

**David Castaño. “‘A Practical Test in the Détente’: International Support for the Socialist Party in the Portuguese Revolution (1974-1975).”** *Cold War History* 15:1 (Winter 2015): 1-26. DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2014.932349. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2014.932349>

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After the celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of the coup of 25 April 1974 that dismissed the authoritarian regime of the *Estado Novo* and ended the colonial wars, which took place in 2014, Portugal celebrates this year the fortieth anniversary of the first democratic elections after the dictatorship. The elections of 25 April 1975 for the Constituent Assembly marked a turning point in the process of transition to democracy in Portugal. These elections were won by the Portuguese Socialist Party (PS) (38%), followed by the Popular Democratic Party (*Partido Popular Democrático*, PPD), with 26% of the votes, and, importantly, showed that the Communists were far from being the major political force in Portugal (they obtained only 12% of the vote), at a time when it seemed that they had absolute control of the political process. These results gave the non-Communist parties, and particularly the PS, a new drive in order to claim the re-structuring of the provisional Government according to the electoral results. The 25 April 1975 election provided the pro-democratic forces, in Portugal and in Western Europe, with an unquestionable argument: the vast majority of the Portuguese people were on their side. In fact, the results proved that the West Europeans were right in their support to the socialists, and that a Communist take over in Portugal would not have the acceptance of the population.

In the article under review, David Castaño focuses on the international support for the Socialist Party during the most agitated period of the Portuguese transition to democracy, from 25 April 1974 to the end of 1975, when the final confrontation between the two sides of the political and military forces took place. Having in mind the international constraints surrounding the Portuguese democratization process, the author describes how the social-democratic West European leaders supported the Portuguese Socialist Party, headed by Mario Soares, in the critical period of 1974-1975, and particularly, how this support was perceived by the United States, in the broader context of Cold War. In

this sense, the article is organized in a chronological perspective, describing the initiatives in support of the Portuguese Socialists that were developed in the first months after the revolution, in particular in regard with the trade unions – although it would have been useful to have a deeper insight on why this matter was so important in Portugal. As the revolutionary process accelerated, after the demise of General Spínola as President of the Republic, in Sept 1974 and, especially, after March 1975, the article analyzes how the West European Social-Democratic leaders developed a combined strategy of support for Soares and the PS, always having in mind the threat of a Communist take-over. While he was in office, Spínola tried to take control of the political process, in particular of the decolonization. He became associated with a more conservative wing of the Armed Forces after his Sept 1974 call for a demonstration of the “Silent Majority.” In March 1975 he led a coup attempt against the growing radicalization of the Armed Forces Movement after which he exiled in Spain. Castaño then focuses on the events taking place in three cities: Helsinki, where the Final Act of the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe was signed, and which represents the zenith of détente; Stockholm, where the most relevant leaders of the Socialist International met to discuss their support to the Portuguese Socialists in August 1975, creating the ‘Committee of Support with Portuguese Democracy and Socialism;’ and to Lisbon, where, eventually, the pro-democratic forces were able to lead the country towards a democratic, pluralistic regime.

This work follows the growing tendency among Portuguese and international academics to focus on the international dimension of the Portuguese transition to democracy, despite their major focus on the bilateral level.<sup>1</sup> Castaño describes how the West European leadership followed the developments in Portugal and how Soares, and other Socialist personalities, tried to gain the international support for the establishment of a pluralistic democratic regime.

This article stresses the importance of the West European commitment to the Portuguese transition to democracy and, notably, the support given by the combined action of the West European socialist and social-democratic leaders to Soares and the PS. Nevertheless, despite the article’s reference to the evolution of the international contacts of the PS before the revolution, it would have been useful to its general argument if the author had focused more profoundly on this topic. Soares had already great familiarity with the major social-democratic parties in Western Europe because of the membership of the socialist group (Acção Socialista Portuguesa, ASP) in the International Socialist since 1972. In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the special issue of *Ler História* (2012), which focused on the new historiography of this period, dedicates three articles to its external dimension: Ana Mónica Fonseca, “O Apoio da Social-Democracia Alemã à Democratização Portuguesa (1974-1975),” *Ler História* 63: 93-107; Tiago Moreira de Sá, “‘Quando Portugal contou para a América’. Os Estados Unidos e a transição democrática portuguesa,” *Ler História* 63: 109-125; and Thiago Carvalho, “Transição e descolonização: as relações entre Portugal e o Brasil (1974-1976),” *Ler História* 63: 127-141. In international publications, the work of Mario Del Pero stands out: “‘Which Chile, Allende?’ Henry Kissinger and the Portuguese revolution,” *Cold War History* 11 (2011): 625-657.

the growing attention that the ASP was receiving encouraged Soares to transform it into a political party, in order to properly fulfill the socialists' purposes as leaders of the non-Communist opposition in Portugal. It was indeed these contacts, established long before 1974, that allowed the PS and Soares to have such close ties with the Western Europe's socialist and social-democratic parties.<sup>2</sup>

The description of the international context is, as the title suggests, paramount to the full understanding of what was at stake in Portugal during the 'hot summer' of 1975. When the transition process started in Portugal, the Cold War was at a turning point. The whole process of the détente, which had been built up since the beginning of the 1970s, was reaching its climax with the signing of the Final Act of the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) which took place in Helsinki in late July 1975. Castaño explores the different levels of engagement of the Western Allies with the Portuguese Socialists through an extensive (and almost exclusive) use of the diplomatic correspondence (especially from the U.S. embassies in the main Western Europe countries) of the United States. Although this documentation can provide a broad description of the events, and the U.S. diplomats had indeed a wide access to the main personalities in the different countries where they operated, there are clearly some limitations in using only these sources as the base for such an article. The most serious is the fact that these documents offer a somewhat biased version of the events, as they correspond to the reading made by the U.S. diplomats of certain events or conversations, and not to the original, direct reports of the actors or from the contacts between them. In this sense, the fact that there was a West European growing concern regarding support for the Portuguese Communists by the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and apprehension towards the possibility of an American intervention in favor of a right-wing solution (like the one applied to Chile only two years earlier<sup>3</sup>), on the other, is, somehow, diluted in this article. These two elements are vital to fully understanding why the Western European actors took the lead in supporting the Portuguese Socialists. A useful and additional source would be the memories of the leaders cited in the article, besides the secondary bibliography regarding many of these topics, to complement the information collected through the State Department cables.

The Portuguese transition to democracy was, indeed, "a practical test in the Détente" (15) as the article demonstrates. The international context of the Portuguese revolution was central to the development of a broad strategy of engagement by the West European social-democratic leaders towards the establishment of a democratic regime in Portugal, which was later followed by the United States. This article offers, for the first time, a broader image of the combined action of the different West European leaders towards

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<sup>2</sup> Ana Mónica Fonseca, "The Federal Republic of Germany and the Portuguese Transition to Democracy (1974-1976)," *Journal of European Integration* 15:1 (2009): 35-56.

<sup>3</sup> This was further developed by Del Pero, "Which Chile, Allende's?"

this common goal in a very complex time in the context of détente between the two superpowers. Forty-one years after the 25 April 1974 coup, we are finally beginning to have a full perspective on the international involvement in Portuguese democratization.

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