The Carnation Revolution

In April 1974, one of Europe's oldest dictatorships collapsed in Portugal. In Switzerland, people were worried about the future of Portugal. Not least because of the fragile political balance in southern Europe.

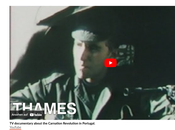
Mattia Mahon

Mattia Mahon is a historian at the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland Research Centre (DoDis) and a researcher at the University of Lausanne.

For from the aspirations sent in the 19th century, which it stretched across the Atlantic to Brazil, Portugal was the last European colonial power to bring about its colonial wars in Africa. The Estado Novo waged war on three fronts in its African colonies: in Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique. These colonial wars had been going on for around ten years with no end in sight. A group of officers who had formed the Movimento das Forças Armadas MFA (Armed Forces Movement) were fed up with the government's lack of commitment to a political solution to the wars, with its continued support for colonialism, a democratisation of the regime and economic measures to benefit the population of the motherland. General Spínola capitalised on the emerging movement and took over its leadership by force the government to end the African wars.

On 25 April, the MFA took to the streets in Lisbon to take control of the city. It was quickly followed by civilians who demonstrated peacefully. The Estado Novo collapsed within a few hours. "It only took 13 hours for a regime of almost 50 years to collapse without a shot being fired," reported the Swiss ambassador in Lisbon, Jean-Louis Pahud.

In the crowd, a waitress of a restaurant decided to decorate the military's rifles with red carnations, unwittingly giving the revolution its name. Spínola, who briefly became president, released the political prisoners. Most of them were left-wing activists who had been imprisoned by António de Oliveira Salazar. They contributed to the MFA's transition from protest against the war to a genuine social revolution.



TV documentary about the Carnation Revolution in Portugal
Youtube

Powder keg Southern Europe

From a Swiss perspective, the Portuguese revolution had two main aspects. The first concerned the consequences for the country's relations with its former colonies. For the political parties of Switzerland, there was a "risk of contagion" from the Carnation Revolution, which could have destabilised the neighbouring Franco regime and, in the further course of events, perhaps also Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia.

It is worth remembering that in 1974, Italy was the only one of these countries that was not led by an authoritarian government, although it was characterised by the severe tensions of the "Years of Lead". In Spain, the Franco regime was still in office despite Franco's worsening state of health and the resulting questions about the regime's continued existence. In Greece, the dictatorship of the colonels held power for a few more months. In the summer of 1974, the Turkish army invaded Cyprus, which led to the fall of the junta in Athens and the country's peaceful democratisation. In the Greek regime finally brought the junta to an end. All in all, there was a danger that the whole of southern Europe would become embroiled in civil war.

Freedom Fighters: In the background the young Jorge Carlos Fonseca in Lisbon, 1975.
Wikipedia

The second aspect concerns European colonialism. From the 15th century onwards, Portugal was one of the first patrons and one of the last European countries to maintain a genuine colonial empire in Africa after Greece and Italy. In the past, Switzerland had used its good relations with Portugal to maintain economic links with the colonised territories in Africa. The Carnation Revolution therefore marked an important step in the decolonisation of Africa in general, but also in the relations of Swiss companies with southern Africa in particular. Switzerland expected Portugal's demands for recognition of its former colonies, which were granted negotiated independence within 16 months.

Fear of a left-wing regime

For Bern, however, the most important question after the crisis was whether it was a transitional phase or whether the relations between martial law and the revolution could produce a left-wing regime against the backdrop of the Cold War. The fear of a takeover by Marxist organisations was very strong throughout the constitutional process, although the Communist Party participated in the legalist project together with the other parts of the movement.

The Swiss ambassador in Lisbon reported on all – actual or alleged – misdeeds and machinations of left-wing organisations in a style that often seems surreal today and always portrayed them as the "enemy" of the state. In a report of 29 April 1974, the Swiss ambassador in Lisbon, Jean-Louis Pahud, fed his government of warning in four weapons dumps. The Swiss ambassador in Lisbon initially announced that it was probably a coup by the communist press to discredit the army. But a few days later, the German newspaper Stern uncovered the matter. The general had actually made contact with a supposedly right-wing extremist armed group in order to buy weapons and ammunition.

Portrait of Antonio de Spínola, October 1974.
Wikipedia

Under pressure from Jean-Pierre de Chastonay, who questioned whether the authorities believed he was a "simple fantasist", the Federal Council decided to expel the former general from the country. The reason given were his political actions, which contradicted the terms of the visa. This case marked one of the final twists in the revolution and bilateral relations subsequently normalised.

Joint research

This text is the result of a collaboration between the Swiss National Museum (SNM) and the Swiss Diplomatic Documents Research Centre (DoDis). The 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution was the occasion for several publications and historical events that inspired this text. The documents accessible on DoDis are available online.

Published on: 25.04.2024