

VETERANS IN THE CENTER OF THE WAR EXPERIENCE MYTH DIALECTIC CONSTRUCTION WORLD WAR I MEMORY IN PORTUGAL¹

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The involvement of Portugal in the First World War often comes as a surprise to those who are not entirely familiar with Portuguese history. Marginal to textbook accounts of the conflict² and barely commemorated at home or abroad, Portugal is very much its forgotten participant. Yet from 9th March 1916 until the Armistice two-and-a-half years later Portuguese soldiers fought alongside the other Allies on the Front. Over eight thousand were killed and a further 25,000 were wounded, captured or declared missing. At the *Battle of La Lys* alone, 25% of the entire Portuguese Expeditionary Force was lost. For such a small country, this was a tragedy on a scale no less than those faced by the other European powers. But what is striking about the Portuguese case is how little it impacted in the national collective memory and how sparing and

¹ This work is based on: CORREIA, Sílvia – “A memória da Guerra”, ROSAS, Fernando; ROLLO, Maria Fernanda (coord.) : *História da Primeira República Portuguesa*. Lisboa: Edições Tinta-da-China, 2009, pp. 349-370.

² AUDOIN-ROUZEAU, Stéphane; BECKER, Jean-Jacques (dir.) : *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre*. Paris: Bayard, 2004; Meriman, Jonh and Winter, Jay (ed.) : *Europe: Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction since 1914*. Vol. 1-5. USA: Thomson Gale, 2006.

small-scale the official efforts at commemorating the War were in comparison to Britain or France.

I want to explore why that was the case and to consider it from two angles. Whether the failure of the Republican regime to commemorate the War reflected its existing weaknesses and how much the inability to come to terms with the traumas generated by the War precipitated the demise of the *Republica* in 1926 and even further 1933. To look at the public memorial spaces conception as manifestation of the national/collective memory construction and reconstruction and ask if Portugal was or wasn't capable, copying or innovating from the European universal war culture, of any solid memorial conception.

Centered in the memory analysis, from up to down, threw official memory versus public memory dialectic, crossing reference/research lines as: the *antigos combatentes* (veterans) as central characters, from their social integration until the associative reaction; and the monumental consecration (shapes, rhythms and actualizing meanings rituals). The war material culture allows for the depiction the acceptance of the conflict deadly brutality. The dimension – 'global war' – and the related memorial processes constructed by the public opinion instruments controlled by the State, dissimulate the relation between power, ideology, art and religion, below the projections of memorial spaces more or less uniform in all war participants.

Historians like Paul Fussell have suggested that the Great War marked a watershed in the ways in which collective memory was constructed and came to define a new matrix for conceiving of war in the West. The unimagined horrors that it produced resulted in widespread loss of faith in the liberal values on which fin-de-siècle societies were based. The surviving governments of those countries now sought to shape representation of the War to recuperate those values and to use commemoration as a mean of reinforcing the state.

Memory and grief were nationalized, either through central shrines to an unknown representative of the dead or by the erection of the standard war memorial in every village, recording its lost sons and linking them into a complex grid of mourning. All of these forms of commemoration were found in post-war Portugal, but their scale was small, their presence limited and their duration brief. Starting in 1919 the Republican government poured investment into commemorative activities along the

same lines as other European models. Initiatives were launched mostly in Lisbon but also across the country. Institutions like the Great War Monuments Commission (*CPGG*) and Great War Veterans Association (*LCGG*) were set up and even given a good degree of political autonomy, but they failed to achieve significant success in integrating them into the national consciousness.

Almost from the first, these attempts to shape public memory of the war were subjected to disagreement between the political factions of the republic.

There was controversy and subsequently confusion over the choice of date for the commemoration. Unlike in England and France, where the day of the Armistice had seemed the obvious choice, the Portuguese date was changed from 11th November, to 14th July, to 9th April, the date of the Battle of *La Lys*, the country's greatest defeat at German hands, with two dates even being used in the same year. The regime was simply unable to impose its own commemorative plans on its critics who used the question about how to represent the war to exploit the government's weakness. It was believed that the political reasons to intervene in the war were based on false premises. The government's attempts to use the first victory celebrations to conceal from the Portuguese population the great losses they had suffered failed.

The repatriation of bodies was another area in which the Republican regime failed to assemble and implement a coherent policy in the aftermath of the war. Even in the fields of Flanders, there was no successful attempt to create specifically Portuguese cemeteries that gathered up and commemorated the country's own war dead beyond a limited effort by the Portuguese War Graves Commission to concentrate the majority of the bodies in a few military cemeteries in Flanders, such as *Richebourg l'Avoué*.³

The events of 9 April 1921, the symbolic return of just two bodies, illustrates this well the difficulties faced by the regime in organizing commemorative activity. A renewed effort was made to establish public cults of mourning alongside the private sites in cemeteries. A substantial international celebration of Portuguese military bravery with military and civil parades was organized and executed by the Ministry for War. Two unknown soldiers were interred in a special tomb at the monastery of Santa

³ AHM, 1.^a Divisão, 35.^a Secção, Caixa 442, n.º 27; Serviço de Sepulturas de Guerra no Estrangeiro, 3.^a Direcção Geral (Estado Maior do Exército): *Relação dos militares portugueses sepultados nos cemitérios de Richebourg l'Avoué, Boulogne s/Mer e Antuérpia*. Lisboa, 1937.

Maria Vitória in Batalha near Leira. On 9th April, before the internment of the two dead heroes, there was a major procession through the streets of Lisbon in the presence of national and international representatives and diplomats that tried to combine the standard structure of a European military parade with elements of Portuguese tradition.⁴

The symbolism of this event was significant. One soldier was from Flanders, the European Front, and the other from the empire in Africa, the two fields of Portuguese international influence and interest, which were increasingly coming into conflict with each other. The site chosen was outside the capital, Lisbon, and rather than being a secular shrine of the State, even though the Portuguese constitution decreed a strong Secular State, as defined by law (1911), establishing total separation between state and catholic religion, it was a medieval gothic monastery with all the religious connotations that conjures up. It says much about the Portuguese Republic that it lacked the confidence to create its own secular shrines, as the equivalent tombs in Paris, Rome and Berlin has been established.⁵ The Portuguese choice of a religious memorial reflected the precarious state of the Republican regime and sought to legitimize its memorials in the older and deeper traditions of the Church.

Over the next five years, a set of national commemorations was gradually established, at first by the War Ministry but subsequently under the active control of the Great War Monuments Association (CPGG) as political institutions became increasingly unable to take control of such affairs. A two minute silence, a national monument and a number of local counterparts, as well as an eternal flame over the graves of the unknown soldiers were established, in imitation of wider European patterns. The LCGG began to introduce consciousness of the continued suffering of veterans and the need to provide support for them. In 1927, it began co-operation with the international *Fédération Interalliée des Anciens Combattants*, marking the high point of the visibility of Portuguese commemoration of the Great War, both at home

⁴ AHM, 1^a Divisão, 35^a Secção, n.º 443, Processo n.º 97 de 1921.

⁵ While the tomb in Westminster Abbey reflected the peculiar nature of the Established Church as a part of the State in Britain, the Portuguese choice of a religious memorial reflected the precarious state of the Republican regime and sought to legitimize its memorials in the older and deeper traditions of the Church and Monarchy.

and abroad. By the time the national monument was completed that year the theme was not of Portuguese victory but of trauma and collective suffering.⁶

However much of the Republicans may have wanted to organise an official, patriotic reception for the soldiers, the erections of public monuments and a commemorative day to perpetuate a collective memory of strength through victory. Just as during the war, after the conflict Portugal was miming the divisiveness and controversy, such attempts were thwarted by obstacles that they were simple unable to overcome. Other institutions, as we saw, attempted to take on the task of commemoration hoping to set it outside the political turmoil and volatility but they too were met with little public enthusiasm for their efforts. It took until 1927 to put a national monument in place and then the symbolism was not of a kind that affirmed the role and status of the *República*.

Monuments remain the most visible record of the construction of memory in post-war Portugal. However, for the greater part, those constructed in its aftermath were imitative structures based on older models. The Government seems to have been more concerned with the symbolic value of 'a monument' rather than one that accurately captured or synthesized contemporary opinion or experiences of the war.⁷ The initiative to raise local monuments was, in any case, launched by the *Junta Patriótica do Norte*, in 1919, on the ancient place of the Portuguese Red Cross hospital in France.⁸ These standards-monuments are inserted, for the greater part, in a civic typology, and the inscriptions do not reveal any particular kind of a patriotism or even expression of local identities, mostly because of the local authorities' poverty and the State's lack of interest.

The variety of commemorative symbols of the war is much less than for the other allies. Attention must be made to some specific representative elements: namely, the personification of virtues in female form more common than women humanized representations.⁹ Unlike in France, where feminine images, besides such allegories,

⁶ Liga dos Combatentes da Grande Guerra (L.C.G.G.): *Relatório de Gerências de 1923 a 1928*. Lisboa: Imprensa da Armada, 1929.

⁷ The 'death political use' as Gibelli referred in *La Grande Guerra degli Italiani*. Milano: Sansoni, 1998.

⁸ AGUIAR, Alberto de : *Junta Patriótica do Norte: 15 anos de Benemerência 1916-1931*. Relato geral da sua obra e da Casa dos Filhos dos Soldados. Porto, 1932.

⁹ Almeida Sobrinho, in *Cascais* (1925) and *Tondela* from *Branca Alarcão* (1940).

embodied the suffering civilians affected by the conflict, in Portugal the absence of combat in national territory, made this humanize choice part of the individual initiative, representing mostly a critique of the national state fragility.¹⁰

The funereal type structures instigated in France or Italy a discussion between State, Church and locals; such conflicts did not happen in Portugal. In fact, examples of monuments raised in churches surroundings are unusual and even more so those holding religious or funeral epigraphy. A divergence was rare, considering the standard-monument simplicity that was pleasing to all. What is reflected here is a series of conciliatory social politics concerning memory of the war, which clashed with the rigid secularization of the beginning of the regime.

The number of commemorative monuments peaked at around only one hundred constructions but their language was civic not patriotic. These monuments were small, poor and generically constructed. There are few exuberant exceptions raised by the Great War Monuments Commission in *La Couture, Lisbon, Luanda, Maputo, the Azores and Madeira*. In fact they are just exceptions in a large number of Great War monuments forgotten for the country and mostly for the Portuguese leadership. Erected significantly after the War, in the twenties and even the early thirties, the monuments were the underwhelming face of an episode that never quite proved capable of establishing itself within the history of the Portuguese state. They depicted the mourning of individuals, not of the nation itself.¹¹

Under Salazar, these commemorations gradually disappeared. Although during the military dictatorship (1926-33) there was a consistent programme of commemorations, one of the principal themes of the 1926 coup was the need to rescue the country from the destruction caused by the War, the blame for which fell entirely with the Republican regime. Commemoration notably declined under Salazar, until the

¹⁰ BECKER, Annette : *Les Monuments aux morts : Mémoire de la Grande Guerre*. Paris : Éditions Errance, 1991; Padrões da Grande Guerra – Consagração do esforço militar de Portugal 1914-18: Relatório Geral da Comissão (1921-1936). Lisboa, 1936.

¹¹ CORREIA, Sílvia : “A Veiculação do Poder no Mito da Experiência de Guerra e as suas Manifestações Artísticas – Memória da Primeira Guerra Mundial em Portugal.” XVII – Curso de Verão do Instituto de História Contemporânea – Arte e Poder (FCSH – UNL), Setembro de 2007.

1940s¹², when he officially forbade Great War commemorations, although they never entirely disappeared. This seems surprising in the light of the way in which memory of the War was manipulated in 1926 to pin blame and responsibility on the Republic as a justification for its termination. Probably, ultimately, Salazar – himself hardly a military man – was concerned that even commemorative acts subverted to the justification of the 1926 coup could be a potential problem for the order of his regime.¹³ Certainly, he would have wanted to discourage public military manifestations from a group of men that were or had been Republicans, even if the enterprise was aimed at highlighting that regime's failures. There were several accusations to the possible freemasonry penetration on the Great War Veterans Association through their most important members.¹⁴ It is a strange situation considering the fact that in Italy or Germany, countries with the *similar* dictatorial evolution as Portugal, veterans associations were the 'cradle' of the fascist militia. This proves once again the political, ideological and cultural proximity of Portugal with French case.

Even today in Portugal, Remembrance Day is still not on the National Calendar.

The politics of memory and commemoration in Portugal were definitely marked by a tragic dimension and never consolidated into a collective memory that offered a positive reinforcement for society in the way of Mosse's *War Experience Myth*. From the very first, in the symbolic date of 9th April, it remembered not victory but defeat and tragedy. The Portuguese example shows the tensions between the needs of individuals to commemorate the dead and the difficulties of the state in providing a framework that sought to collectivize them into a shared pattern of memory that affirmed the community as much as comforting individuals. Clearly the failure to do this contributed at some level to the fall of the Republic because it could not bind

¹² Personal Correspondence: "This date must be entirely forgotten." ANTT, AOS, CP 49 – Correspondência pessoal com o Tenente-coronel Esmeraldo Carvalhais, Abril de 1943.

¹³ MENESES, Filipe Ribeiro – "Os limites do Salazarismo: o Exército e as comemorações da Primeira Guerra Mundial, 1926-1949." III Encontro Luso-Espanhol de História Política – A formação e a consolidação do Salazarismo e do Franquismo nas décadas de 1930 e 1940 (CIDEHUS – Universidade de Évora) Junho de 2007.

¹⁴ GONÇALVES, Horácio Assis : *Relatórios para Oliveira Salazar: 1931-1939*. Lisboa: Comissão do Livro Negro sobre o Regime Fascista, 1981, pp. 21-22,74.

individual experience to its existence as a government over the most important and traumatic issue that faced the Portuguese population in the years after 1918.

From here I think we should ask how much this obstruction and collective forgetfulness, hardly new in the socio-political context of Portugal in the twentieth century, itself reflected longer-term trends and traditions in Portuguese history and, perhaps, Portuguese identity itself. It thus forms part of a larger narrative of forgetfulness of a politically turbulent past: the fall of the monarchy, the Republic and, lately, the dictatorship.¹⁵ The memory absence/forgetfulness of the political metamorphosis and of the recent past history are central in the Cultural History, that intends to understand the reasons of that, analysis the ‘creative space between the two’ *history* and *memory*.

The way that the Portuguese governments and population responded to and co-opted the First World War into their collective memory is thus a curious intersection between a country that preferred to overlook and a war that was “never to be forgotten.”

¹⁵ WINTER, Jay : *Remembering War: The Great War between memory and history in the twentieth century*. Yale: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 288.