

Meneses, Filipe Ribeiro de. *A Grande Guerra de Afonso Costa*. Lisbon: Publicações Dom Quixote, 2015, 527 pp. ISBN: 978-972-20-5877-3

David Castaño¹

This book is part of a long process of research that Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses, a Professor from the Department of History at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, has been devoting to the First Republic and to the Portuguese participation in the First World War. The author of *União Sagrada e Sidonismo: Portugal em Guerra, 1916-1918* (Lisbon, 2000) and *Afonso Costa* (Lisbon, 2010), Ribeiro de Meneses has emerged both as a practitioner of political history based on the narrative genre and as a skilled biographer (in addition to his biography of Afonso Costa, he also wrote *Salazar: A Political Biography*, New York, 2009, Lisbon, 2010, and São Paulo, 2011).

Using an extremely wide set of primary sources contained at national and international archives (Military Historical Archives, Ministry of the Interior Archives, Historic and Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Library, Mário Soares Foundation, Archives of the Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Liddell Hart Military Archives, National Archives and Politisches Archiv des Aswärtigen Amtes), which enabled him to compare official documents and private correspondence with press articles, memoirs, diaries and personal testimonies from the chosen period, this study also uses the most recent historiographical contributions dedicated to the Portuguese First Republic and the Great War, not forgetting Oliveira Marques' pioneering work dedicated to the man who marked the early years of the Portuguese republican regime.

The title suggests that this is a work devoted to the study of the Portuguese participation in the Great War or, alternatively, to the study of the war waged by Afonso Costa in order to take the country into the first major conflict of the twentieth century. However, in the introduction, Ribeiro de Meneses explains that this book is not a history of the Portuguese participation in World War I, nor a political history of this period. His intention is to narrate and interpret the path followed by Afonso Costa at a crucial moment in Portuguese contemporary history. More specifically, the author analyzes the political behavior of the leader of the Portuguese Republican Party (PRP) over a range of situations

¹ IPRI ([Portuguese Institute for International Relations](#)) – Nova University of Lisbon. E-mail: davidmcastano@hotmail.com

which, in his view, reveal ambiguities and contradictions that are difficult to explain. In this way, he seeks to overcome the view (which he considers to be incomplete) that Afonso Costa's political erosion is to be explained by the consequences of his efforts to promote Portugal's military participation on the European front.

Nevertheless, in this large volume (527 pages), the actions of Afonso Costa are somewhat diluted by long passages contextualizing the complex internal, colonial, and external environment, relegating the thoughts, intentions, actions, and omissions of this Republican leader to a secondary level in various parts of the book.

In the introduction, Ribeiro de Meneses identifies a number of situations and decisions that he later intends to clarify. These are set out in chronological order and the reader is led to believe that the book's structure will follow this same sequence: Costa's position in relation to the movement in favor of interventionism; his role in the crisis that befell Bernardino Machado's government; his refusal to lead the executive after the coup of May 1915; his behavior during the diplomatic crisis that led Portugal into war; his insistence on the constitution of the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps (CEP) and its submission to the European front; his role in the fall of the first government of the "União Sagrada"; his uncomfortable relationship with his own party during his last government; and, finally, his silence during exile. However, the book is divided, once again in chronological order, into six main chapters in which these issues are not afforded any particular emphasis and end up not being distinguished from the other subchapters. For example, Afonso Costa's position on the Great War is only analyzed by the author on page 56, following a brief description of the situation of the Portuguese Republic in 1914 and the beginning of the war and after an examination of the debate between the interventionists and the supporters of neutrality, a description of the military preparations for a possible military expedition and the author's careful dissection of Bernardino Machado's attitude towards the war. Instead, the analysis of all of these aspects could have taken the position of the central figure of the book as their starting point. Basically, the author's great efforts to provide a credible contextualization tend to disregard the actions of the person who was largely responsible for sending troops to Europe, as he himself confirms. In this regard, we should note that Ribeiro de Meneses shows how, despite the fact that, at the beginning of the conflict, Afonso Costa was not among the major proponents of interventionism, he took immediate action to obstruct the sending of artillery pieces without artillerymen, and he proved to be an advocate of the direct

involvement of Portuguese military forces alongside the allies on European battlefields, i.e., sending them into the “eye of the hurricane” (197).

Ribeiro de Meneses maintains that this obsession had its genesis in the idea (among other factors that are presented by several historians who have studied this issue and are also taken into consideration throughout the book) that only this level of commitment to the allied war effort would enable Portugal, in the first place, to have access to the grains and other raw materials that were indispensable for guaranteeing the efficient functioning of the economy, and, secondly, to participate in the Peace Conference and ensure the country’s access to its fair share at a later date when the winners presented the accounts of the war to those that lost. As we know, this strategy was defeated, and, as its chief architect, Afonso Costa was to suffer the consequences of this failure. But the great challenge of this book is precisely to discover other reasons for the political fate of Afonso Costa.

Let us then turn to the central theme of this work and to the decisions and behaviors exhibited by Afonso Costa during these years. What stand out above all else are the omissions and the absences. In several passages, Ribeiro de Meneses refers to criticisms that were directed towards Afonso Costa by other interventionists, namely Jaime Cortesão, about the lack of propaganda, and points to several occasions at critical periods in the national political life when the leader of the *democráticos* was absent. In some cases, the author indicates the reasons for such absences and silences, but the reader is led to think that, after all, Afonso Costa, a prominent anticlerical, was a cultivator of *Sebastianism* and saw himself as a messiah: the only one able to make a success of the radical project. It turns out that while, for moderate and conservative republicans, royalists and Catholics, Afonso Costa was considered a radical, for some sectors within his party and other leftist groups, the democratic leader was believed to have contributed to the failure of the revolution and the radical project that he had started as Minister of Justice in the provisional government.

Quoting Oliveira Marques, Ribeiro de Meneses states that for Afonso Costa the Republic was not an end in itself, “but only a first necessary step for the implementation of a ‘full socialism’, the ‘socialism of the future’” (15). This statement deserves further development. Why are there no references in the book to the way that Costa regarded and accompanied the events taking place in Russia? On two occasions, reference is made to the victory of the Bolsheviks and to the end of the eastern front (372, 389), but no allusion is made to Afonso Costa’s positioning in relation to this remarkable historical fact. Despite the great differences between the two countries that marked the western and eastern limits of the European continent, there were certainly some factors that linked them together.

One was the lack of bread. It happens that, in Russia, bread was presented as a synonym for peace, while in Portugal the same commodity was presented as a synonym for war.

The book raises pertinent questions and finds some answers, revealing, however, that there are still many paths yet to be followed and many topics to be studied in order to break new ground in the already distant land of the history of the First Republic.