

The Vote for the Greatest Portuguese and its Leading Candidates

A Fascist, a Communist and a Righteous Gentile

by Norman Berdichevsky (March 2016)



When Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, Portugal's authoritarian ruler since 1932 finally was unable to rule effectively and his regime subsequently deposed by a military coup in 1974 ("The Carnation Revolution"), there was universal agreement that he left Portugal the poorest and most backward nation in Western Europe. Reporters on the scene in Lisbon reported signs of jubilation equaling V-E Day in London or Paris.

How is it possible then that when a Portuguese television program ran a survey in 2007 and staged write-in vote for "The Greatest Portuguese" amidst remarks from media commentators and letters to the editor that Vasco de Gama or Magellan, or the great poets Luis de Camões and Fernando Pessoa, the great fado star Amalia Rodrigues or one or another famous king would be the certain winner, it was however, none other than Salazar, never even mentioned in the original list of candidates! Many voters cited his dedication, competence, austerity and integrity as worthy of their vote.

Even discounting many voters who may have been registering a "tongue-in-cheek protest vote" of sarcasm to express disappointment with the unfulfilled promises of the Carnation Revolution, it was also a poignant reflection that many Portuguese did indeed value his enormous contributions to stabilizing the chaotic aftermath of the Republican Revolution in 1910. The Republic has been described as "*continual anarchy, government corruption, rioting and pillage, assassinations, arbitrary imprisonment and religious persecution*". It had had eight Presidents, 44 cabinet reorganizations and 21 revolutions until Salazar.

During his forty years in power, the highest estimate of fatalities among political prisoners amounted to no more than sixty, an inconsequential number

compared to any other dictatorial European regime of the 20th century. The TV special featured individual documentaries advocating the top ten candidates. The final vote took place on 25 March 2007, Salazar was the winner with 41% of the write-in votes. Nevertheless, in second place was Alvaro Cunhal (19.1%) – the general secretary of the Portuguese Communist Party (1961-1992) and a life-long opponent of the Salazar regime!

Among the also-rans were the famous expected navigators of the Age of Discovery, poets, writers and kings but the unexpected third place finisher was a testament to the conscience of the nation, one traditionally considered a bastion of antisemitism, Aristides de Sousa Mendes (13.1%), a career diplomat demoted by Salazar. Sousa Mendes is remembered with great honor as one of the “Righteous Gentiles” by the State of Israel!

Spain and Portugal During World War II

In 1940 (the 300th anniversary of Portugal’s regaining its independence from Spain), a leading Spanish magazine wrote (threatened?) that: *“it was God’s will that the two countries be reunited again.”* This anecdotal incident reflected much of Spanish anxiety over Portuguese “neutrality” and possible cooperation with the British. Salazar had to walk a narrow tightrope to preserve Portuguese neutrality.

In April 1941, President Roosevelt declared that the Portuguese possession of the Azores lay in the “Western Hemisphere,” implying that they came under the protection of the American “Monroe Doctrine.” Their significance for the American and British navies in combating the German U-boat threat was essential. Franco maintained a strict neutrality, and even permitted thousands of Spanish volunteers to serve with the German Army in a special “Blue Division” to fight communist Russia (5,000 were killed and missing in combat on the Eastern Front).

The Portuguese under the crafty Salazar however, knew where their most vital interests lay and by June 1943 the British formally invoked their ancient alliance with Portugal, requesting the use of airfields on the islands. Portugal agreed. Salazar was convinced that just as Portugal had entered World War I to ensure that its overseas empire would remain intact at the Versailles Peace Conference, it was essential that Portugal secure a place among the victorious Allies in the second World War (see *NER* April, 2015, [“Franco, Fascism and the](#)

[Falange](#)”). Embarrassed by the favorable American press received by Salazar in June 1940, Franco made it Spanish policy to accept all refugees who legally entered Spain and even gave special attention to Jews of Spanish-Portuguese descent (the “Sephardim”). He also realized that it could conceivably be in Spain’s interest to maintain a decent and humanitarian respect for the refugees and he was determined not to play “second fiddle” to Salazar. Although neither had intended to aid Jewish refugees, the inherent sense of rivalry between the two countries inadvertently came into play as a result of a sensationalist story of humanitarian interest in the American press.

The Final Chapter

Sousa Mendes died in poverty on April 3, 1954, owing money and still in disgrace with his government. The Israeli Holocaust authority Yad Vashem had begun to recognize Holocaust rescuers as “Righteous Among the Nations” and in 1966, Sousa Mendes was among the earliest to be so named, thanks in large part to the efforts of daughter Joana. However, Salazar was still in power, and reluctant to have the case made public. His representatives denied the existence of Directive 14. In 1987, the Portuguese government began to rehabilitate Sousa Mendes’ memory and granted him a posthumous Order of Liberty medal, one of that country’s highest honors. A year later, the Portuguese parliament officially dismissed all charges, restoring Sousa Mendes to the diplomatic corps posthumously by unanimous vote and honoring him with a standing ovation. He was also promoted to the rank of Ministro Plenipotenciário and awarded the Cross of Merit.

U.S. Ambassador to Portugal, Edward Rowell, presented copies of the congressional resolution from the previous year to Pedro Nuno de Sousa Mendes, one of the sons who had helped his father in the assembly line at Bordeaux, and in 1994, former President Mario Soares dedicated a bust of Sousa Mendes along with a commemorative plaque at the address at which the consulate at Bordeaux had been housed. In 1995, Portugal held a week-long National Homage to Sousa Mendes, culminating with an event paying tribute to him in a 2000-seat Lisbon theater that was filled to capacity. A commemorative stamp was issued to mark the occasion and the Portuguese President Mário Soares declared Sousa Mendes to be “Portugal’s greatest hero of the twentieth century.”

Norman Berdichevsky is the author of [*Modern Hebrew: The Past and Future of a Revitalized Language*](#).

To comment on this article, please click