

“Tarrafal Never Again!” exhibition in Lisbon exposes horrors of Portugal’s fascist concentration camp

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Tarrafal Never Again!—Exhibition at the Aljube Museum—Resistance and Freedom (Museu do Aljube Resistência e Liberdade) in Lisbon, Portugal, October 18, 2018—April 28, 2019

Visitors to the Aljube Museum—Resistance and Freedom (Museu do Aljube Resistência e Liberdade) in Lisbon will be shocked by what they learn about a period of Portuguese history whose brutalities have largely been suppressed.

Located across from the city’s Sé Cathedral, the old building served as a prison for centuries. It was where the feared PIDE (Polícia Internacional de Defesa do Estado) secret police incarcerated and tortured thousands of political opponents of the fascist regime that ruled Portugal from 1926 to 1974 until its overthrow in the Carnation Revolution.

A current exhibition “Tarrafal Never Again!” tells the story of the little-known concentration camp in the former Portuguese colony of Cape Verde, an island group in the central Atlantic Ocean. The exhibition includes stark photographs of the arid, isolated prison, coldly meticulous government dossiers detailing the lives and deaths of individual prisoners under the most wretched conditions, and moving testimony from survivors.

The Aljube Museum was established due to a campaign by the Civic Movement Don’t Erase Memories! (NAM)—primarily led by former Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) turned Socialist Party (PS) members—to combat the “complicit amnesia regarding the dictatorship that we faced between 1926 and 1974.”

However, steps were taken to ensure that a safely controlled history would emerge from the campaign. This was indicated by the agreement reached in 2008 by all the parliamentary parties, including the most right-wing, to create a National Roadmap for Freedom and Resistance and a memorial in Lisbon.

In 2013, then PS mayor of Lisbon and current Prime Minister António Costa gave the go-ahead for the Aljube prison to be converted into a museum (instead of luxury apartments), overseen by the Mário Soares Foundation. Soares, a leading figure in the liberal opposition to the dictatorship, founder of what was to become the PS, twice prime minister and then president of the Republic, opened it in 2015. The PCP abandoned its own plans for a museum.

The museum’s mission is to promote “the history and memory of the fight against the dictatorship and the recognition of resistance in favour of freedom and democracy.” The possibility of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society is expunged from the narrative.

It was the instability and weakness of Portugal’s First Republic, which saw eight presidents and 45 governments between 1910 and 1926, and the movement of the working class, inspired by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, that led to the right-wing coup of May 28, 1926.

In 1928, António de Oliveira Salazar, an economics lecturer, was appointed Portugal’s finance minister and then prime minister (1932-1968). In direct response to continuing working class struggles that peaked in a five-day insurrection in 1934, Salazar declared his clerical-fascist New State (Estado Novo) with its values of God, Fatherland, Authority, Family and Work. It was anti-communist and venerated a rural lifestyle uncorrupted by industrialisation.

The most important function of Salazar’s regime for Portugal’s ruling elite was its strangling of any struggle by the working class at home and opposition developing in the colonies. Independent trade unions and strikes were outlawed, and workers were forced into state company unions or “sindicatos.” The PCP leadership was imprisoned or driven into exile.

The exhibition includes the original 1936 letter authorising the construction of Tarrafal. That year, some 150 political prisoners arrived from the mainland, including those who had taken part in the 1934 insurrection, as well as sailors who had mutinied on two naval vessels in 1936.

They found themselves in a makeshift “camp,” a rectangle of 200 by 150 metres, bordered with a deep trench and surrounded with barbed wire. For the first two years, the men were kept in canvas tents while work brigades built more-permanent structures. Guards took all their clothing and other personal effects.

Until its temporary closure in 1954 after national and international pressure, 360 men passed through the camp.

The desperate conditions took their toll, and the prison soon became known as the concentration camp of “slow death.” Edmundo Pedro recalled the maniacal raging of commandant Captain Manuel Martins dos Reis: “You have no rights here, you have only duties to fulfil. And do not be deceived—anyone who enters that gate will die. You will all drop like flies!”

At least 32 inmates did die between 1937 and 1948. Most were working class men in their twenties and thirties, and many were PCP members. Public pressure, including a huge demonstration in 1974, saw their remains eventually brought back to Portugal.

Gilberto de Oliveira recalls the punishment by isolation in the “frigideira,” or “frying pan”—depending on the season. “The feeding on alternating days meant bread and hot water on one day and bread and cold water on the other. ... The punishment in the frying pan, therefore, consisted in isolation, starvation, slow asphyxiation, dehydration, sweltering heat during the day and abrupt cooling at night and, often, beatings.” Temperatures inside the concrete punishment cell reached 60 degrees Celsius [140 degrees Fahrenheit] and victims could spend days at a time there. One prisoner, Joaquim Faustino Campos, spent 108 days there.

The camp's closing in 1954 was short-lived. In 1961, Tarrafal was reopened to imprison and torture a new set of political prisoners—those from the rebelling Portuguese colonies of Cape Verde, Angola and Guinea-Bissau. One recalled, “The disciplinary cell was a kind of tomb inside a warehouse. ... At 3 p.m. it was already dark inside. Here I tamed sparrows.”

The Tarrafal exhibition and the Aljube museum bring a deliberately “forgotten” history to a far wider audience. However, the idea that the bitter struggle and enormous sacrifice against the fascist regime and its overthrow by the Carnation Revolution all culminated successfully in the establishment of a more liberal capitalist regime of “freedom and democracy” is a dangerous lie.

The successful Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 was a powerful vindication of Leon Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. In opposition to the Menshevik conception that Russia was too economically backward for socialism, Trotsky insisted that Russian development could be understood only within the context of the world economy. Consequently, the democratic tasks once associated with the bourgeois revolution could only be completed under the leadership of the working class, drawing behind it the rural masses, in a socialist revolution that must then be completed on the European and world arena.

It was on this basis, with the guidance of the Communist International (Comintern), that the Portuguese Communist Party was formed in 1921. But the subsequent evolution of the PCP and all the world's Communist parties was shaped by the rise to power after Lenin's death of a bureaucratic caste within the USSR under the leadership of Joseph Stalin.

The theory of “socialism in one country” developed by Stalin and Bukharin in 1924 provided the ideological foundation for the abandonment of the programme of world socialist revolution. The international workers' movement was increasingly subordinated to the Stalinist bureaucracy's defence of its own material interests.

This produced massive defeats for the working class. Most catastrophic of all was Hitler's accession to power in Germany in 1933, following which Trotsky concluded that the Soviet Communist Party and the Comintern could not be reformed and called for the founding of the Fourth International.

Stalinism's political disarming of the working class was to prove disastrous in Portugal. The PCP leadership was purged and the Stalinist two-stage theory of revolution imposed. During the “first stage,” the revolution was deemed to have a national-bourgeois democratic character. The working class had to subordinate itself and its class interests to supposedly progressive bourgeois forces through “popular fronts.”

The “second stage,” the socialist revolution, was put off to an unspecified and distant future. Stalin's dissolution of the Comintern, which had become an obstacle to his alliance with American and British imperialism in 1943, confirmed that even this prospect had been abandoned. The post-war division of Europe, decided at conferences in Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam, established that the bourgeoisie would be kept in power in the West (and that meant Portugal) and that the Soviet Union would seek only a “buffer zone” in Eastern Europe.

The PCP slavishly followed the Stalinist line, joining the Movement of Democratic Unity (MUD), a coalition of bourgeois forces from across the political spectrum (including the extreme right) in 1945. In 1958, the Stalinist party supported General Humberto Delgado, a prominent New State leader (who had published a book in 1933 praising Adolf Hitler) when he contested and lost, through ballot rigging, the presidency in opposition to the official candidate.

Delgado's candidacy was a sign that the regime was fracturing. Growing unrest among students and workers in the 1960s was met with police repression and arrests.

Álvaro Cunhal, elected PCP secretary general in 1961, noted that the party had not benefitted from the “pre-insurrection” situation, in which it

had “it had been superseded by the initiative of the popular masses.” The PCP, of course, had no intention of leading an insurrectionary movement. In 1964 it formed the Patriotic Front for National Liberation (FPLN) with social democratic politicians, Delgado and various liberal bourgeois figures.

In 1970, Cunhal was to reaffirm the Stalinist two-stage theory, declaring that “at each stage of the revolution the proletariat must have a corresponding system of alliances with different classes and layers of the population. ... The proletariat's allies for the socialist revolution are not the same as for the national democratic revolution.”

Cunhal made his statement just as the Portuguese ruling elite confronted a massive strike wave at home and uprisings in the colonies. Compulsory military service in the colonial wars combined with low pay intensified grievances in the army and stimulated opposition, which developed into the Armed Forces Movement (MFA).

When the MFA launched a coup on April 25, 1974, it was intended to be merely a democratic *renovação* (renovation) or face-lift. But it inadvertently brought the masses onto the streets demanding more fundamental change. Workers began taking over factories, offices and shops, and peasants occupied farmlands. The revolutionary atmosphere spread among soldiers and sailors who marching alongside the workers, carrying banners demanding socialism.

The PCP played a key role, along with the PS (founded in 1973) and petty bourgeois left groups, in betraying the revolution and providing capitalism a breathing space. The Stalinists tied the working class to the ruling elite, promoting “the alliance of the MFA and people” and glorifying supposedly “left” military generals.

A new constitution was proclaimed in Portugal on April 2, 1976, and elections for a new Assembly of the Republic led to a PS victory. In power, the new Prime Minister Soares turned to the International Monetary Fund and implemented a structural adjustment programme at the behest of big business.

Speaking in 1995, Cunhal revealed his nationalist conceptions, blaming the then right-wing Conservative government for “sacrificing Portuguese interests to foreign interests.” The PCP today follows in his footsteps, calling for a “patriotic policy of the left” aimed at “the sovereign development of our country.” It retains its influence within the largest Portuguese trade union federation, the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers, which has played an indispensable role in imposing the austerity measures of one government after another and has been rewarded with large state subsidies.

Today, the PCP is seeking to control and police the huge strike wave that has erupted in Portugal and prevent its development into an insurgency against the PS government.

These efforts to demobilise the working class contain great dangers. The vast levels of social inequality and the ruling elite's return to military rearmament and war can only be imposed through the suppression of “freedom and democracy” and by resorting to authoritarian forms of rule and fascism. The slogan “Never Again” runs the risk of ringing hollow, given the return of the fascist cancer throughout Europe—including Vox in neighbouring Spain. The Aljube Museum exhibition is evidence of the price the working class paid in the 20th century for the failure to overthrow capitalism.

The authors recommend:

Thirty years since the Portuguese Revolution—Part 1

Thirty years since the Portuguese Revolution—Part 2

Thirty years since the Portuguese Revolution—Part 3

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