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THE NATIONAL MEETING OF VETERANS: 'PERHAPS DURING THIS CEREMONY WE SHOULD ONLY HEAR THE BUGLES PLAY'

Fátima da Cruz Rodrigues

On the day of the inauguration ceremony of the Monument to the Overseas Veterans on the 15 January 1994, Adriano Moreira opened his speech: "Mr. President of the Republic, combatants. Perhaps during this civic ceremony intended to honour the veterans of the Portuguese overseas war it would be appropriate to listen only to bugle players, who bring together sounds of agony and glory."



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Since then, every year on the June 10, the National Meeting of Veterans takes place at the Monument. This meeting pays homage to the men who died fighting in Portugal's name. It is composed of an interfaith ceremony, speeches, parades, military demonstrations, a procession and the laying of flowers at the Monument and along of the memorial headstones that cover the *Bom Sucesso* Fort. The headstones were only unveiled in 2000.

This is a particular type of June 10. Its particularity derives not so much from being different from the other causes celebrated on this date, which is also Portugal Day, Camões Day and the Day of the Portuguese Communities, but from what this June 10 condenses. The meeting brings together, in a single place and time, a density and complexity of facts, narratives, practices, interactions and meanings that together represent much more than a ceremony honouring veterans. When read with an attention to the space, date and contexts in which it takes place, as well as its form and history, the meeting's complex web of meanings forces us to reflect on its significance in post-imperial Portugal.

Built twenty years after the end of the war, this monument was, [according to the executive commission in charge of the project](#), "built in honour of all those who fell whilst serving their country during the Overseas War (1961 to 1974)." The monument is intended to "1) represent an act of justice, in homage to those who served Portugal in the former overseas territories; 2) Effect a cultural and pedagogical exaltation of their love of Portugal; 3) Communicate, in a simple but lasting and public way, Portugal's recognition of all these veterans."

[General Altino de Magalhães - then President of the League of Veterans - underlined these associations in his inauguration speech](#). The site is also symbolically charged. The Belém Tower, a World Heritage Site since 1983, was, [according to UNESCO](#), "built to commemorate the expedition of Vasco da Gama, and recalls the great maritime discoveries that laid the foundations of the modern world." This symbolic freight is routinely evoked in the dozens of speeches that have been given there to exalt and to honour the veterans. [One of those speeches was given at the Monument's inauguration by Adriano Moreira](#), Minister of the Overseas Territory in 1961, when the liberation war began in Angola. In it, he evoked a common trope about the Monument's situation " [...] in this small sacred triangle of Portuguese soil. Up there on the hill is the chapel where the captains of the sea and of the war prayed and, following the line of the Tagus, there is the Belém Tower where men set off for the Indies. There is the Monastery they came back to, and here now is the Monument that befits those fought in the battle that put an



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end to the Euro-world political system and that led all the powers of the European maritime front to call the legions back to Rome.”

The Monument is, as such, associated with the narrative of ‘Portugal of the Discoveries’.

[The Minister of Defence Fernando Nogueira made this connection explicitly at its inauguration when he said:](#) “our history and our collective destiny as a nation have long marked this place as a point of departure and arrival, as a point of separation and reunion. In this space [...] our collective memory touches the greatness of the universal vocation that characterizes us as a people and identifies us as a nation, with a multiseular dimension and with a force that few other places in Portuguese territory will ever know. From here heroes, sages and saints [...] who wrote striking pages in the book of Portugal’s history departed. [...] “. After reinforcing the idea of a Portuguese cultural vocation for dialogue, exchange, meeting and solidarity, he added: “[...] we also made some mistakes in our universalist pilgrimage, but I dare say that our historical faults were smaller than others’ and that in our humanistic posture we were, as a rule, beyond them. [...]. It is, therefore, only right that this is the place where the flame of the Fatherland will continue to remind everyone of the effort of those who, like the heroes, saints and sages of old, set out over the sea in the 60s and 70s to fight there under the symbol of the national flag [...].”

Celebrations that occur in this place, then, associate themselves and overlap with these narratives. Further, these meetings, which are unequivocally sites of homage to those who died in combat, at the same time manifest resentment, demands, contestation, confluence, negotiation, sharing and conflict between public, collective and private memories related directly or indirectly to the War.

We can see this in the reception of the President of the Republic Mário Soares’ speech at Monument’s inauguration. He began: “[...] honouring the dead who fell in the field in the service of the Fatherland.” But heckles forced Soares to digress: “Those who cannot listen in silence to others are not democrats. The moral superiority of democracy consists in knowing how to listen to others even when we disagree with them.” From then on, his speech was punctuated by arguments that sought to justify this homage that Portugal in general, and he in particular, had to render to the war dead. In his own words, it was not to be confused with “[...] the return to a spirit of nostalgia or to some revivalism that no longer makes sense. On the contrary, this is a tribute to the future, to give an example to Portuguese youth, an example of tolerance and an example of respect for our dead, for those who died overseas regardless



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of their convictions. Because many of those who died overseas in the service of the Fatherland did not agree with the old regime's colonial policy." This speech, like all the other speeches, in its multiple meanings and the audience's reaction, demonstrates the density and complexity of the material that comprises these ceremonies for veterans.

Prior to the various contemporary 10 June celebrations, the *Estado Novo* used this date to celebrate the race, national identity and glories of the Empire and the Armed Forces. From the beginning of the Angolan war in 1961 and until 1973, soldiers in Portugal and in Portuguese territories were also decorated with combat prizes on this day. (1)

Now, forty-four years after the end of the War, for the former combatants who celebrate it in Belém, June 10 is, above all, a day when those who once fought together in Africa pay tribute to their comrades who died there. This year the meeting was celebrated for the 25th time. The same format unfolded: interfaith ceremony; speeches; a message from the President (in the Azores for other celebrations); parades, a cortège and the laying of flowers. Adriano Moreira did not speak, but he was a guest of honour.

This tribute to the war-dead stages the consensus on which the meeting itself has always relied. Therefore, in this highly symbolic place, which carries within it all these narratives, facts, memories, meanings – not always consensual or reconcilable – perhaps “we should only hear the bugles play.” Or, for that reason, **maybe not...**

(1) The first of these military ceremonies took place in Terreiro do Paço on 10 June 1963, and they happened each year until 1973.

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