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**The Portuguese Land Reform  
resulting from the 25th of April Revolution**

**by José J. M. Rodrigues**

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This article by José Rodrigues is a prize-winner. When he wrote it he was at St Julians's School, aged 18)

**ABSTRACT**

This essay deals in general with the Agrarian Reform and analyses more specifically why it has failed. It is an attempt to establish the reason why a post-revolutionary land reform which was born with so much hope, for those who initiated it, is nowadays considered a failure.

In this essay I have put forward the idea that it was the fact that the Communist Party, who initiated the land reform, was removed from power but not completely deprived of influence that caused the failure of the land reform. That is, the fact that their political revolution was incomplete caused the land reform to be left incomplete and therefore it failed.

This essay is of particular interest to me due to my family's personal involvement in the subject. I have always heard criticisms of the land reform so I decided to find out for myself. The subject is of special importance due to the fact that Portugal is still very orientated towards agriculture.

In the essay, in order to decide on the validity of the thesis, it is important to establish a parallel between the political development and the development of the land reform movement. When one does this it is then not very difficult to discern the difference between different governments and their different attitudes to the land reform. Finally one goes on to spot a conflict between the different governments and the eventual appearance of a political deadlock which condemned the land reform.

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On the 25th of April 1974 there took place a coup d'état in Portugal which both knocked down the right wing dictatorship of the time, and marked the start of a revolution which would come to change the very core of the Portuguese social structure and political system. The now fallen regime had had its base in the 1933 constitution drawn up by Dr. Salazar. It had lasted for 41 years, but Salazar's death (1970) and especially the pressure of the African wars on the economy and public opinion made the coup more and more inevitable.

The coup itself was carried out by the junior officers in the army and met with little or no resistance. After the first week of celebration which culminated in the gigantic rallies in Lisbon and Oporto on the 1st May (Labour Day) polarisation began to take place amongst the revolutionaries. There was the less radical, more moderate, wing, at first led by General Antonio Spínola and later by the so-called Group of Nine, and there was the extreme left wing headed by the Communists under the leadership of Dr. Álvaro Cunhal.

In all revolutions the revolutionaries' aim is to change 'things' which they believe need to be changed; the 'things' that are changed range from the political system to the social composition of the population to the economic policy. In this essay we will look at one aspect of the economic area, that is, agriculture. In Portugal, this area assumes an increased importance because Portugal is to a large extent dependent on its agriculture.

With the coup, a land reform basically aimed at a redistribution of land and reorganisation of production was started. However, nowadays it is criticised by all sections of the political spectrum and economically it is a

disaster. Quite simply it has failed in its aims. This essay will try to trace the reason for this failure. Offhand one can identify several probable causes.

Some might say it was not a land reform at all, but simply a result of post-revolutionary anarchy, others will blame this failure on the corruption that appeared amongst the peasant class, others will say it was doomed to fail because it was in essence a compromise between incompatible economic notions. There are even those who will go so far as to suggest that it was the very fact that it had a left wing foundation that condemned it. However, in this essay we will accept most of these as significant but will attempt to find out why things such as corruption were allowed to become a problem, and why the people who started the land reform did not deal with these problems and solve them. We will try to show how the people who were responsible for the initiation of this land reform did not remain in power and could not see the land reform through to its natural conclusion. We will try to show that their revolution was not, politically, completed, and that this led to its failure.

To do this we will first follow, as briefly as possible, the narrative of the political development in order to have a reference point when subsequently tracing the events which composed the land reform. We will benefit from specific case studies as well as from general information.

## PART I

In order to really understand the development of the land reform in Portugal and understand the main argument of the essay it is necessary to be acquainted with at least a simple outline of the relevant political developments, even if this is only to be aware of who was in control of the country at any particular time, and what their priorities were.

With the 25th of April 1974 coup, a moderate army General took over the Provisional Presidency. His name was Antonio Spínola. His rule was never a peaceful one and he was always under constant threat from the extreme left. In an attempt to assert his supreme authority he staged a military coup on the night of the 27th of September. It failed and on the 30th he officially resigned from the Presidency.

He was replaced by General Costa Gomes who was above all a pacifier, willing to follow whichever stream was leading the way. This marks the beginning of a new phase in the development of the revolution as the extreme left took this chance to move into power. This period is important because of the ensuing Communist rule, which is of paramount importance in relation to the land reform movement.

A new government, the Third Provisional Government, then took power. It did not differ greatly from its predecessor, except in the fact that its Prime Minister, Vasco Gonçalves, had a free hand. He was the representative of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA), which initiated the 25th April coup, and he was closely connected with the Communists. It was his government that permitted and encouraged the beginning of the occupation of land during the summer of 1975, and it was also his government that published the first decrees concerning the land reform, mainly the law that determined the points system used to find the value of the land, dating from the 29th July, straight after the first occupations.

Meanwhile the moderate group of the revolution had started to stir again. This group was supported by the Social Democrats (PPD) and Socialist Party (PS) and became known as the Group of Nine. They had a complex situation to face: neither did they want the right wing to take over and destroy the ideals achieved with the 25th April coup, nor did they want the left wing to become the vanguard of the revolution and lead the country into a communist economy (of which their land reform was a feature) under Soviet control.

The Moderates published their intents and asked the President not to sanction the 5th Provisional Government which was now totally composed of "communists and crypto-communists"<sup>1</sup>, as the Socialist leader Mário Soares put it. The President, however, ignored this and the government took power.

This provoked the Moderates to act, and through a complex power game they managed to get the President to dismiss the Prime Minister and his government on the 12th September 1975, one month and four days after having sanctioned it. This was an important victory for the Moderates and meant the political annihilation of Vasco Gonçalves, who lost support from the left wing of the army. Already at this stage attention was centred on political occurrences and all other subjects had lost priority.

During this beginning of the power struggle the MFA split itself into two factions: the supporters of the Group of Nine; and the supporters of the extreme left which had united itself under the name of the United Revolutionary Front (FUR). This last group was composed of the Communist Party (representing roughly 12.5% of the population) and the MDP/CDE (Portuguese Democratic Movement/Democratic Electoral Committee) representing about 4.1% of the population.

The FUR was in control of the Revolutionary Council which was a very powerful advisory body to the state. The Revolutionary Council was another power centre, responsible for many important decisions. What is relevant here, is that with a firm grip on this Council the Communist Party and its allies could still effectively run a large part of the country — and obviously the land reform measures.

With the above-mentioned division in the Armed Forces, the overriding concern of the President was to avoid a military confrontation. Therefore, on 5th September there was a meeting of the MFA General Assembly to vote on the new constitution for the Revolutionary Council. The Moderates obtained a

majority and thus in the month of September alone the Group of Nine had secured dominance over two important power centres, the Government and the Revolutionary Council. All that was left now was the military control of the leftist side of the MFA, which was especially powerful in the Lisbon area.

On the morning of the 25th November, one month later, the parachutist division launched an attack on the few moderate positions in Lisbon. It was an attempt by the FUR (extreme left) to take full control of the Lisbon area, including the Government. The Group of Nine, who had provoked this move in the previous month was not caught unprepared, and retaliated with the Commando unit which quickly defeated all the extreme left positions and secured the last power base for the Group of Nine.

It is at this point that the power struggle ceases and the Communist Party is removed from power, even though they still remained very influential in the Alentejo area and surrounding districts (see Map I). From then on, the Governments have been non-Communist.

## PART II

Having looked at the political development we should now turn our attention to the agricultural development, and, more concretely, to the emergence and development of the land reform.

The distribution of land in Portugal in 1975 was very uneven, with something like 5% of the landowners owning 68% of the land, and the remaining 95% sharing 32% of the arable land.

This unequal distribution was even more striking in the Southern Central and Southern areas, especially in the province of the Alentejo. Here the large properties known as the «latifundia» were dominant and were the cause of a great deal of discontent amongst the peasant class. The injustices were striking, and more and more the idea of working someone else's land became a cause for complaint, especially when those owners were for most of the time away from the property.

Therefore it was only natural that, when it started, the land reform movement started in these areas. Another factor that would favour the Southern areas as the birthplace of reformist tendencies was the fact that the Communist party, illegal up until 1974, had held its traditional clandestine base in that area. Its ideology was effectively implemented amongst a sizeable section of the peasant classes of the zone.

With the growth of the revolution and the securing of power by the radicals under the leadership of Prime Minister Vasco Gonçalves, the revolutionary forces in the South began to stir and the occupations of private property by the peasant workers took place.

Without any logical development that might suggest a master plan, they were however, consistently backed by young revolutionary people. Also, a

leftist faction of the army was used as a threat if there was any resistance. However, the most important thing to note is the paramount importance members of the Communist Party had in rousing the masses and encouraging the occupations. It is believed that they were in fact the brain behind the brawn, although as was mentioned before, no master plan was or is perceivable.

A group of left wing youths, accompanied by some agitators (probably members of the Communist Party) would enter the property and instigate the workers to take over the farm.

An excellent example of this sort of occupation is seen with the property referred to as Cortiçadas (see Annex I). It is situated near Évora which is in the district of Alentejo. What occurred there is illustrative of what was happening in other properties within the region.

In the summer of 1975 a group of forty men entered the property. These men called for a meeting of all the employees and demanded to know who the foreman was. They then asked if there were any complaints against him. Since there were no complaints, they gave him 24 hours to leave the property and threatened to call in the army if he did not. In this particular area the regiment that was usually called in was led by a young Captain who apparently had posed as more than just a threat in previous occupations. With the expulsion of the foreman, the occupation now occurred.

These occupations by force and by the «will of the people» were in fact nothing less than theft under the law of the time. It was the case with this land reform that the occupations preceded the law and would eventually come to form the backbone of that same law.

The total occupied area extended to about 1,200,000 hectares, which is about 31% of the total southern area.

Occupations continued throughout 1975 and even well into 1976, although by then they were markedly slowing down and were backed with laws. Even in 1977 we have the example of 'Herdade do Corunheiro e Alvora' which is on the border between Alentejo and Ribatejo (see Annex 2). Here, even though the expropriation was illegal because of an old treaty between Portugal and England in 1915, it is a good example of a Government-backed expropriation. It is important to note that by this time the country was under the control of the moderates.

Also, perhaps at this point it would be useful to determine the difference between occupations and expropriations. Occupation was the stage before expropriation and was usually carried out by the local people. An expropriation would only occur when the Government gave some sort of legal coverage to the occupation. Therefore a property might have been occupied but not expropriated, and vice versa. Expropriations were only taking place by 1976, and they were legalising the 1975 occupations.

It is these occupations of the summer of 1975 that were of significance for the initiation of the land reform movement and it is these that would come to weigh enormously in the forming of a land reform law that would be issued in September 1977.

Once these expropriations took place, the workmen united to form cooperatives of production, better known as 'Unidades Colectivas de Produção' (Collective Units of Production, or UCPs). These UCPs were a grouping together of three or four neighbouring «latifundia» and were run by all the workers. Again the extreme left had a major role in initiating these cooperatives and as Eng. Almeida Martins, a member of the Portuguese Confederation of Agriculture, states «It was the Communist Party that was better organised to take advantage of the political situation and it was that same Communist Party that gave a continuation to the occupations». As a result of this active role they became firmly embedded within this area and were a backstage controller of a lot of the properties, and later UCPs. One factor that would facilitate the involvement of the extreme left is the fact that at this time the Moderate wing was too worried about its own political survival to check the development of the situation in that area.

These cooperatives were born in troubled times and from then on until the present it is common belief that they have never recovered from their initial difficulties — of which there are quite a number.

One problem which they faced was lack of organisation and a lack of the capacity to handle many of the problems. A concrete example of this is seen in the case of «Cortiçadas», already mentioned above.

Here it was the foreman's aide who took over the running of the property. As the occupation took place in the summer, he was immediately faced with the problem of the yearly wine making. He had never made wine before, but had seen the foreman run the operations in previous years, so he decided to give it a try. However, he failed miserably and the wine had to be converted into

vinegar. This was by no means a solitary example, but again a very representative one of what was happening to the properties straight after the occupations.

Another problem which faced the UCPs was lack of ready cash. This was because most of the properties were part of several farms owned by a family which would run the whole group from an office in one of the main urban centres. Obviously, when that property was occupied and subsequently expropriated, the money which usually came from the office to pay the wages and any other expenses simply did not come. Hence the UCPs were faced with the problem of paying the wages themselves.

In Cortiçadas, what happened was that they decided to sell all the cattle for meat. Now this cattle was the result of special breeding techniques, and over the years had become a herd of very high quality. In the long run, the selling of it for ready cash proved to be a major mistake, and a loss in valuable future revenue.

Another example of where mistakes were incurred for the sake of having «ready cash» is given to us by Roderick Reynolds concerning his farm in Coruche. He tells us that soon after the expropriation he saw men cut down over 2,500 cork trees for the ridiculous reason that there was nothing else for them to do. This action, he reminds us, ruined some of the intrinsic value of the property. He estimated this loss at around 20% of the total value of the property.

It is important to understand the state of mind of the workers, in order to understand why things like the above happened. With the occupations, a new feeling of hope for, quite literally, a better life, was born amongst them, and they would never understand if the revolution was not even able to pay them their wages. It would be very hard for them to see the changes as positive if they did not even get the wages they had had before the revolution<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, to make sure the workers did not lose their original impetus, the above-mentioned backstage controllers (members of the Communist Party) would allow actions like the above to happen.

Just as lack of organisation and cash constituted a problem, so did stealing. As always when there exists a state of confusion there are always individuals who take advantage of the situation for their own profit, and doubtless a great amount of agricultural products changed hands illegally, causing the UCPs even greater losses.

One of the people interviewed was an eyewitness to an illegal sale of cork by a worker in the Alentejo. He tells us that he was driving along in the district of Évora, which is within the Alentejo province, when he saw a man with a lorry full of cork, stopped in the middle of the road, whilst two other men were loading on more cork. Apparently this might seem harmless, but he goes on to explain that the loading was taking place on the borders of the property and not in the usual place used for the selling of cork. He then concluded that they were stealing the cork<sup>3</sup>.

So, as can be seen, the beginning of the UCPs was by no means a peaceful one, and perhaps this was an omen for the unsuccessful future they were to have.

In 1976 we see the first attempts of the, by now, moderate government to put some order into the situation. However, it was only in 1977 that a complete law appeared.

This was known as the «Lei Barreto», owing its name to the Minister of Agriculture, António Barreto. It was issued in September 1977, and from the start was subject to criticism by a wide range of people. The main thing they criticised was the continuance of the «Zona de Intervenção da Reforma Agrária» (Zone of Intervention of the Agrarian Reform, ZIRA) which had originated in a previous law decree (see Map 2). This area comprised all the districts in the Alentejo, part of the district of Santarém (province of Ribatejo), part of the district of Setúbal (province of Estremadura) and part of the province of the Algarve. It effectively divided the country, land reform-wise and meant that there were great injustices, such as the situation in which one property was subject to expropriation and the neighbouring property was not. It was in fact saying that if you lived outside the ZIRA it was permissible to have large properties, whereas if you lived inside it wasn't. The right wing argued that if they (the moderate government) were going to go ahead with this land reform, then it should be nation-wide.

However, the greatest criticism is related to the actual implementation of the measures stipulated by the Government in the law.

The first thing to mention is related to the attribution of reserve properties. These reserve properties were approximately a third of the land, in value, which the old owner was allowed to keep. The values were determined by a points system based on an aforementioned law made by the Gonçalves Government (Part I). This points system basically stated that different crops and soils were worth different value points, these would be added up and eventually you

would reach a value number for the farm. It further stated that if you were not farming the land directly and instead had it leased out to a farmer, then your third could be reduced to about a sixth. In theory this could be acceptable, however, the overwhelming majority of the landowners have not received these reserve areas yet.

Another issue that is criticized is connected with the indemnifications the law promised to pay the expropriated landowners. These indemnifications have not only not been paid by the Government, but they are also considered to be far below the real value of the property that was expropriated.

Both factors, which are due to lack of motivation or an incapacity to act as will be seen later, have made unnecessary enemies of the landowning class against the land reform.

A final area of criticism, which has not been touched upon before in the essay, is the fact that within the ZIRA there are cases of occupied land that under the 1977 law should not have been expropriated because they do not rate as «latifundia», just as there are cases of large properties which should be, but have not been, expropriated. An example of this last situation is the 'Quinta da Conceição' in the district of Setúbal, which, although it qualifies for expropriation under the law, has so far been left untouched.

In retrospect several conclusions can be reached. Quite clearly this land reform package came into being as a result of the events of the summer of 1975. It was an attempt to give legal coverage to a very popular movement in areas that would come to be known as ZIRA. However, it is also clear that the Government of the time was not very keen on this land reform, and the proof of this is the fact that the Government did not wish to apply the law uniformly throughout the whole country. All the Government did was what it had to do if it were to maintain the stability that was possible at the time. Had the Government demanded that the occupants of the properties leave, and that the UCPs be dismantled, the consequences could have been very serious, giving the extreme left parties the opportunity to criticise the Government and even incite the locals to help them regain the power they had lost two years before (November 1975). Consequently one can see that there was little the Government could do except legalise the 1975/76 occupations.

Also, the law was not implemented with the energy that such a law required. So, both as a testimony and as a cause of that, we have the cases of non-expropriated «latifundia» and occupied small properties. This illustrates

the state of mind of a Government which did not know which way to go and was afraid to act decisively one way or another.

Another factor contributing to the failure of the land reform was the above-mentioned stealing and lack of competence within the newly formed UCPs. The fact that the Government never really solved these problems betrays its real lack of commitment to the project.

Nevertheless, the main fault of the Government was not the failure to deal with the above problems, but instead the failure to provide the cooperatives with money and economic support.

The Lei Barreto in Article 15, lines (a) to (j), (Annex 3), did suggest several different kinds of support but only (a) came into practice under the form of Créditos Agrícolas de Emergência (Emergency Agricultural Loans), but even those «were not much of a success», or so states the above-mentioned member of the Portuguese Confederation of Agriculture.

Seeing that the cooperatives and the whole agricultural sector were economically unprofitable<sup>4</sup>, the lack of investment in the area became evident and a vicious cycle set in with the sector increasingly depressed and the investment becoming increasingly scarce. Nowadays an overwhelming number of UCPs are bankrupt or on the brink of bankruptcy.

If a land reform had been started, why did the Government not complete it, and why was it impossible for coalition governments to push forward a new land reform? The main reason is that the Communist Party is still very powerful in the Alentejo area and especially within the UCPs, so it put up an effective, fierce resistance — in the form of demonstrations, and by using their influence in the trade unions to provoke strikes. This resistance, which in the early years would assume the threat of a counter-coup, later merely assumed the above-mentioned forms, which would still be enough practically to cause the fall of any coalition Government. This would provoke instability and delay the solving of other pressing problems. And there has not been one government in Portugal between 1974 and 1987 which has had a one-party majority in Parliament, so the necessary stability has not occurred.

Only recently in 1987 did the Social Democratic Party obtain a majority. Already rumours are circulating of a new land reform. This goes to support the idea stated above as to why the governments did not change land reform. That is, that it was merely because they did not feel powerful enough to do so. It was

not lack of will, because now that the Moderates do have the power, they will initiate a new land reform.

Looking back on the whole essay and bearing in mind the idea put forward in the beginning that it was the failure of the (Communist) revolution, that is, that it was incomplete, that caused the land reform to also remain incomplete, and thus fail, one can make several deductions.

We saw how the land reform did indeed fail economically for two main reasons which are related to one another. It had its problems with theft or corruption, lack of competent staff and shortage of cash, and these were worsened by the fact that the Government did not give the reform the attention it needed to survive. Therefore we see the lack of monetary aid and physical implementation of the Lei Barreto.

The next question which we looked at concerned the reason for this reaction of the Government. This part is directly related to the thesis and we concluded that the initiators of the land reform were not the same as those that were asked to perpetuate or reverse it. To prove this, one has merely to refer to the chronological development of political control in the country and see that the rulers in 1975 during the occupations were not the same as those that published the Lei Barreto in 1977.

However, the situation is made more complicated because the Communists of 1975 did not totally lose their influence but were still very powerful in the ZIRA area, which is what matters for the land reform. This was seen in the way they established themselves within the UCPs.

With all this information it is easy to see that, apart from the fact that the land reform failed because its initiators failed in their drive for power, there is also the idea that a deadlock developed due to the fact that the central government did not have the power (owing to its coalition status) to fight the regional power held by the Communist Party in the Alentejo area.

This is why, in the introductory thesis, the words referring to the incompleteness of both the communist political revolution and land reform were used. They are both incomplete, meaning that they were both left half-way in their stages of development. The political power disappeared, but not entirely as they had a power base within the ZIRA, and the land reform was checked but not destroyed. This situation led to the deadlock which ultimately

was responsible for the economic failure of the land reform that resulted from the 25th April coup.

I feel compelled to end on a note of hope and state that with the one party majority gained by the Social Democrats, the deadlock, after ten years, seems to be at last loosening up.

## Notes

1. This is a quotation from a letter sent by Mário Soares to President Costa Gomes concerning the coming to power of the 'V Provisional Government'. In this letter he further reminds the President that this government represents less than 18% of the electorate, and advises him not to sanction it.
2. In an article in the newspaper «Expresso» dated 18th May 1974 named «The Agrarian Question — What the Political Programmes Say» it is stated that «of the small landowners (which were part of the peasant class) only 1% have a secondary school education or university education, 54% just know how to read and write and 45% neither read nor write». This helps us to understand why they had such a simple view of the revolution.
3. This example is also illustrative of the lack of organisation within the UCPs as well as the state of confusion that existed.
4. The Portuguese Confederation of Agriculture also stated that the main function of the Minister of Agriculture, for the last 10 years and through successive governments, was to try to find out if the UCPs were economically viable or not.

## ANNEXE 1

Name of property:	Herdade «As Cortiçadas»
Location:	Freguesia de S. Sebastião da Giesteira, Concelho de Évora, Alentejo
Area:	Approximately 1,350 hectares.
Crops:	Vineyards, olive trees, cork trees.
Livestock:	Cows, pigs.
Produce:	Wine, olive oil, cork, beef and pork.

It is part of a group of farms owned by the family and spread throughout the country.

Expropriated during the summer in 1975 and still the property of the UCPs. No indemnification or reserve property has been received.

## ANNEXE 2

<b>Name of property:</b>	Herdade do Corunheiro e Alvora.
<b>Location:</b>	Coruche, near the border between Alentejo and Ribatejo provinces.
<b>Area:</b>	650 hectares.
<b>Crops:</b>	Tomato, rice, maize, cork, eucalyptus and pine trees.
<b>Produce:</b>	Mainly cork. 9,000 arrobas per annum (1 arroba — 15 kg). Tomato, rice and maize was produced in the valley region, which was rented out to a farmer.

Expropriated on 17th July 1977.

Illegal expropriation because it was owned by a foreigner, ie. an English national. According to a treaty between Portugal and England in 1915 called the «Trade and Navigation Act», the Portuguese Government was not permitted to expropriate the property of British subjects before paying the indemnification. The new constitution in 1974 did promise to keep all treaties with foreigners. Nowadays the property has been returned to the initial owners. This occurred in 1985 as a result of pressure from the British Government.

## ANNEXE 3

Translation of Article 15 of the Lei Barreto dated 29th September 1977.

### Article 15

(Measures of Encouragement)

The following are encouragement measures for the activity of agricultural enterprises:

- a) Concession of credits (loans)
- b) Concession of non-returnable subsidies
- c) Special insurances related to agriculture, namely, those related to climatic hazards and plant mishaps
- d) Previously selected price fixing of a compensatory nature
- e) Preference conditions and guarantees for product acquisition
- g) Ease is granted in relation to the elaboration of investment projects or economic surveys
- h) Granting the use of equipment
- i) Celebrating of contract-programmes
- j) Fiscal incentives

## MAP I

Shows the location of relevant urban centres as well as acquainting the reader with the geography of Portugal, and especially with the location of the Alentejo area.




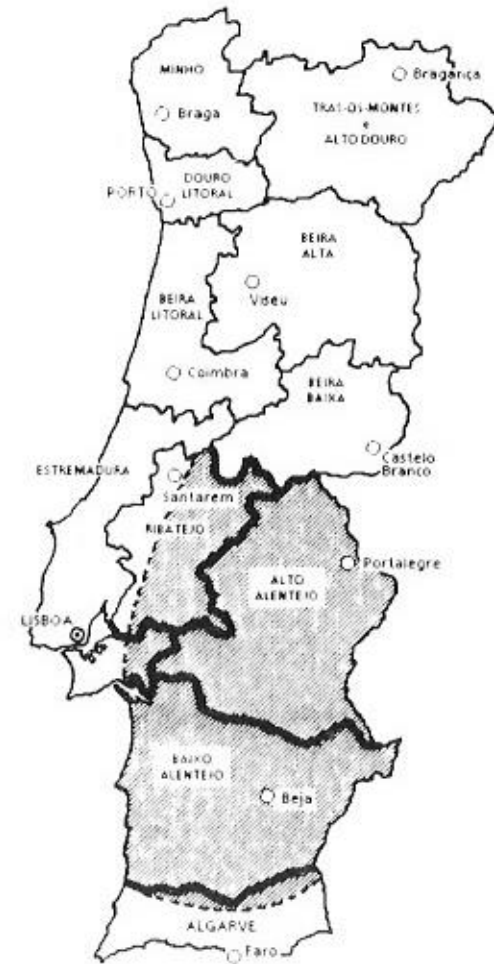
## MAP II

Shows the location of the ZIRA.

ZIRA. — 

Boundary of ZIRA. — 

Boundary of provinces within ZIRA. — 



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- Several from 'Journal Expresso' — newspaper, all from 1974
- Compilation of articles from University of Lisbon, Faculty of Letters, Department of the Portuguese Language and Culture, entitled '25 Abril'

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