The Political History of Twentieth-Century Portugal

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Abstract

The political history of twentieth-century Portugal has recently become the focus of intense research by historians of that country. This article attempts both to summarise the political developments of the period and to provide an English-language readership with an introduction to the on-going debate. This debate is driven to a great extent by the attempt to explain the reasons for the longevity of Salazar’s New State and by the attempt to place it within a broader European context. As a result, the regime immediately preceding the New State, the First Republic, has been somewhat neglected by Portuguese historians.

Keywords

Twentieth-Century Portugal, Historiography, Political History, First Republic (1910-1926), New State (1933-1974)

Contemporary history sells in Portugal, and is a regular presence on the country's television screens and in its museums. A handful of historians has become well known through their regular media presence. While it must be acknowledged that historical research covering contemporary topics might seem, to the uninitiated, more accessible than medieval or early modern studies, which require a number of technical skills, notably palaeography, the reasons for this sudden awakening of interest in twentieth-century events both among producers and consumers of history lies elsewhere, and is intimately related to the political events which shaped Portugal’s recent past. Towering over other issues lies Salazar’s New State: its origins, its nature, its ability to survive for so long, its place in a wider European context, its demise and its consequences. All of these are topics that the Portuguese, whether or not part of the academic community, want to understand, having been unable to discuss them fully while events were underway, either because of direct censorship or as a result of a more subtle tactic: the encouragement of historical activity dedicated to earlier, and less politically troubling, periods, such as the mediaeval monarchy or the ‘Discoveries’.

As was mentioned in an earlier article, Salazar’s New State rested on the belief that Portugal’s decadence, which it had halted and reversed, had been inextricably linked to the untimely...