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## **History as a Politic Weapon? Writings of Portuguese History in the New State (1933-1974)**

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The Portuguese dictatorship, the longest in Europe, began on May 28, 1926, following a coup d'état by right-wing soldiers who wanted to put an end to the republican regime, characterized by a constant instability. António de Oliveira Salazar's figure soon became essential, especially when he became President of the Council in 1932. The following year, in 1933, he submitted the Estado Novo constitution to a referendum, which was approved by over 99% of the votes. From that date until April 25, 1974, the Portuguese dictatorial regime had only two prime ministers, António de Oliveira Salazar and Marcello Caetano. The position they held was the main one in Portugal, since the President of the Republic had only a representative function. Consequently, they were the two main figures of the authoritarian regime, the first for 36 years and the second for 8 years.

The Portuguese intellectual and academic community worked, thought, researched and wrote in a regime where censorship controlled publications and where people were monitored by the political police called the PVDE/PIDE/DGS, depending on the period. In the course of my doctoral research, which is now a thing of the past, I highlighted three main reactions to power that were observable in authoritarian Portugal. Through a sample of 186 historians, the three main positions taken by historians are thus those of the organic historian, accommodated and in opposition. For the organic historian, I have used Antonio Gramsci's terminology to refer to those historians who have chosen to put themselves at the service of the authoritarian regime. Their very small percentage must be emphasized, as they represent only 2% of all the historians considered in my research. Therefore, Portugal has had very few official historians who supported the vision defended by the authoritarian power. For the accommodated historians, I use the notion used by the French historian Philippe Burrin in his work on France during the German occupation. By accommodated historians, I mean those who have made the choice to accommodate themselves to the political situation, either by being in favor of or supporting the politics of the regime or by making the choice not to choose and to continue working. This is the majority position, as nearly three quarters of historians have adopted this position. Finally, the historians in opposition include all the historians who chose to reject the authoritarian regime. They represent close to one quarter of the group. It may have had real implications for the careers of historians, as some were simply unable to enter Portuguese universities because of the blockade by the political police.

In order to illustrate these three attitudes and to see how they affected the historiographic field, I have chosen three historians who correspond to the three positions that will be analyzed in turn: João Ameal, Alexandre Lobato and António Borges Coelho. Of course, they are only examples among many others and I have deliberately chosen intellectuals who have had strong positions in the field of history. Many other historians could have nuanced the vision brought here and it is not possible to consider that all Portuguese historians during the dictatorship wanted to give a political meaning to the writing of history. However, history may have had a political dimension or, above all, the government may have given it a political scope, and thus may have seen an interest or a danger in the positions adopted by some historians. The objective here is therefore to ask to what extent history can become a political tool?

#### **I) Talking the same language that power does. Putting history at the service of the State**

Organic historians have accompanied the vision of history conveyed by the authorities. Their position is interesting within the historical community. Indeed, the four historians who belong to this group have never obtained a permanent position at the University. While they occupied a central place in the eyes of the government, they had a marginal place in the academic field and even in some institutions created by the authoritarian government, such as the Portuguese Academy of History, they only joined it late, which shows that a functioning by peer judgment excluded them from the main places of history. The historian chosen was João Ameal, the most famous of the historians in the service of the regime, especially because the national propaganda organ, the Secretariat for National Propaganda, contributed to the dissemination of his work, like a summary version of *The History of Portugal* which was translated into French for propaganda purposes in 1949. The historian Luís Reis Torgal referred to him as the most publicly recognized "historian of the regime". Formed in law, he never studied in history and until his death, he was disregarded due to his political commitment. His work was divided between political works in defense of the regime, in which "everything for him ended in the person of Salazar," and others with a historical dimension. *The History of Portugal*, which he wrote in 1940, is part of a process of revision and reparation of history. The awarding of the SPN's Alexandre Herculano Prize in 1941 was a first sign of this. It is a work of historical popularization, as confirmed by the absence of footnotes. *The History of Portugal* was a response to a commission. Indeed, João Ameal was expressly asked to write a history

based on the model of Jacques Bainville's *History of France*. The multiplication of editions, seven in total, highlights the editorial success of the book.

João Ameal's *History of Portugal* is clearly committed to the right. João Ameal presents himself as a direct witness of the written history, imagining himself "in the caravels of the Infant (n.: Henry the Navigator)" or "behind the missionaries, with aplomb and a fiery word", or even as an observer of "the great Kings who made the Fatherland" (p. XI). From the admiration to the praise of the medieval and modern past, his beating heart was indignant in front of "the fall of the traditional edifices - defended here by farsighted Monarchs - in front of the breaths of the ideologies of the revolt of the destruction" that had led to the decadence, targeting the XIXth century. Satisfied, he specified that recently, "the coast was again climbed and the saving directions returned" that is since the installation of the dictatorship (p. XI). He concluded, vindictively: "Why do we impose on the historian the obligation to close himself in an absolute impassibility? The historian is a man - a man who studies, weighs, evokes, reflects, ends up seeing and living the past " (p.XII). Consequently, by maintaining that history was alive, he intended to make the past live again and refused the cold analysis or the scientific neutrality.

On the other hand, the organic historian insisted for a long time, like the Portuguese government and conservative thinkers, on his deep opposition to the vision of the historians of the 19th century, a century of deviation as when he wrote:

"For a long time, they wrote with a contrary passion. [...] With a kind of negativist and demolishing sadism. [...] The life of a nation that should be explained in the light of the Gospels, the Itineraries and the Chronicles - was described in the light of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the theory of historical materialism. The Portuguese past has been falsified and corrupted." The opposition to the French Revolution and to Marxist thought is evident here. It was therefore necessary to restore a nationalist vision and to extirpate Portugal from foreign influences. Finally, he cut short any criticism of his lack of rigor or his partisan approach by recalling that he had "the intention of serving God and the Fatherland" (p. XVI).

Without being able to be exhaustive here, the work as a whole is filled with a constant nationalism. The approach of the contemporary period is eloquent through the titles of the work, so about the French Revolution, João Ameal summarized: "Bad winds come from France", comparing besides Bonaparte to Genghis Khan. (p.565). The chapter on the nineteenth century entitled "Under the sign of Cain" draws from the Christian religion a reference to fratricide to emphasize how the political tensions of the century were crimes within the same family, the Portuguese nation. The sub-sections are also evocative: "The Devil set free", "The

Calvary of Legitimacy", "The Fatherland and the Parties", "Heroes of the Occupation", "Royalty and Demagogy". The nineteenth century was thus presented as a satanic period, where the nation was divided by political parties, an argument regularly used by authoritarian regimes to justify the one-party system, and where the monarchy was contested until its abolition. It is worth noting the absence of the term "Republic" in the titles, so deep was João Ameal's rejection of it that he preferred to pass it over in silence.

Then, the organic historians have chosen to written history to correct the mistake of the XIXth century and the liberal historians of this century and of the beginning of the XXth. Their vision is to confort the action of the dictatorship to rebuild the nation finding in Christianity and Natiolanism a source of strength and joy.

## **II) A nationalist history of the nation? Difficulties and renunciations of distancing power**

The historiographic positions of the accommodated historians are characterized by a certain proximity in the themes insofar as they have exclusively written about the history of Portugal. Until the 1960s and even the 1970s, history was exclusively event-based, political and not versed to the written economic and social history that was developing more and more in France and in other European countries. To avoid political control, most of them decided to avoid treating the contemporary history and focused on medieval and modern history. Far from the present, far from the politics. But at the same time, history written by accommodate historians could be used by the power and some of them agreed in defending Portugal, even more when its Empire was attacked.

Alexandre Lobato is one of these historians. He is a son of the Empire. Born in 1915 in Mozambique, he had to go to Portugal to study first law and then quickly enrolled in history-philosophy at the University of Coimbra. He finished his degree in 1949 and held various positions, including that of editor for the SPN/SNI and then librarian for the Ministry of Overseas. His integration into the authoritarian regime was certain as he was a deputy between 1961 and 1965. The positions he held were regularly turned towards the Empire: educational inspector for the Ministry of Overseas Affairs from 1960, he was a professor at the University of Lourenço Marques between 1968 and 1973, and resumed his duties there until 1977, when the university was called Eduardo Mondlane. He also directed the Historical Archives of Mozambique. He returned to Lisbon in 1977 and died there in 1985.

The question of the Empire was one of the main factors for the involvement of accommodated historians in the public debate and Alexandre Lobato made its defense a

necessity. Indeed, this historian actively participated in the promotion of the Portuguese imperial policy. He was well aware of the role that history could play, as when he observed about the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885:

"If it had been possible to make an honest and vigorous critical revision of the history of Mozambique a hundred years ago, perhaps the political solutions to the African problem in the second half of the last century would have been better for us, because if it is handled intelligently, history is a political weapon."

The role of history was thus obvious to him. Within the framework of international law, science made it possible, by mobilizing sources, to assert the primacy and the titles of possession over such and such a conquered territory. From then on, he intended to invest himself fully to avoid the errors of the past century and to ensure the durability of the Portuguese Empire in the 20th century. Alexandre Lobato participated actively in what was called "The Goa Question", in response to pressure from the Indian Union led by Nehru to recover the Indian territories controlled by Portugal - Goa, Daman, Diu, Dadra and Nagar Haveli - from January 1953.

Alexandre Lobato also participated in the Portuguese delegation to defend Portugal against the Indian Union at the International Tribunal of Justice in The Hague. The historian's commitment was total and he was proud of his participation: "No Portuguese had the right, at that time, not to make a total effort to defend the Nation's living infrastructures, such as the overseas provinces. Even less a Mozambican". For example, a treaty of the eighteenth century between the Portuguese crown and the Maratha State served as a basis for the trial of The Hague, whose application seemed still valid for the historian:

"I refer to the treaty of December 17, 1779. This treaty, of friendship and alliance between the State of Portuguese India and the Maratha court of Pune, presents the curious fact of having been negotiated by a Hindu, Naraena Vital Dumó, whom the Captain General of India had invested with the delicate functions of permanent diplomatic agent of Portugal to this court. [...] That is to say, both the Indian Union and Portugal were bound by a treaty that did not allow insurgent movements to be organized against their neighbor in their own territory, since traitors - as the treaty prophetically stated - could not count on support outside their own country, not even on asylum. [...] In addition to having violated the rules of international good neighbourliness, the Indian Union has violated the content of a treaty that it is bound to respect, because it is the heir to the rights and duties of that sarkar who, in the eighteenth century, negotiated with the Portuguese in Goa."

In the eyes of Alexandre Lobato, the Indian Union could not dispute the veracity of the document and was obliged to respect the conditions defined. By inciting the Indian troops and the population of the territories under Portugal's control to rise up against the colonizer, the Indians were not respecting the two-century-old treaty. For Portugal, the impression of continuity of Indian sovereign authority prevailed over the struggle to complete the process of decolonization initiated in 1947 by the young Indian Union. The questioning of the Portuguese presence in India could not be questioned because diplomacy gave reason to the colonial power.

However, Alexandre Lobato was well aware of the admissibility of the argument of the Indian Union that Portugal had conquered territories in the subcontinent. But he retorted with an argument petrified of lusotropicalism to justify the Portuguese presence in India. Indeed, he tended to defend Portuguese colonialism in order to relativize any form of violence on the part of the Portuguese. Alexandre Lobato affirmed thus: "We do not deny that the Portuguese set foot in India" and then quickly presented the originality of the Portuguese contact. For him, the colonial power had made contracts and respected the adversaries, guided by a Christian message addressed to the Indian authorities and therefore "this attitude is the basis and origin of all Portuguese action in the East, and constitutes the first condition". Alexandre Lobato's vision was in line with António de Oliveira Salazar's speeches on the fundamental importance of Christianity and on the religious motivations of the conquests. For the historian, the colonial was "synonymous with the brutal and despotic" and he preferred to blame other European nations for the reminiscence of colonialism. However, his discourse did not stand up to the facts. Following the Indian conquest of 1961, he could not hide his sadness: "And because the Indian state and the former metropolis are in each other's blood and soul, there will always be a mutual presence in them. No one in Goa can imagine what the Nation has suffered and is suffering from the unjust conquest of Goa.

Then, history could have been for some accommodate historians a way to defend the Portuguese imperial policy. When the nation was threaten, even more prudent historians than the organic could join without hesitation to save the Empire criticized from every continent.

### **III) The cost of criticizing power: interpretations of history seen as a threat to the nation**

Oppositional historians include all those who, at some point in their career or in their civic activity, expressed their opposition to the dictatorial regime. The writing of history by historians in opposition was characterized, especially from the 1940s, by a writing of history

distinct from the rest of the historical community, because they wrote an economic and social history. They were thus attentive to contemporary historiographic production while the rest of the production did not undergo substantial change. The writing of history could also become a way of criticizing the position of the regime, especially with regard to the Empire.

António Borges Coelho is a good example. Born in 1928, He studied history-philosophy, but only completed his studies in the early 1960s because of his various militant struggles. His incarceration in the 1950' led him to invest in history. The 1960s marked the beginning of his historical works, written when he had time among the many jobs he held because he was banned from teaching. Concentrating on the medieval and modern periods, his publications during the authoritarian regime were numerous. His text *Roots of the Portuguese Expansion* was a direct opposition to the vision of the Empire defended by the government and by most of the accommodated historians. Published in 1964, it was banned on July 31, 1964, and António Borges Coelho was interrogated by the PIDE the next day. At a time when the colonial war had already been extended to all the colonies and conscripts were going to the front to guarantee the permanence of the Empire, the first book by the former communist activist was perceived as a provocation.

The book is short: 93 pages. Like Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, the most important historian of this period, who had criticized the idea of a conquest strictly motivated by religion and without taking into account other parameters such as economics, António Borges Coelho was quick to put forward the argument of economics as the driving force behind the expansion. Thus, many passages go in this direction: "The surprise of Ceuta is not absurd, nor contradictory. Trade and piracy are the two edges of the sword that will mark the path of the rise of the bourgeoisie" (p. 17); "what will most awaken his lust is gold, the small shiny gold that along with spices, slaves and dyes for the textile industry are part of major engines of interest" (p. 74); "In the plundering of Ceuta, the bourgeoisie will be able to use its own resources to buy and sell goods and services. 74); "In the plundering of Ceuta, the conquistadors will fill their hands with gold, but the current that came from Sudan has retracted to the interior of Belamarim" (p. 75); "Ceuta conquered, piracy in the Strait has become a most lucrative activity" (p. 77). In sum, through these different excerpts, the vocabulary used, sometimes depreciative such as "sacking" and "piracy", insisted on the covetousness of the Portuguese. While the depreciative terms had been used more against the Muslim powers, and that, until then, both the accommodated historians and the historians in opposition had praised the acts of their ancestors in a patriotic reflex, António Borges Coelho on the contrary insisted on the violent acts of the Portuguese. The fact that a Portuguese historian evoked the violence of



colonization may have offended a part of the historical community. It recalled the generational divide, where younger scientists had a different view of the Portuguese colonial past.

Religious motivations were strongly minimized: "Without doubt, the Christian faith functioned as an important ideological weapon in the enterprise of Portuguese expansion. The possibility of creating one or more bishoprics, monasteries and ecclesiastical benefits functioned as an incentive, especially later" (p. 70). Thus, no sooner was the religious dimension mentioned than he linked it to the political and economic interests of the Church in supporting the conquest of an empire. Moreover, the sub-section: "The service of God or the ideal of crusade" is only half a page long, which reflects the small place he gave to religion as a driving force for conquest. For him the economy the principal "engine" (p.77) of the conquest.

The cases shortly presented here of João Ameal, Alexandre Lobato and António Borges Coelho has allowed us to show how different political positions have led to very different visions of history. Each historian has his or her own interpretation of history, but in the context of an authoritarian regime, it can quickly become part of the political field, especially when the authoritarian power sees it as a favorable or unfavorable element.

Of course history is not just a disguised way to make politics. However, the authoritarian context contributes to an ever-increasing tension about the meaning that can be given to history. If history can be social, economic, cultural, it is also political. Whether or not to use it as a weapon depends on the will of each individual.