Captain Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho: The suppressor of the 1974 Portuguese Revolution dies—Part 1

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Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho, the Army captain who organised the military coup on April 25, 1974, that overthrew 48 years of dictatorship in Portugal died on July 25 in a military hospital in the capital, Lisbon, aged 84.

In official discourse Carvalho is portrayed as the intransigent leader of a left-wing faction in the military intent on social revolution. But this persona was largely fostered by the combined efforts of Stalinism, social democracy and the pseudo-left, which all opposed an independent perspective for the working class and promoted the bourgeois Armed Forces Movement (MFA) he co-founded as the guarantor of the "Carnation Revolution", which erupted after the coup.

Carvalho went on to play a major role in suppressing the revolutionary struggles of the working class, maintaining public order through the 5,000-strong special military "intervention" force known as COPCON that he commanded. He provided a breathing space to Portugal's ruling elite to cobble together a bourgeois republic to preserve its rule.

The response to Carvalho's death

On learning of Carvalho's death, Portuguese politicians and the media were quick to acknowledge his role in the overthrow of the dictatorship but insisted any deeper examination of the events that followed be left to a future date. To do so now in a spontaneous uncontrolled reaction to Carvalho's death could, amid an insoluble, international crisis of capitalism, raise questions about how the working class was betrayed and how the very real possibility of a socialist revolution in Portugal was defeated.

The Socialist Party (PS) government has already created a special commission to prepare events for the 50th anniversary of the April 25 coup, in 2024, claiming it will cover "the entire historical cycle". It will promulgate the official narrative that the only possible outcome was the transition to bourgeois democracy and that the struggle by the working class for socialism was futile.

PS Prime Minister António Costa remembered Carvalho as "the operational coordinator" who ended "the longest dictatorship of the 20th century in Europe."

"The strategic and operational capacity of Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho and his dedication and generosity were decisive for the success, without bloodshed, of the Carnation Revolution… [and] became, therefore, and rightly so, one of its symbols," Costa added.

Right-wing Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa called Carvalho "the top protagonist in a decisive moment in Portuguese contemporary history" but stressed that people had to be "aware of the deep cleavages that his personality created and evokes in Portuguese society."

"It is still too early for history to appreciate him," he declared.

The Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) issued a perfunctory press release, saying, "Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho's role in the military uprising of the 25th of April must be recorded in essence. The moment of his death is not the occasion to record attitudes and positions that mark his political path."

Left Bloc national coordinator, Catarina Martins, praised Carvalho as "one of the workers of the 25th of April, recognized as the strategist of the coup that gave us freedom back," who deserved "to be remembered as one of the liberators of our country."

The Salazar dictatorship

Carvalho was born in 1936, the son of a postal service official in the Portuguese colony of Mozambique, a decade after economic and political instability (eight presidents and 45 governments took office between 1910 and 1926, the period of the First Republic) and a revolutionary movement of the working class inspired by the Russian Revolution had led to the right-wing military coup of May 28, 1926.

Two years later, economics lecturer António de Oliveira Salazar was appointed finance minister and then prime minister. In direct response to continuing working class struggles that peaked in a five-day insurrection in 1934, Salazar declared his fascist New State (Estado Novo). The most important function of Salazar's regime for Portugal's ruling elite was to brutally suppress the impoverished working class at home and the growing demands for independence in the colonies.

A 1965 Amnesty International (AI) report on prison conditions in Portugal gives a glimpse of life under the police state. Salazar ruled the country "on a virtually one-man basis" in order to "repress or prevent the formation of any opposition party." No organisation could be set up without approval, and publications were subject to such rigid censorship that "practically all criticism of the government" was excluded. Virtually all opposition was driven underground, and pursued as "subversive."

Every worker had to be a member of an official syndicate and anyone who went on strike faced up to eight years' imprisonment. AI noted that due to rising unrest among students, the year 1965 has "so far been notable for the number of student arrests and trials."

The secret police, the Policia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado (PIDE) was modelled on the Gestapo. It could search virtually anyone's

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home at will and detain them indefinitely and repeatedly. Those arrested were brought before kangaroo courts and dispatched to political prisons, or the Tarrafal concentration camp on the Cape Verde Island. The AI report records countless horrific examples of abuse, torture and killing.

Rising opposition in the military

Salazar not only faced rising opposition from workers, students and intellectuals but from the military. It was a sure sign that the regime was fracturing.

When General Humberto Delgado (who had participated in the 1926 coup and praised Hitler in 1941) contested but lost, through ballot rigging, the presidency in opposition to the official candidate in the 1958 presidential election, he was able to rally the entire democratic and Stalinist opposition around him. The PIDE assassinated Delgado in 1965.

In 1959, several military and civil figures launched an unsuccessful uprising in Lisbon, known as the "Coup da Sé", with the aim of overthrowing Salazar. Another attempted coup was launched by a group of liberal officials, led by the Minister of Defence, General Botelho Moniz, in 1961.

Portugal and the international situation

The rising opposition that would lead to the Carnation Revolution unfolded against the backdrop of the end of the post-World War II boom and the eruption of a systemic crisis of capitalism. In country after country, the interaction of economic contradictions with working class struggles produced political upheavals, and a significant growth of left-wing and socialist movements.

The most significant events included "Khrushchev's secret speech, the Hungarian Revolution, the outbreak of a massive wave of anti-colonial struggles (i.e., Vietnam, Egypt, Algeria, the Congo), the establishment of the Castro regime in Cuba, the US intervention in Vietnam and the subsequent eruption of the massive worldwide student protest movement, the counter-revolutionary massacre in Indonesia of 1965–66, the Cultural Revolution in China, the French General Strike of May–June 1968, the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in August 1971, the overthrow of Allende in September 1973, the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973, the victory of British miners over the Tory government in March 1974, the Portuguese Revolution in April 1974, the collapse of the Greek Junta in July 1974, the resignation of Nixon in August 1974, the defeat of the United States in Vietnam in May 1975, the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79, the coming to power of Thatcher and Reagan in 1979 and 1980, and the subsequent initiation of a process of social and political reaction," (David North, "The Political Origins and Consequences of the 1982–86 Split in the International Committee of the Fourth International," 3 August 2019)

The liberation wars in Africa

During this period in almost all of Portugal's African colonies—Mozambique, Angola, Guinea, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Cape Verde—independence movements emerged, leading to guerrilla warfare beginning in Angola in 1961.

This was a major reason for the growth of an oppositional movement within the military, convinced that the liberation or colonial war was unwinnable and expensive in terms of lives and the economy. Some 9,000 Portuguese, mainly conscript, poorly paid servicemen and 70,000 African guerrillas and civilians would die before the end of the conflict. Nearly half of Portugal's budget was spent on the decade-long war.

The Salazar regime refused to negotiate. When Indian independence was granted by the British in 1947, Portugal refused requests from India to hand back its colony of Goa. The Indian Army duly invaded unopposed in 1961 and annexed the territory.

United States opposes Portugal

The election of the John F Kennedy administration in 1961 also put pressure on the dictatorship. Faced with the upsurge in the anticolonial struggle that had just led to 17 new African nations gaining independence, and the Soviet Union's overtures towards them in the context of the Cold War, the US adopted a new African policy supporting self-determination and independence. It recommended the urgent adoption of reforms in the Portuguese colonies in return for substantial aid.

Salazar rejected "any thought of Portugal's complying with the United States suggestion" and criticised Kennedy for failing to understand the events as "part of the Communist assault on the Portuguese position, not only in the Overseas Provinces but also in the Iberian Peninsula, with the aim of weakening the Western position and provoking a situation which might be propitious for the intervention of the forces of international Communism." (*About-Face: The United States and Portuguese Colonialism in 1961*, Luís Nuno Rodrigues, University Institute of Lisbon-Center for Contemporary History Studies, 2004)

Portuguese-American relations deteriorated further when the US voted, despite Portugal being a NATO member from 1949 and providing a vital mid-Atlantic air base in the Azores, in favour of a UN resolution condemning Portuguese colonialism in Angola.

When Salazar's successor appointed in 1968, Marcelo Caetano, continued the colonial war and it became obvious that even the US, the world's greatest superpower, was near defeat in Vietnam, sentiment increased in the military for a negotiated settlement. This was expressed most openly by General António de Spínola, the army's second in command, in his popular book, *Portugal and the Future*, published in February 1974 and appearing in three more editions before April 25. He called for a gradual transition to a presidential regime in an orderly and disciplined fashion and the cultivation of a moderate black elite in the colonies opposed to the liberation movements and prepared to negotiate some sort of federation along the lines of the British Commonwealth.

Carvalho and the colonial war

Carvalho lived through the collapse of the Portuguese empire first-hand. His military experiences and the lessons he learnt in Africa would serve him and the Portuguese ruling elite well during the Carnation Revolution.

Carvalho had enrolled in the Military Academy in Lisbon in 1955, at the age of 19 and was dispatched to Angola as an artillery lieutenant in 1961, just as the armed liberation struggle erupted. In 1963 he was appointed instructor of the Portuguese Legion, the fascist militia created by Salazar tasked with "defending the spiritual heritage of the nation and combating

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the communist threat and anarchism." It acted as the brownshirts for the PIDE, breaking up demonstrations and shutting down organizations considered subversive.

Carvalho served again in Angola from 1965 to 1967, becoming one of the heads of military intelligence there and then in Guinea-Bissau between 1970 and 1973. He was stationed at the headquarters of the Chief Command, reporting to Spínola as head of the Broadcasting and Press Section of the Civil Affairs and Psychological Action Department. Psychological Action was a counter-insurgency "hearts and minds" campaign promising better living conditions and resettlement in new "villages"—surrounded by barbed wire to reduce contact with the guerrillas.

Carvalho later said that his personal experiences enabled him "to get in touch with the reality of fascist corporatism and its support among small officials" and convinced him of the moral and political injustice of the colonial wars. He is supposed to have had a sneaking admiration for the liberation movements and had contacts with some of its leaders.

However, it was something closer to home that finally sparked off the formation of the Movement of the Captains, the predecessor organisation to the MFA—a 1973 government decree, which sought to promote less qualified soldiers as captains or majors. The decree was revoked but the Movement was already launched.

The MFA programme

Carvalho and the Movement of the Captains prepared plans for a coup for April 25, discussing them with General Spínola and General Francisco da Costa Gomes, who had recently been dismissed as Chief of the Armed Forces for refusing to swear loyalty to Caetano.

Spínola put the finishing touches to a programme for the MFA. It declared that "after thirteen years of struggle in overseas lands, the current political system has not managed to define, concretely and objectively, an overseas policy that will lead to peace among Portuguese people of all races and creeds." It called for the immediate removal of the president of the republic and the current government and political power to be handed over to a National Salvation Board (Junta de Salvação Nacional, JSN) until the formation of a provisional civil government tasked with drawing up plans for a National Constituent Assembly.

Following the coup, Spínola became JSN President and Gomes his deputy. Carvalho was made a brigadier and placed in command of the special military Command for the Continent (COPCON). Its mission, inscribed in law, was "to intervene directly in the maintenance and restoration of order, in support of the civil authorities and at their request… [and] when internal situations threaten public peace and tranquility."

Carvalho later revealed that he was offered the post of president but thought that "for the revolution to be recognized all over the world we had to have generals, and with the greatest possible prestige." Caetano, on his arrest, demanded that power be handed over to Spínola, so that "power did not fall to the street."

Although Spínola wanted to limit the coup to a simple renovação (renovation), it brought the masses onto the streets. Workers began taking over factories, offices, shops and farms demanding more radical measures including the arrest of officials and supporters of the old regime, especially those in the hated PIDE secret police. Half a million marched through Lisbon a week later on May Day.

Previously banned parties emerged from underground or exile, including the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) with some 2,000-3,000 members led by Álvaro Cunhal and the Socialist Party (PS) with just 200 members led by Mário Soares.

The role of the PCP

The PCP was to play a critical role in politically disarming the working class and rejecting an independent programme. It described the struggle against Salazar as "a democratic and national revolution," with the socialist revolution consigned to some unspecified future in line with the Stalinist "two-stage theory" of revolution and in order to oppose actual social revolution.

This Stalinist two-stage theory was a wholesale repudiation of Marxism and the critical lessons of the Russian Revolution. The success of the Bolsheviks in 1917 had been a powerful vindication of Leon Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. It insisted that, in the context of the world economy, the democratic tasks once associated with the bourgeois revolution could only be completed under the leadership of the working class, drawing behind it the rural masses, as a component part of a socialist revolution that must be completed on the global arena.

It was on this basis and with the help of the Communist International (Comintern), that the PCP was formed in 1921. However, the subsequent evolution of all the world's communist parties was shaped by the rise to power after Lenin's death of a bureaucratic caste within the USSR under the leadership of Joseph Stalin. The theory of "socialism in one country" unveiled by Stalin and Nikolai Bukharin in 1924 provided the ideological justification for the abandonment of the programme of world socialist revolution and the subordination of the international workers' movement to the Stalinist bureaucracy's defence of its own material interests.

Massive defeats for the working class followed—most devastatingly with Hitler's accession to power in Germany in 1933, following which Trotsky concluded that the Soviet Communist Party and its satellite parties in the Comintern could not be reformed and called for the founding of the Fourth International to carry forward the struggle for world socialist revolution.

Trotsky's warnings of the bloody counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism were tragically confirmed in the Spanish Civil War that broke out in 1936. Workers were told to support the ruling Popular Front alliance of liberal bourgeois, social-democratic, Stalinist and anarchist forces. Independent workers' organizations were dissolved and anti-fascist militias subordinated to the capitalist state.

To be continued

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