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O Salto – Portuguese emigration in the 1960s



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Introduction

During Portugal's African Wars of 1961-74, young men avoided conscription for military service in Africa by emigrating from Portugal, and most of them went to France. But they were not alone, since many other young people and families also left Portugal – this emigration was known as “O Salto” (the jump, or leap).

Other reasons for emigration are not difficult to establish, since inflation was beginning to grip the country, and the oil crisis of 1973 made economic problems worse. Emigrants to more democratic countries also found life abroad more agreeable than under the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal.

The Portuguese government reacts

Emigration, a feature of Portuguese life since the 16th century, began accelerating in the 1950s, when the economies of France and West Germany grew much faster than the Portuguese, and attracted Portuguese workers for better salaries.

1958 saw the publication of *Guia Prático para Uso dos Emigrantes Portugueses que se destinam a França* (Practical Guide for use by Portuguese Emigrants bound for France),

published by the Junta de Emigração of the Interior Ministry. It included a detachable sheet, aimed at making it easier to send money back to Portugal.

Advice on the rights and duties of workers in France was accompanied by advice on willingness to adapt to work and adapt, honesty and perseverance. The guide showed that working abroad was difficult, but “your greatest pride is your Portuguese nationality, and the Portuguese nationality of your children.”

In 1969, the Interior Ministry published another guide for Portuguese workers in Germany. This guide included useful phrases in both German and Portuguese, how to delay compulsory military service and how to remit money to Portugal. It suggested that Portuguese could easily get used to the climate in Germany, after a period of adaptation, since “variations in weather are more frequent than in Portugal and the winters colder and rainier.”

France was the main destination for Portuguese emigrants even before the African Wars broke out, but the official numbers are unreliable since the Portuguese dictatorship exercised control by refusing passports except for government approved business. Even so, the estimates are astonishing.

Between 1957 and 1974, over one and a half million people left the country. It was the first time since 1926 that Portuguese emigration had reached that level, and the first time that people left not for the Americas but for Europe.

The Portuguese government at this time saw the phenomenon as a national problem. France accepted more than 900,000 Portuguese, and so when the Portuguese government addressed the “problem of emigration”, it meant emigration to France, mainly to Paris.

The chief worry in Portugal concerned the social, economic and political effects of the continuing disappearance of thousands of Portuguese workers. During the last years of the dictatorship, the government deplored the departure of both labourers and young men fighting on the African fronts.



Photo: Leo Welling/Unsplash

In 1969, the new President of the Council of Ministers, Marcelo Caetano, while conceding that emigration was not a specifically Portuguese problem, said that, in any case, there were advantages as well as disadvantages. "But from a certain point, the inconveniences will outweigh the benefits," he continued. "We cannot allow ourselves to bleed continuously. The Country needs the energy of its sons. How shall we staunch or at least considerably reduce emigration to foreign countries? Well, by the improvement of the

conditions of rural life. If we had a richer agriculture, teamed with industry and producing for the big markets, we could provide more constant work and better salaries, efficient welfare and assistance for our workers.”

Clearly, this improvement in conditions never happened, and rural Portugal continued to empty itself during the years that Caetano led the country. During the oil crisis of 1973, the National Assembly discussed the outcomes for stagnant European economies, and whether the crisis would force emigrants to return, since West Germany had already decided not to accept any further immigration.

If they did return, how would Portugal absorb them, and how should the country adapt if there were fewer remittances from abroad? One deputy suggested that it would be wise to re-admit those who had emigrated, as they had learned that foreign countries were no Eldorado.

The Portuguese government was not able to prevent the circulation of ideas, however, and when Portuguese emigrants returned to Portugal either permanently or on holiday, they brought experience of other political ideas, since they had lived and worked in a democracy. Their new way of thinking may have played its part in making Portugal ripe for revolution.

O Salto

The difficulties involved in secret emigration were daunting. Looking to emigrate, many Portuguese had cardboard suitcases in hand, ready secretly to cross frontiers without the necessary papers. There were guides who escorted men and women by secret pathways, usually at night. Some completed the whole journey on foot, from their Portuguese villages to their destinations in France.

Many were cheated by their guides, some were picked up by the authorities, and a few died on the journey. For those who had correct papers, the Lisbon to Paris Sud-Express took many Portuguese to the French border, and brought many of them home again for their holidays.

French resistance to immigration

Philosopher and activist Jean-Paul Sartre in 1972 called for a street demonstration in Paris to protest against racism. He spoke of the new colonisation in French territory, in which workers from the old colonies and the poorest Western European countries were attracted to France to take up the work which the French refused to do.

Xenophobia was an increasing problem in France, and when *The New York Times* published an article called ‘The Poor Employees in Europe’, it covered police violence against Portuguese emigrants at Hendaye, on the border between Spain and France.

The moon was covered by clouds at the instant when a group of young Portuguese (including one girl) jumped off the moving train near the frontier, and illegally crossed into

France. Detained by waiting police, they were beaten up in plain sight of the American reporter, who approached one policeman and asked the reason for the violence. The agent, who smelled of cheap wine, complained that the Portuguese were a plague invading France; even worse, he said, were the Algerians, “who were all pimps.”

The war in Algeria had ended with the independence of that country in 1962, but it had left a bad resonance in the minds of many French people. In the present case, these Portuguese were still a problem, since they had no papers.

The American reporter wrote that the number of Portuguese entering France was enormous, with hundreds and sometimes thousands of Portuguese being disgorged from the trains every day and every night, and the French economy was absorbing this cheap labour.

Engaging Portuguese workers, big employers such as Renault obeyed the law, but many smaller employers cheated the immigrants out of their salaries and failed to register them with the Social Security.



Photo: Jorge Gascon/Unsplash

The Mendes Family

The story of the Mendes family is instructive. Different from the many Portuguese youngsters who were getting near the age for conscription, in 1971 teenager Rui Mendes crossed the frontiers almost legally. Travelling by car, he pretended that he was visiting his father, mother and brother and sister who had emigrated the year before, while he had stayed in Porto to finish his schooling.

Julia, one of his aunts, worked as a concierge in the centre of Paris, and she also took in work as a seamstress. The position she gained through her work greatly helped her family in the task of integration. While many Portuguese remained isolated in the working-class suburbs, those who worked as concierges generally lived in work-related accommodation inside the city.

Living in exclusive areas, they had access to better schools and avoided the need of child-minding services. The mothers could supervise the education of their children without any effect on their wage; they looked after other children, cleaned, ironed and did sewing work. Concierges, therefore, had access to many influential contacts, and aunt Julia was consequently able to take care of everything for the Mendes family.

On arrival in France, Rui's father had immediately begun work in an orthopaedic shoe factory owned by a Greek immigrant, and Rui's mother began work at his house as both cook and cleaner.

When Rui arrived in France a year later, thanks to aunt Julia, his family was living in a house with a garden at the Parisian suburb of Fontenay-sous-Bois, where his father grew roses, strawberries and lettuces. He also had an enormous radio, on which he could listen to commentaries on Portuguese football matches.

A Portuguese in France

In Portugal, Rui had been a good pupil at school, especially in French and English, and as soon as he reached his parents in France, he also began work in the shoe factory where his father was employed. In the first years, Rui did not integrate in the Portuguese community because he worked and socialised only with French people.

As his family lived in the middle-class suburb of Fontenay-sous-Bois, he never knew Champigny-sur-Marne, the biggest shanty-town in France. This slum had grown rapidly with the arrival of more and more Portuguese, and it eventually accommodated over 15,000 people in dreadful conditions. Contemporary photos show children wading in streets of mud, and whole families living in one room, often without electricity.

Nobody spoke of the Portuguese dictatorship. They were there to work, and did not criticise Portugal. But when Salazar learned that communist agents were active in Champigny, Portuguese secret police appeared there to discover whether anyone was criticizing the government.

Rui Mendes said, “They were there to spy, and no-one criticized or spoke of politics, since family members still in Portugal were at risk. The secret police caused a certain fear among the emigrant community and the network of spies created a climate of suspicion, and so tens of thousands of emigrants kept a low political profile.”

The economy in Portugal

Whilst living in Porto, the Mendes family had never conversed about the dictatorship, nor had Rui discussed it with his school friends. But the effects of the Colonial Wars could not be ignored, as neighbouring families in Porto mourned their lost sons. It has long been thought that the principal driver of “O Salto” was the desire of young men to avoid conscription. But the war was not the only factor – economic conditions in Portugal were also difficult.

Rui’s family had owned a grocer’s shop in Porto, a wine shop, a games room, where people used to play cards for money, and a small television room where kids could watch *Bonanza* for a few *cêntimos*. His parents worked hard for little reward, and he remembered that the tax officials were so keen to extract fines from businesses that his mother was alarmed, because she knew that some of them were cheats.

While the decade of the 60s began with stable prices, by 1971 inflation had reached an annual figure of 11%. The government fixed both prices and wages as the economy overheated, and the addition of the petrol crisis of 1973 caused worse problems. Strikes and demonstrations – all illegal in authoritarian Portugal – broke out. The continuing rise in the cost of living and wage stagnation impelled thousands of Portuguese to emigrate.

A personal note

When Lynne and I arrived in the Algarve 25 years ago, we knew only rudimentary Portuguese, and people spoke to us in French, since many of them had grown up in France. Since then, our friends Osvaldo and Elisabete have returned every year in their French-registered car from Paris to their house in Livramento for their summer holiday. Many Portuguese such as Osvaldo and Elisabete prefer to remain in France, their adopted country. They are a present-day reminder of “O Salto”.

Read more from [Peter Booker](#) about [Portugal’s Colonial War in Guiné – the beginning of the end](#) or [The Portuguese World Exhibition \(O Mundo Português\)](#).

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www.algarvehistoryassociation.com