

VI - Lord Salisbury's 1890 Ultimatum to Portugal and Anglo-Portuguese Relations

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In the late nineteenth century Anglo-Portuguese relations were not at their best in political and diplomatic terms. This paper deals with an episode which is badly known by British imperial historiography, although it cannot be dissociated from the widely debated Scramble for Africa – the so-called ‘Ultimatum’ – a term that makes sense to the Portuguese only.

What is meant by the Ultimatum? It refers to a *memorandum* sent to the Portuguese Government by Lord Salisbury on 11 January 1890. In that document he demanded the withdrawal of the Portuguese troops from Mashona and Matabeleland (later Rhodesia) and the Shire-Nyasa region (Malawi) where Portuguese and British interests in Africa overlapped. The text ran as follows:

What Her Majesty's Government require and insist upon is the following: that telegraphic instructions shall be sent to the governor of Mozambique at once to the effect that all and any Portuguese military forces which are actually on the Shire or in the Makololo or in the Mashona territory are to be withdrawn. Her Majesty's Government considers that without this the assurances given by the Portuguese Government are illusory.

Mr. Petre [the English Minister in Lisbon] is compelled by his instruction to leave Lisbon at once with all the members of his legation unless a satisfactory answer to this foregoing intimation is received by him in, the course of this evening, and Her Majesty's ship *Enchantress* is now at Vigo waiting for his orders.¹

In order to understand the different points of view on the Anglo-Portuguese dispute its international context has to be taken into account. At a time when several European nations were consolidating their position in the African continent, the Ultimatum meant the official acknowledgement of British sovereignty over territories Portugal had been claiming for centuries. Under the pressure of European expansion in Africa in the 1880s, mainly French,

¹Quoted in Marquês do Lavradio, *Portugal em África Depois de 1851: Subsídios para a História* (Lisboa: 1936), pp. 169-170.

German and British, the Portuguese tried to extend their sovereignty over the Mashona and Gaza regions in East Africa to stop British expansion. The idea was to establish a large corridor of Portuguese influence linking Angola to Mozambique.

Portuguese efforts were, however, hampered by the agreements reached at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. Article 35 of chapter VI of the General Act established the following:

The Signatory powers of the present Act recognize the obligation to insure the establishment of authority in the regions occupied by them on the coasts of the African Continent sufficient to protect existing rights; and, as the case may be, freedom of trade and transit under the conditions agreed upon.²

This clause, the so-called clause of 'effective occupation', was important because it threw out historical claims based on priority of discovery and travel, the principle hitherto used by the Portuguese to account for their rights in Africa.

In spite of the outcome of the Berlin Conference, the idea of a trans-African belt was not abandoned, and to insure this Portugal signed treaties with France and Germany on 12 and 30 December 1886, respectively. By the German treaty Portugal laid claim to a belt of territory along the Zambezi valley linking Angola to Mozambique. Following the treaty, Barros Gomes, the Portuguese Minister for Foreign Affairs, presented two maps representing the Portuguese claims in Africa, in which a pink coloured stretch of land extended from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. This was to be and is still known as the 'Rose Coloured Map'³.

England protested against the German-Portuguese treaty for two main reasons. On the one hand, Portuguese pretensions in Nyasaland were an obstacle to the activities of the Scottish missionaries who, in pursuit of David Livingstone's aims, had settled in the area in 1875. On the other, it threatened Cecil Rhodes' policy of expansion. Rhodes, indeed, was an obstacle to Portuguese ambitions. Although he was not its mentor, he was responsible for the 'Cape-to-Cairo project', or rather, for the establishment of a British sphere of influence stretching from Cape Town to the Mediterranean, which consequently overlapped onto the long dreamt of Portuguese African belt.

² Edward Hertslet, *The Map of Africa by Treaty*, 2 vols (London: 1894) I, p. 43.

³On the Map, see Charles Edward Nowell, *The Rose-Coloured Map: Portugal's Attempt to Build an African Empire from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean* (Lisbon: 1982).

The episode which ultimately led to an open conflict between Portugal and Britain was the battle between the Portuguese explorer Serpa Pinto and the Makololo which took place at Mupassa, in the Shire district, near Lake Nyasa, on 8 November 1889. Although Barros Gomes emphasized the scientific purposes of Serpa Pinto's expedition and justified the attack on the Makololo as self-defence, Britain accused Portugal of aggression and of having disregarded British sovereignty over the areas claimed by Portugal. Barros Gomes responded by reaffirming Portuguese authority over those areas basing his arguments on priority of discovery.

Let us see now how the Ultimatum was seen by the British. In some of the articles published in the British papers just before the Ultimatum it is possible to realize how unavoidable and justifiable it was to British eyes⁴. In fact, it was seen by the press just as a logical conclusion of a long dispute which did not have a plausible *raison d'être* since Britain's rights were considered beyond question.

Under the title 'The Quarrel with Portugal' the independent weekly *Spectator* wrote on 21 December 1889:

It is quite certain, and, indeed, on the face of things, that Portugal can neither colonise nor civilise such an expanse of territory, and it is the first claim recognised by the European Conference which distributed the territories on the Niger and Congo.⁵

In November, according to the conservative *Saturday Review*:

Although all international law is contentious enough, there is perhaps, less contention about no point than about the proceedings necessary to give validity to the claim prior to that of other nations. It must be distinctly made, and it must be followed up by, at least, some attempt to make the possession

⁴ For a comparison between the British and the Portuguese Press, see Maria Teresa Pinto Coelho, '“Pérfida Albion” and ‘Little Portugal’: The Role of the Press in British and Portuguese National Perceptions of the 1890 Ultimatum', *Portuguese Studies* 6 (1990), 173-190. For a comprehensive study on the Ultimatum itself, the British and the Portuguese Press and Portuguese Late Nineteenth-Century Portuguese Literature, see, by the same author: *Apocalipse e Regeneração: O Ultimatum e a Mitologia da Pátria na Literatura Finissecular* (Lisboa: 1996).

⁵ 21 December 1889, p. 872. Page numbers will be given only when an article was not published on the front page. The year of publication is 1889 for the months of November and December and 1890 for January and February. Nineteenth century spelling is kept.

real. In none of these respects can any sufficient evidence be produced in support of the Portuguese position.⁶

On 5 January 1890, a few days before the Ultimatum, the left wing *Fortnightly Review* published a long article on the Portuguese expansion in Africa. Going back to the Discoveries, that article analyzed the causes of the Anglo-Portuguese conflict concluding 'that no evidence exists of effective occupation by any power but Lobengula of the lands claimed by the British South Africa Company on one hand; nor of those in Nyassaland on the other, before the planting of the British flag, much less before the actual British occupation of the past twenty-five years'⁷.

On the Ultimatum itself *The Guardian*, a liberal paper, wrote on 15 January 1890:

Lord Salisbury could not have asked less. It is simply a moderate requisition that the Portuguese should retire from the country, in which they have done so much mischief, within their own acknowledged borders. He has shown that he knows how to exercise in their proper season the two complementary qualities of long patience and sharp decision⁸.

The Ultimatum is also justified by the Edinburgh conservative *Scots Observer* and seen as something that could only be deserved by the Portuguese:

The sudden and peremptory action of Lord Salisbury at the end of last week is easily accounted for. The Portuguese complain of it as excessively tyrannical, but did not go beyond the needs of the occasion, and our good allies brought it on themselves.⁹

The terms of the Ultimatum aroused violent anti-British sentiments all over Portugal. Demonstrations were held, the British consulate stoned and economic sanctions against Britain demanded. Advocating Portugal's claims in Africa, the Portuguese press and literature echoed and stimulated the reaction against Britain. Journalists, poets, novelists, students and the public in general protested violently against what they saw as an outrage¹⁰.

⁶ 30 November, p. 601.

⁷ P. 143.

⁸ P. 81.

⁹ P. 228.

¹⁰ See Maria Teresa Pinto Coelho, *Apocalypse e Regeneração* already quoted.

The crowds were stirred mainly by the Republican press. The British press readily acknowledged the relationship between the riots and the Republicans. For instance, *The Guardian*, an independent paper, wrote on 19 February 1890:

No Englishman, however, farsighted, probably foresaw the storm which this Lake Nyassa dispute has aroused in Portugal. It may perhaps be traced to three causes – to the excitable character of a Southern people; to self-reproach felt by the Portuguese for their prolonged neglect of splendid colonial opportunities; and lastly... to Republican intrigues.¹¹

On 31 January 1891 a Republican *coup* was crushed in the city of Oporto. It followed the attempt of reaching an agreement with England over African borders signed on 20 August 1890 but never ratified by the Portuguese Parliament.

On a private letter from 31 December 1890 kept at Hatfield House Petre had written to Salisbury on the rejection of the treaty:

A relative sobriety of tone (I exclude of course the republicans, who continue to indulge on lies and scurrility) has replaced generally the ridiculous chauvinism and hysterical patriotism which have been the jest of this country, and which cowed the late Government and led to the crowning folly of rejecting the Treaty of August. Within certain bounds the present Government has a tolerably free hand, because the absolute necessity of a friendly arrangement with us is admitted on all sides.¹²

And he added on the threat to the Monarchy:

I quite agree with your Lordship that the argument founded on the danger to the monarchy, which I presume alone induced other Powers to put a word for Portugal, has been made too much of – there was a moment when a republican leader might have upset the Monarchy, but the Brazilian revolution has perhaps as much to do with this as our quarrel, and that opportunity has passed.

As the events of 31 January 1891 in Oporto showed, he was wrong. He was compelled to write privately to Salisbury on 8 February of that same year:

The Oporto affair was a most serious one although the revolt was crushed with energy and promptitude. All is quiet now and likely to remain so for the present. It has left however a feeling of insecurity and revealed a source of weakness¹³.

¹¹ 19 February 1890, p. 28.

¹² Hatfield House, A / 81, no. 67, Miscellaneous, vol. I, Private / Lisbon, Dec. 31 / 90.

¹³ Hatfield House, A / 81, no. 67, Miscellaneous, vol. I, Private / Lisbon, Feb. 8 / 91.

It was not only Portugal who did not agree to the August treaty. Rhodes, whose plans of expansion had not died down, also wanted it to abort. In a trenchant letter he sent to Philip Currie, Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office, dated from 23 September 1890, to be found in Rhodes papers at Rhodes House in Oxford, Rhodes wrote:

I took the liberty of sending you a direct cable as to the Portuguese treaty in the hope that it was not too late to remedy the mischief that has been done. Now that the Portuguese Ministry has resigned I hope you will drop this wretched treaty, under which we get nothing and give away a great deal¹⁴.

And he went on:

You have given away half the Barotse which has just been formally ceded to us [...]. You have given away the whole of Gazaland. I have an agent now with the King and expect to hear daily of his accepting our flag. [...]. You have given away Manica. My people are now occupying and out of it. They will not go, and further they will not be ruled by a half-caste Portugee¹⁵ and I hope you will draw Lord Salisbury's attention to this fact.

He also complained of 'the brutal conduct of the Portuguese to their native subjects'. And said:

It is to a nation of this kind that you are for no valid reason giving away half of Africa, and I can only place on record my firm conviction that you will be providing a future of trouble for us if this agreement goes through¹⁶.

And he concluded:

I can only add in conclusion that if you have any regard for the work I am doing you will show it by now dropping the Anglo-Portuguese agreement. I see nothing but trouble in the future if it is carried through, and I do not think I am claiming too much from your department in asking you to give some consideration to my views¹⁷.

Since the treaty of August was rejected, an agreement was reached according to which there would be a standstill in Anglo-Portuguese negotiations, the so-called *Modus Vivendi*. This

¹⁴ Rhodes Papers, MSS. Afr. S. 228, 63 (2), p.1.

¹⁵ Pejorative for 'Portuguese'. It can only be intentional

¹⁶ p. 2.

¹⁷ P. 4.

was negotiated by the Marquis of Soveral, the Portuguese Minister in London, and signed on 14 November 1890.

There followed the treaty of 11 June 1891 which finally established the borders which still exist today.

Anglo-Portuguese relations took a long time to heal, though. In the late 1890s Portugal was going through a severe economic and financial crisis. In 1897 Soveral started working on the possibility of a British loan but Germany reacted. An agreement was then signed on 30 August 1898 by Balfour and Hatzfeldt according to which if Portugal would ask Britain for a loan, the latter had to inform Germany and both countries would agree on the sum to be lent by each of them. If Portugal would not be able to pay back, Britain and Germany would split the revenues of the Portuguese colonies between them¹⁸.

The 1898 Anglo-German Agreement never worked out because its terms were not favourable to Britain who did not wish to see Germany's power increase in Africa. On 13 July of the same year the Portuguese government had already started negotiations with France. These were backed by Britain so that Portugal would not have to ask the British for a loan.

The Boer war also changed things. The Anglo-Portuguese Declaration of 1899 signed on 14 October 1899 reaffirmed former treaties of Alliance. According to the new treaty, Britain committed herself to defend Portuguese colonies from all enemies present and future. Portugal agreed to stop the supply of arms through Lourenço Marques to the Transvaal and officially declare neutrality in the Anglo-Boer conflict¹⁹.

The document was signed by Salisbury and Soveral. The latter was a close friend of the Prince of Wales and had long been working on a *rapprochement* between Portugal and Britain. Anglo-Portuguese Royal family ties, fostered by Soveral, together with his diplomatic efforts tried to get what politicians found hard to achieve. In the early twentieth century Soveral helped organizing Royal visits to both countries to strengthen the Anglo-Portuguese connection²⁰. It

¹⁸ See document in Fernando Costa, *Portugal e a Guerra Anglo-Boer. Política Externa e Opinião Pública (1899-1902)* (Lisboa: 1998), pp. 299-300.

¹⁹ See document in Fernando Costa, *Portugal e a Guerra dos Boers*, pp. 305-306.

²⁰ About the Royal Visits, see Alice Berkeley and Susan Lowndes, *English Art in Portugal* (Lisboa; 1994), pp. 122-128.

must not be forgotten that the King of Portugal, Don Carlos, and Queen Victoria were relatives. Prince Albert was the cousin of Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha who got married to Queen Maria II, King Carlos' grandmother.

In April 1903 King Edward VII visited Portugal on a State visit. In November-December 1904 King Carlos visited Britain. A new treaty of Alliance was then signed at Windsor on 16 November consolidating the *rapprochement* between Portugal and Britain which had started with the 1891 treaty.

In January 1905 the Duke and Duchess of Connaught visited Lisbon. In April it was Queen Alexandra's turn to come to Portugal.

King Manuel II, who succeeded his father King Carlos on the Portuguese throne after he and the Prince Heir were murdered in Lisbon in February 1908, officially visited Edward VII in November of 1909 and he was invested with the Order of the Garter. On 20 May 1910 he attended Edward VII's funeral.

On 5 October 1910, following the fall of the Portuguese Monarchy, King Manuel went to exile in England. He never returned to Portugal. He died at his home in Fuwell Park in Twickenham in 1932.

Petre's words to Salisbury in the already mentioned private letter from 31 December 1890 did not materialize: 'My own belief is that security of the throne is not threatened, although it has not unfortunately as much prestige or influence as one could wish'²¹.

²¹ Hatfield House, A / 81 no. 67 Miscellaneous , vol. I, Petre to Salisbury, Private, Lisbon, Dec. 31 / 90.