

Portugal at La Lys in WW1

Lessons from History

By Richard Hartwell

I grew up in an age when ‘history’, as taught in my school at any rate, had just stopped being a matter of dates. Learn what happened when and you’ll know your history. So I could account for the ‘what’, ‘when’ and ‘where’ questions comfortably, and probably the ‘who’ and the ‘how’ if I was half-awake, but that didn’t really get to the nub of it. These events had occurred, but why? And it’s the ‘why’ that’s the key issue, isn’t it? Description in history can be difficult enough, but explanation is a different continent, never mind a different country

You know the saying about economists - for my sins, I am one - ‘wherever two or three economists are gathered together, there are always four opinions’. And so it is with history and historians. In this article, you will read facts, quite a lot of them, but you will also read opinions, my opinions, of the whys and wherefores. Feel free to disagree, argue the issues, that’s how we move towards a better view of events. I would be pleased to hear from you.

If history is not a matter of dates, that makes it a flow, a continuum. But major events on certain dates do act to alter the flow of that continuum. So if we are to explain the major events, for Portugal, it was 9 April 1918, where are we to start?

The Somme – Portugal Is Drawn In to the Struggle

The Great War, as I shall call it, contains a number of such dates. If I were to hazard a guess at when the twentieth-century world began - in terms of international relations and the waging

of war at least - then 1 July 1916, the first day of the British offensive along the Somme, is a good candidate. Prior to this date, many men had joined up willingly, on both sides, in a spirit of idealism. One was my great-uncle. Like many, he lied about his age to get in. I met all seven of his siblings, but not him, because he was killed near Ypres in 1916. He was 16.

In one of its blackest days, that first day the British army lost 60,000 dead and wounded. With the twenty-twenty of hindsight, it was more than simply human beings that fell that day - so did the value of idealism. But we do have a clue here as to why Portugal was in this struggle at all. Field Marshall Haig said at a later stage in the Somme battle *'In the stage of the wearing-out struggle, losses will necessarily be heavy on both sides, for in it the price of victory is paid.'*

So then - do it the hard way, wear them down, make their losses greater than ours and we will either break them or they will seek peace. For that, larger reserves of men would be needed. Where could they come from? Were there potential allies not yet considered?

In fact, by early 1916 the British had already had a change of view about the Portuguese. In 1914, they had indicated their unwillingness to have them as allies. On both sides, there was an overhang of the 1890 situation, where the British had given Portugal an ultimatum over territorial occupation in colonial Africa. Throughout the war, the British view of Portugal and the Portuguese was not high. The Portuguese, if aware of this, were prepared to hold their noses and do what was necessary to safeguard their remaining African possessions.

By the beginning of 1916, it was becoming clear to Haig and others that British volunteer forces alone might not be enough. We've already seen how Haig saw the conflict. More allies, even

those viewed as second-class, could be accommodated. The bones of a deal, therefore, existed, and in February 1916, the skeleton acquired flesh and sinews.

It is perhaps prudent at this point to remember Hartwell's Law of Conflict; '*Before entering a conflict, it is essential to know how you will exit from it*'. In other words, once we're in, how do we get out? Perhaps the Portuguese did not consider this enough. So what were their objectives?

- The retention of colonial possessions. After 1890, they wanted no further diminution of their position in Africa. They were not to know that in both in 1898 and as late as 1912, Britain and Germany had agreed secretly to divide the Portuguese possessions between them in the event of a war. Naturally, this would not apply if they fought on opposite sides.
- A seat at the top table. Even a small voice in world affairs must be better than no voice?
- Making a stand. Here was Europe's first democratic republic - we must remember that - making a stand for a newer, bigger future.

Securing these advantages would necessitate manpower being sent to Africa, certainly, but naturally to the Western Front. The republican government decided that the benefits outweighed the costs. And Hartwell's Law? Well ... All that was needed was a cause.

They looked out of the window, and there it was. In 1914, 36 German and Austro-Hungarian ships, either in the Tagus or Lisbon port, had been interned 'for the duration'. On 24 February 1916, Portugal seized them 'to carry vital foodstuffs for the Portuguese population'. Germany took the bait, and on 9 March declared war

on ‘this English vassal’. It must have hurt in Lisbon to be described thus. A little too near the truth, perhaps? But the Portuguese were now astride the tiger of war and must learn how to direct it.

A Portuguese Miracle and a French Disaster

Through 1916, however, occurred what Portuguese accounts call ‘the miracle of Tancos’. In just three months, a division was raised - from nothing, one may observe - equipped, and provided with basic training at Tancos, the training area on the Tagus between Torres Novas and Abrantes. By February 1917, the *Corpo de Artilharia Pesada Independente* (CAPI) - a heavy artillery corps using three British-supplied heavy batteries of guns - and the *Corpo Expedicionário Português* (CEP) - the infantry division, later two divisions - were being deployed in France.

The troops received additional training from the British, both in France and in southern England. This was mainly to do with the trench warfare, with how to deal with gas attacks, and with weaponry - the short Lee Enfield rifle and the Lewis machine gun. At this stage, the written records from the British actually carrying out the training - although it’s anecdotal evidence and there were language difficulties - points to a committed, capable force, whatever the British upper echelons thought. The Portuguese soldier was a winner of admiration. This is comparable with Wellington’s opinion, you may remember.

In all, 54,976 men were sent to France in the Great War. Troops were deployed to the front line from 11 May 1917 with the last in place by 5 November. This does indicate, incidentally, how long it did take to raise and deploy forces in the Great War, not a fact always recognised by armchair generals. And the war landscape a year on from Portuguese entry had changed significantly.

Let's start with the French. Late in 1916, Nivelle had replaced Joffre as C-in-C of French forces and succeeded in persuading his political masters that they, the French, could indeed win the war, with a little help from the British, of course. What was needed was a dose of Napoleonic élan and dash. The casualties so far had been grievous - 342,000 around Verdun alone in 1916 - but one major effort more and victory would make those sacrifices worthwhile.

The French duly attacked on 16 April, 1917. The Germans - who had previous detailed knowledge of the attack - smashed it in about two days. The military casualties were significant, the collapse in morale equally so. In short order, Nivelle was removed and General Pétain put in his place. Pétain found himself commanding an army that was almost uncommandable. Mutiny was in the air everywhere. For months, he found his major task was to restore French belief and resolve, while still resisting the Germans, and this he did very successfully. Throughout the summer campaigns of 1917, though, it removed France as a major offensive player. For a while, it was like Hamlet without the prince, fighting to free France without the French.

Pétain set strict offensive limits. Attacks would be made to achieve limited objectives only, and when they had been gained, the assault would automatically cease. He set his face resolutely against anything like another Somme. Consequently, he got the French army to achieve small but morale-restoring victories. His view, expressed a number of times at the top level, was 'we wait for the Americans'.

Contrast this with Haig. In May 1917, he confided to his diary *'there seems little doubt, however, that victory on the Western Front means victory everywhere and a lasting peace. And I have further no doubt that the British Army in France is capable of do-*

ing it, given adequate drafts of men and guns..... For the last two years most of us soldiers have realised that Great Britain must take the necessary steps to win the war by herself.

Did he really believe this? That sheer determination would win? In 1815, Wellington really could say of that damn close-run thing Waterloo that it was won on the playing-fields of Eton. A hundred years on, the Western Front needed a whole lot more than playing-field pluck and a sang-froid spirit. But his 'drafts of men and guns' did include, amongst so many others, his Portuguese allies, who were steadily increasing their front-line strength.

Haig committed his troops to the Flanders offensive, commonly called the Passchendaele offensive, at the beginning of July 1917. From the start, losses were heavy and progress very limited. Haig wrote to the War Cabinet on 25 July *'even if my attacks do not gain ground, we ought still to persevere in attacking the Germans in France. Only by this means can we win'*. The Somme, clearly, had only confirmed him in fighting a war of attrition. Theoretically, as with all Allied troops at this stage, the Portuguese were an independent entity, fighting in co-operation with the forces of other nations. In practice, they were commanded by British generals, who placed them where they wished in the line.

The German Perception

As the British set out to win the war, events elsewhere contrived against them. In August 1916, Erich von Falkenhayn had been replaced as Germany's Chief of the General Staff by Paul Hindenburg. With him from the Russian front had come Erich Ludendorff, appointed Quartermaster-General. They brought a new, more robust, ruthless approach to the waging of the war, at odds with the approach of the Chancellor, Theobald Bethman-

Hollweg. On his resignation in December 1916, after a brief struggle for influence, ascendancy in German decision-making passed from the politicians to the military.

One consequence was Germany's intensification of its submarine offensive in the Atlantic, which was at least partially responsible for bringing the United States into the war against it on 3 April 1917. However, a more vigorous prosecution of offensives on the Eastern Front had seen a Russian collapse through the spring of 1917. From about July, Russian soldiers had departed the front line in droves after a provisional government offer of land redistribution back home.

By the autumn, Germany was able to move whole divisions westwards, with more moving each month. Pétain appreciated what this meant quite quickly but Haig, taken up with the Flanders offensive, saw it more slowly. By early 1918, German forces on the Western Front would be significantly boosted in numbers, whereas the allies would only slowly have the benefit of United States troops.

Pershing, the US commander, anticipated putting at least a million men, perhaps far more, into the struggle, a decisive number if deployed effectively. However, on his estimation, because of training needs, significant numbers would only be available for a campaign in 1919. By the end of 1917, troops were at last landing at a rate of about 200,000 per month. The numbers were deceptive, therefore, even if the allies could estimate that, because of fitness and youth and general condition, one new US division was worth two existing Allied divisions.

Ludendorff, not slow to spot it, had recognised a window of opportunity, a once-in-a-lifetime chance. By attacking in early 1918, Germany would have superiority in force numbers that

might just be decisive. It wasn't only a numerical advantage they would have; it would also be in the way the two sides were now fighting the war.

From early 1916, the British had thought in terms of attack, and in a particular way, Haig's wearing-down process. This was the overriding principle into which the Portuguese, and all who joined the struggle, bought.

The Germans, therefore, were forced to learn how to defend better, and did so admirably. The British in Flanders in 1917 suffered as a consequence. However, sometime in late summer 1917, the Allies got hold of a copy of the German defence manual. Pétain, always cautious and more defensive-minded, saw its significance. The Germans, he knew, would attack in strength in 1918, and so he tried to get his French subordinate commanders to learn the German lessons and adapt. Many did, but too many stuck with the old ways.

Haig and the British only came late to the realisation of what was likely to happen to them in 1918. In December 1917, though it's difficult to be certain, it appeared that Haig was still thinking in terms of 'same again' for the coming year as it had been in 1917.

So how had the German approach become different from Allied thinking? In essence, this is about flexibility and emphasis. Defensive forces should:

- Defend in depth; anything up to five kilometres, occasionally more.
- Lightly defend the front line; only one-third of the troops were to be in the forward sector, with two-thirds further back.

- Be prepared to move the two-thirds rapidly to where the enemy was attacking.
- Make the machine-gun the key element of defence. Troops should move to support the guns, not the other way round, and do so in platoons - small, flexible groups with a rapid-fire capability.

Does this sound counter-intuitive in a war of vast troop numbers?

The British adoption of these precepts came in December 1917. They give every appearance of having been cobbled together in some haste. Perhaps they distrusted what they read, or saw it as too great a risk. In any event, they made two vital changes: firstly, the two-thirds/one-third troop allocations would be reversed in terms of positioning, and secondly the machine-guns would support the troops, not the reverse. Both changes would have significant consequences for the Portuguese.

The Germans had learned about offensive tactics, too. For at least two years, the challenge had been to project troops through the defensive lines facing them - and these could be deep - and into the open country beyond, where they could deploy and attack much more easily. The standard method was to attempt to batter down opposing defences with days of heavy artillery barrage, and then send in infantry. However, at Riga, on 1 September 1917, a variation in approach had been tried, with significant success. The army there had been commanded by General von Hutier, and the artillery barrage had been organised by a Colonel Georg Bruchmüller. By early 1918, von Hutier was commanding the 18th Army on the Western Front, having taken Bruchmüller with him. Of this man, and his particular tactics, we shall hear more.

The German Offensive of 1918

By early 1918, Ludendorff was debating with his headquarters staff as to what to do next. It is interesting to note that these conversations took place in the absence of Hindenburg, the Kaiser, and the Chancellor, such was Ludendorff's influence over German policy at that point. Among the options considered was that of actually doing nothing and sitting tight. Maybe the British and the Americans, at least, would be willing to consider a peace?

This is where the absence of what might be called political nous, instead of a simple military assessment, would have helped. Bethmann-Hollweg would have told Ludendorff that approaches made in December 1916 had been answered frostily with the stiffest of terms. Throughout, Ludendorff seems not to have realised that Lloyd George had discovered that a national war machine is one of the most exhilarating vehicles to drive. For himself and Clemonceau, the French Prime Minister, only total victory would do.

So then - if it was to be a German attack, where should the main thrust be made? Through the French, perhaps, and so through to Paris, taking Verdun - at last! - on the way? That would surely finish the war! But for Ludendorff, to win the war meant the British had to be defeated, and for a brief while, he appeared to have the means to do so. His headquarters staff presented a number of options - see map (Fig. 1) - but he found it difficult to make his mind up. Even when he did, there is a kind of imprecision, with the strategic and the tactical not always moving in concert.

All the time, the trains were rolling westwards, bringing the troops. It has to be said, also, that the German organisation throughout early 1918 was extraordinarily good. The trains would arrive some way short of the front line, frequently at night, the troops would disembark and then, almost miraculously, melt into the landscape, to

a large extent unseen. It made the task of disguising an assault, or at least its strength and direction, that much easier to achieve.

Ludendorff made his decision on 21 January. It would be ‘Michael’, the earliest assault possible because of the wetness of the ground further north. It would occur on 21 March, and be preceded by Bruchmüller’s first Western Front barrage.



**Fig. 1. The German Spring Offensive of 1918 – the five assaults:-
(1) Michael; (2) George, which became Georgette; (3) Blucher-Yorck;
(4) Gneisenau; (5) Friedensturm**

Bruchmüller Enters the Fray

His barrages, relying on far more intensity and ferocity than anything yet seen, have been described in terms of Wagnerian orchestration. The very detailed firing tables he issued were precise in terms of - well, everything. Timing, direction, wind, precipitation, he thought of everything. There were three basic stages, all of which demanded surprise, great accuracy, and concentration of fire and so, naturally, superlative information on enemy positions was needed.

The first wave hit headquarters, communication and command posts, and artillery batteries up to the full range of enemy positions. A complete array of firepower was used, from high explosive to gas, with the latter especially aimed at the enemy heavy gun line. In the second stage, everything concentrated on enemy artillery. After fifty minutes, shelling switched to infantry positions - high explosive on forward positions, gas for those further back.

The pattern would then be repeated. On 21 March, it was done at least three times, with a barrage of five hours. It was a complete assault on the senses. Your sight might be removed by blast damage, and you simply didn't want to see what the shells were doing to your comrades. The sound, even with earplugs, was that which literally drove men mad. The smell? Well, high explosive can smell quite bitter and acrid, whereas the gas used, I'm told, could smell quite sweet, almost seductive, like wild garlic. If you could smell it, you were in trouble. You tasted the atmosphere, it was so thick, and all the time you could feel the crump of the shells, nearer, further away, right next to you, because the Germans knew where you were and they were seeking you out.

This kind of intensity had never been seen before. Was it any wonder that the records show that the British 5th Army, facing von Hutier's and Bruchmüller 18th, was reduced to little more than

isolated, unco-ordinated elements of gassed and blasted troops. The British 3rd Army fared better, but only because Bruchmüller's *principles* were followed by the 2nd and 7th armies, not his rigorous attention to detail. When the ground advance came - and, let's remember, that's what this was all about, breaking the enemy line and moving into open country - the Germans made significant progress, especially the 18th army. 21 March is still seen by the British Army as one of its blackest days. By 23 March, a forty mile wide breach had been made in its lines.

Here is the crux of this battle, maybe of the whole war. Despite what followed, it really was the major effort made by Germany to win the Great War. Haig was desperate for French support, demanding two divisions one day, then twenty divisions two days later. The wings of panic can be heard fluttering. Pétain gave him seven. Haig pulled troops from his left flank, reserves, anywhere to stem the flow. And the French and the British armies, as they would be over the same ground in 1940, were close to being split.

An Opportunity Missed?

Did Ludendorff miss his chance of a lifetime? Maybe. At the crucial moment, he seems to lose, not nerve, but focus. Maybe, just maybe, if he'd defined and kept to a few strategic objectives - and he was the one who'd said the British must be defeated - he could have turned the British line and rolled them back towards the sea. Perhaps towards Dunkirk?

But it didn't happen. 'Michael's' disparate attacks dissipated German strength. Despite great gains, 'Michael' faltered after about a week, and then was stopped. Other armies than the 18th failed to break through as they had done, paying the penalty for not following Bruchmüller to the letter.

In late March, one senses desperation on both sides. Ludendorff initially decided to redirect his armies and widen the struggle, but in so doing achieved incoherence, not clarity, over his objectives. But that seductive window of opportunity was still open - just. Perhaps if one of the original operations considered, 'George', could be relaunched? A lesser version? It became Operation 'Georgette'. In one of those historic ironies, he focused on precisely the part of the line defended by the Portuguese.

Portuguese Deficiencies

But they should not have been there. Only fully deployed in this sector by November 1917, there were problems from the start. Troops suffered in the unusually cold winter, and they didn't like the British food rations. Moreover, from leading commanders to privates, they felt abandoned. In December 1917, a new, conservative, authoritarian regime had come to power in Portugal, led by Sidónio Pais. He was certainly more pro-German than pro-Allies, and it is possible - though it is not proven - that he vetoed the sending of replacement troops and supplies to France. There is also the charge that the British did not provide the necessary sea transport, focusing instead on moving US troops across the Atlantic.

Whatever the cause, the effect was that by April 1918, Portuguese forces were significantly below strength and insufficiently supplied. Partly, of course, this was due to enemy action. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence to show that the Portuguese were no mean fighters. For some reason, they developed a penchant for operations in no-man's-land - scouting, sniping, raiding. Losses should have been made good. When that does not happen, morale can suffer, and it did.

There was also the problem of leave, or the lack of it. For ordinary soldiers, it was so short in duration as to be meaning-

The battle of La Lys - or Estaires in the British Army record - began at 4:15 a.m. with an astonishing artillery barrage containing all the Bruchmüller trademarks, further perfected after 'Michael'. This time, it lasted just under three hours, but the effect was just as devastating. Later, British HQ staff were contemptuous of the Portuguese performance, conveniently forgetting that its own 5th Army had simply disintegrated in front of a similar Bruchmüller assault.

At 7:00 a.m., the Germans advanced in three waves, 120 metres apart. Platoons were preceded by four machine-gun teams each, behind a barrage creeping forward fifty metres every four minutes. They found both wire and trenches levelled, as Bruchmüller had intended that they should, and overran the frontline positions. By 11:00 a.m., troops had reached some of the Portuguese artillery batteries in rear, and the 5th Brigade HQ was taken.

To give a flavour of what it was like, this quote comes from a British sergeant's letter: *'We went into the line to support the Portuguese troops, who were falling back. The Bosche was putting up a terrible barrage of heavy shells - it looked as if nothing could live in it. We moved further towards the River Lys, and we had not moved two minutes when a shell dropped on the place we had been, which would certainly have finished us, with the Company HQ. The poor Portuguese were coming through us in a panic from shell-shock. (The next day ...) we got through a perfect hail of machine-gun bullets and whizz-bangs. The relics of our 150th Brigade - what a few! What happened to the remainder we never knew.'* That was what it was like on the fringes. Within the fire-storm, it must have been unimaginable.

It sounds like a disaster, and it was, but it wasn't all failure. Where they could, the Portuguese fought well. The reserve brigade, the 3rd, slowed the German advance. Captain Bento Roma,

for example, initially attacked at 9:30 a.m. on the 9 April, and eventually surrounded, held out until 11:45 a.m. the next day before being forced to surrender. Buying time, buying time ...

One in a Million

And then there is the story of Anibal Milhais. If you remember only one name from this piece, make it this one. At some point on 9 April, Milhais, a private, found himself positioned close to Isberg. And as one does, he became fed up with being battered senseless and assaulted in great numbers and decided to take on the German army alone. By doing so, he allowed considerable numbers of his comrades to withdraw in good order, but actually I think his secret purpose was to reach Berlin before anyone else.

Fortunately, he had Luisa with him, and she was of great assistance. Luisa was the name he gave his Lewis gun. In quick order, he stopped the German advance in front of him. It is very likely that he moved position frequently to avoid return fire from machine-guns, snipers or artillery. The effect appears to have been that the Germans thought they were facing not an individual but at least a platoon, and maybe more, of determined soldiers. For several hours, the record shows, the German advance in that sector was delayed. Eventually, they went round Milhais's position, leaving him stranded.

However, our man was not finished. At some time on 11 April, he came across a Scottish major, an army doctor, who had become stranded in a marsh. Milhais decided that rescuing Scottish majors was more fun than fighting the entire German army, so he extricated him and escorted him back to allied lines. It is to the major that we owe the telling of Milhais's tale, who really does appear to have seen these events as a slightly more interesting day at the office.

Aftermath

For the Portuguese, Georgette finished on 11 April. From their 13,001, they lost 1,938 dead, 1,500 were wounded, and 6,585 - just over 50% - captured. The German assault continued, but against a defence that was, eventually, better organised than it had been against 'Michael'. After nine days, 'Georgette' stalled for good, and with it the last chance of an overall German victory.

And Ludendorff's judgement? *'Our troops had fought well; but ... certain divisions ... failed to show any inclination to attack in the plain of the Lys ... the way in which the troops stopped around captured food supplies, while individuals stayed behind to search houses for food, was a serious matter. This impaired our chances of success and showed poor discipline ... both our young company commanders and our senior officers did not feel strong enough to take disciplinary action, and exercise enough authority to enable them to lead their men forward without delay.'*

Here, one feels, is a significant reason for German failure. At various times and places, they had advantages in manpower, artillery and tactics - Bruchmüller, now nicknamed *Durchbruchmüller* ('durchbruch' in German means 'breakthrough'), really had given them a tool that might have won the war. In May 1918, an assault on the French along the Aisne was initially successful, but slowed. On 15 July came Bruchmüller's final massive bombardment. Again, there were initial advances, but French forces, at last deployed exactly how Pétain wanted them, administered a crushing rebuttal to the German 7th Army. This was followed on 18 July by a successful French counter-attack, preceded only by a creeping artillery barrage. Bruchmüller must have squirmed in disapproval! It was over; from here on, the Germans would advance no more.

And afterwards? Were the Portuguese war aims achieved? The colonies, certainly, were retained where otherwise they might not have been. A seat at the top table? The cruel lesson was that mere participation in the war did not grant the right to influence the peace. Portuguese troops lined up in the 1919 Paris victory parade, but that was about as far as it went. It is a sad judgement, but the Great War involvement simply slowed slightly the downward course of Portuguese influence as a world power.

And Anibal Milhais? Like Bruchmüller, he acquired a nickname. Immediately after the events of 9 to 11 April became known, his commanding officer, in a moment of inspiration, said he should be not Soldier Milhais but Soldier Milhões - a soldier among millions. It was as Soldier Milhões that many Portuguese remembered him. And two months later, not content with taking the Germans on single-handed just the once, he did it again, so enabling a large group of Belgian soldiers, this time, to retreat in safety.

The highest honour available to Portuguese military personnel is the *Ordem de Torre e Espada*, Order of the Tower and Sword, Fourth Class. Milhais remains the only man to have been awarded the honour on the battlefield rather than in Lisbon. Soldier Millions, therefore, is not one in millions, he is in a class apart. But he went back to being a farmer in the Minho with barely a 'thank you', least of all a pension. He married, not Luisa, but Teresa, and they produced, eventually, nine children. Public pressure at the on-going poverty of such a hero at length did produce a government response. Yes, they would do something for him - and they renamed Milhais's home village in his honour. This was not what he'd had in mind!

In disgust, and seeking a better life, in 1924 the Milhais family removed themselves to Brazil. However, Anibal found his fame had gone before him, and he was welcomed and recognised everywhere. A public collection generated enough contributions to

enable him to return to Portugal to the farm he'd left. In 1928, he did so. A shamed government at last granted their greatest war hero a pension. He lived a farmer in the village of his own name until he died in 1970, aged 75.

The Great War memory in Portugal did not die with him, but a chapter was closed. Anibal Milhais is one reason, at least, why the memory is all around us here, in street names and in war memorials. The flow of history moves on, but for a generation of Portuguese, 9 April 1918 existed as a significant date, when their troops, from their point of view, were in the wrong place at the wrong time.



Fig. 3. The Aftermath

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