

Desertion and Exile: Experience and Memory (A Kind of Preface)

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Opening

“Can anyone be who he is not? / Can anyone be who he is not? / Can anyone be who he is not? Sérgio Godinho’s chorus – from a song included in the album “Pré-Histórias” / “Prehistories” (1972) – came to mind as soon as I started reading the testimonies collected in this book. That was the year I was arrested in the course of a rally against the Portuguese Colonial War. I was then sure my destiny was written down: a registration with the PIDE-DGS (the State Security Police) meant I could not pursue my studies and, if not taken to Caxias – the infamous political prison – I would be drafted into the army, and sent to somewhere in Africa with the next platoon. Given I could not be who I wasn’t, I would then choose the path of desertion and exile, in the footsteps of so many before me.

And so it happened, if only up to a point; I will be telling the closure of this personal episode at the end. For now, it should be noted that desertion seemed, back then, a natural choice, almost inevitable for those who, like myself and all the others whose voice can be heard in this book, had decided not to betray their conscience nor the trust of those who refused to accept an unjust war and a tyrannical government.

1.

The social condition of a deserter is ambivalent, dodging, and almost always marginal. Cursed or acknowledged, criminalized or made heroic, desertion starts by being what those who judge from afar declare it: an outlaw action. Until the 25th April 1974 to desert for political reasons – as well as leaving the country before being drafted – was not an easy decision to take and one which was not understood by everybody. Besides being deemed a crime it implied some kind of moral slight to most people, with the exception of the more politicized in the opposition to the Estado Novo. The Regime would lead you to believe that it was a form of “treason”, concomitant to the refusal of

doing one's duty to the "Motherland", whose interests were supposed to be well above all individual choices.

The contempt with which some political sectors – nostalgic of the colonial past or associated with right-wing politics – still regard that choice has this principle as a starting point and as the proof of a stain that, for them, cannot be washed-up. Many years after the end of the war that forced many thousands of young people to take that extreme step, there are still Portuguese people, including supporters of the democratic regime and even military which were with the April Revolution from the very the beginning, that feel, and sometimes express, a certain discomfort towards those who own up to having deserted. For those people, *Le Déserteur*, the old song by Boris Vian, was never an anthem. They don't understand it, nor do they accept it.

The word "treason" echoes then in the air, together with the words "fear" and "comfort". We know that reality is often painful and this is the reality: there are still people that disregard that dramatic and difficult choice, the choice of those who decided not to take part in a war with which they did not agree.

People who exchanged their experience for a life in exile, almost always difficult, concomitant with a political option that required courage, for it led to the greatest dangers, left in a situation that would mean, probably forever, pawning their personal well-being and a possible peaceful future.

Thus, very far-removed from the insinuations of "cowardice", desertion has been for many thousands of youngsters an act of bravery and risk in the context of an individual process of resistance to the unjust and criminal regime with which they didn't want to comply. It is important to show it and to recognize it openly.

2.

These many years later and yet the historical approach to the subject remains just as difficult. First of all because first person narratives, or testimonies, as well as material documentation are not abundant. They do exist yet, have been kept mostly private and only recently have started to surface. Besides, there are no precise and reliable figures on the number of deserters, unauthorized absentees and draft evaders, nor about their distribution in the different places of exile. Furthermore, left wing sectors that defended

or, at least, accepted that option, had no consensual position in regard to desertion back then, while some controversy still persists today.

The Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) grounded its position on an attitude of effective support to the stances defended by the African liberation movements. From the very beginning it maintained that the emancipation of colonial peoples and the Portuguese people struggle for freedom – having a common enemy in the fascist and colonialist government – were closely connected. Nevertheless, its way of conducting the internal fight against the war would evolve, namely on the issue of desertion. The publication of a document with a programmatic designation, “To create a strong military organization is one of the most urgent tasks of the Party”, in the bulletin “O Militante”, in January 1966 (n. 141), would be crucial for this development.

In this document enormous importance is attributed to the organization of the communists in military quarters and to propaganda among soldiers, focusing on the following targets: “against war in the colonies, against the violence of the exercises and military maneuvers, against injustices and humiliations practiced by fascist commanders and officers, against the intrusion of foreign officers and the installation of foreign military bases on national territory, against the fascist government politics of national treason, against repression and political terrorism, against the absence of democratic liberties”. It was, however, the issue of desertion which deserved more attention. The document states that: “It is known that the party not only does not oppose, but supports and applauds the desertion by soldiers, sergeants and officers who do not wish to take part in the criminal colonial wars. (...) The organization of collective desertions (...) must therefore continue and be intensified as much as possible”.

However, it is clarified that “in the case of party members”, “desertion as an isolated initiative cannot be supported”, as that would mean to deprive many youngsters already in the army of being enlightened of the negative nature of the government colonial politics. It is further written: “In the fight against colonial war communists must go as far as possible, including to the battle front, always with the goal of enlightening other soldiers that they shouldn’t fight, that they must not risk their lives to defend the interest of monopolists and other Motherland’s enemies”. In this line argument, the possibility of leaving the country before being drafted or even before going to military inspection was unacceptable: “how is it possible to conciliate the attitude of these comrades with the purposes of the revolution if they flee the learning of weapons handling?” Sometime

later, in another article – “Young communists and the colonial war”, n. 144, August 1966 – a clarifying note is added: “The Party disapproves of individual desertions by Party members, who only may desert when in eminent risk of being arrested as a consequence of their revolutionary action or in the context of collective desertions.”

3.

This was one of the touchstones of the gradual and multiform process that tended to drive away from the PCP many young antifascists, youngsters that, particularly in the last years of the regime, became increasingly closer to the positions of “the revolutionary left”. In the university environment communist students didn’t choose as a priority the fight against the colonial war, focusing rather most of their activity in the semi-legal combat against the educational government policies and for the recognition of the unifying role of student associative life. That is, there was no clear answer to a situation that was affecting directly the life of University students and young people in general, which distressed them, stalled their future and revolted them deeply. Thus, the organization of combative student groups that, on the party’s left, took the active opposition to the colonial war as the axis for a great deal of initiatives, became less difficult. At the same time, inside immigration circles, where scores of deserters and exiled worked methodically towards the politicization of emigrated workers, the war issue became the core of the active and militant groups’ activity, openly committed to initiatives of anti-colonialist nature.

The colonial war issue has been therefore, since the first published documents, present as a political target of this sector, this being one of the diverging points with the PCP political line at the time. On this, the party was less inclined towards immediate combat – strangely enough, even against the grain of the proposals coming from “progressive catholic” sectors. As soon as 1964, in the first issue of the clandestine newspaper “Revolução Popular” / “The People’s Revolution” – the organ of the “Comité Marxista-Leninista Português” / “Portuguese Marxist-Leninist Committee (CMLP) – it was stated that “the beginning of the revolutionary wars of liberation by the peoples of the Portuguese colonies marked the passage into a new phase of the antifascist struggle in Portugal”. It was argued that the armed struggle of the African liberation movements should be articulated with the Portuguese people’s struggle, with the call to armed

violence having the overthrow fascism as aim. And there was no time to loose in the pursuit of this goal.

4.

Even after CMLP's dissolution this option will define the activity of the groups derived from it as well as of those which had broken apart from it in the course of the short but complex history of our self-called Marxist-Leninist – or Maoist – movement before the 25th of April. Despite the successive divergences that kept splitting them, almost all these organizations kept, in this regard, three common basic principles, with small and sometimes merely formal differences. The first was to recognize as a priority the struggle against the Colonial War, a necessary and crucial prelude to the fall of the regime and the establishment of a society that would be new and more just; the second, made compulsory the revolutionary's refusal to fight the liberation movements in the African territories, as long as the colonial war went on; a consequence of the previous one, the third ordered that a revolutionary, when mobilized to the war theatre, should forcibly desert the army, and keep on fighting in other roles and other places for the end of fascism, for the social revolution and for the rights of the peoples of the colonies.

One such group, and definitely one of the most dynamics, was OCMLP (Organização Comunista Marxista-Leninista Portuguesa / Portuguese Marxist-Leninist Organization), a structure created from the fusion of "Grito do Povo" / "The People's Shout" and "O Comunista" / "The Communist", in which the authors of this book's testimonies have either been militants or collaborated with. This sector advocated "desertion with weapons" at the final stage of army training, thus combining the refusal of participation in the war with the creation of the conditions for the future launching of an armed revolution that would overthrow the regime. "O Manifesto dos Soldados" (The Soldiers' Manifest) stated it clearly: "When you desert, try by all means to appropriate arms, explosives, uniforms, documents, maps, etc...In the case you have a reliable revolutionary friend give him the material. If not, bury the material, well protected from humidity, or hide it in a safe place: when the revolution shall come to need it, the weapons will be ready to be used."

At the same time that they tried to materialize these principles efficiently, by creating conditions for the revolutionary or more politicized military men to leave the country, OCMLP was taking part in battlefield organizations (“frentistas”) related to the anti-colonial struggle, such as “Comités Servir o Povo” (Serving the People Committees) and others. In immigration circles, the work was done by energizing newspapers, theatre groups and associations where the struggle against the war and the boosting of the political consciousness of sectors of the Portuguese immigrant community – in France, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Holland, Denmark and other countries – were a crucial factor. A number of texts included in this book tell that experience of years of tireless militancy in detail and by those who experienced it.

5.

The authors of this book are, therefore, men and women who took a very active part in this universe. They played their role in exile territories as a consequence of their option for desertion from the Army or, in other cases, for activities calling to desertion, for propaganda against the war and for generally maintaining an active and organized resistance to the fascist and colonialist regime near the Portuguese communities in Europe.

Naturally, women have a singular place here: not being actually “deserters”, their condition as exiled persons – by their own choice – was characterized by a militant intervention in close complicity with the deserters. In fact, their important testimonies contribute to complete, or to revisit in an independent approach, much of what their comrades or companions of the time and of places of exile are telling us in their own texts.

Furthermore, to read what is told here allows us to overcome the mere formulation of the political choices, shared by all of them and common to many other youngsters who have chosen the path of exile to avoid to fight the war and keep up their combat. We are thus able to perceive partially their daily lives and, through this knowledge, able to confirm that the path that they have chosen was not, as some people still proclaim, the easiest one.

To abandon the cocoon of origin and, far away, to “live with the essential, restart all over again”, as it is said at some point, was everything but a simple choice. It meant to

leave the family, the town or neighborhood of origin, a possible material security, sometimes to undergo a process of social declassification – as Miguel Cardina calls it in his study of Maoism in Portugal from 1964 to 1974 – to start living “hidden from fortune”. Often, without a steady resting place, without a secure job, without the comfort of a warm bed and a safe and certain table. Other times in solitude, on the margins of legality and under the threat of the police, the immigration services and even the long arm of PIDE. The places of exile were not vacation resorts or train-stations on a journey, but rather unstable territories in which the body’s youth, the solidarity of a few companions, the occasional love affairs, the faith in historical justice and the dimension of the utopia that generates hope were what better fed the body, the soul and the determination to proceed.

And then there was reading, music, the theatre, the movies, which were part of the process of politicization and emancipation that, in the country where they came from – impoverished, gagged and at war – were strongly constrained for some and virtually impossible for others.

This is also a scenery present throughout these pages: a kind of novelistic apprehension of the world, of the conquest of new horizons, which has transformed these men and women, endowing them with a perception of the world, of history, of their own personal lives and even of their own country, which was rather different from the one held by those left behind, still inhabiting “inland”, or of those that eventually went to the remote fronts of the Colonial War, quite often without a return ticket.

Not only because of this, but also because of this, this texts overflow with pride. Contrary to what may think those who don’t understand – and might never be able to understand – the political and personal option for desertion, these women and men know that they have lived a unique experience, they know that the experience changed them forever, they know above all that they have fulfilled a destiny that they identified, and keep on identifying, as a duty.

And they know, even if some exile experiences that they gone through also had their adverse side, that they have done what had to be done.

Closing (1)

Truth be told that, if we get down to detail, we might detect a few inaccuracies, the occasional anachronism or even minor contradictions in some of the stories or in some of the references that appear in these testimonies.

After all, as it is well-known, the work of memory – which should not be confused with History, but which feeds it – is also done through oblivion. It works by the selection of what each of us considers as more relevant and by the incorporation of experiences lived later, in other moments and other places, in what is told. This finishes up by increasing the margin of error. However, these very occasional cases only enhance the level of honesty and revisitation of the past that we may find here. This book is, therefore, an intensely personal and indispensable contribution to the construction of a collective history which in fact has not yet been written. A history which, once written, will certainly put an end to the anathemas that some people persist in throwing against those who acted following a moral imperative that deserves only respect and gratitude.

Closing (2)

Because a promise is a promise, and I believe that my story is unusual, I will close by finishing the short personal episode that I started to tell at the beginning. The one about my own desertion.

I experienced the 25th of April in the condition of military (“having joined the army” on the 17th of April 1973). In August 1974, I was incorporated in a battalion that was to go to Angola. However, as the Alvor Agreements – that established, in January of the following year, the parameters for the partition of power among the three independentist Angolan movements – had not yet been signed up, OCMLP, of which I was a militant at the time, decided to maintain the call for desertion. And thus I did it, deserting from the Infantry Regiment n.15, in Tomar, and lived as a clandestine between September 1974 and January of the following year. Then, once the peace agreements were signed – a transitory peace, but we didn’t know that at the time –, I would be reintegrated in the army under an amnesty. In February I proceed to Luanda, in order to live there the “hot year” of 1975, as a military but also carrying political tasks required by the organization.

“My” clandestinity was spent working as assistant to a bricklayer, in a construction company in the district of Braga. But that was a second-best choice, because on that

morning in September as I walked out of my parents' home, leaving them without any idea of what I had decided to do, as so many others had done before me – such as the comrades that you will read next – I still believed I had as destiny the path of an exile without return, another life to be lived beyond the Pyrenees.

“Can anyone be who he is not?”