The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755
– Public Distress and Political Propaganda

Ana Cristina Araújo
University of Coimbra
araujo@fl.uc.pt

Abstract
This article examines the impact of the Lisbon earthquake on the international political sphere. The shock waves of the event reflected the basic ideological traits of the eighteenth century. For the first time in the western world, the press helped to create the illusion of proximity and unity among the peoples of different European nations. Furthermore, the 1755 earthquake launched the modern debate on how to think and act in a world where such catastrophes are likely to occur. On the eve of the Seven Years' War, the destruction of the capital of the Portuguese empire also triggered diplomatic and political reactions. Pombal's attempt to turn Portugal into a prosperous and politically strong country contributed towards minimising the disruptions to social and economic routines. Against the backdrop of the 1755 earthquake, and using the European war as an immediate cause, the Marquis of Pombal, minister of King Joseph I, laid the foundations for a press policy commensurate with the scale of the catastrophe.

Keywords
Catastrophe; Marquis of Pombal; War; International Policy

In the months immediately after the 1755 earthquake, the quaking ground aroused curiosity amongst readers and stirred the imagination of writers, who turned their minds to producing fantastic portrayals of a partially devastated Lisbon. Age-old fears and myths emerged amidst the terrifying descriptions of ruins in hundreds of tracts written at the time in almost every European language. They were published and republished to great success, especially in 1755, 1756 and 1757, when the subject was most topical (Löfler 1999). To a large extent, this unexpected effect on the public sphere resulted from the way in which the print media of the time overlapped with the massive output of texts about the earthquake (Araújo 1993). This system generated new channels for the spread of information, succeeding thanks to the dissemination of accounts supported by witnesses who were felt to be credible (Buescu 2005).

e-JPH, Vol. 4, number 1, Summer 2006