

VIII - The Oldest Ally: Britain and the Portuguese Connection, 1919-1933*

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As the senior partner in the Anglo-Portuguese alliance for most of its history British governments had consistently interpreted their commitments to Portugal in terms of their own interests, notably strategic and economic ones, and had reserved their position when called on to render assistance to their oldest ally. In 1873, for example, they had not unconditionally guaranteed Portugal's integrity and independence when she had been faced with a possible invasion by Spanish Republican forces, nor in 1877, when the Portuguese had asked for assistance in defending their Indian colony of Goa. The alliance also did not prevent the British from engaging in discussions with Germany over the fate of the Portuguese colonies in 1898-1899 and 1911-1914, with only the outbreak of the First World War rendering them null and void. Despite the wishes of the Portuguese authorities to enter the war immediately on the allied side, the British applied diplomatic pressure upon Lisbon not to become a belligerent. They suspected that if Portugal became involved she would make 'very inconvenient demands for more territory'.¹ When they relented in early 1916 and encouraged the Portuguese to requisition German ships in their ports, in the certain knowledge that the Germans would declare war on Portugal, they did so because of their desperate need for increased naval tonnage. Portugal's military engagement in the common struggle did little to increase British sentiment in her favour. On the contrary, London was much irritated by what they saw as the lamentable performance of the Portuguese armed forces, first in East Africa and later on the Western Front. The Curzon Committee, a sub committee of the Imperial War Cabinet, went so far as to recommend in April 1917 that far from supporting Portuguese claims to German colonial territory Britain should acquire Portuguese East Africa, Delagoa Bay in particular, and the Azores.² While these claims remained recommendations and were not adopted by the British War Cabinet, the British

delegation at Paris in 1919 refused to support Portuguese demands for the southern part of German East Africa as a mandate and conceded to Lisbon only a small portion of territory in northern Mozambique called the 'Kionga Triangle', which rounded off Portuguese territory at the natural frontier of the Rovuma river. This was given to them, in Alfred Milner's words, as 'a matter of grace and convenience'.³

The low esteem with which Portugal was clearly held by their British ally during the First World War was to be a consistent feature for much of the period after it. British statesmen, diplomats and officials alike were scathing of the instability of the Portuguese parliamentary system until its demise in 1926 as the result of a military coup. The military dictatorship which followed was scarcely less stable in British eyes until 1932 and the complete ascendancy of the soon to be dictator of the Portuguese *Estado Novo*, António Oliveira Salazar, began to restore respect internationally. Coups, counter coups and rumours of counter coups were a regular feature of Portuguese political life in the last years of the parliamentary republic. In 1920 alone two prime ministers were murdered and there were nine different Cabinets. Disenchantment and disaffection with the parliamentary republic affected all classes of Portuguese society including the professional middle class and artisans who had originally been the most committed of its supporters. Political instability was complemented by economic instability with many Portuguese, including army officers, suffering a real decline in incomes.

The British were unsympathetic and less concerned with the problems of the republic and their causes than they were in the creation of a critical impression of chaos and instability in Portuguese life which they roundly deplored. In September 1920 the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon, advised Mello Barreto, the Portuguese Foreign Minister, that, notwithstanding the their ancient and enduring alliance, the influence of Portugal in popular British estimation was bound to be adversely affected by 'the instability of her Ministries and the apparent lack of cooperation among her different parties and sections of opinion'.⁴ The continuing inability of Portuguese politicians to achieve any kind of consensus in order to stabilise government and reduce political violence was reported assiduously and scathingly by British diplomats in Lisbon throughout the last years of the republic. In 1925 Sir Lancelot Carnegie, who had been upgraded from Minister to Ambassador with the replacement of the British Legation by an Embassy the previous year, reported that:

The parliamentary system of Government, so unsuited in many ways to the Latin nations has hopelessly collapsed, owing partly to the indolence of, and partly to the perpetual quarrels between the Deputies....we find her [Portugal] with a weak government, an incompetent Parliament, her credit abroad impaired, no budget, a huge deficit, business at a standstill, high prices and a discontented working class...A wave of insubordination and lawlessness seemed to be spreading over the country.⁵

In February 1926, months before the military overthrow of the parliamentary republic, the Ambassador complained of the lack of discipline throughout the Portuguese nation and warned that 'such little prestige and respect as Portugal still enjoys in the world will entirely disappear'.⁶

When the military coup took place on 28 May 1926 the British Government showed neither enthusiasm nor regret. When questioned about the coup in the House of Commons, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Locker Lampson, merely replied that he had nothing 'to add to the information contained in the press reports'.⁷ British indifference was matched in Portugal where few if any mourned the passing of the parliamentary republic. The Embassy in Lisbon reported that the General Confederation of Labour had proclaimed a general strike in protest at the coup but 'no one paid the slightest attention to the order and work went on as usual'.⁸ When Herbert Grant Watson, British Chargé d'Affaires, was assured by the new regime that they 'wished to show themselves worthy of the alliance by rehabilitating the country and by regaining Portugal's lost prestige' the Embassy and its political masters remained to be convinced.⁹ Despite the greater stability brought about by the military dictatorship, British diplomats continued to have doubts as to the capability of the Portuguese to put their house in order. In 1928 the Chargé d'Affaires, Godolphin Osborne, lamented that while in most other countries financial stability was feasible, in Portugal, where 'politics is rather a distemper than a healthy function of the State', optimism would be rash. According to Osborne, there were a variety of disruptive elements in Portugal 'any of which may combine to effect a disturbance of the process of national regeneration'.¹⁰ Such critical observations and views were commonplace in the mind of British diplomats in Portugal and the officials in the Foreign Office. But none of them reached the appalling level of racist vituperation achieved by the British Ambassador, Sir Colville Barclay, when he wrote in 1929 that

...the [Portuguese] nation, owing partly to the copious admixture of negro blood and partly to a rather enervating climate, is physically, mentally and morally degenerate. Some 80 percent of the population are either tubercular or syphilitic, 60 percent are illiterate, and almost all are incurably emotional, volatile and incapable of sustained effort or logical thought.¹¹

Barclay's comments were exceptional and extreme but there could be no disguising the low esteem in which the Portuguese were held by their British allies throughout the 1920s. The Portuguese for their part were hardly enamoured by the attitude of successive British governments. They complained about Britain's lack of support at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919; her negativity when requested to provide economic assistance, notably in pursuing reparations from Germany, or in modifying and rescheduling the debts owed to Britain in consequence of Portugal's participation in the First World War; the seeming indifference of the British to their proposals to establish imperial air communications to the different parts of the Portuguese empire and Brazil; Britain's apparent reluctance to support Portugal's candidature for a seat on the Council of the League of Nations; or British bullying, as the Portuguese saw it, in support of the deplorable British owned Charter companies in Mozambique, such as the Niassa Company. Occasionally, the Portuguese would abandon diplomatic reserve altogether and complain bitterly about the lack of appreciation and support shown by their British partner. In November 1919, for instance, the President of the Republic complained to Carnegie that while Great Britain had emerged from the Great War more powerful and dominant than ever, Portugal 'who had made enormous sacrifices in blood and money by participating in the campaigns in France and Africa', had lost much and gained nothing, not even any recognition of what she had done, only coldness and indifference.¹² Eight years later, in October 1927, little had changed when the Portuguese Foreign Minister, Dr Bettencourt Rodrigues, protested to Carnegie that 'the coldness now shown to his country by His Majesty's Government was really undeserved and caused him much regret'. British aloofness was in stark contrast, he argued, 'with the very friendly attitude towards Portugal of Belgium, France, Germany, Spain and especially the United States of America'.¹³ Likewise, in October 1930, the Portuguese Foreign Minister, Commander Fernando Branco, expiated at great length to Sir Francis Lindley, British Ambassador at Lisbon, on 'the infamy of a country such as Guatemala being preferred to Portugal for a seat on the Council of the League of

Nations'. He warned Lindley that Portuguese public opinion had not understood why Britain, 'the ancient ally of Portugal' had not supported her candidature at Geneva and ensured her election.¹⁴

In view of the low esteem in which Portugal was held by her British ally, and Portuguese ill feeling towards British aloofness and indifference towards their many problems, it is remarkable that there was any mileage left in the Anglo-Portuguese alliance in the 1920s. Yet for both countries it retained its value and importance. For Portugal it still provided the best external guarantee of her integrity and independence and that of her colonial empire and for Britain it continued to contribute towards the strategic defence of her global interests. From time to time the British needed to be reminded of this fact. Before the war, in late 1912, the Admiralty, led by the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, and the First Sea Lord, Prince Louis Battenburg, convinced that Spain was more important from a military strategic view than Portugal, had ordered a review of the alliance. The review, while recognising the importance of Portugal's several outlying positions in various parts of the world, including the Azores, Cape Verde Islands and Portuguese Guinea, concluded that Britain derived no direct advantage from the alliance, which tended to increase her responsibilities without adding to her strength, and did not confer upon Britain's national interest any direct advantage of supreme importance.¹⁵ Appalled by the Admiralty's attitude, the Foreign Office, notably Sir Eyre Crowe, countered with a blistering response in defence of the alliance. Crowe argued that by giving up the alliance Britain would have no legal right, no *locus standi*, to intervene to prevent other powers from taking and occupying Portuguese territory, including the Atlantic Islands. In this connection, he revealed that under existing arrangements the alliance prevented any third power from acquiring the Portuguese islands, 'except by going to war with England and defeating her'.¹⁶ The force of Crowe's argument had been accepted though the British Government before the war continued to hold the view and to state that they 'should reserve to themselves the right of judging the circumstances under which help might be given or withheld'.¹⁷

After the war the British continued to insist on this reservation. When questioned in the House of Commons, in March 1926, as to whether British obligations to defend and protect all conquests and colonies belonging to Portugal against all enemies, future as well present' were still in force, Locker Lampson repeated the pre-war statement to the letter.¹⁸ The significance of the alliance to

British strategic interests also continued to be recognised. In April 1926 the Foreign Office stated emphatically if somewhat complacently:

The British alliance is the sheet-anchor of Portuguese foreign policy, and though the Portuguese Government are behaving extremely badly in commercial and financial matters, notably as regards British claims, we can safely count on their support in any question of really first-rate importance. Such support would be of negative rather than of positive value. The Portuguese army and navy do not count, but...it would add to our liabilities if there were any danger of the mouth of the Tagus or the Portuguese Atlantic Islands being placed at the disposal of a hostile power.

In recognising Portugal's strategic significance, however, the Foreign Office raised considerable doubts as to its continuation in the long term owing to what they regarded as the continuing maladministration of the Portuguese African Empire which, they insisted, was a source of constant trouble to British, and in particular South African interests. Unless the Portuguese 'put their house in order' of which at present there was 'neither sign nor prospect' the Foreign Office was convinced that 'the conscience of the civilised world' would 'one day demand that Mozambique and Angola should be handed over to some other Power'. As they believed that the Union of South Africa was the most suitable successor Britain would find it difficult to resist such an outcome.¹⁹

Discussion of the value of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance continued in the Foreign Office and in September 1927 Austen Chamberlain instigated another full review of its worth, claiming 'I can see what we stand to lose by the Treaty of Windsor' by which he meant the liability of dealing with inconvenient Portuguese claims for British support, such as their candidature for the Council of the League of Nations, but 'I cannot see what we gain'.²⁰ The subsequent review dispelled any doubt as to the importance of maintaining the alliance. It guaranteed Portuguese assistance in time of war and despite the inefficiency of Portuguese armed assistance it had proved valuable during the Boer War and the First World War. The alliance also guaranteed to Britain the use of the Tagus and the Portuguese Atlantic Islands as bases for warships, submarines and aircraft in time of war. It was admitted that Britain's situation in the Great War would have been 'immeasurably more dangerous and difficult' if the Portuguese had been in alliance with the Germans or had been neutral in the same way as Sweden and that it 'might indeed have cost Britain the war'. In supporting this view reference was made to the Admiralty's review of the

alliance in 1912 and the Foreign Office response, and it was considered that despite the elimination of the German menace, Eyre Crowe's contention remained sound. Legally, it was admitted that a denunciation of the treaties of alliance on Britain's part would be problematic as there had been no vital change of circumstances since the decision to 'defend and protect the Portuguese colonies' in 1899. It was presumed that if the British Government told the Portuguese they intended to denounce the treaties they would demand arbitration, which Britain could not refuse and she would lose her case.²¹

The review of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance proved salutary from the British point of view. It was discussed by Cabinet in November 1927 and ministers concurred in Chamberlain's revised opinion that 'it was undesirable to reconsider Britain's treaty obligations with Portugal'.²² The decision to stand by the alliance was reaffirmed in the House of Commons on 21 December 1927. Asked whether the official attitude towards the Anglo-Portuguese alliance had been, in any way modified in respect of the Portuguese colonies in Africa, Chamberlain announced that 'His Majesty's Government had every intention of maintaining in force the ancient alliance between Britain and Portugal which, of course, covered the Portuguese colonies'.²³ The change from a Conservative to a Labour Government brought no change in the resolve of the British to uphold the treaties of alliance. When questioned in the House of Commons on 22 July 1929 whether in view of Britain's adherence to the League of Nations the Government intended to take an early opportunity to terminate the Anglo-Portuguese alliance Arthur Henderson, the Labour Foreign Secretary rejected the suggestion outright. He saw nothing in Britain's obligation to Portugal which was in any way inconsistent with the Covenant of the League of Nations and saw no reason for 'wishing to terminate an association which has united the two countries in friendship for many hundreds of years'.²⁴ From the British point of view the case for retaining the alliance with Portugal was strengthened further in 1930 when the Foreign Office considered its economic dimension and recognised that the Portuguese connection gave to Britain a certain standing in pressing for equitable treatment for the very large British commercial and financial interests in Portugal, Mozambique and Angola. It was certain that a 'repudiation of the Alliance would be fatal to those interests'.²⁵

While the Portuguese expressed their satisfaction, not to say gratification at the public reaffirmation of the alliance, they recognised the caveats included in those

statements. Moreover, they continued to be concerned that their colonial territories might be the subject of Anglo-German negotiations as they had been prior to the First World War or that the Union of South Africa might annex Mozambique. The British were careful to disabuse the Portuguese of such fears and in the case of Mozambique the South African Government acted to calm Portuguese apprehension about their supposed designs. In November 1926 the South African Prime Minister, General Herzog, disclaimed personally to the Portuguese Ambassador in London any wish to impinge on the sovereign rights of Portugal over Mozambique and emphasised that his Government desired to cultivate the most friendly relations with Portugal and to develop the railway and port facilities at Lourenço Marques and Beira to their mutual advantage.²⁶ Following hard bargaining South Africa and Portugal signed an agreement in 1928 with regard to the use of Mozambican migrant labour in the South African economy.

With regard to the possible repetition of the Anglo-German pre-war negotiations, the British were disinclined to engage in any such action during the period under review. In November 1924 Chamberlain went out of his way to reassure the Portuguese Ambassador that there was no foundation for the statement of the former German Navy Minister, Alfred von Tirpitz, in his published memoirs which made reference to the pre-war negotiations. He stressed that the British Government had 'no desire but for the prosperous development of the Portuguese colonial empire'.²⁷ However, while colonial revision was not an immediate priority in German foreign policy it was raised publicly on a number of occasions by the statesmen of Weimar Germany: in the course of negotiations for the 1925 Locarno Agreement; on the occasion of Germany's entry into the League of Nations in 1926; and during the Young Plan negotiations in 1929. While there was no public announcement of German interest in Portugal's African colonies on these occasions, discussion, both within and between official and unofficial circles, took place which revealed that the pre-war ambitions to acquire at least a part of these territories were far from moribund. Indeed, during the Young Plan negotiations the former head of the German Foreign Ministry, Richard von Kühlman, actually raised with Sir William Tyrrell, British Ambassador at Paris, the question of reviving the pre-war accords in relation to Angola and Mozambique. As a result, the British Ambassador at Berlin, Sir Horace Rumbold, was instructed to inform the German Foreign Minister, Gustav Stresemann, that Britain was absolutely unable to reconsider 'the former conventions concerning

the Portuguese colonies'.²⁸ The British knew only too well the significance of the colonial issue for the Portuguese and if any reminder was needed it came at the end of the period under review when Russell, in March 1933, reported the public response to rumours of Italian designs on the Portuguese colonies. According to the Ambassador: 'The Government and the nation were quickly roused in defence of the one thing in which the Portuguese people are ardently united; namely, an uncompromising determination to keep their colonies'.²⁹

By this time also the British had come to appreciate the greater stability created by the military regime headed by Salazar, even if it had been achieved at the cost of political democracy.³⁰ They recognised that it was now capable of maintaining order, as the suppression of the revolts in the Azores and Madeira in April 1931 and in Portugal itself in August demonstrated. At the same time, it was recognised that the Portuguese Government faced a potential threat from Portuguese revolutionaries acting in concert with Spanish left-wing organisations, both of whom were encouraged by the onset of the Second Spanish Republic in the spring of 1931. Branco emphasised this threat to Russell at the end of August 1931. The Foreign Minister was concerned for the future and thought that the time had come when Portugal and Britain would be forced to act together to save the whole peninsula from falling under communist rule.³¹ Fear of Spanish developments encouraged the Portuguese to lay further stress on the alliance with Britain, as the Chargé d'Affaires, Frederick Adam, noted in August 1931: 'But the whole population is keenly alive to the fact that...it is the existence of the Alliance which at the moment prevents the neighbouring republic or its communist demagogues from attempting by peaceful penetration or propaganda the absorption of Portugal into an Iberian federation'.³² In the event, there was no appeal made to the alliance before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 despite the mounting concerns of the Salazar New State with events in Spain. But when the civil war erupted Portugal's international significance increased considerably and for the first time the British were confronted with serious rivals, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, in their relations with Portugal and they were compelled to take a whole series of measures to retain the good will of the Salazar regime. Portugal was no longer held in low esteem by her British ally.

* This is a working paper for a larger article to be published subsequently.

¹ Minute by Percey on [Sir Lancelot] Carnegie, to Sir Edward Grey, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 15 July 1915. John. Vincent Smith, 'Anglo-Portuguese Relations, 1910-1916', unpublished University of London Ph.D. thesis, 1971, p. 299.

² Gaddis Smith, 'The British Government and the disposition of the German colonies in Africa, 1914-1918' in Prosser Gifford and William Roger Louis (eds.), *Britain and Germany in Africa: Imperial Rivalry and Colonial Rule*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967, p. 289.

³ William Roger Louis, *Great Britain and Germany's Lost Colonies, 1914-1919*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 152.

⁴ Lord Curzon to Sir Lancelot Carnegie, British Minister at Lisbon, 28 September 1920. FO 371, W449/449/36.

⁵ Cited in a despatch by Sir Charles Wingfield, British Ambassador at Lisbon, to Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 25 September 1937. FO 425/414, W18554/923/36.

⁶ Carnegie to Sir Austen Chamberlain, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 4 February 1926. FO 371, W990/12/36.

⁷ 3 June 1926. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HC, 5th series, vol. 196, c.

⁸ Carnegie to Chamberlain, 21 June 1926. FO 371, W5917/12/36.

⁹ Herbert Grant Watson, British Chargé d'Affaires at Lisbon, to Chamberlain, 16 July 1926. FO 371, W6662/12/36.

¹⁰ Godolphin Osborne to Lord Cushendun, 17 August 1928. FO 371, W7961/73/36.

¹¹ Cited in Wingfield to Eden, 25 September 1937. FO 425/414, W18554/923/36.

¹² Carnegie to Curzon, 12 November 1919. FO 371, 153682/692/41.

¹³ Carnegie to Chamberlain, 13 October 1927. FO 371, W9844/4573/36.

¹⁴ Sir Francis Lindley to Arthur Henderson, Secretary of States for Foreign Affairs, 23 October 1930. FO 371, W11381/2123/98.

¹⁵ Admiralty War Staff Memorandum, 18 December 1912. FO 371/2105 (40102) or FO 367/342 (7899).

¹⁶ Foreign Office Memorandum by Sir Eyre Crowe, 12 February 1913. FO 367/342 (7899).

¹⁷ Memorandum by Grey to the Cabinet, 30 July 1913. FO 371/1741 (36217).

¹⁸ 16 March 1926. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HC, 5th series, vol. 193, c. 254.

¹⁹ ‘Memorandum on the Foreign Policy of His Majesty’s Government, with a list of British Commitments in their Relative Order of Importance’, undated but submitted under cover of a minute of 10 April 1926, by Sir John Gregory, Assistant Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, to Chamberlain. *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, series 1A, vol. I, app., pp. 853-4.

²⁰ Chamberlain to Sir William Tyrell, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, 18 September 1927. Annex I to Memorandum by Sir Austen Chamberlain on the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance. CAB 24/189, C.P. 255(27).

²¹ Memorandum by Sir Austen Chamberlain on the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance, 24 October 1927. CAB 24/189, C.P. 255 (27).

²² CAB 23/55 C.M. 53 (27), November 1927.

²³ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HC, 5th series, vol. 212, c. 385.

²⁴ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, HC, 5th series, vol. 230, cc. 883-4.

²⁵ FO 371/20512, W825/762/36. This particular Foreign Office memorandum is indexed as appearing in FO 371/14990, W11381/2123/98 but within the volume and file there is no trace of such. The information which appears here is taken from a reference to the memorandum in one of a series of minutes representing a discussion on the value of the alliance amongst Foreign Office officials in January-February 1936.

²⁶ Chamberlain to Carnegie, 12 November 1926. FO 371, W10607/10607/35.

²⁷ Chamberlain to Carnegie, 14 November 1924. FO 371, W9912/9912/36.

²⁸ For a discussion of Weimar Germany's colonial aspirations as they related to the Portuguese Colonies see FO 371/18820 C2595/21/18; FO 371/18821 C5124/21/18.

²⁹ Sir Claude Russell to Sir John Simon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 25 March 1933. FO 371, W4104/2294/36.

³⁰ See, for example, Frederick Adam, British Chargé d'Affaires to Simon, 9 July 1932. FO 371, W8163/43/36.

³¹ Russell to the Marquess of Reading, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 31 August 1931. FO 425/408, W10424/801/36.

³² Adam to Reading, 19 October 1931. FO 425/408, W12510/801/36.