

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 128

“A Portuguesa”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Kingdom of Portugal and the Kingdom of England first agreed to an alliance all the way back in 1386, in the Treaty of Windsor. This treaty has been in effect ever since, even in our time, making this the oldest alliance in the world still in force, a justified point of pride for both nations.

But the awkward truth is that by the late 19th century, this treaty, though still formally in effect, had become nearly a dead letter. But then came the Great War, which breathed new life into the old alliance, though not necessarily in the way you might expect.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 128. *A Portuguesa*.

I began writing this episode intending it to be the next chapter in the story of the Great War in Africa, which we last visited in episode 113, but the British effort to subdue German East Africa, the one German colony that stubbornly refuses to get subdued, is now going to include assistance from Belgium and Portugal. Assistance that the British were less than pleased to accept, for reasons I'll get into in a few minutes.

The involvement of Belgian and Portuguese soldiers in the war in German East Africa stems from the geographical fact that the German colony borders not only on British East Africa and other British territories, but also on the Belgian Congo and on Portuguese East Africa, which we know today as Mozambique. So before I can talk about the Belgian and Portuguese roles in the fighting, maybe we should first take a look at these neighboring colonies.

First, a quick recap on the Belgian Congo. I already talked about King Leopold's Congo Free State at length in episodes 19 and 20. At the conclusion of episode 20, the Belgian government took control of the Congo Free State, which was thereafter called the Belgian Congo. By 1916,

Metropolitan Belgium is mostly under German occupation, but the Belgian authorities still rule in the Belgian Congo. That the Belgian colonial authorities in the Congo began eyeing German East Africa and thinking thoughts of revenge is perfectly understandable, if not necessarily excusable. Germany deserved to be punished for attacking neutral and innocent Belgium, and you know, turning over German East Africa to Belgian control as a form of reparation might sound like a pretty good idea to the Belgians.

I say it's not excusable because remember that, at least in theory, Belgian rule in the Congo started out as a philanthropic exercise in making life better for the Congolese. Introducing the benefits of modern civilization, opening trade, abolishing slavery, all that good stuff. This was the understanding under which the Great Powers ceded control of the Congo to Leopold in the first place. King Leopold's reign of terror makes all this sound like a sick joke in retrospect, but when the government in Brussels took over control of the territory, that was supposed to turn the project around, and in any case, when the Belgian government claimed the Congo, they took ownership of King Leopold's philanthropic promises, too. Control of the Congo is supposed to be for the benefit of the Congolese. The Congo is *not* supposed to be a staging area for a Belgian grab for additional African territory. But by 1916, there were few Belgians who would have much patience for that argument.

And then there's Portugal. I have been meaning to talk about Portugal for a while now, and this seems as good a time as any, so let's shift focus for a few minutes and take a closer look at Portugal.

The Kingdom of Portugal has come up in the podcast several times now, mostly when I talk about the Age of Exploration. I've only mentioned twentieth-century Portugal once so far. That was back in episode 56, when, following the lead of Barbara Tuchman, I described the May 1910 funeral of King Edward VII. Remember that? I named all the royals who were in the procession and then described the fate that awaited each of them: mostly either deposition or murder. One of the monarchs in that catalog of kings was Manoel II, King of Portugal. I said back then that he would be the first to go; his reign would not even survive the year 1910. Well, I wasn't lying, so let's take up that thread now, and follow it all the way to Africa.

The Age of Exploration had been good for Portugal. I've already made that plain enough, I hope. Portugal's far-flung trade empire made her rich, but bigger and more powerful European nations cut in on Portugal's action, which cost her her monopoly benefits. But she still had an Empire, and the crown jewel of the Portuguese Empire was Brazil.

She also had that alliance with England that I mentioned at the top of the episode, and which is still in effect today, although I should note that in our time, the United Kingdom and Portugal are both members of NATO, and their alliance obligations now run mostly through that treaty. Still, 632 years is a long time, and there is no doubt that this alliance helped shape the histories of both nations. For example, it is credited with introducing first, tea, and second, port, into English

culture. Port wine is made in Portugal, which became popular in England during the long period of tension with France, when French wine was expensive and hard to come by.

The English alliance also helped preserve Portugal's independence from Spain, but by the late 18th century, the Portuguese were finding their alliance with what is now the United Kingdom to be more of a burden than a benefit. Portugal's refusal to renounce the alliance led to her being invaded by France and Spain in 1762, during the Seven Years War. Forty-six years later, in 1808, Portugal's refusal to participate in the Napoleonic embargo against Britain led to another French invasion. This time, the Portuguese Court fled to Brazil. The Court decided they rather liked it in Brazil, and even after the French were expelled from Metropolitan Portugal, the Court dragged their feet about relocating back to Lisbon until the outbreak of revolution forced them to return in 1820.

But by this time Brazil was feeling its oats. Brazil had enjoyed having its own monarch and being the tail that wagged the dog for the past twelve years, and it was not content to go back to playing second fiddle to Portugal, especially not when the Spanish colonies all around were in the middle of their own wars of independence, and so in 1822, Brazil and Portugal went their separate ways.

That revolution in Portugal led to the end of absolute rule and the ratification of Portugal's first constitution. That was a good start, but it would not be the end of Portugal's woes. Its economy was a shambles. The old trading monopolies were long broken, and the loss of Brazil was a huge blow. Few Portuguese were educated, less than half the country was literate, and the Industrial Revolution seemed to have passed Portugal by.

With Brazil gone, Portugal's largest remaining colonial possessions were those in Africa. The Berlin Conference of 1884 ratified Portugal's control over its African territories, albeit with some reluctance. The Portuguese presence in their own territories was so small that some European diplomats questioned whether Portugal actually ruled there, which led the government of Portugal to spend resources it didn't have to strengthen its rule in Africa, with an eye not only toward securing its claim over what it had, but also expanding Portuguese rule into the interior of southern Africa, perhaps even linking up Portuguese East Africa and Portuguese West Africa into one large Portuguese territory that would stretch all the way from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.

This idea went over very badly with the British, who also claimed those interior territories—what in our time are Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Malawi. Lord Salisbury, the British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary at that time, reacted to the Portuguese claim with his characteristic charm and tact, saying, "You can shove it up your arse." When the Portuguese persisted in setting up outposts in the disputed territory, the British handed them an ultimatum in 1890, demanding the Portuguese withdraw.

There was no hope of taking on the world superpower, so Portugal backed down, but this event drove home how weak Portugal had become, not to mention angering many Portuguese, who pointed to the longstanding alliance with Britain. Hey, guys, remember those two times we got invaded by the French for standing up for you? And this is how you repay us? Hence the bitter joke that became popular in Portugal, which translates as something like, “Britain keeps Portugal close. So they can screw us.”

Meanwhile, internally, Portugal’s theoretical parliamentary democracy was in practice hopelessly corrupt and dominated by a few wealthy elites. The government went broke twice, in 1892 and 1902. Some in Portugal began to argue that the monarchy itself was hopelessly retrograde and that Portugal’s only hope was a republican revolution. This idea began to gather steam and merged with the rising Portuguese nationalism that the British ultimatum had helped enflame until a powerful underground republican movement emerged, a movement that took as its article of faith that Portugal was being held back by a failed political system, and the key to modernization and national renewal was a republican revolution.

In 1906, King Carlos began cracking down on this growing republican movement, using extra-constitutional measures like dismissing the parliament and censoring the press. On February 1, 1908, radical republican assassins struck back by ambushing the King’s carriage in Lisbon, killing both the King and his older son, the heir apparent. And so his 20-year old younger son inherited the throne and became King Manoel II. And here we are.

Manoel began his reign with the sympathy of the nation, which is natural after the shocking murders of his father and his older brother, and he made good faith efforts to reform the system, but it was a case of too little, too late. Manoel was deposed in a republican revolution just two and a half years later, on October 5, 1910, and went into exile in England. And so history remembers him by the epithet *Manoel o Desventurado*, or “Manoel the Unfortunate.”

Now, in those days of the Concert of Europe, every country was supposed to have a king. Republics were considered dangerous and unstable. But in this case, the prevailing view of Sir Edward Grey and the British government of the time was that Portugal was such a mess and the monarchy there had failed so thoroughly, that maybe a little republican shakeup was just what the doctor ordered.

Alas, it would not work out that way. As so often happens in revolutions, the winners fell into squabbling among themselves over exactly what kind of republic Portugal should be while the opposition, the usual collection of conservative Catholics and monarchist retreads, pressed for a restoration. In other words, there was no consensus.

All this political turmoil in Lisbon meant further neglect of Portugal’s colonies in Africa, a situation Sir Edward Grey decried as “scandalous.” What development there was in those colonies was funded by loans from Britain and Germany, and beginning in 1912, these two countries actually entered into secret negotiations to discuss stripping Portugal of her African

possessions and divvying them up between themselves. In Germany, an *Angola-Bund*, or “Angola League” was organized to advocate for German control of that territory.

We can only speculate about what might have come from these Anglo-German negotiations. Perhaps an agreement? Perhaps an Anglo-German rivalry over the Portuguese territories, perhaps even an armed conflict? We’ll never know, because the discussions were interrupted by the July Crisis, and you know what happened after that. The disposition of Portugal’s colonies suddenly seemed pretty small beer.

Still, you may be asking by now, whatever happened to that 500-year old alliance between Portugal and the United Kingdom? How can the British be contemplating grabbing their ally’s colonies? Also, why didn’t Portugal enter the Great War when Britain did?

Well, at the risk of spoiling the pretty picture of this staunch and long-lived alliance, the truth is that, as I said in the opening, it was pretty much a dead letter by this time. British foreign policy had been to resist getting entangled in alliances with European powers, and the Foreign Office regarded the Portuguese alliance as little more than an empty anachronism. Britain was the world superpower, and Portugal had little or nothing to offer in return for British protection. Britain therefore reserved to itself the right to decide when—or if—the alliance was in effect.

Portugal was certainly not a party to the network of alliances and ententes that drew Britain into the Great War, and so the July Crisis came and went without any Portuguese involvement. You might think that Portugal’s interests would best be served by keeping out of the Great War. But the new republican government in Lisbon didn’t see it that way at all. The disputes over the Balkans meant nothing to them, but with Portugal still mired in a backward economy and endless corruption and political infighting, the government looked hopefully upon their still substantial African holdings. If these were held, or even expanded—say, at German expense?—they could be the new Brazil, the colonial holding that once send a river of gold flowing into Portuguese coffers. On the other hand, to sit back and do nothing risked Germany—or maybe even Britain—seizing Portugal’s African holdings. So by early 1915, a year before Portugal officially entered the war, she was already building up her armed forces in her African territories, for self-defense, yes, but also perhaps as a tool to expand her territory.

[music: *Tic Tac Fado*]

So, with that review of what’s going on with the Portuguese and the Belgians, we’re almost ready to get to East Africa, but first let’s take a moment to get caught up on what’s going on in South Africa.

You’ll recall from episode 103 that the South Africans have taken control of German Southwest Africa, the Germans there having surrendered in July 1915. South Africa held a general election in October of 1915. The governing party in South Africa after its first general election had been the South African Party, led by Louis Botha and Jan Smuts, an Afrikaner-led party that

nevertheless supported British rule and, as we saw, even volunteered to take over the job of ousting the Germans from Southwest Africa, to free up British soldiers to fight elsewhere, and even putting down a uprising of more radical Afrikaners who saw the Great War as the perfect opportunity for South Africa to align with Germany and assert its independence from Britain.

In the 1910 election, the main opposition party had been the Unionist Party, a mostly English-speaking party that was even more staunch in its support of the British Empire. This party was led by Leander Jameson, and yes, that is the same Leander Jameson who led the ill-fated Jameson Raid back in 1898. My, my how times have changed.

But after the events of 1914, a new political party emerged in South Africa, the Nationalist Party, organized by Afrikaner nationalists who had sympathized with the revolt and opposed the Botha policy of working hand-in-glove with the British Empire. So this general election in October 1915 functioned as a referendum on the government's Great War policies. The result was, well, mixed. Botha's party lost its majority, but could still form a minority government with the support of the English-speaking Unionists who, of course, backed Botha's pro-British position to the hilt. But the brand new Nationalist Party won the second largest number of votes, so hey, you can see which way the wind is blowing.

Meanwhile, back in Portugal, in February 1916, at British instigation, the Portuguese government seized the 36 German and Austrian merchant ships that had been trapped in Portuguese waters since the war began. Within weeks, both Germany and Austria declared war on Portugal, making it official. Portugal is now a belligerent in the Great War. Portugal would send troops to France to fight on the Western Front, but her main interest remains Africa.

And during 1915, the German commander in East Africa, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck raised an army of nearly 15,000 mostly African soldiers, most of whom are deployed on the northern border with British East Africa. Remember that some of them actually occupy positions inside British territory. Against this force, the British have some 8,000 Indian soldiers, now reinforced with white South African and Rhodesian forces brought in after the fall of Southwest Africa and commanded by Jan Smuts. In the Belgian Congo, Belgian authorities have raised an army of about 12,000 Africans. This Belgian force is well-trained and equipped, composed as it is of veterans of the *Force Publique* and some of the toughest native fighters.

Speaking of "equipped," I need to talk about the massive logistical problems of conducting a military campaign in the African interior at this time. Keep in mind that railroads are scarce and roads are virtually nonexistent. Horses, which are still the main way armies in Europe transport their equipment and supplies, can't survive in the tropical climate. So instead of pack animals, armies use pack humans, what are called porters. Over the course of the Great War in East Africa, well over a million Africans, perhaps as many as two million, will serve as porters in this conflict, far outnumbering the soldiers they supply. At first, the Europeans hired Africans as porters at attractive wages. As the war progressed and resources became scarce, the wages

became less attractive, and by late in the war, Africans were being impressed into service as porters. The work was hard, the food was poor, the health care rudimentary, and African porters died at rates comparable to combat soldiers.

Porters have to carry not only supplies for soldiers, but supplies for the porters ahead of them in the line as well, so, for example, the 12,000 Belgian soldiers massing on the western border of German East Africa require over 200,000 porters to keep them in supply, because the larger part by far of what the porters are carrying is consumed by their fellow porters.

In the month of January, some 13,000 South African troops were shipped to British East Africa in preparation for an offensive to drive the Germans out of British territory and finally, at last, capture the white-settler portion of German East Africa.

These South African troops, a mix of Afrikaners and English-speaking natives of South Africa and Rhodesia, went into this campaign brimming with confidence. The Indians may have had trouble adapting, but this was *their* country, *their* Africa. They had brushed aside the Germans in Southwest Africa with little trouble. Now they would do the same here in East Africa.

But it *wasn't* their Africa. This Africa is quite different from the veldt, where the Boers on horseback had confounded the British army. And while some of these South Africans were hardened veterans of the Boer War and the Southwest Africa campaign, others were teenagers, barely old enough to fight and experiencing the jungle for the first time.

Like the Indians before them, the South Africans discovered what it meant to assault a well-entrenched and concealed enemy with skilled and well-positioned snipers. In their first skirmish, on February 12, 1916, a few days before Smuts would arrive and take charge personally, a South African unit lost half its soldiers to German snipers. The survivors fled, leaving behind equipment to be scavenged, and many of their fallen comrades to be buried by the very German soldiers who had killed them.

In this one small skirmish, the South Africans lost one-third of the total number of soldiers lost in the entire Southwest Africa campaign. The Indian soldiers took a certain satisfaction at seeing the South Africans get their comeuppance. The South African military report of the fighting was a model of creative writing: "The enemy was found to be in force, and counterattacked vigorously. [The unit] was compelled to withdraw..., but much useful information had been gained and the South Africans had learned some valuable lessons in bush fighting, and have been given the opportunity of estimating the fighting qualities of the enemy." Yeah, that's one way of putting it.

This early skirmish established a number of basic facts that the white South Africans and the British command had been reluctant to acknowledge, but were now undeniable. Black African soldiers on both sides can shoot as well as white soldiers, and they move through the terrain more easily and more quietly. The Germans and their *askari* fighters were remarkably skilled at

using the terrain to their advantage. The Indians could also fight as well as the white soldiers, given the proper training and experience, but right now, both the white and the Indian soldiers on the British side were deficient in both areas.

February 15, 1916 was, as you may recall from episode 100, the day that German Kamerun surrendered. East Africa was now the only German-controlled territory left on the continent, with lifted spirits a bit on the British side. And on February 19, Smuts arrived in Mombasa to take personal command.

Smuts reasoned, logically enough, that the German forces—and remember, I’m calling them “German,” but they are mostly Africans—the German forces were too well entrenched and too skillful to take by frontal assault, even though the British side has far greater numbers. Instead, Smuts wisely chose to use his greater numbers to outflank the Germans. He sent a column far to the west, around the inland side of Kilimanjaro, under the command of Jacob van Deventer, an Afrikaner veteran of the Boer War. He was 41 years old, a large, strong man and an experienced guerilla fighter, but lacked education and spoke English poorly. He was known to some as Jaap, which can be taken as a nickname for Jacob, but can also mean something like “hick” or “hayseed” in Afrikaans.

The flanking maneuver succeeded, forcing the Germans to fall back, although it was slow going. The German commander, Lettow-Vorbeck, understood and expected this maneuver. He knew he could not hold the northern rail line and the surrounding territory against a determined British attack. As always, his focus was to slow the British down and force them to pay dearly for their gains.

By Easter Sunday, April 23, the day before the Rising in Dublin, van Deventer’s column had advanced as far south as Kondoa, most of the way to the critical German Central Railway. This is the one that runs from Dar es Salaam on the coast to Lake Tanganyika in the west. You can think of it as the backbone of German East Africa. As the Germans get closer to the railroad, they get closer to their supply sources, and the number of porters they need gets smaller and the logistical problems get simpler. For the British, it’s exactly the opposite. They need more and more porters and supply becomes more and more complicated, and so van Deventer’s advance ground to a halt as he was forced to wait for his supplies to catch up.

As they waited, the number of effective fighters in van Deventer’s column kept dropping, as malaria and other illnesses claimed increasing numbers of the South Africans. It didn’t help any that the South Africans scoffed at mosquito netting and were reluctant to take quinine. The Germans saw their chance, and on May 9, attacked van Deventer’s position. In spite of their advantages, including a couple of guns salvaged from *Königsberg*, the attack failed, a rare German defeat in this theater.

Having pushed the Germans off their own northern rail line, the British set to work rebuilding the track, which the Germans had destroyed before their withdrawal. It was a challenging

project, but by summer the British were able to use sections of the railway, which eased their supply problems a little. In July 1916, the Royal Navy was able to take the port city of Tanga, at the eastern end of the rail line, avenging the British defeat there in 1914.

But in the meantime, the Germans had also scored a coup. In late 1915, the German government outfitted a blockade runner, christened *Marie*, and sent the ship to sea under strict instructions never to use its wireless. The German ship navigated all the way from the North Sea down the west coast of Africa, around the Cape, and on to German East Africa, arriving in the spring of 1916. This was the second time a blockade runner had made it to East Africa. The first was a year earlier. That ship had brought supplies intended for the crew of *Königsberg*, but after she was lost, they went to bolster Lettow-Vorbeck's ground forces instead.

Marie carried 1,500 tons of badly needed supplies, including a few howitzers, 2,000 rifles, and three million rounds of ammunition. The ship also brought food, uniforms, and medical supplies, and all of it was pre-packaged into 50,000 porter loads, ready to be carried into the interior. It also brought an Iron Cross, First and Second Class, for Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. After the war, he would say that the Royal Navy's failure to intercept *Marie* was the most important British defeat in the East Africa campaign. But it would also be the last time Lettow-Vorbeck and his soldiers get any help from outside Africa. Here on in, they are on their own.

Meanwhile, in the west, the Belgians began moving in the spring. They entered the far northwestern corner of German East Africa, occupying the town of Kigali in May. From there they advanced farther, taking control of the western portion of the German Central Railway in August and September. The South Africans took towns on the rail line farther east, including Dar es Salaam itself, which was occupied on September 3.

A South African newspaper celebrated the Belgian advance, saying "it was something like poetic justice that Belgium, which had been so cruelly treated by Germany in Europe, should have the opportunity of taking part in the conquest of the bully's pet colony."

But at the governmental level, tensions were rising between the British and the South Africans on the one hand and the Belgians on the other. Both sides were already thinking ahead to the postwar resolution, as in, if East Africa was to be taken away from Germany, who would get it? Britain and Belgium both coveted the territory.

Given that's the case, it was pretty cheeky of the Belgians to demand that the British provide porters to supply their *askari*. The Belgian colonial officials would not permit civilians from the Congo to cross the border into East Africa. As for the British, they tried to undermine the Belgian claim to African territory by reminding everyone of the depredations of King Leopold, as well as circulating accusations that the Belgian-led soldiers were committing widespread pillage, rape, and even cannibalism in the areas they controlled, as well as accusing them of abusing the porters the British had provided.

By the end of 1916, Lettow-Vorbeck and his troops had withdrawn into the southern third of German East Africa, and they were down to about 7,000 soldiers. They pursued a scorched-earth strategy, destroying food stocks and anything else that their enemies might find useful. But defections became a problem. *Askari* from the northern part of the country now under British control would frequently slip away and return home, and sometimes then enter into British service, as we will see.

Smuts wrote to Schnee, the German governor, and Lettow-Vorbeck, suggesting that their situation was impossible and requesting their surrender. He got no response. He queried the British government about using poison gas in East Africa, but was advised that gas wasn't likely to work very well under African conditions.

Although the Germans were gradually losing soldiers and territory, they remained wily and dangerous foes. This point was driven home at the end of the year when the Portuguese made their first attempt to move north and grab a piece of German territory for themselves. The Portuguese were completely unprepared for German tactics, not to mention the ferocious German artillery, and were driven back in a humiliating panic. Not that it stopped the Portuguese from declaring victory and awarding themselves medals. The commander of this small German force that had stopped the Portuguese advance was Max von Looff, the erstwhile captain of SMS *Königsberg*.

The Portuguese blamed their failure to push the Germans off their northern border on a lack of cooperation from the British. But the British weren't any keener to see Portuguese soldiers advancing into German East Africa than they were to see the Belgians. This unseemly rivalry among the neighbors of German East Africa—the British, the Belgians, and the Portuguese—would continue for the rest of the war, and on into the peace negotiations.

So here's something to remember the next time someone tries to tell you that colonialism was an altruistic enterprise and the Europeans were actually losing money on the project. Think how strange it is that people who are losing money on a project would take up arms and fight on the battlefield for the sake of the opportunity to save their enemies some money and lose even more themselves. This point was not lost on anyone, even at the time. Whatever other repercussions this war in East Africa might have, it was certainly going to make it a lot harder to explain and defend European policy toward Africa. And that's going to have long-term consequences.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and I'd like to thank August for making a donation, and thanks to Timothy for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you have a few bucks to spare and would like to become a patron, or make a one-time contribution, visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the Patreon or PayPal buttons. Your contributions help keep the lights on around here, so thanks again to everyone who helps out.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention back to the United States during this eventful year of 1916. This is a Presidential

election year in the United States, and we'll be looking at Woodrow Wilson's campaign for re-election in two weeks, but first, next week, I want to pick up where we left off last time, just after Pancho Villa raided the town of Columbus, New Mexico. Woodrow Wilson responds to the first foreign military attack on the United States in a hundred years. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Back in 1890, when the Portuguese government accepted that British ultimatum and abandoned Portugal's claim to the lands between Portugal's two African territories, the Portuguese composer Alfredo Keil and lyricist Henrique Lopes de Mendonça wrote a protest march "A Portuguesa," which you can think of as the Portuguese answer to "La Marseillaise." It became a republican anthem, it was banned by the monarchy, and after the overthrow of Manoel II, it became the national anthem of Portugal, and it has been ever since.

[music: "A Portuguesa"]