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Series on Memory, History and Power: Portugal – The Return of the Colonial War

JULY 6, 2021 BY MIGUEL CARDINA



Praça do Império, Lisbon, 2021 | Photo by Olivia Borges

This article is a part of our [Series on Memory, History, and Power](#). Read the Series Introduction [here](#).

Early this year, discussions around Portugal's colonial past and its legacies reappeared in the country, restored by three episodes. The first was related to Lisbon City Council's proposal to renovate the gardens of *Praça do Império*. The square, situated in west of Lisbon, was inaugurated in 1940, during the Portuguese World Exhibition. The event, organized by the Estado Novo dictatorship, was a celebration of both Portuguese nationality and its colonial empire. In the 1960s, when Salazar's regime pursued colonial wars in Africa, flowers were introduced to the gardens of *Praça do Império*. The floral arrangements were designed as coats of arms representing the capitols of each district of the country and the 'overseas provinces' – a name that from the 1950s onwards would be used as an effort to internationally conceal the fact that Portuguese colonialism had 'colonies'. The fact that the renovation proposed by the Lisbon City Council does not include the restoration of the coats of arms was enough for some to raise their voices against what would be an attempt to 'erase History', [mobilising sectors from the right and](#)

[the far-right and even two former presidents, António Ramalho Eanes and Aníbal Cavaco Silva.](#)



Marcelino da Mata, 1969 | Public
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The second episode, which also occurred last February, happened after the death by Covid-19 of Marcelino da Mata, a military leader who became renowned during the colonial war for commanding an extremely aggressive Portuguese squad of African soldiers at Guinea. As in other colonial wars (such as the French in Algeria), Portugal instituted, especially in the final years of the conflict, a process of Africanization of the war, integrating thousands of black men into its forces. None were as distinguished as Marcelino da Mata, known for his particular aggressiveness, he led various actions against civilian populations and the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), including secret operations condemned at the time by the United Nations in neighbouring countries, such as Guinea-Conakry and Senegal.

President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and several military chiefs attended Da Mata's funeral. The Minister of Defence under the current centre-left Socialist Party (PS) government praised Da Mata's '[commitment and dedication](#)' in serving Portugal. In the Parliament, several right-wing parties and PS approved a vote of honour for Marcelino da Mata. The bureaucratic language used in the vote's text is a symptom of its omissions: by referring abstractly to his 'individual courage and bravery', the text forgets the concrete translation of certain horrific acts, that Da Mata himself was responsible for, and that would constitute war crimes. Several voices appealed to a formalistic argument that consisted in affirming that Da Mata was the most decorated soldier in the war, but omitted the fact that such honours were awarded by a dictatorial and colonialist regime whose fall on the 25th of

April 1974, in the context of a political defeat in the war, marked the beginning of the Portuguese democracy.

The case provoked debate in the Portuguese political context and had peculiar shock waves. The Social Democratic Centre (CDS), a conservative right-wing party, suggested a state funeral and national mourning. Far-right party *Chega* – created over a year ago and currently polling at 8% nationally – said it would submit a complaint before the Prosecutor-General's Office against Mamadou Ba, a well-known anti-racist activist, who [had questioned the fairness in celebrating, as a hero, someone that was a 'torturer of the colonial regime'](#). CDS has also asked for Mamadou Ba's removal from a public working group on racism and a [petition](#), which garnered around 20,000 signatures, proposed the Senegalese born, Portuguese naturalised activist to be 'expelled from the country'. At the same time, [a large movement in solidarity with Mamadou Ba has emerged](#), condemning the racism, the outrage and the irrationality of deporting a black Portuguese citizen. In Portugal, colonialism is a living dead. Democracy in the country is a close relative of the defeat of this late colonial project, maintained by the dictatorship against international dynamics even stronger after Second World War. From the 1950s on, Salazar's regime strived to affirm the influence of luso-tropicalism, an ideology appropriated by Estado Novo that contributed to define Portuguese colonialism as more benign and less violent than other colonialisms. When, in Africa, countries were beginning to declare independence, Portugal started a colonial war on three fronts – Guinea, Angola and Mozambique – against liberation movements. The 25 April 1974 Revolution against Estado Novo dictatorship resulted from the deadlock of a war that lasted thirteen long years, dragging thousands of young men away from their homes and unleashing a parade of violence whose repercussions remain, until today, unknowable in their totality. At the same time, atrocities committed during the war remain clouded by collective amnesia. Espousing the heroism of Marcelino da Mata is only possible in a country that voluntarily forgets the 'genetic mark' of its democracy and that does not want to remember the colonial violence that is an inherent part of its imperial history.

The third and final episode occurred few months later, during the official commemorations of the 25 April Revolution's anniversary. In his [official speech](#), president Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa decided to address the Portuguese colonial past and its colonial wars, a strong and unprecedented move. The intervention was almost unanimously approved by politicians from different parties and political analysts. Such a high endorsement might be explained by the ambiguous nature of the speech itself: while recognizing the need ["to study the past and to dissect it"](#) and going against glorifying vision of the empire, the president also warned about the danger of "excessive global self-punishments". Nonetheless, a speech that addressed the issue of colonial violence, racism and slavery – even when it affirmed this false and inexistent symmetry – is not something to be dismissed in a country where

public memory is still characterized by readings that imply the greatness of the 'Discoveries' and the singularity of the 'Portuguese presence in the world'. Even though the weight of dissident voices have grown in the public sphere (that is, in academia, arts, social movements and among some sectors of the political left), images of a great imperial past remain socially embedded. The country still lives in, what one could describe as, a melting pot of imperialophilia, definer of discourses around Portuguese identity and history. The weight of a denied colonial history emerges in the racism manifested in police operations, housing and segregation politics, nationality laws, as well as in the self-representations of the country, its people and its past permeated by the lasting trail of luso-tropicalism and in the maintenance of the old rhetoric about 'martyrs' and 'heroes of the Overseas'.

Portugal had a prominent role in European imperial history that persists in keeping itself alive as a national imaginary and that has different social reverberations, among which racism is one of the most visible traces. Conscious of the necessity to deal with this past, French president Emmanuel Macron commissioned a report to compile an inventory about Algerian colonisation and the independence war. Subsequently, the historian Benjamin Stora delivered, last January, a list with 22 recommendations to the French president: among them, the clarification of massacres and crimes committed during the war; the opening of archives and a common investigation on this past; the renovation of educational curricula; the promotion of exhibitions and conferences on the multiple facets of the war, including the refusal to acknowledge it, and on African independences. Similar initiatives have not been supported by Portuguese governments and it is not the case of replicating this same exact process. But the truth is that, in Portugal, the war still plays as a background loud silence. And colonialism, as its ultimate background, continues to act as a recomforting past, even though it is increasingly questioned. So, maybe the time of the benevolent images of the colonial past are coming to an end.



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