

The 1974 Portuguese Carnation Revolution: A Matter of Time and Perspective

Triumph or Tragedy?



The question of triumph or tragedy is always a matter of perspective and time, pertinent when observing the 1974 Carnation Revolution and its aftermath. In the immediate, democracy triumphed over communism despite both having gained and lost, however consequences since have culminated in a mutual tragedy for the original stakeholders.

The question of 'triumph or tragedy' is a complicated and subjective one in the wake of the Portuguese Carnation Revolution of 1974. Its unique bloodless overthrow of the dictatorship was symbolised by a red carnation tucked into every soldier's gun, the event marking the beginning of the Third Wave of Democratisation. Initially, it emerged as a triumph in the eyes of all stakeholders: the military was satisfied at having overturned the regime and accelerated the end of the colonial wars and the wider public was pleased at the possibility of a new reformative political system. As the honeymoon period faded however, a sharp split between these two parties emerged over the type of political system that should be heralded in – a communist-style governance supported by the workers and farmers or a bourgeois-associated Western democracy preferred by the majority of the military and the elite. There could only be triumph for one of them – the other would see tragedy in their cause not being actualised. The advancement of each side varied throughout the transitional years, thus each having their own victories and defeats. The Left initially made bigger strides towards their objectives throughout the first of many provisional governments though later on, the moderate side of the leadership managed to steer the country towards their democratic model, perhaps the ultimate triumph as it created foundations of the Portuguese democracy today. And yet, despite this history of interplaying triumphs and tragedies on both sides, in the long term many in Portugal now view the Carnation Revolution of 1974 as perhaps nothing more than a tragedy for all involved.

The revolution overthrew the Salazar regime, installing General Spínola as the leader of the new Junta and signified a triumph for all involved. The previous government had been authoritarian in nature, using secret police and censorship to remain in power. Salazar's repression had intensified in the 1960s, particularly against leftist sympathisers which escalated the dissent already present. At the same time, the Colonial Wars began with Angola, Mozambique and Guinea which drained the country both in budget and conscription,

galvanising the military forces against Salazar. This *raison d'être* for the military right sector of the population, specifically the underground MFA (Armed Forces Movement) thus combined with the enthusiastic support of left-wingers and the general public to overthrow Salazar's replacement Caetano in a bloodless takeover on the 25th of April 1974. The wider cause of "anti-fascist" (Mailer 2012) ideals had won and the event had delivered movements towards goals of both sides. The power vacuum now temporarily occupied by the military Junta and later a provisional government, gave hope to the possibility of further revolution and establishment of a communist state whilst also cementing the possibility of cutting the Portuguese colonies loose and establishing a return to proper democracy. The Junta promised these possibilities in the day after the coup, saying the country would have, "new elections as soon as possible, an end to all fascist institutions and negotiation over the wars in Africa" (Mailer 2012) which effectively satisfied the population, save those affiliated with the old regime. The victorious atmosphere was infectious across the streets of Portugal as first hand witness, Mailer recounts, "Whiffs of freedom are rising over Lisbon and people are passing them on to one another in their speech and laughter". The threads of reform were offered, delivering hope for reformative governance as 170 political prisoners were released and previously banned oppositional parties like the Communist Party (PCP) resurged. This was symbolic for both the Left and democrats: an advancement towards their goals of a Communist state whilst also a move towards political variance. The country seemed to be one, people chanting the "slogan of the day, "*O povo unido jamais sera vencido*" (United, the people will never be defeated) in the streets (Mailer 2012), caught up in the euphoria and not anticipating the political battle that was to come in the aftermath.

In the months that followed, conflicting views on what the new political system should resemble emerged, which led to debate over whose the triumph was. After all, the "anti-fascist" nature of the new government, though guaranteed, was far too broad of a term, applying to both communist and a democratic styles of governance. These two forces slowly revealed themselves to be in conflict, the street graffiti celebrating the unity of the overthrow fading into

the backdrop as tensions between the Left and moderate-conservative provisional government emerged to the forefront. The triumphs came quickly for the Left in the immediate period, managing to spread their influence through many media distributors, newspapers and televisions carrying their slogans and demands. Many of the farmers and agriculturalists with those leanings also took the chance to expropriate land from the *latifundia* (large landowners), attempting to self-manage and organise themselves into collectives some with land almost four thousand hectares like Casebres. Several groups of workers also seized control of their own factories nationwide, creating their own militant Committees to run themselves at the same time a wave of strikes spread across Portugal, beginning with the fishermen of Matosinhos refusing to fish for their company on the 6th of May. All in all, these small victories began to accumulate into a proud triumph for the communist forces in Portugal during this time of uncertainty, demonstrating the supremacy and legitimacy of their cause. However, triumph and tragedy existed hand in hand and the Left did not achieve a completely overwhelming series of victories. The government responded in ways to achieve their own objectives, the triumph of democracy, thus inducing tragedy for the leftists. General Spínola, the temporary head of state, denounced the strikes, declaring their ways to be those of, “reactionaries, of counterrevolutionaries” (Mailer, 2012). The military was called in a strike at Timex and broke it up, securing the capitalistic property rights that accompanied their model of Western democracy. Additionally, the endeavours of the workers and farmers had not done much damage to the provisional government’s political base of large enterprises whose monopolies over business stayed constant - the same 0.5% of 42,000 companies holding half the total capital of Portugal. This divide was the basis of the see-saw like dichotomy of the gains and losses on both sides, a triumph for the Left - a group of farmers creating their own communist collective – a contrasting tragedy for bourgeois sectors of the state. This therefore makes it difficult to judge overwhelmingly at this point whose the triumph or tragedy really was, each side possessing a share of both.

The balance of triumphs began to shift towards the Leftists however as the revolving doors of provisional governments were brought in, bringing tragedy for the democratic cause as the communist threat seemed closer to actuality than ever. The second provisional government with Colonel Vasco Goncalves as Prime Minister signalled a shift from a more moderate stance to the radical left, hence a victory for the PCP and radical leftists. The triumphing of the MFA-connected Continental Operations Command (COPCON) and other left extremists in defeating Spínola's attempt at a coup to restore the regime's more conservative roots on the 30th of September 1974 also contributed to their increasing influence within Portugal. By October, the PCP had consolidated their influence and control over the MFA, administrative posts, trade unions and workers committees, once again their success seeming assured. In the first few months of 1975, even more gains had been made including the defeat of yet another Spínola coup, the formation by the military of the extremist Council of Revolution in place of the Junta and the nationalisation of 70% of the country's GNP by the government. Therefore conversely, this was a tragedy for democratic sympathisers as never would have the moderate bourgeoisie or elite anticipated the level of control the communist influence would have had on the country as a result of the revolution's power vacuum. Terrorist attacks by left extremists were worrying for the fate of democracy, an attack on a People's Democratic Party (PPD) Congress on the 8th March leaving one dead and thirty wounded. The narrative of 1975 was beginning to look like a triumph for the communist cause and a tragedy for democracy.

Again, however, the interplay of triumphs and tragedies shifted with the Constituent Assembly elections held on the anniversary of the old regime's overthrow in favour of the socialist-democratic advocates. Although the PCP and the MFA opposed the elections, anticipating low popularity, the people were allowed to vote in the first free election since 1925. The results were a triumph for pluralistic democracy with 38% of the vote delivered to the Socialist Party of Portugal (PS) and PPD holding 26.5%, indicating popular support for moderate politics. On the contrary, the PCP won 12.5% of the vote. It was evident the

communist talk had not swayed the raw majority of the Portuguese people, the first of the many tragedies for the communist cause which would culminate in their failed coup in November that year. Although the Left still made some accomplishments in the 'hot summer' following such as the increased number of forcibly seized estates-cum-collective farms, a right wing response began developing, composed of farmers who had initially formed a large base of their early support. Their revolutionary activities were turned from triumphs into tragedies, in one event their successful closure of a socialist newspaper carried out by associated radicals bringing condemnation upon their actions both domestically and abroad. Their influence began to decline even more when the fifth provisional government, the most adherent to communist ideals, was replaced after a month and the left-aligned Prime Minister Gonçalves was expelled from the Council of Revolution in the body's move towards the centre. The final tragedy however, that marked the ultimate failure of the Left's ambitions of a communist state, came on the 25th of November when a radical leftist military coup failed to displace the sixth provisional government. It was justification enough for the military to declare a state of emergency, take control of the MFA and COPCON and arrest around 200 left-wing military extremists. This was the definitive event that confirmed the end of the transitional years, securing the triumph of democracy and the tragedy of Communist failure.

Trying to assess whether the 1974 Carnation Revolution was a triumph or tragedy depends on which perspective one approaches it from. From a Western lens, it was in the short term an undoubted triumph for democracy and from a Communist one, a tragedy. Yet the long-lasting repercussions of the event did not end with the democratic triumphs of the First Constitutional Government in December 1975, the eventual independence of ex-Portuguese colonies like Angola or even the acceptance of Portugal into the European Community on the 1st January 1986. Instead, consequences have since steered towards a more negative perspective with participants and observers on both sides expressing regret at the Revolution's occurrence. Marxists mourn, naturally, the loss of their cause they say is the fault of, "the leaders of reformism and Stalinism" (Mitchinson 1994) but curiously, the original

'April Captains' who organised the MFA overthrow have too mourned its results, popular sentiment being the feelings of betrayal by the way the country has developed since. An interview with the strategist, Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho who was behind the 1974 coup remarked in 2011 that the revolution, "has not achieved its objectives" and that, "If I had known, I would not have staged the revolution." ("Portugal revolution veterans feel betrayed by crisis" 2011). The state of Portugal's economic and social woes, having applied for three bailouts since from the international community, can be partially attributed to the defeat of Salazar's government under which the economy had been making great improvements, Portugal's GDP rising from 38% of the European Community average in 1960 to 56.4% in the timespan of eight years (Solsten and Keefe 1993). Post-revolution however, the economic repercussions of relinquishing the colonies, nationalisation, mass emigration of talent and general chaos brought Portugal into several years of negative growth, their GDP only beginning to approach 54.9% of the European Community average in 1991. Currently, Portugal is still feeling the economic effects of the 1974 revolution, suffering a budget deficit of -3.5% in 2015 and undergoing unpopular policies of austerity. Thus, in today's world, the Revolution is largely observed to be a mutual tragedy for both sides originally involved.

Therefore, the question of triumph or tragedy regarding the Carnation Revolution of 1974 is subject to multiple factors of perspective and timeframe. The mutual triumph felt after the ending of Salazar's fascism morphed into a dichotomy between moderates and leftists regarding the political re-organisation of the state. After turmoil and individual victories and defeats on both sides, democracy managed to triumph, naturally leading to tragedy for a potential Communist state. In a modern context however, these gains and losses have largely been forgotten in the wake of Portugal's economic troubles that stem from the 1974 revolution, leading to the regarding of the event on both sides as a certain tragedy.

Reference List

25th April: Carnation Revolution Captains to boycott official celebrations.

(2012). *Portuguese-american-journal.com*. Retrieved 17 August 2016, from

<http://portuguese-american-journal.com/25-april-carnation-captains-to-boycott-official-celebrations-portugal/>

In this article, some of the original 'April Captains' who organised the 1974 coup were interviewed in light of their announcement that they would be boycotting the official celebrations of the Carnation Revolution. The article gives voice to their reasons why they chose to boycott the celebrations as well as offering some brief background information to the Revolution but not its aftermath. It was useful to my research as it highlighted the troubles of modern Portugal such as their need for an international bailout and fuelled my thesis of the moderates who triumphed after 1974 now seeing the event as a tragedy. The limitations to this article is its neglect in outlining the aftermath of the revolution in the transition years, instead only stating the main consequence of the revolution to be the implementation of democracy and not making a link to the long-term economic consequences or the decolonisation that resulted. Although this source was useful to develop my thesis about the contemporary tragic consequences of the Revolution through primary source interviews, it was not helpful when assessing the period directly after the revolution and the triumphs and tragedies contained there.

40 years since Portugal's 'Carnation Revolution'. (2014). *Socialist Worker (Britain)*. Retrieved 19 August 2016, from

<https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/37973/40+years+since+Portugals+Carnation+Revolution>

This article from a socialist-inclined website speaks about the progressiveness and positivity that resulted from the revolution on the workers in Portugal. The author mainly cites historical events and recounts the immediate aftermath of the revolution, posing an explanation for the failure of a communist outcome to be the inexperience of the revolutionaries. It is useful to my research as the accomplishments of the workers highlighted informed my argument about the Left's triumphs in the transitional period following however presents an obviously biased view of the events, glorifying the role of the workers and demonising the oppositional forces like General Spínola and the Socialist Party. In addition, it gives no account of the lasting impacts of the revolution on Portugal or the accomplishments of the moderates. Thus, although it was useful to a focus on the triumphs of the Left, did not assist much in other aspects of my thesis.

Matos, C. (2011). *April 25 "Freedom Day" is a national holiday.* (2011). *Portuguese-american-journal.com*. Retrieved 17 August 2016, from <http://portuguese-american-journal.com/april-25-freedom-day-is-a-national-holiday-portugal/>

In this article, Matos juxtaposes the Carnation Revolution's results with its economic difficulties in 2011 when Portugal was applying for an international bailout. Matos acknowledges the accomplishment of the turnover from fascism to democracy in the events of the Revolution and proceeds to document the current economic troubles and social issues in Portugal today such as its recession and unemployment rate. It is useful to my research as it recaps some outcomes of the Revolution as well as offers useful statistics about Portugal's modern tragedies but is limited as it does not cover varied outcomes of the 1974 revolution or directly connect the two with a cause and effect relationship despite the data and information available. Thus although

illuminating my knowledge of the current situation in Portugal, it did not form a large basis of my research.

Boyd, S. (2016, August 19) Personal Interview.

This interview was conducted with Dr Susan Boyd, a foreign service officer posted in Portugal in the three years leading up to the revolution. Her primary accounts of the atmosphere in Portugal leading to the events of 1974 and her insight into the motivations for the revolution were extremely useful to understand the context for the revolution and the nature of the parallel motivations of the Left (workers, agrarians) and moderates (mainly the military). However, it was limited somewhat as she did not remain in Portugal for the actual revolution and did not keep up with its development and consequences as she was posted elsewhere. Thus, it is useful to my contextual knowledge and the idea that 'triumph or tragedy' is subjective to the group that participated in the revolution which is part of my thesis.

Costa, J. (2014). *40 years after the Carnation Revolution*. *Internationalviewpoint.org*.

Retrieved 17 August 2016, from <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3379>

This article offers a fairly detailed recap of the transitional years between the April revolution of 1974 and the failed left-wing coup that marked the change to democracy in 1975. Its scope is quite large, mentioning some troubles afflicting Portugal today whilst also summarising the year and a half immediately following the revolution. It is useful as it directly links the modern troubles of Portugal with the revolution however is limited due to its pointedly socialist perspective that may skew or omit information that does not fit with its narrative of the revolution and its bias against the current capitalist government of Portugal and the moderates during the period. Thus, although it is useful to link modern Portuguese issues with the revolution, the information was treated carefully as to not influence the attempted impartiality of my essay.

cysipimental (2014, February 9) *Carnation Revolution Documentary* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J25dPwS0IN8>

This video was designed by Youtube user cysipimental as a brief documentary of events leading up to and during the Portuguese Revolution. It used images, voiceover and a primary interview of a Portuguese immigrant to document the happenings of 1974 however did not follow the event into the modern day and omitted consequences of the revolution apart from the democratic system that developed. It is fairly useful as a quick insight into the context for the revolution and the main event of the overthrow as well as for the testimony from a primary source however is limited by its narrow scope. Due to its brevity, it does not go into much detail which reduced its usefulness to my research. Therefore though providing a good introduction into the actual revolution of 1974 and a primary source testimony, it was not substantial enough to help form many of my conclusions.

Graham, L. & Makler, H. (1979). *Contemporary Portugal*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

This text comprises several essays from notable contributors about the pre-existing atmosphere that preceded the Revolution of 1974. These essays spanned topics of the political circumstances to social ones of the workers, substantiated with evidence, and helped improve my knowledge of the lead-up to the coup. However, seeing that it was limited to the preconditions for the revolution, it did not form majority of my essay and only contributed to the contextual paragraph at the beginning.

Lisbon celebrates Carnation Revolution's 40th anniversary. (2014). *Morningstaronline.co.uk*. Retrieved 18 August 2016, from <https://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-35a3-Lisbon-celebrates-Carnation-Revolutions-40th-anniversary#.V7cVovl97IU>

This article contrasts the positive results of the 1974 revolution with the current anger of many Portuguese and original military planners of the revolution, citing primary

interviews with the veterans and economic troubles of Portugal today. It is useful to my research as it highlights the perception of the event as a tragedy in the eyes of the original participants and mentions the current problems in Portugal. However it is limited by the omission of significant consequences of the revolution such as decolonisation and statistics to evidence the current Portuguese economic struggles. Therefore though useful for its primary sources and acknowledgement of Portuguese issues today, it does not form a huge basis of my research as a whole

Mailer, P. (2005). *Portugal: the Impossible Revolution?* Oakland: PM Press.

This book recounts the events immediately following the Revolution in 1974 from the point of view of an Irish man living in Portugal at the time, spanning until the failed coup in November 1975. It is his primary account of his observations in the streets melded together with analysis and accounts of the situations of other social groups drawn from research conducted. Although the scope is narrow, only spanning the year and a half after the revolution, it is incredibly detailed and thus formed a large part of my research into the triumphs and tragedies for both sides in the period following. Its limitations are the narrow scope and socialist leanings of the author which may skew his account but nonetheless, it was an extremely useful source that assisted my research greatly.

Mitchinson, P. (1994). *Worker's History - Portuguese Revolution 1974. In Defence of Marxism*. Retrieved 17 August 2016, from <http://www.marxist.com/workers-history-portuguese-revolution1974.htm>

This article reviews the phases of the transitional period following the 1974 revolution and from a communist point of view, focusing partly on why the communists ultimately failed to establish a state. Its scope is fairly large, recapping the preconditions for revolution in Portugal as well as highlighting key events during the transitional years such the strikes of the workers. It is useful for this reason as its level of detail and

commentary assists the evidence put forward in my essay about the triumphs and tragedies of the Leftists. However, it is limited in that it does not mention the modern consequences of the revolution and has an obviously skewed perspective of the historical narrative. Therefore though the evidence and incidents contained within are helpful to my research, the account it presents of the events and the roles of moderates and rightists needs to be treated lightly.

Peciccia, A. (2014). *Four decades on from the Carnation Revolution, Portugal is Adrift*. *Theconversation.com*. Retrieved 15 August 2016, from <http://theconversation.com/four-decades-on-from-the-carnation-revolution-portugal-is-adrift-25891>

This article connects the current discontent of the Portuguese veterans who organised the 1974 revolution with the consequences of the original event. Its scope is more limited as it focuses on the revolution in a modern context but is useful to my research as it highlights key flaws in the consequences of the revolution. However, it neglects several of the obvious consequences in lieu of the less obvious ones and does not delve into very much detail into the original events of 1974 in the first place. Therefore although useful to the situation of the revolution in a modern context, is limited in its assistance to other aspects of my thesis.

Portugal revolution veterans feel betrayed by crisis. (2011). *Expatica.com*. Retrieved 16 August 2016, from http://www.expatica.com/es/news/Portugal-revolution-veterans-feel-betrayed-by-crisis_253662.html

This article contains commentary about the modern problems of Portugal, integrating economic data and primary interviews with the veterans who organised the Carnation Revolution. Although it does not detail any of the events of 1974-75, its focus on the modern day perspective of the coup from the original military strategists is useful to my research as their primary interviews revealed their reasons for perceiving the coup now

as a tragedy. Though limited in respect to its neglect to outline the actual revolution process and immediate aftermath, it is advantageous in presenting evidence and explanation as to why the veterans are now disappointed with the long term outcomes. Therefore this was useful to my research and formed a crucial part of my essay's thesis.

Reeve, C. (2014). *PORTUGAL: Forty Years of Democracy*. *Brooklynrail.org*. Retrieved 19 August 2016, from <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2014/07/field-notes/portugal-forty-years-of-democracy>

This article focuses on both the events of 1974 and its modern day consequences but more concentrates more heavily on the latter, arguing essentially that Portugal needs to mobilise again as a society to reorganise its democratic system. It utilises analysis of Portugal's current condition and contemporary statistics to illustrate its contemporary troubles whilst linking some of them to the failures of the Carnation Revolution. It is useful in that it does provide evidence for why the revolution may be seen as a tragedy however does not directly tie all of the modern day consequences back to this crucial event and seems to be inclined to the radical left, necessitating some scepticism to be applied to the claims that it makes about the roles of moderate forces, historical 'myths' about the revolution and its choice of data to be used. Thus this was somewhat useful to my research in situating the Carnation Revolution in a larger context but was not a main reference for my essay.

Solsten, E. & Keefe, E. (1993). *Portugal: A Country Study*. Washington DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress.

This study of Portugal conducted by the US Library of Congress in 1993 covers much of the history of Portugal from the 1400s up until 1993 with extensive bibliography and detailed chapters on different aspects of the country such as its historical setting,

economy and government. Its scope therefore is immense and extremely comprehensive, being very useful to my research as the specific sub-chapters on the revolution and the transitional years contains information difficult to find in many other sources. It may be limited in that the information gathered, although attempting to be impartial, may bring in Western-orientated bias into the historical narrative it presents. It remained invaluable to my thesis however as it provided a backbone with which to frame the other research conducted.

Tannock, M. *Third Republic. Portugal-info.net*. Retrieved 19 August 2016, from <http://www.portugal-info.net/history/third-republic.htm>

This website contains a timeline of events from the 20th and 21st century in Portugal, highlighting the key events during the Carnation Revolution. It was useful to my research in order to see how the events following the Salazar overthrow fit together chronologically as well as trace and pinpoint certain dates and events that marked the shift from the radical left to the centre through the transitional years. It was limited in that no direct connection between events was established due to its nature being a timeline and therefore was only useful when taken into consideration with the other research done.

The Carnation Revolution: A Peaceful Coup in Portugal. (2015). *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved 19 August 2016, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/adst/the-carnation-revolution_b_8208322.html

This article recalls the Carnation Revolution in 1974, integrating the accounts of American diplomats in the country at the time and covers the events of the revolution leading up to the elections held in 1975. It is useful to my research as the primary accounts of these diplomats informed my research on the immediate outcomes of the event however was limited in that the diplomats focused their account somewhat on

American policy regarding the Portuguese during this time, unhelpful to my research, and had fairly subjective views on the figures e.g. the junta they interacted with perhaps due to their Western liberalist point of view. Therefore although the primary accounts were useful in understanding some of the atmosphere following the coup, it was largely unhelpful to the majority of my essay.

The World Factbook — Central Intelligence Agency. (2016). *Cia.gov*. Retrieved 19 August 2016, from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/po.html>

This government-gathered country brief about Portugal lists a series of data about the country in various categories like economy and compares it to the rest of the world. These statistics were gathered and sanctioned by the CIA and were useful to my final assessment of Portugal's situation today as economic statistics and rankings of this country was strong evidence for my analysis and thesis. As this source is a collection of statistics, it did not assist me much in researching the historical narrative but ultimately helped to support my conclusions, being fairly useful.