

ENTERING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Entering the First World War:
the Experiences of Small and Medium Powers

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Entering the First World War: the Experiences of Small and Medium Powers

Ana Pires, António Paulo Duarte and Bruno Cardoso Reis

Introduction

This volume is the result of a partnership between the National Defense Institute, the Institute for Contemporary History of Nova University and the Institute of Social Sciences, which supported a multi-year research project titled “Thinking Strategically Portugal: the International Role of Small and Medium Powers in the First World War”¹. It aims to: provide an analysis of the political and strategic dynamics of the Great War; contribute to a better understanding of Portugal’s geopolitical situation in the early decades of the 20th century; study the role and relevance of small and medium powers in international crises.

With this parameters in mind, the National Defense Institute organized on 30th of March 2016 the international seminar “Entering the War: the Entry of Small and Medium Powers in the First World War”.

Its goal was to discuss the causes and dynamics related to the entry in the Great War of small European powers, and compare Portugal’s entry into the conflict with that of other small states.

The seminar was organized around two panels: (1) “Entering the War: Small Powers”; and (2) “Entering the War: Portugal in Africa and in Europe – Diplomacy, Economy and Society”.

The first panel examined the entry of small powers in the Great War, contributing to a better understanding of their role, their differences, and their impact in times of conflict and crisis. The second panel dealt with different arguments employed to justify Portuguese intervention in the First World War. The two panels were conceived as complementary.

Belgium was the first of three small powers to enter the war. As Emmanuel Debruyne and Laurence van Ypersele describe, that decision was consensual, made by the Crown Council with representatives of all the main political forces but it was forced by a German *ultimatum* in the beginning of August 1914. Belgium refused the *ultimatum* and opted for war against Germany. This was seen as indispensable to ensure effective national

1 This project is inserted in the celebrations of the centenary of the Great War, supported by the Ministry of Defence and financed by the Coordinating Commission of the Evocation of the Centenary of the First World War (see <http://www.portugalgrandeguerra.defesa.pt/Paginas/default.aspx>).

independence, as the only honorable course of action, but also made resistance more effective due to the military reforms initiated few years before 1914.

Loukianos Hassiotis deals with the complexities of the Greek case. The country was deeply divided between a germanophile King and a Prime Minister favorable to the allied side. This uneasy balance was made untenable by the presence of an allied army in the northern city of Salonika, after the Gallipoli expedition. With support from the allied army of the East the pro-allied faction triumphed, but Greece only entered the war at the end of 1917.

The case of Portugal is analyzed next. The Great War witnessed the most important military operation carried out by Portuguese troops outside the country's borders during the first half of the 20th Century. Portugal was the only country involved in the conflict, between 1914 and 1916, that was able to preserve a position of undeclared neutrality in Europe and, simultaneously, wage war against Germany in Africa.

António Paulo Duarte describes three historiographic perspectives of Portuguese participation in the First World War. After the Great War, the initial historiographic studies on the country's participation in the war argued that it was the result of external causes, namely: threats to Portugal's territorial sovereignty (e.g. its colonial possessions) and to its status as an independent nation-state. This traditional view underestimated Portuguese political parties' domestic motivations regarding the country's war entrance.

In late 1990s, a new perspective was put forward (i.e. the "primacy of domestic politics"), presenting Portuguese belligerence as a consequence of the Republican Party radical options aimed at providing national and international legitimacy to the new Republican regime, established in 1910. More recently the "primacy of domestic politics perspective" was combined with the external political dimension. This perspective argues that radical Republicans didn't have only a domestic agenda, the Portuguese international status was also very fragile and to consolidate the Republican regime it was necessary to interlock international and national legitimacy, reinforcing both. Military participation in the First World War was seen as a tool to achieve these goals.

Nuno Lemos Pires, analyse several military dimensions of the Portuguese campaigns in Africa. The conflict started in Angola, even before a German's formal declaration of war, with border clashes with German Southwest Africa in 1914, later in Mozambique in 1916, and again in 1917-1918, when German East-African forces invaded this Portuguese colony.

Ana Pires discusses the organization of Portuguese war economy. Before Germany's declaration of war on Portugal the country was affected by the economic consequences of the outbreak of the conflict in Europe. One of the main problems that emerged shortly after the beginning of hostilities was the difficulty experienced by the vast majority of European countries in purchasing grain (in particular wheat) to produce bread, and animal products (namely meat). Apart from bread, sugar, potatoes and meat were the first foodstuffs to run low in Lisbon. This was due not only to heavy dependence upon maritime imports vulnerable to a shortage in transportation means, but also to the endemic deficiencies that characterized Portuguese productive economic base. Agriculture had

not intensified, the commercial fleet was clearly insufficient to meet the country's needs, and industry remained unable to supply both the mainland and the colonies.

The motivations for Portuguese entrance in the Great war may provide some clarifications of other small powers' belligerence (in this case, Belgium and Greece). Drivers that led other small powers to war, can supply reference points of analysis concerning the dynamics of the Portuguese participation in the First World War, establishing not only its specificity but also some commonalities with other countries. The present volume is a contribution to that effort.

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