Chancellor of Austria.

15. Walpole to Grenville, 214 February 1792, PRO.FO. 63/15.

16. Walpole to Grenville, 14 March 1792, PRO.FO. 63/15.

17. Walpole to Grenville, 23 May 1792, PRO.FO. 63/15.

18. Walpole to Grenville, 9, 20 JUne 1792, PRO.FO. 63/15.

19. Walpole to Grenville, 9 June 1792, PRO.FO. 63/15.

20. Ostervald, Walpole's replacement, to Grenville, 3, 24 November 1792, PRO.FO. 63/15.

21. Grenville to Ostervald, 5 December 1792, PRO.FO. 63/15.

22. Pinto.

23. Walpole to Grenville, 9, 20 June 1792, PRO.FO. 63/15.

    Ostervald to Grenville, 23 December 1792, PRO.FO 63/15.

24. Grenville to Ostervald, 29 December 1792, 9 January 1793, PRO.FO. 63/15, 16.

25. Ostervald to Grenville, 3, 23 January, 2 March 1793, PRO.FO. 63/16.

26. William Cobbett (ed.), *Parliamentary History of England*... 1066 to 1803 (36 vols., London, 1806-20) 30, 1055-1057.

27. Walpole to Lord Grantham, former envoy in Spain, 9 October 1779, Bedford, County Record Office, L30/14/410/19.

28. Barthélemy to Montmorin, French foreign minister, 29 May 1787, Paris, Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Correspondance Politique Angleterre 563 fol. 10.

29. Walpole to Grantham, 4 October 1773, Bedford L30/14/410/4.