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# ACTA 2024

*The role of the military in political transitions:  
from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day*

**XLIX International Congress of Military History**

1 - 6 September 2024, Lisbon

## Volume I





# The role of the military in political transitions: from the 18th century to the present day

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## OPENING SESSION

## Inaugural speech by the President of the International Commission of Military History

*Prof. Dr. Massimo de Leonardis*

Ladies and Gentlemen, Generals and Admirals.

with great pleasure and confidence, the ICMH annual international Congress comes for the third time to Portugal, where the European Continent ends and the Atlantic Ocean begins, as famous Portuguese poet Luis de Camões (born in 1524) wrote in his masterpiece *Os Lusíades*: «Eis aqui, quasi cume da cabeça / De Europa toda, o reino Lusitano; / Onde a terra se acaba, e o mar começa».

Senhoras e senhores, Generais e Almirantes,

com muito gosto e confiança, o congresso anual internacional de la ICMH vem pela terceira vez a Portugal, onde termina o continente europeu e começa o oceano Atlântico, como escreveu o famoso poeta português Luís de Camões na sua obra-prima *Os Lusíadas*.

In 1998 the 24<sup>th</sup> Congress was organized in Lisbon on the General Theme *The War and the Encounter of Civilisations, from the XVI<sup>th</sup> Century*, and in 2009 the 35<sup>th</sup> Congress took place in Porto on the General Theme *Warfare in the Age of Napoleon: Precedents, Military Campaigns and Lasting Impacts*. As a participant to both Congresses I cherish very good memories of their excellent scientific level, of the impeccable organization and of the magnificent visits.

Como participante em ambos os Congressos guardo muito boas recordações do excelente nível científico, da organização irrepreensível e das magníficas visitas.

I remember with great pleasantness the Presidents of the Portuguese Commission of Military History at that times: Gen. Manuel Freire Temudo Barata and Gen. Alexandre Maria de Castro de Sousa Pinto. Current President, Gen. João Jorge Botelho Vieira Borges, is the perfect continuator of a distinguished tradition.

Lisbon is a city very rich of remarkable artistic monuments and spots full of magical atmosphere, which give inspiration the songs of Amália Rodrigues, a *reina do fado*: among these I will only mention *Lisboa Antigua* and *Barco Negro*, two of my favourites. Moreover, Lisbon's historical role in the birth of modern world makes this town particularly fascinating for historians, and specifically for those of maritime power and empires<sup>(1)</sup>.

As President of ICMH, maybe I should not express any fondness for a specific country. However, with your permission, I cannot refrain from a personal remembrance. I was a young boy when I saw a photo of the Tower of Belem, a few hundred meters from here. Knowing already some history, I was fascinated by the place, since my mind imagined that this stone ship witnessed the departure of so many naval expeditions which toured the world and created a vast colonial empire. This small Portuguese people saw many skies and many lands: «*Do mar temos corrido, e navegado / Toda a parte do Antartico, e Callisto; / Toda a costa Africana rodeado; / Diversos ceos, e terras temos visto*».

Nearby, we have the *Museu de Marinha*, which documents the story of these expeditions, the beautiful *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* which commemorates them and the *Mosteiro dos Jerónimos* a masterpiece of Gothic and Manueline architecture. After enriching our soul, we can feed the body with the tasty *Pastéis de Belém*.

The Congress takes place at the *Instituto Universitário Militar*, as last year in Istanbul we were at the Milli Savunma Üniversitesi (Milli Savunma Iuniversitesi), the National Defence University of Türkiye. These environments perfectly reflect the identity of the International Commission of Military History, combining culture with military ethos. I am most grateful to Lieutenant General Hermínio Teodoro Maio for the hospitality in the Institute he commands. I promise not to molest the 80 peacocks.

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the uprising of units of the Portuguese Armed Forces, which on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1974 put an end to the *Estado Novo* and paved the way to parliamentary democracy. Actually, on 28<sup>th</sup> May 1926 military action had also terminated the unstable Portuguese First Republic and initiated the *Ditadura Militar* (Military Dictatorship), which in 1928 transitioned into the *Ditadura Nacional* (National Dictatorship), renamed in 1933 *Estado Novo* (New State), by Antonio de Oliveira Salazar. So the armed forces were protagonists both of the rise and the fall of an authoritarian regime.

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1. M. Castro Henriques, *La «atlanticità» di un Paese europeo: il Portogallo*, in M. de Leonardis-G. Pastori (eds.), *Le nuove sfide per la forza militare e la diplomazia: il ruolo della NATO*, Monduzzi, Bologna 2007, pp.145-159.

This motivated the choice of the excellent Congress' General Theme: *The Role of the Military in Political Transitions: from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day*. As usual, I take the liberty of some general comments on it.

Military were protagonists of political changes also in previous centuries. We could just mention the key role of General George Monck in the restoration of the Stuart dynasty in Britain in 1660. Neither all military interventions were of this importance nor were so successful and peaceful.

Various scholars stress that usually the military have a kind of mystical relationship with the Sovereign<sup>(2)</sup>. Between a «military with decorations», the King, and a «kind of notary in frock coat»<sup>(3)</sup>, the President, naturally the military is more attached to the former. «Military service is fundamentally based on obedience; therefore, for an officer loyalty to the King and allegiance to a dynasty which embodies the military glories of the past are wholly natural attitudes. For him the personification of military honour in a specific individual, is much more concrete than the attachment to abstract concepts, as the State or the constitution»<sup>(4)</sup>.

Some services or some corps, for example in the Kingdom of Italy, were more royalist than others, as the Navy, the Cavalry, the Carabinieri (*the equivalent of the Portuguese Guarda Nacional*). Most Sovereigns had or have specific corps which are their Guard of Honour<sup>(5)</sup>: for example, in the United Kingdom the Household Division (*which is also an elite fighting body*), in the Kingdom of Italy the Carabinieri Guardie del Re (*commonly known as Corazzieri, now serving the President*), the Habsburg had, in successive periods, the k.k. Erste Arcièren-Leibgarde, the k.u.k. Leibgarde, the k.u.k. Trabantenleibgarde, the k.u.k.<sup>(6)</sup> Leibgardereitereskadron, the k.u.k. Leibgardeinfanteriekompanie, the Pope the Guardia Nobile (*Noble Guard, dissolved by Paul VI*) and the Swiss Guard, in Iran the Shah Reza Pahlavi had an Imperial Guard (*the elite of it was known the Immortals as the guards of the ancient Kings of Persia*), and so on.

In some cases, the Sovereigns could not entirely rely on their guards: at the time of Louis XVI on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1792, six hundred of the Swiss Guards were killed to defend him, while the *Gardes françaises* joined the ranks of the Revolution. This is an example that in history categorizations have always exceptions. In fact, there are cases in which

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2. J. Evola, *Significato e funzione della monarchia*, published with K. Loewenstein, *La monarchia nello Stato moderno*, tr. it., Volpe, Roma 1969, p. 184. When necessary, all quotes are translated in English by the author.

3. The two definitions are of the Spanish Pio Baroja y Nessi, quoted in J. M. PÉMAN, *Lettere a uno scettico di fronte alla monarchia*, tr. it., Volpe, Roma 1969, p. 78. All Sovereigns often wear a military uniform and are trained in military academies; the only exception is the Emperor of Japan, who must make us forget the past militarism of his country.

4. Loewenstein, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

5. A scholarly history of this specific kind of military corps is provided by P. Mansel, *Pillars of Monarchy. An outline of the political and social history of the Royal Guards 1400-1984*, Quartet Books, London-Melbourne-New York 1984.

6. K.K. (*kaiserlich königlich*) means imperial royal; after 1867, with the division between the Empire of Austria and the Kingdom of Hungary, it became k.u.k., *kaiserlich und königlich* (imperial and royal).

the military (or a faction of them) were instrumental in dethroning the Sovereigns. For example, that happened in Portugal in 1910 and in Brazil in 1889.

Spanish language is particularly rich in names which express the great variety of types of military interventions. We have the *golpe de estado*, the *pronunciamiento* or *alzamiento*, the *cuartelazo*, the *intentona*. In Spanish politics between 1814 and 1868 have been counted 34 military interventions; 43 up to 1923<sup>(7)</sup>. The lack of total success of an *alzamiento* may generate a civil war like in Spain in 1936-1939. In my short speech it is impossible to examine all cases and I will just make few considerations.

The Congress deals in particular with contemporary age since the XVIII century, when military interventions came to be considered an infringement of established constitutional rules, which in most cases do not provide for a political role of the armed forces. According to a scholar<sup>(8)</sup>, there are no *a priori* interventionist and non-interventionist armies, but rather the military «form an effective pressure group on the organs of government», that acts in the political decision-making process when they consider that the homeland is in danger due to the actions of civilians. In most cases, military interventions are the consequence of the failure of civilian politicians. Probably, the general public believes that military interventions and the regimes they install are inspired by conservative or reactionary views; this is not always true, since there are various examples of progressive, or at least, populist military regimes.

Neither Fascism in Italy nor Nazism in Germany seized power thanks to the military. According to an anecdote the authenticity of which is not sure, the King of Italy asked the head of the Army if it could be trusted if required to suppress Fascists' agitation. General Armando Diaz's answer was ambiguous: «Your Majesty, the Army will perform its duties, but it is better not to put it to the test». Hence, the Sovereign tasked Mussolini to form a government, which obtained a vote of confidence in Parliament. On the contrary, the fall of Fascism was engineered by the King with the support of the Armed Forces. These tried also in Germany to oust the dictator, even organizing a tyrannicide, but without success.

In some areas of the world, the seizure of power by the military is a frequent occurrence. I will just mention only Egypt, which since 1952 and the fall of the monarchy has always been dominated by the military, with a short interval of one year in 2012/2013. In Latin America and in Africa, after decolonization, we saw phases of democratization and periods of military dictatorships.

The so called international community mainly reacts to illegal seizures of power not following legal or moral criteria, but according to *Realpolitik*. We find a famous expression

7. J. Busquets, *El Militar de Carrera en España*, Ediciones Ariel, Barcelona 1971, pp. 55–64; S. G. Payne, *Politics and the Military in Modern Spain*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1967, pp. 17–32.

8. R. Muñoz Bolaños, *Are we so Different? Military Interventionism in Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States*, <https://doi.org/10.12795/araucaria.2021.i47.19>.



of this policy in the 1930' when Franklin Delano Roosevelt replied to his secretary of state's assessment of the Nicaraguan strongman Anastasio Somoza Debayle – «Somoza's a bastard!» – with the rejoinder «Yes, but he's our bastard».

As I said, there are many examples of military interventions short of the complete seizure of the power. Even in the United Kingdom, the most stable democracy in the world, in 1914 there was the risk of sedition when groups of officers signalled their unwillingness to obey if ordered to stamp down unionist activism against the government's proposals of Home Rule for Ireland<sup>(9)</sup>. During the Great War, in the German Empire, the High Command of Generals Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff prevaricated over the government making a compromise peace impossible.

Retired military sometimes take positions that those on active service cannot express with the same freedom. For example, in early May 2021, a group of retired French military officers – most of them holding the rank of general – wrote a public letter to President Emmanuel Macron warning of the dangers facing their nation – especially the wave of Islamic terrorist attacks– and the immediate need to neutralise them. The letter included a significant paragraph warning of the possibility of military intervention in the political decision-making process if this situation was not tackled: «If nothing is done, the weakening will continue to spread inexorably through society, eventually leading to an explosion and the intervention of our active comrades in a dangerous mission to protect our civilizational values and safeguard our compatriots at home»<sup>(10)</sup>.

The academic programme of our Congress witnesses the participation of about 182 congressmen, and 71 speakers from 33 different countries. As usual it includes a panel of PhD students. We will have the pleasure to enjoy the hospitality of the ministry of defence, of the chiefs of staff of defence and of the three services and of the Commandant-General of the *Guarda Nacional Republicana*. The post-Congress tour will take participants to outstanding cultural and artistic places.

Ladies and gentlemen, a pleasant and fruitful week is waiting for us; I wish you to fully enjoy it. Thank you for your attention.

Senhoras e senhores, espera-nos uma semana agradável e frutuosa; desejo que aproveite ao máximo. Obrigado pela sua atenção.

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9. C. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*, Penguin Books, London 2012, pp. 488-490.

10. <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210512-french-soldiers-warning-of-civil-war-in-open-letter-told-to-quit>.