

25 DE ABRIL, SEMPRE!

Rezola, Maria Inácia. *The Portuguese Revolution of 1974–75: An Unexpected Path to Democracy*. Liverpool UP, 2024.

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2024 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Portugal's Carnation Revolution and it is safe to say that, even though much still needs to be done, and much remained the same, the country has undergone enormous changes in that half a century. In spite of its many fragilities, from disastrous economic conditions to a minimal infrastructure outside of the major urban centres, there are clear successes. The country's literacy rate has significantly improved from less than 80% in 1974 to over 90% in the present. Democratic processes, even if constantly weakened by old power structures and corruption, has become established. The country joined the EU, adopted the euro, and ended its bloody and infamous wars against the emerging nations in Africa that had caused so much devastation and carnage in the thirteen years preceding the Revolution. In order to mark and celebrate fifty years of freedom after almost fifty years of fascism, all kinds of activities and organised, among which various international and interdisciplinary conferences in Portugal and in many other countries. A host of publications also ensued or was in preparation, some of which provided much needed information or consolidated established knowledge.

One such, early, publication is *The Portuguese Revolution of 1974-75: An Unexpected Path to Democracy*, by Maria Inácia Rezola, an experienced and highly published historian affiliated with the Institute of Contemporary History at the Universidade Nova in Lisbon. Amidst a sea of celebratory publications, many of them ephemeral, this is a most welcome, solid, and original contribution. Published as part of an established and growing series on 'The Portuguese-Speaking World: Its History, Politics and Culture' from Liverpool University Press, the book's main audience clearly extends beyond the confines of Portugal and yet, I would argue, it is also a Portuguese audience that can derive much profit from it. The author is keenly aware of this as in her dedication she both mentions the Captains of April, those intrepid young men who risked all to liberate their country, as well as present students, 'May

these events, so distant and unfamiliar to you, become relevant and help you understand the Portugal of yesterday, and of today’.

The book is divided in three main parts of varying length: the first looks at ‘The Captains: A Revolution in the Pipeline’, the second at ‘The Military, the Politics, and the People: A Country in Revolution’ while the third examines ‘Politicians and the People: The End of a Revolution’. Although it might seem a minor point the fact that Rezola does not shy away from using the term ‘Revolution’, indeed that she stresses it throughout and noticeably in the titles of all three sections, should be heeded. Far too many historical studies, under a claim of supposed objectivity and often not even that, avoid that designation, going so far as referring it to a coup d’état. If the Revolution got its start on the initiative and absolute risk of the young junior officers who left their barracks and descended into Lisbon in the early hours of that day, the people immediately and spontaneously joined them on the streets, so calling it a coup, in my view, is not only surious but seriously ideologically charged. This does not mean that Rezola does not see all of the multiple problems which assailed the Revolution from the very beginning, including the various attempts either by conservative forces in the military, or even the Portuguese Communist Party, to derail, reroute, or simply take over the initial uprising and its promises to rebuild a very different country, in line with other Western democracies and principles of freedom and universal representation.

If, for those who lived the Revolution as it unfolded, times could be euphoric, they could also be difficult and scary. In the lead up to her conclusion Rezola offers a succinct overview:

The 11 months after the overthrow of the dictatorship were troubled. There was resistance to the decolonisation process and the guaranteeing of independence to the colonies. There were two failed coup attempts. There were the first street confrontations between the defenders of electoral legality and revolutionary legality over *unicidade sindical*. There was the debate on the role of the MFA [the Armed Forces Movement that had started the revolution] in the future constitutional framework. There was the institutionalisation of the MFA, through the creation of the Council of the Revolution and the restructuring of the MFA Assembly. There were the first nationalisations. But nothing was yet definite as regards the Portugal to be established (...). (p. 237).

Rezola's book is not a brief introduction to the Carnation Revolution, even though it might well be deployed to serve that function, as it has a richness of detail. It certainly will be useful in various university courses, whether about Portuguese culture or European Political History. Indeed, it might even surprise some who thought, like this reader, that they were fairly aware of the various intricacies related to that turbulent period. Readers might take exception with one or another view. Personally, I would have liked to read a bit more about the effects of the Revolution on the rural areas – but I realise choices had to be made and obviously the revolutionary process and the ensuing political struggles were largely played in the urban centers. Likewise, even though I tend to see the 25th of November 1975 in a different light and question it having had any merit at all, Rezola's point that 'the great merit of 25 November was probably to make possible the end of the Revolution and the acceleration of the process of institutionalising democracy' is valid. Obviously, nothing lasts forever, much less a revolution. Fifty years after the Revolution, the positive changes brought on by relative stability and integration into the European project, largely outweigh the negatives. Another way in which Rezola's book stands out is its ability to steer clear of both nostalgia and hagiography. And yet, fifty years after the Revolution, just when one would think democratic life and the rule of law have become firmly anchored in the experience of the Portuguese, one would do well not to be blind and be alert to how quickly those guarantees brought on by the Revolution are severely threatened by the upsurge of the far right and a newly rediscovered taste for strong men and authoritarian states everywhere. More of a reason to pay attention to an essential historical study such as this book, lest one forget the recent past and all its devastation. Resistance is again called for: '25 de Abril, Sempre!'