

REPRESENTATIONS OF EMPIRE: THE GREAT WAR AND THE BATTLE FOR HUMANITARIAN RELIEF IN ANGOLA AND MOZAMBIQUE

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Abstract

Portugal, the founder of the first and longest lasting global empire, became the most recent of only three republics in Europe after a victorious seizure of power in October 1910. This paper aims to capture not only the growing rivalries between European powers as they extended their colonial empires, especially on the aforementioned continent, but also to foreground the activities and responses of local and national philanthropic actors, encompassing empire mobilization and surveying the humanitarian responses in Angola and Mozambique.

It will analyse the humanitarian relief efforts carried out in and for the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique. By focusing on the humanitarian mobilization in Portuguese Africa, ongoing between 1914 and 1918, this provides an innovative insight into the inhumanity of war, at the intersection of colonial history and aid, revealing the impacts both of brutal global warfare and of humanitarian altruism in this early phase of the 20th century. The mass-industrial 1914-1918 World War held major impacts for colonial life far beyond those usually perceived and among the most affected regions. These peripheral spaces experienced the consequences of war, altering their structures, rhythms, and routines to not only transform private and public life but also catalyse their importance as wartime humanitarian actors

The article will help to better understand the disruption of normalcy and the involvement of small and peripheral colonial powers in the war's humanitarian struggle.

Keywords: First World War; Portugal; Africa, Aid; Humanitarianism; Colonialism.

The mass-industrial 1914–1918 World War held major impacts for colonial life far beyond those usually perceived and among the most affected regions. These peripheral spaces experienced the consequences of war, altering their structures, rhythms, and routines to not only transform private and public life but also catalyse their importance – as hopefully the Portuguese case will show – as wartime humanitarian actors. In the early days of August 1914, Africa ended up acting as the trigger that transformed a local conflict into a World War. Indeed, the first British shots in the Great War were fired in Togoland and not in Europe.

By shifting the focus from the Western Front to Africa, the article aims to capture not only the growing rivalries between European powers as they extended their colonial empires, especially on the aforementioned continent, but also to foreground the activities and responses of local and national philanthropic actors, encompassing empire mobilization and surveying the humanitarian responses in Angola and Mozambique. Therefore, this correspondingly portrays the scope and duration of the activities carried out by these two colonies in support of the Motherland, contributing both to a more expansive understanding of the global impacts and dimensions of this war and opening a new research perspective on empire commitment and humanitarian engagement in troubled times, demonstrating the risks the civilian populations also faced.

The intercontinental telegraph not only pushed the global economy forward, but it also nurtured a sense of global suffering upon which notions of international humanitarian action would develop. This paved the way for mediators such as the Red Cross to operate for the first time as truly international movements¹.

This, in turn, shaped understandings of peace and war among wider publics, such as the Portuguese nationals living in Angola and Mozambique, while also interpreting their reactions and motivations for assisting; whether out of pity, politics or power.

Hence, war, as I argue, emerges as a generative force, not only depicting destruction, but generation. On this particular matter,

we should also recall that these impactful years sowed the seeds of independence². Conflict, therefore, also appears as a formative moment for (re)thinking what it meant to belong to an imperial nation.

Through its intense humanitarian mobilization, the war ended up nurturing the connections not only between empire and motherland but also within the empire, the home front and the battlefield, endowing visibility on Portugal's presence in hitherto almost unknown lands. Humanitarian engagement³, therefore, emerges as a category for comprehending the imperial connections, which helps delineate the contours of a "Portuguese World/a Greater Portugal" and enhancing the perception of the different social realities prevailing on the empire's home front.

Based on Portuguese and African newspapers and research carried out in the Portuguese Red Cross Archives in Lisbon, this article focuses on the efforts of imperial communities to analyse the humanitarian mobilization in Africa during the First World War through focusing on Angola and Mozambique, two Portuguese colonies directly affected by military operations. This conveys the impact both of the advent of global and industrialized means of killing and of the humanitarian altruism deployed to combat suffering in the early years of the twentieth century. By disclosing not only the efforts made by individuals and institutions to mediate suffering in the peripheries of a networked and global world, this article correspondingly analyses this overall expansion in the scope, engagement and contribution of the colonial world towards mitigating the impacts and ramifications of the conflict and thereby opening up different readings on the nature and engagement of empires in the First World War, both through their involvement in humanitarian operations and through detailing the social and political strategies of different agents of benevolence, most notably women. Thus, the article surveys national and local humanitarian responses to the war's impact on the two largest Portuguese colonies in Africa.

The horrors that the conflict produced had a tremendous impact on individual engagement with aid initiatives. At the time of the armistice, the Portuguese Red Cross was already running 43 delegations, whether located on mainland Portugal, its archipelagos

(Madeira and the Azores) or in Africa, with the institution able, over these years of conflict, to train, create infrastructures and handle hundreds of volunteers across four focal points: the home front, Flanders, Angola and Mozambique. Portugal's humanitarian mobilization relied heavily on the donations that it was able to raise to a greater or lesser extent worldwide, with these actions allowing us to examine the country's involvement in the Great War in terms of a linguistic community that crossed oceans, bound together by a multitude of ties of varying strengths⁴.

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¹ On this particular matter see: Tara Zahra, *Against the World. Anti-globalism and Mass Politics between the World Wars* (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2023).

² Ana Paula Pires, "The First World War in Mozambique: public discourses and representations of identity" *National Identities*, (2020), p.12.

³ "Angola perante a guerra. O grande movimento de solidariedade nesta província. Assistência aos mobilizados" in *Jornal de Angola* (26 August 1916), p.1.

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