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*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**

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## Volume II





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# 16<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 1974

## A COUP THAT WASN'T A COUP ON THE EVE OF THE PORTUGUESE DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION ACCORDING TO ITS INVESTIGATION PROCESS

*Joana de Matos TORNADA (Portugal)*

### **Abstract**

The appearance of the *Processo de Investigação* (Investigative Process) about the events of March 16, 1974 is a historic moment to critically question the relevance of the 1974 Caldas Coup in the seizure of power on April 25, 1974. These documents, written in March 1974, show the knowledge of the Movement and of the military's contestation by the military hierarchy. Its analysis allows us to go beyond its military purpose and understand the role of the regime's military and those involved in the Caldas Coup of March 16, 1974 in the deconstruction of the oldest dictatorial regime in Europe.

Meanwhile, the Process raises many questions about what role the military played in the seizure of power in April 1974 and about the non-traditional nature of the failed military coup in Caldas of 1974. This military intervention's report is told here by its participants (the military), by the way they tell and that they tell, at a key moment in the construction of a conspiratorial movement, by their pluralism and their ability to unveil this historical event. The Caldas Coup was silent and singular in the past, but, for History, it is a revealing moment of how the dictatorships' essence lies in the control of the daily lives, thoughts and attitudes of all its citizens.

**Keywords:** Coup d'Etat; Captains Movement; Estado Novo; Revolution; Archives

## Introduction

When a group of junior and senior officers of Infantry Unit 5 of Caldas da Rainha formed an uprising column and exited its unit towards Lisbon on the dawn of 16th March 1974, they aimed to appeal to other military units and members of Captains Movement. This would dramatically transform the political and military situation of Estado Novo. They failed their aim but the implications of their actions would integrate them in the immediate causes of the Portuguese Revolution that have been historically neglected.

In Portugal, in March 1974, the political situation was intense after the publication of *Portugal e o Futuro* written by General Spínola. The population and militaries knew now that only a political change could solve the Colonial War. In addition, on 5th March, junior officers (milicianos) and career officers (cadetes) joined their efforts to contest and improve their working conditions. In addition, they confirmed that there was the need for a political change in Portugal. More importantly, on 8th March, several key members of Captains Movement received the order of transfer to Ozores which weakened its communication systems. The Infantry Unit 5 (*Regimento de Infantaria 5 - RI5*) officers were part of the conspiracy plan to seize power and they were deeply involved in its organisation. March 1974 was an intense month. Many small scale events happened and the militaries contested all political measurements that aimed to continue the Colonial War. Nevertheless, the turning point was the dismissal of the generals Costa Gomes and Spínola. Once again, around the country, officers involved in the Captains Movement communicated their solidarity to their commander. Consequently in Oporto, senior officers were dismissed. In Penafiel the telephone line was cut. There were several informal meetings in Lisbon all day on 15th March. In the entire country, many phone calls were spotted by the military hierarchy. However, in Caldas da Rainha, in the late evening, there was a rebellion. The commander was neutralised and senior officers went to Lisbon in an apprised column hoping to appeal to their colleagues and to gain international attention. This situation was smoothly controlled by the government and it was announced as an ‘adventure’, a meaningless event. Yet, the Army Minister demanded an Inquiry Process to understand what happened and charge the militaries involved.

The *Processo de Averiguações* about the events of 16th March 1974’s dawn in RI5, in Caldas da Rainha was led by Colonel Ernesto de Lencastre following up the Army Minister dispatch of 19th March. It aimed to inquire about the events of the 16th March dawn. This report was concluded on 11th April. It intended to support legal charges of all implicated. This never happened due to the 25th April Revolution as it was lost in the chaotic environment of the Revolution. The source is valuable as an example of the ultimately disastrous way of how Estado Novo dealt with the Captain’s Movement and the overall unrest with their military institution. Furthermore, its conclusions are arguably a demonstration of how political transitions are disorderly and vulnerable. As a source written in a dictatorship and by senior officers of its Army, it is limited in that it

emphasizes more its view and interpretation of 'highly damaging actions of indiscipline and against the nation, state and order' rather than an authentic and reflective view of the 16th March coup. The conclusions of the Process describe a local event without integrating its national and international implications. This was exactly how it was portrayed in the Portuguese newspapers and how it remained remembered for decades.

On 16th March 1974, the military intervention that attempted to seize power surprised everyone. In an old fascist dictatorship the power was restrained by the political police, the censorship, the fascist colonial ideology, the Ação Nacional Popular party, and the economic corporate system. Furthermore, the control over technology did not regard the possibility of an attempt to seize power. The surprise was mostly because there was an uprising military column (12 vehicles) that went from Caldas da Rainha to nearby Lisbon and returned to its unit voluntarily. In this *Processo de Averiguações*, the militaries have told their story, official reports from other state institutions and bystanders were analysed (there was a great concern about civilians participation) and official documents such as *Fita do Tempo* too. This is the first time that the official report is being analysed. The file is a collection of primary sources that assess military responsibility of Portuguese military officers in the events of Caldas Coup d'état.

By analysing this *Processo de Averiguações*' origin, purpose and content, we might understand further whether Caldas Coup was a coup d'état and its implications in the eve of the Portuguese Revolution. This is, indeed, a glimpse into the immediate causes and successes of 25th April 1974's events. The documents undoubtedly show that on the 15th March night, there was a confusing environment inside the RI5. The commander was not in command. There were many phone calls. Soldiers were given weapons. There were several unauthorised meetings. No one repressed general disobedience. There was a collective action which was contrary to the Constitution and harmed discipline. It lasted all night. This demonstrates that the replacement of the commander at 6pm on 15th March created a 'sensitive' situation. The RI5 officials declared that they had a mission: to protest the dismissal of the generals. The neutralisation of the commander was a collective action to prevent any obstacle to the exit of the uprising column. However, his phone was not cut off and there was no direct hostility towards the commander.

This was not a single story. This was not a local event. Although there were signs of a plan, Caldas Coup did not follow a plan. A complex network made the military institution vulnerable to the displeasure of the officers. There was an intense call activity mostly led by lieutenant Silva Carvalho. The apprised column was ready at 2am but they only left RI5 at 4.30 am. They waited for support. While they left, the defense of the unit was established. At 7am majors Casanova Ferreira and Monge met the uprising column. They persuaded them to come back and wait for the siege. They returned, they waited and continued the phone calls.

In the records, it is clear that the RI5's senior and junior officers had turned against the dictatorship. Most officers in Caldas were members of the Captains' movement. Yet, it would be inaccurate to claim that their actions were planned and supported by it. In the inquiry, the officials stressed the focus on Captains Movement actions (they questioned: *who gave orders? who was linked to their actions? who are the members of the Captains Movement coordination commission? who are its representatives in the unit? who leads the Captains Movement? what is the role of the coordination commission? how do they justify the intense phone call activity? what were your activities in the previous week?*). They were not alone and had strong connections to members outside the unit. Majors Monge and Casanova Ferreira encouraged Captain Armando Ramos to go to Caldas. He knew the unit and the officers there. In Caldas, he explained the situation (leading several meetings); gave assignments; identified targets (the airport); ultimately, Captain Armando Ramos was responsible for the exit of the column. Indeed, this was the most damaging action according to Colonel Ernesto Lencastre. Moreover, during the night, the RI5 militaries involved turned against the 'virtue and honor, love the Motherland, guard' the Political Constitution. In addition to being 'offensive to members of the Executive Power, superiors, equals or even inferiors or in any way harmful to the good execution of service and discipline'.

Throughout the *Processo de Averiguações*, senior officers use ambiguities (a potential attempt to seize power and the idea that RI5's officers took action prematurely) to comprehend what seemed incomprehensible (the uprising column and the antagonistic positions). They evaluated officers' actions (they gave more credibility to university-educated officers) by cross referencing many sources. They tried to understand what happened in the unit and in its outskirts. There was an attempt to understand what happened in other locations but the testimonies were mostly incoherent. In particular, by examining lieutenant colonel Almeida Bruno's actions. There is evidence that the events were part of a plan (the column was ready and communication codes between RI5 and EPI - *Escola Prática de Infantaria/Infantry School* - and EPC - *Escola Prática de Cavalaria/Cavalry School* - were shared with soldiers). Overall, it seemed an opportunistic event which spread mistrust among the RI5 officers.

For Colonel Ernesto Lencastre, not only there were charges to pursue but also the need for further inquiries such as: the commander neutralisation; possible dual activity of some officers; captains and lower rank activities which were not reported to the commander; officers that took control of the telephone exchange; the commander walked freely; major Casanova Ferreira's words and actions during the siege and surrender supporting general Spínola; organisation of the defense; inaction of some towards the opening of the armory. The colonel emphasised the antagonistic positions between the commander, his group and other stakeholders. For example, Captain Varela stated that the aim was to pressure the government and force it to resign. It was not a violent action

nor a coup. Therefore, the commander walked freely and had access to his phone. There was no direct hostility against him.

The Regime was vulnerable. In RI5, the tensions affected career and junior officers which had conflicting interests due to the decree laws. The transfer of some militaries and the dismissal of the generals were mentioned by several militaries as cause for their displeasure. Moreover, it increased the tension in the unit. On 9th March, RI's officers communicated their discontent to the commander. On 11th, 20 officers signed a protest document. In addition, there was an intense connection between RI5 officers and others around the country. The *Processo de Averiguações* concludes that the actions were severe but not greatly. At the time, the regime did not realise that they faced significant challenges and were under attack. Yet, in this file, there are clear echoes that decisive events and unrest were exploited by several individuals which increased the existent clashes.

## Conclusion

Caldas coup could be a simple failed attempt but it is not. The analysis of its *Processo de Averiguações* demonstrates that the military institution was not able to fully understand the complexity of all communications and actions in the country. They were not in control. They were under threat and weak. In spite of that they recognized the officers' motives in detail. They acknowledged the officer's tension and 'sensitive' situation. It seemed there was a plan but they were not able to describe it. They knew that RI5's officers were supported in the whole country. They knew who and how the rebellion operations were executed. Although they concluded that there was no clear organisation, the Captains Movement presence was dominant. It was thought that junior militaries were responsible and were alone. The Generals were not involved so this was a limited threat for Estado Novo's officers.

It all started when majors Casanova Ferreira and Monge encouraged Captain Armando Ramos to go to Caldas and persuade the unit to join a national protest for the generals dismissal. The Captain had been stationed in Caldas before. He knew the officers there well so he accepted this request. Then, Captain Armando Ramos contacted lieutenant Silva Carvalho who helped him entered RI5 at 10.30pm. The officers organised the neutralisation of the commander and the uprising column quickly. Meanwhile, there was an intense phone call activity mostly led by Lieutenant Silva Carvalho. The commander was neutralised but his phone call was not cut and kept in contact with Captain Varela.

The commander's arrest is an uncertain situation which puzzled the inquiry and questioned the dimension of Caldas Coup's threat. When the apprised column left RI5 towards Lisbon, they knew they were alone. They knew they could not seize power by force. They were isolated. By this time, this was just a demonstration of their discontent of the dismissal of the generals. The Caldas Coup was not a coup. Instead, it is a clear demonstration of general displeasure, fear, internal instability, mistrust within the

confines of political power (grounded in an intense politisation); and, perhaps, it has facilitated the required political change that motivated the elimination of dictatorial centers of power. Caldas Coup was, indeed, driven by opportunity and various forms of insecurity. It was an ‘infiltration’ supported within the pillars of institutional power. Nevertheless, the conspiracy of the Captains Movement was in motion and it was not severely harmed on the 16th March dawn, not even foreseen. This is the eve of the Portuguese Democratic revolution and the collapse of Estado Novo.

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## **Author's short CV**

Graduated in History, via the educational branch, at the Faculty of Arts of University of Coimbra, in 2004.

At the same institution, Master's degree in Contemporary History, having also taken part in the master's degree *The Twisted Road to Democracy*, in partnership with the University of Uppsala, Sweden. Since 2008, collaborated with the group of historians of Caldas da Rainha, called PH–Historical Heritage, in the promotion of local history in various initiatives. Over the years, produced several academic works dedicated to local history. In 2009, published her master's thesis entitled "On the Eve of Democracy in Portugal – The Caldas Coup of March 16, 1974". Professionally, in the first years of her career, was a trainer and mediator of various professional courses and also as a History teacher at a public school. Since 2014, works at St. Dominic's International School, IB curriculum, as a teacher of disciplines of Humanities, History, Global Politics and Theory of Knowledge.

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