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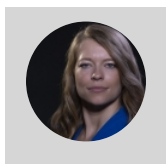
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The Portuguese overthrew a 40-year dictatorship in one day. How did they do it? And why was this revolt called the Carnation Revolution?

Half a century ago, on April 25, 1974, Portugal saw the fall of the authoritarian system led by António Salazar. How did this change the then poor country? And how do the Portuguese remember it? We asked participants and witnesses of the events.



Agnieszka Zielinska
from the Iberian Peninsula

23/04/2024
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Portuguese soldiers in the streets of Lisbon a few days after the successful coup, April 29, 1974 // Photo: Bettmann / Getty Images

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He knew he might never finish his studies. Although he had only two years left to defend his final thesis, a draft for the army was already waiting for him at home.

Today he recalls that it was a punishment for his activity in the student government. The authorities wanted to send rebellious students who opposed the dictatorship somewhere far outside the country – preferably to fight in defense of Portuguese colonies (there were still a few of them at that time).

The regime also hoped that the army would instill in young people the canon that the Portuguese dictatorship so eagerly invoked. Especially the one that the eternal dictator António Salazar, who had been in power since 1932, kept repeating in his motto: "God, country and family."

"We felt that change was coming"

João admits today that he has been very lucky in life. He was supposed to report for military training in September 1974. However, that April changed everything.

Earlier, in March, the political police had entered his parents' house. João was not present at the time. They ended up searching his room, much to the parents' horror.



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Colleagues from his organization spent months or even years in Portuguese prisons. He was lucky to avoid that.

He recalls that his generation was even banned from certain readings, especially Marx and Engels.

– Look how interesting it is. You Poles and we Portuguese were in two opposing political blocs at that time. We were forbidden to read almost all Russian books, and in Poland you had a communist dictatorship – says João Leal, now a 70-year-old professor of anthropology at the University of Nova in Lisbon, in an interview with Tygodnik.

Although undemocratic, Portugal had been a NATO member since the beginning of the Alliance. However, it would join the then European Community (today the Union) only a few years after the introduction of democracy, in 1986.

João recalls that despite the regime's repression, despite the censorship of the press and books, at that time, for months there had been a sense that some change was coming: "We were full of hope. And when on April 25, 1974, together with other students, we took to the streets, at first we didn't know what was happening or whose attack it was, leftist or rightist. But we went out and joined the soldiers who were leading this revolution.



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Celeste Caeiro was 40 years old then, and for her that April 25 was supposed to be just another Thursday at work.

The restaurant where she was a waitress was celebrating its anniversary. It was carnation season, so the restaurant management bought red ones to distribute among the customers. When it was certain that the revolution had begun, her boss decided to close the restaurant. So the woman was left with unnecessary bouquets of flowers. She took them with her.

On her way home, Celeste ran into soldiers, and one of them asked her for a cigarette. She didn't smoke, but she offered him a flower. He put it in the barrel of his rifle. Other soldiers began to imitate the gesture. Soon, flower sellers in the Baixa district, the historic center of Lisbon, began handing out more flowers to the rebel soldiers...

Many theories have since accumulated as to where the carnations in the barrels came from – captured in numerous photos taken that day. But, as João Leal argues, the one involving Celeste, now 90 and living in Lisbon, is the most popular.

And he likes it the most.



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Flower sellers on the streets of the Portuguese capital. Lisbon, May 1, 1974 // Photo: Bettmann / Getty Images

"Everyone is equal, and the people rule"

The signal to start the revolution was to be the broadcasting of the song "Grândola, vila morena" on the radio – the basic means of media communication at that time.

Previously banned by the regime, this song by teacher and folk singer José Afonso tells the story of the difficult life and brotherhood of the inhabitants of the small southern Portuguese town of Grândola. The lyrics



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people like:

The young officers who had planned this revolution in their barracks decided that this particular song would be the signal to start an armed coup. The song was broadcast on April 25, just after midnight.

Alfredo Cunha, then a photographer-intern at a Portuguese newspaper, heard it. He recalled what he witnessed in a conversation with Tereixa Constenla of the daily El País: "I heard about the revolution on the radio. I lived in the city of Amadora, not far from Lisbon. I immediately got on the train, and when I met the first people on the streets [of Lisbon] and the army, it was not yet seven in the morning. The PIDE [Portuguese secret political police] officers were firing small arms, there were fatalities. Fortunately, the army did not shoot. The soldiers were aware that if the tanks started shooting, there would be massive bloodshed."

New times are coming

There were only a few rebel soldiers on the streets at the time, just over two thousand. However, thanks to good organization, they quickly managed to take over the seat of power and the government media. By noon, it was all over.

The revolution took place in an almost bloodless manner, four people died



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a few years earlier), after a short period in prison, surrendered to the revolutionaries. Then he and his closest associates were allowed to leave the country (he settled in Brazil, a former Portuguese colony, where he died a few years later).

A new government began in Portugal. Left-wing parties, including communists, came to power.

– I was a little boy then and we emigrated to the USA with my parents. We talked a lot about politics at home. Many Portuguese living abroad were afraid that when the communists took power, another dictatorship would come. They made up gloomy scenarios that we might not be able to return to our country and see our families. Many were also afraid for their homes that they had in Portugal – recalls Miguel Moniz, now a doctor of anthropology from the Institute of Social Sciences in Lisbon, in an interview with “Tygodnik”.

Fortunately, this did not happen. In 1975, democratic elections were held, after which the far-left government was removed. A new one was formed by socialists and moderate conservatives. Although this was not the "end of history" - in the meantime, there was an attempted mutiny by soldiers associated with the far-left - the country had entered a path that was the opposite of what had happened before April 25, 1974.



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At that time, António de Oliveira Salazar, a conservative Catholic (he attended a seminary in his youth, but ultimately did not become a priest) and an economist by profession, became prime minister. A year later, the so-called New State, *Estado Novo*, was officially created.

Before the dictator died – four years before the Carnation Revolution – his political legacy was taken over in 1968 by Caetano, who continued his line. In his book on Salazar, historian Ribeiro de Meneses compares the dictatorships in Portugal and neighboring Spain: “There was no civil war in Portugal, Salazar did not seize power as Franco. There was repression, but the country and its families were not divided to such an extent. There was no such bloodshed in Portugal.”

However, in an authoritarian system (based on single-party rule) and a social contract (based in turn on professional and social corporations), it was impossible to conduct any alternative political activity or go on strike, the opposition was suppressed, and opponents were imprisoned.

Repression and emigration

Observing what was happening in Eastern Europe at the time, Salazar was especially afraid of the communists. That is why Álvaro Cunhal, the secretary general of the Portuguese Communist Party, spent 12 years in



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also ruthlessness that allowed Salazar and his successor to stay in power for over 40 years.

Many Portuguese had to emigrate during the dictatorship not only for political reasons, but above all for economic reasons. Salazar, although a professor of economics by education, led the country to poverty, which forced many residents to emigrate for work – especially the poorest, workers and farmers. For example: among the emigrants who reached France in 1970, over 50 percent were Portuguese.

"My generation dreamed of going to a rock concert, but in the dictatorship there was no chance. There were separate schools for girls and boys, and if one of the schools refused to adapt, it was immediately closed. We didn't like the moral tone, the conservative Catholicism, the emphasis on family values at every turn. Like most of my peers, I was also against the wars in the colonies," João Leal tells me.

The Collapse of the Colonial Empire

The Portuguese – once at the forefront of European explorers and later colonizers – were still clinging to their colonial empire. The largest colony, Brazil, had already achieved independence in the early 19th century. However, after World War II, Lisbon still controlled Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and East Timor.



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Independence movements consumed up to 40 percent of the budget annually. Most Portuguese wanted peace, an end to the colonial wars, which they had little chance of winning anyway.

The final straw was the oil crisis in 1973. Until then, the state had subsidized gas. The crisis caused prices to rise sharply, which was felt by the residents. The fact that the authorities preferred to spend money on further military operations in the colonies, rather than helping the citizens on the ground, aroused dissatisfaction.

In early 1974, General António de Spínola, commander of the troops stationed in Guinea-Bissau, called for an end to the colonial wars through negotiations; he was expelled from the army for this. However, many soldiers supported him, as was also seen in the streets on April 25, 1974.

The first years of democracy

The Carnation Revolution put an end to the isolationism to which Portugal had been condemned and contributed to the birth of new independent states. It also showed that armed forces did not have to be a mere instrument of oppression, but could be a liberating force. For the first few months after the revolution, Spínola served as president. He abolished censorship, eliminated surveillance by the secret services.

But the economy was still in serious trouble. In June 1975, Lisbon



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has dried up. Unemployment is rising as refugees from Angola and soldiers are demobilized. Revenues from the second-largest sector of the economy, tourism, have fallen by about 75 percent."

In 1976, a new constitution was adopted, and the Third Republic was established. The aforementioned elections (parliamentary and presidential) were also held. The authorities of the new state had to deal with protests for a long time, as social and professional groups demanded their rights.

But that's another story.

Echoes of the past

Half a century has passed, and the election campaigns of recent years show that there are groups in politics that still sympathize with that regime. In 2022, the leader of the far-right Chega party in his slogan "God, homeland, family and work" directly referred to Salazar.

"It's a political game to appeal to the most right-wing voters. Most of the people who voted for Chega have more democratic views, but their vote was meant to be a symbol of protest against the ruling elites," Prof. João Leal tells me.

However, this protest recently gave Chega's party more than 18 percent of



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government. He will head a minority cabinet.

Meanwhile, 50 years after the Carnation Revolution, historians are still discovering new facts. They are now focusing on smaller, sometimes symbolic events and the involvement of particular social groups. Thus, Professor Leal claims that there were in fact “many smaller revolutions” like the one at his university, which aimed to replace staff and liberalize and broaden curricula.

Bittersweet

Today, the Portuguese also recall the song “Grândola, vila morena”. It can sometimes be heard during demonstrations against unpopular decisions – as in 2012, during the eurozone crisis, when the then government was introducing budget cuts.

Paulo, 64, tells me that while he supports the revolution, it hasn't solved all the problems: “Salazar was poor and died poor, and that's very Portuguese. He even banned us from drinking Coca-Cola because he was against consumerism.”

Alfredo Cunha, one of the photographers of the revolution, thinks similarly. In an interview with El País, he said: “I am satisfied with freedom, democracy, the end of the war and how happy we were then. But I am dissatisfied with the society we have created, with inequality



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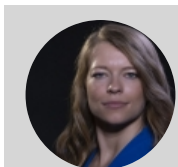
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Instead of producing wealth, produces new people.

But are there any revolutions that solve all problems?

#Portugal , #Carnation Revolution , #Antonio Salazar

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