

The Rise and Decline of Porto Grande (Cabo Verde): a Microcosm of Anglo-Portuguese Relations

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Prologue

In September 1922 an incident occurred in the harbour of Porto Grande, on the island of São Vicente, which vividly illustrates the clash of economic interests and cultural perceptions in a port-city struggling to survive during the heyday of European imperialism:

'Upon arrival yesterday morning', wrote captain Ashley of *SS Hypatia* from his anchorage in Porto Grande, 'the steamer was surrounded with the usual flotilla of small boats belonging to ship-chandlers and bumboatmen etc., and as soon as the quarantine flag was hauled down they threw up their lines with hooks attached and swarmed aboard like flies. The writer's experience is that 99% of these men come aboard to steal and to try to get some of the crew to exchange ship's stores etc. for cheap booze, and so I requested the Authorities to put a policeman on board to keep them off, as it is impossible to keep them off alone, but despite the efforts of the writer, three officers and two policemen, they kept getting aboard after being cleared off the decks. Shortly after 10 am I saw three or four men hanging around aft near the crew's quarters, so went along to ascertain what they wanted.

Finding they were bumboatmen, I ordered them to go down to their boats, when they became very abusive and threatened to knife me etc.,

so with the assistance of one of the policemen, they were compelled to leave the steamer. They spoke fluent English and their language was vile. We had just cleared the after deck when I heard one of the sailors shout "Captain, there is a nigger trying to dump the Third Mate."

I rushed up onto the saloon deck and found the Third Officer and a big half caste struggling, so naturally grabbed the nigger and pulled him off. It appears the Third Officer found the nigger bumboatman prowling about the saloon deck and ordered him off, when the nigger grabbed him and threw him onto the deck. Several of my sailors proved to be real white men and came to our assistance and a free fight between nigger bumboat men and coolies versus various members of the crew and police ensued. Their accomplices in the boats then commenced throwing lumps of coal, one of which struck me on the right side of the head, cutting me badly, and raising a huge lump.

Whilst this was going on, three or four niggers got aboard aft and tried to join their accomplices on the saloon deck, but were prevented from doing so by Chief Officer Madrell and two sailors, who compelled them to return to their boats. During the struggle the Chief Officer had his nose scarred and badly bruised, and one of the sailors received a black eye, both men being injured by knuckle-dusters the niggers wore.

This amounts to nothing less than absolute contempt for the British flag.¹

Written in high indignation, this text uses language loaded with cultural significance. Consider the following phrases: "They spoke fluent English and their language was vile", "the nigger bumboatman prowling about the saloon deck", "my sailors proved to be real white men", "nothing less than absolute contempt for the British flag." Such language is extraordinarily revealing of the racial and class tensions that lay so near the surface of society during the imperial era.

However, it is not the purpose of this paper to analyze this text in detail (although it might be appropriate to recall that the British

1 National Archives (London) [henceforward NA] FO 371/8386 J. W. Moore, Secretary of the Imperial Merchant Service Guild to the Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, enclosing a report from Captain H. Ashley of SS *Hypatia*, 26 September 1922.

Vice-Consul, commenting to the Secretary of State on this incident, “pointed out that the foul language – in English – could only have been learned amongst British sailors”) but rather to try to understand the historical context of this incident, to add another paragraph to the much studied history of Anglo-Portuguese relations and to see what light it throws on the early history of one of the most important cities of the Portuguese Atlantic.²

1. Geographical Location

In 1922 Mindelo was one of the most important port-cities in the Atlantic empires of both Portugal and Britain. Like many other port-cities it had come into existence not as a centre of religion, defence or administration but because of its pivotal role in international commerce. The Cape Verde Islands lie approximately half way between Europe and the Cape of Good Hope and Europe and the Rio de la Plata. They also lie astride the route which sailing vessels had to take to pick up the trade winds of the South Atlantic. From the time of their discovery by the Portuguese and Italian navigators in the 1450s the islands had played a crucial role in international commerce. At first, they served as a base for European trade with upper Guinea but, with the opening of the sea routes to India and South America, they became regular stopping places providing water and fresh provisions for sailing ships on long distance voyages.

Porto Grande on São Vicente is by far the best natural harbour in the archipelago. A British Foreign Office handbook, produced during the First World War, neatly summarized its advantages:

The bay has an entrance two miles wide and penetrates inland for one and a half miles. Between the points of entrance there is an even bottom of 22 fathoms, shoaling on the west side to nine fathoms at three-quarters of a cable from the shore. There is ample anchorage on hard sand and

² NA FO 371/8386, Vice-Consul to Secretary of State, St Vincent, 25 November 1922.

the harbour is sheltered by lofty hills, though when a north-east wind is blowing there are often sudden squalls. In the centre of the bay the depth of water is 10 fathoms, but alongside the wharves 8 feet only. (Cape Verde Islands 1920, 14)

However, in spite of these advantages, the island of São Vicente attracted no permanent settlement because of its exceptionally dry, almost desert, conditions. Lack of water does not necessarily inhibit the growth of cities – Hormuz and Mozambique Island being two examples from Portuguese colonial history – but for four hundred years, Porto Grande was almost totally neglected by the Portuguese. It was, in fact, Dutch and English Indiamen and American whalers, vessels which had need of a port but good reason to avoid the Portuguese authorities, which made most use of the bay. As late as 1784 the anonymous author of the *Notícia Corográfica e Chronológica do Bispado do Cabo Verde* (...) listed São Vicente among the “Ilhas desertas” commenting that it was “almost totally arid and produced no food at all.” (Carreira 1985, 36)

The first attempt by the Portuguese to settle São Vicente occurred in 1781 when the island was granted, along with the title of *capitão-mor*, to João Carlos da Fonseca from Fogo. After he died a ruined man, a further attempt to plant a settlement was made in 1819 which also failed after only five years. (Silva 1998, 29-30) As late as the 1820s sailing ships bound for the Cape of Good Hope or South America avoided São Vicente and stopped at Porto da Praia in Santiago or occasionally at Brava, Fogo, or at Maio to take on a cargo of salt.

2. Changing Conditions in Atlantic Trade

It was the changing commercial and political world of the South Atlantic that turned an arid and deserted bay into a thriving sea-port and a vital strategic link in two interlocking imperial systems. During the 1820s, Brazil and Argentina, now independent of Portugal and Spain, had opened their ports to European, principally British,

commerce. At the same time the campaign against the slave trade was gathering momentum and squadrons of warships from Britain, France, the US and Portugal operated against the trade in the South Atlantic. However, although forced black emigration from Africa declined under this international pressure, it was replaced by a steadily increasing flow of emigration from Europe and the Atlantic islands. These factors all pointed to the need for a major international port to service trans-Atlantic flows of people and goods.

However, these factors alone would not have created the city of Mindelo, had steam navigation not begun the slow but inexorable process of replacing sail on the sea routes to South America and the East. Steamers moving between Europe and South America could not carry enough fuel for their whole voyage and needed to take on more coal at some port *en route*. For bunkering purposes, steamers needed large, sheltered, deep water ports and Porto Grande offered exactly the right conditions.

The first attempts to set up a coaling depot were made by the East India Company in 1838, and the same year the Septembrist government in Portugal officially established the town of Mindelo and declared that it would be the future capital of the archipelago. (*Linhas Gerais* 1984, 13)

However, it was in 1850 that the development of Porto Grande really began. In that year the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company obtained a concession for a coaling station and made Porto Grande a regular stop on the voyage to the Cape and India. That year Vice-Consul John Rendall decided to move the British Consulate from Praia to the new port-city. Rendall was an enthusiastic advocate of Porto Grande and founded one of the earliest coaling companies. As described in his book, *A Guide to the Cape de Verd Islands*, which he published, with the official approval of the Foreign Office, in 1856, the arid, desert island of São Vicente is hardly recognizable. "The salubrity of St Vincent is very superior (...)", he writes, water is in "great abundance" six to ten feet from the surface; a road has been completed to Green Mountain (Monte Verde) and "at present a good deal of cultivation is going on". The harbour, he optimistically declares, can shelter 300 ships. (Rendall 1856, 2, 3, 27)

The American anti-slave trade squadron also needed a base for its operations and began to use Porto Grande. A vice-consul was installed and an American cemetery was walled off a little way from the beach. (Thomas 1969, 332) Alongside the Americans, a number of British steamship lines began to use Porto Grande to resupply their vessels with coal and new British coaling companies installed themselves around the bay, among them, Patent Fuels, Thomas and Miller, Visger and Miller, McLeod & Martin and Millers and Nephew. (Silva 1998, 32-3) By 1860 there were eight coaling companies established in Mindelo.

Coal bunkering required large amounts of labour. Cape Verdian workmen began to come from the other islands to work for the coaling companies, which built them small stone houses near the coal depots. The Portuguese administration followed. In 1852 a small fort, Fortim del Rey, was constructed; in 1858 a customs house was built and in 1860 a Comissão Municipal was established marking the separation of the island administration from that of neighbouring Santo Antão. (Silva 1998, 36) Later a residence was built for the governor of Cape Verde who began to spend some time in the island because of its growing international importance. However, the official capital of Cabo Verde was never transferred from Praia as the Setembristas had intended.

Although the Spanish established a coaling depot at Porto de Luz in Gran Canaria, which was declared a free port in 1852, the Canary Islands were too near Europe and too far from the ports of the Rio de la Plata. Ships from Europe did not have to refill their bunkers until they reached the half way point where Porto Grande was located. So, for most of the rest of the century, Porto Grande maintained its position ahead of its rival largely because of its ideal geographical location.

However, the prosperity of Porto Grande fluctuated as the coaling companies vied with each other to create a monopoly. By 1860 the companies that had been established in the previous decade had merged to create one dominant company, Millers and Nephew. As a consequence of this monopoly, coal prices remained high. Then in 1875, another large coaling company, Cory Brothers & Co entered

the market. The immediate consequence was a lowering of the price of coal and the doubling of the number of ships calling at the port. (Prata 2014, 49-69) The Portuguese authorities took advantage of this situation to raise the tax on coal and state revenues increased five times by 1885 and nine times by 1890. In 1884 two new coaling companies appeared but, as Atlantic navigation was going through a depression, one of the consequences was another round of mergers with Miller and Nephew and Cory Brothers merging in 1889 to form a new company known as Miller and Cory Vert Islands Ltd.. The new company, holding a near monopoly, once again raised the price of coal until, in 1891, it was twice as expensive as the coal sold in Gran Canaria. In 1891 an experiment was made by granting a licence to a Portuguese coaling company and this resulted once again in a lowering of the price of coal and a boom in the numbers of ships arriving in Porto Grande. However, within three years this company had been bought up by British interests.³

In 1894, the year when Porto Grande reached the height of its importance – 2,464 ships used the port – 1881 being long haul steamers and 34 being non-Portuguese warships. 194,793 passengers passed through the port in transit. One hundred and fifty-six coaling ships delivered 657,634 metric tons of coal and, often quoted figures for January 1890, show Porto Grande importing 36,600 tons of coal from Cardiff, about the same as Gibraltar and exceeded only by Port Said, Singapore and Malta. (Machado 1891, 34-35)⁴ Between 1890 and the First World War, Porto Grande maintained a fairly steady, if declining, level of activity as rivals in the free port of Porto La Luz and Dakar ate into its business. In 1910 301,400 tons of coal were imported and in 1913 1,414 steam ships cleared the port at a rate of about four a day and the port maintained a month's supply of coal amounting to 34,000 tons. Before the First World War, on average, goods imported by British firms in São Vicente accounted for two-thirds of all the

3 For the history of the foundation and mergers of the coaling companies see Prata, 2014.

4 See table facing page 26 in Vasconcellos 1903. According to the figures given by Villaça, 1896 was the peak year with 3,056 ships, but he was giving figures for Cape Verde as a whole. (Villaça 1890, 232)

imports into the Cape Verde islands, the customs duties providing the government with a substantial part of its revenue.

Porto Grande was not just a coaling station. With the laying of the transatlantic cables, it became a major link in the cable network connecting Europe with South America and Africa. The first cables reached São Vicente in 1874 and from there lines ran to the Azores, Portugal and Britain and via Ascension to Cape Town and South America. By the end of the century lines also ran to Bathurst and Free Town in West Africa. The Western Telegraph Company maintained offices and staff on São Vicente and in 1916 a wireless relay station was also in operation.

By the outbreak of the First World War, the city of Mindelo had a population of 8,500, twice the size of any other town in the archipelago, including Praia. (*Cape Verde Islands* 1920, 7, 15, 18) The character of the city was being forged by the rivalries and interactions of the British commercial community and the Portuguese administration, while ordinary Cape Verdians, subjected to the harsh conditions of drought, famine and a ruthless proletarianisation, were increasingly using Porto Grande as a staging port for emigration to the US.

3. The British and the Portuguese

In 1836, when the town of Mindelo was officially created, São Vicente had almost no native population. The few inhabitants of the island, it was reported, went round in state of "*nudez absoluta*". (*Linhas Gerais da História* 1984, 13) The city was entirely the creation of trans-Atlantic commerce. From the date of its foundation, it was part of two competing colonial empires. The British provided all the economic activity of the city and the port developed entirely to meet the various needs of the British Empire. In 1879 there were 157 businesses established in the town, virtually all of them British, and British companies owned most of the waterfront of the port. (Prata 2014, 55, 58) At the same time, Mindelo was politically and administratively controlled by Portugal. This dual relationship, so important in

shaping São Vicente society, was not unique. Parallels can be found in Madeira and, more clearly, in the Mozambican port city of Lourenço Marques, which, nominally ruled by Portugal, became a port of great strategic and economic importance for Britain in the last years of the nineteenth century.

In 1910, the British employees of the telegraph and coaling companies numbered 170. (*Portugal. Report for the Year 1911 1912*, 11) They formed a distinct colonial elite, reproducing the social relations typical of British colonies throughout the world. At the head of the community was the British Vice-Consul and the managers of the different companies. Otherwise it was a bachelor community whose members lived separately from the local population in large purpose-built residences. Their lives revolved around drinking and sport. Within three years of establishing themselves in Porto Grande, the British had petitioned for a grant of land for a golf course. Later, tennis and football were introduced and a cricket club was formed which prospered sufficiently for a book eventually to be written about Cape Verdian cricket. In 1925 the Prince of Wales visited São Vicente on board *HMS Repulse*. After a motoring expedition into the interior and an ascent of Monte Verde, "cricket and other games were arranged in the afternoon for officers of *HMS Repulse* by the British residents and for the men by the local Portuguese residents" – a hierarchical gradation of sporting activity that the British in the 1920s would have thought wholly appropriate.⁵

A small commercial community of Gibraltese Jews also existed, running hotels and shops and linked inevitably with the British.

The British were a transient community but even so, until at least the end of the nineteenth century, they outnumbered the Portuguese. Few if any of them settled in the island, which they referred to as the 'cinder heap', or visited the other islands of the archipelago. They were there to make money and felt no commitment to the local population or to the welfare of the islands. The captains and crew of the steamers which called to take on coal, also had a narrow range of

5 NA FO 371/11094 Vice-Consul L. Leach to Secretary of State, St Vincent, 10 October 1925.

interests. They wanted the quickest turn round time and they wanted to be provided with the water and fresh provisions that they required as well as the coal.

The Portuguese community in Mindelo was made up for the most part of the officials in charge of the police, the military, the customs and the administration. This community aspired to a certain cultural elegance. According to João de Sousa Machado, writing in 1891, “os bailes da classe mais elevada são perfeitamente em regra como os das cidades de segunda ordem da Europa.” (Machado 1891, 16-17)

As in so many other parts of the Portuguese world, British and Portuguese found themselves locked into a loveless marriage, each needing the other but each resentful of the attitudes and behaviour of their partner. There was continual tension between the Portuguese administrators, the economically dominant and culturally exclusive British community and the constantly changing population of foreigners in transit whose presence exacerbated the problems of smuggling and prostitution.

From the start, conflict existed between the expectations of the British and the Portuguese. Both the ships’ captains and the personnel of the British coaling companies looked to the Portuguese authorities to provide the port services. Quarantine facilities and a customs house were duly built but proper harbour works were never constructed. In the last quarter of the century almost the entire waterfront of Mindelo was owned by British coaling companies (Prata 2014, 58) but the simple wooden jetties they built compared unfavourably with the facilities available at ports like Gran Canaria. Archibald Lyall, visiting São Vicente in 1936, described how

the passenger reaches the little jetty pied with black stains where he has been splashed by the coal-dust laden water (...) he has to clamber up a rusty iron companion-way and pick his way carefully along the broken wooden jetty to avoid falling through the holes into the sea. (1938, 76-77)

This, he comments “was once the fourth greatest coaling station in the world”. (Lyall 1938, 76-7) Not only were there no harbour works,

but there was no proper water supply and no ice plant. "If the town (...) were made more attractive by the installation of electric light, better buildings, shops, amusements etc. there would be inducement for passengers from ships calling to land and spend money", wrote the British Vice-Consul in 1912. (*Portugal. Report for the Year 1911 1912*, 4)

The single greatest complaint of the British community, however, was the lack of adequate policing. Shortly after the declaration of the Portuguese Republic in 1910, the workers in Porto Grande went on strike for more pay. The Acting Vice-Consul sent a panic-stricken telegram – "British merchants property in hands of mob and business suspended authorities powerless (...)"⁶ The following day he reported, "the position was very critical, crowds of men about the streets insulting British residents, and on my appealing to the Mayor he told me that he was doing his utmost to preserve order but that his force was not adequate."⁷ In fact the Portuguese police managed to protect the transatlantic cable from interference and, when the strike was over, it was admitted by Captain B. Miller of *HMS Aeolus* that "the Authorities ashore seemed determined that order should be kept and except for the presence of large numbers of unemployed labourers in town, I saw nothing to cause apprehension to the white community."⁸

The Portuguese claimed that the British charged too much for their coal and that this was threatening the survival of Porto Grande. They believed that the British preferred to make their profits from high prices and low turnover rather than from the growth of the port. In 1911, they suggested levying a flat rate tax on the coaling companies who would then be free to import as much coal as they liked tax free. (*Portugal. Report for the Year 1911 1912*, 5)

The coaling companies rejected this but continued to blame the price of coal on the high rates of tax imposed by the Portuguese.⁹ And there the argument stuck. It was summarized in September 1925 in

6 NA FO371/974 Acting Consul to Secretary of State, St Vincent, 20 October 1910.

7 NA FO371/974 Acting Consul to Secretary of State, St Vincent, 21 October 1910.

8 NA FO 371/974, Captain B. Miller to C-in-C Devonport, 11 November 1910.

9 See for example NA FO 371/7101 Vice-Consul Darrell Wilson to Lancelot Carnegie, British Minister in Lisbon, St Vincent, 19 May 1921.

a letter written by the British Vice-Consul to Lancelot Carnegie, the British Minister in Lisbon, describing the return of the Governor of Cape Verde, Julio de Abreu, from a visit to Lisbon:

Dr Abreu seems to have returned here with considerable prejudice in his mind against the British Coaling Companies in Saint Vincent. He appears to consider that the decline of the port is due, in great part, to causes within the power of the Coaling Companies to remedy; generally speaking, he is vague in his statements, his only definite suggestion being that the price of coal here is too high; as Your Excellency knows, this is to no small extent, due to the tax of 1/6 a ton levied on all coal imported here, a disability from which the competing islands, Las Palmas, Madeira, Tenerife, are in fact entirely free.¹⁰

The governor, again not for the first time, proposed inviting non-British firms to compete for the coaling contracts and proposed forming a company to undertake and pay for improvements to the port.

While the British complained that the Portuguese did nothing to improve the port, in spite of high levels of local taxation, the Portuguese complained that the British companies were unwilling to invest any of the excessive profits they made from over-priced coal. Each side blamed the other for the slow but inexorable decline of the port. Ana Prata has shown that in the years when more than one coaling company operated in the port, competition lowered the price of coal and increased the number of ships calling, only for the situation to be reversed when the next round of mergers resulted yet again in monopoly conditions. (Prata 2014, 49-69)

The Portuguese also blamed the British for much of the disorder in the town, for the rampant contraband trade that spread from the ships and for the drunken and disorderly behaviour of the British community. In 1920 the British Minister in Lisbon told Lord Curzon that

all the trouble has been caused by Mr Butler [the Vice-Consul] and his particular friends (...) he was often drunk and he and his companions when

10 NA FO 371/11094 British Vice-Consul to Lancelot Carnegie, St Vincent, 26 September 1925.

in that condition had made scandalous scenes in the street at night and had defied the authorities for whom they perpetually created every sort of annoyance and difficulty.¹¹

Archibald Lyall commented that “one would gather from the few survivors of the good old days that half the colony spent Saturday night bailing the other half out of gaol.” (1938, 78)

Relations with the English community were regulated through the important figure of the British Vice-Consul who not only represented the commercial community, but had direct communication with the British embassy in Lisbon and the Foreign Office in London. Whatever the behaviour of the British community, most Vice-Consuls took care to maintain friendly relations with the Portuguese authorities. A letter written in 1876 from the British Vice-Consul to the Foreign Secretary, the Earl of Derby, can be read either as a case of close cooperation between the two elite communities or as a sign that the British were beginning to treat São Vicente as their own colony. In 1873 the Portuguese had initiated a tree planting programme and had imposed penalties on anyone cutting down trees in the island. The British Vice-Consul and the Portuguese president of the Câmara Municipal had begun to experiment with growing Casuarina trees, reputed to grow well in dry sandy conditions. The plants had attained two inches in height when the Portuguese official was transferred to Angola. The British had then ordered seeds of two species of Casuarina to be sent from Réunion Island to continue the experiment.¹²

4. The Cape Verdian Working Class

In the nineteenth century, the working population of Mindelo was entirely made up of migrants from the other islands. Used to migrating in search of work, Cape Verdians now found a foreign

11 NA FO 371/5492 Lancelot Carnegie, British Minister in Portugal, to Lord Curzon, 8 December 1920.

12 NA FO 63/1042 British Vice-Consul to Earl of Derby, St Vincent, 15 November 1876.

colony installed on one of their own islands where work of a kind was available. At first the migrant workers retained their roots in the agricultural communities of their islands of origin. It was reported that, whenever it rained, the city would be emptied as the workers returned home to help with planting or traveled inland to cultivate small plots of land on Monte Verde, the only part of São Vicente that received sufficient moisture to allow any agriculture. As João Sousa Machado commented in 1890,

em caindo as primeiras chuvas, corre ao campo para os trabalhos da sementeira, quasi toda a população valida da cidade, com prejuizo do serviço do mar, collocando por vezes as companhias em graves dificuldades. (1891, 3-4)

The bunkering of ships was very labour intensive. Porto Grande had no quays and all ships rode at anchor and had to be supplied by lighters. The coal, stored in sacks, was manhandled into the lighters, which were then taken out to the steamers in the bay. If the steamers had hoists fore and aft, 100 tons could be loaded in an hour and the average steamer could be turned round in a day. Labour costs were low and much of the work of moving the coal was actually performed by women “who carry great buckets of coal and *bidons* of water as large as their own torsos; and it is on their kerchiefed curls that the huge sacks of flour and maize and rice are carried up from the lighters.” (Lyll 1936, 80) A report dating from 1925 claimed that it took 17 women and 18 men to load 200 tons of coal. The men were paid 1/4d a day and the women 7d – in 1911 the rates had been 1/5 and 10d.¹³

In 1880 the Portuguese administrator had described the population of Mindelo as “pacíficos, indolentes, faltos de instrução e muito dados ao uso e abuso de bebidas alcoolicas. Amigos de danças

13 NA FO 371/11094 British Vice-Consul to Lancelot Carnegie, St Vincent, 26 September 1925, enclosing article from *Gazeta das Colónias*, no 24, 8 August 1925.

e folguedos, consumindo num dia os ganhos da semana.” (*Linhas Gerais da História* 1984, 33)

João de Sousa Machado, who carried out a study of the coal trade in 1890, also maintained that the population of São Vicente was “pacífica, bondosa, humilde e alegre” (1891, 16) In fact, labour relations were poor and were exacerbated by the effects of the droughts that regularly struck the islands. Cape Verdians were not subject to Portuguese colonial labour laws and escaped the forced labour which, under various disguises, was imposed on the inhabitants of the mainland colonies. Instead labourers, small peasant farmers in their islands of origin, were reduced by the monopolistic practices of free enterprise to becoming a proletariat without rights except those they could extort through collective action or subterfuge.

Labourers were employed by the coaling companies on a daily basis. If there were no ships, there was no work and no pay. The earliest strike took place in 1855 when famine conditions in the islands made the small wages earned by the workforce valueless as there was nothing to buy. The workers demanded that they be paid in food. (*Linhas Gerais da História* 1984, 20) After this the port labourers received part of their pay in kind to be spent in the companies stores – the notorious ‘truck’ system so hated by industrial workers everywhere. Another major strike occurred in October 1910 soon after the declaration of the Republic. The numbers on strike were variously estimated at between 1000 and 2000 and the coal lighters were prevented from being towed out to the waiting ships. The strikers wanted a doubling of their wages and were, allegedly, supported by “the small shopkeepers of the place, to whose advantage it would be if they were to obtain an increase of pay.”¹⁴ In the end the strikers settled for 15 per cent. Low as the wages were, they attracted ever-growing numbers of migrants to the city. Those who were not employed by the coaling companies worked as household servants. In 1879 out of 1,623 people employed in the city, 671 worked for the companies and 224

14 NA FO 371/974 Rear-admiral A. H. Farquhar to Secretary of Admiralty, *HMS Leviathan*, St Vincent, 27 October 1910.

were household servants. (*Linhas Gerais da História* 1984, 33) The only alternative was to make a living by prostitution, petty crime or dealing in contraband goods.

Living conditions in the city were appalling. At first there was only one well supplying water. Cholera broke out in 1858 and carried off half the population before subsiding. Visiting ships brought typhoid, yellow fever and bubonic plague. In 1911 the British Vice-Consul reported "there is no drainage, refuse being cast upon the waste lands near the towns or on to the sea-shore, with the consequence that during, and after, the rainy season outbreaks of malarial fever occur." There had been an outbreak of typhus and malaria among the British inhabitants and four people had died. (*Portugal. Report for the Year 1911* 1912) As late as May 1921 the British Vice-Consul summed up the situation in an official report, "the Port of St Vincent (Porto Grande) itself is in a very poor state of development, with no running water, town sanitation, electric light, telephones, wireless station, ice-plant or good roads."¹⁵ Six months later he was reporting an outbreak of bubonic plague:

anti-bubonic serum has arrived and many of the white Portuguese have been inoculated (...) an order recently posted states that all dogs found loose on the streets will be seized and destroyed if not claimed within 24 hours in order to prevent dogs spreading plague infection through possible contact with rats. A number of rats (20 to 40, I am told) are found dead from plague every morning. Disinfection apparatus arrived a month ago and many native dwellings have been disinfected, although none too thoroughly, I fear.¹⁶

Disease not only arrived with the ships and bred in the appalling sanitary conditions of the town but was exacerbated by the state of semi-starvation in which much of the population lived. Starvation

15 NA FO 371/7101 Vice-Consul Darrell Wilson to Lancelot Carnegie, British Minister in Lisbon, St Vincent, 19 May 1921.

16 NA FO 371/8386 Vice-Consul Darrell Wilson to Lancelot Carnegie, British Minister in Lisbon, St Vincent, 20 December 1921.

lay at the root of much of the lawlessness of which the British complained, but for them, it remained a police matter and the responsibility of the Portuguese authorities.

Petty thieving increased during the periods of severe drought when desperate and starving people would steal from the houses and business premises of the Europeans. In September 1920, all 104 members of the British community in São Vicente signed a petition drawing the government's attention to "the present undesirable and indeed serious state of affairs in this island" and demanding "protection against the wanton aggression of the lower class native population". The petition listed three robberies and two "most brutal assaults" and went on to complain that "members of the community, including ladies, are repeatedly insulted in the street and on more than one occasion even native policemen have jeered at them". The British community indignantly claimed that they were not protected by the police and demanded action to control the levels of crime.

The petition-letter went on to assert that "the unfriendly attitude of the Authorities towards British interests, is the basic cause of the conduct of the natives towards us" and "shipmasters on whose opinion the whole life of the community depends, are treated with the utmost discourtesy and abuse (...)." ¹⁷

When drought struck the islands, the population of the city would be swollen with the destitute. The Portuguese government had no systematic relief policy, while the coaling companies considered the poverty to be none of their business. Lyall describes the famine riots of the early 1930s and the resulting *taxation populaire* – the political economy of riot which has been described so often in early modern Europe:

The storm broke one morning, when some men paraded the town demanding food, work or maintenance. Others joined them and in an hour or two there were ten thousand people marching through St Vincent with

17 NA FO 371/5492 Vice-Consul H. Butler to Secretary of State, St Vincent, 21 September 1920 enclosing letter from British residents dated 28 August 1920.

the black banner of hunger waving at their head. Then they began to loot the food shops. Even then the fundamental decency of these miserable people showed itself. The police had refused to fire; the town was theirs; but the starving mob, which could easily have embarked on a wholesale *jacquerie*, preserved a sort of discipline and discriminated between friends and foes. They did not touch the merchants who had shown them charity (...). The others were looted. (1938, 84)

A further clash of interest between the coaling companies and the workers in Mindelo came to a head in 1925. For years small sailing boats had been used by men from São Vicente to dredge the harbour floor for coal that had fallen into the sea during loading. This practice known as 'Rocega' was resented by the coaling companies which claimed the dredgers stole coal directly from the lighters, that the coal on the seabed was theirs and that they should have the sole right to dredge. Although it was pointed out that the coal being loaded actually belonged to the ships which had paid for it, the Portuguese authorities sided with the coaling companies and dredging was banned.¹⁸

If tension constantly existed between the working population of Mindelo and the British community, the same was also true of relations between the workers and the Portuguese authorities. Second only to the bunkering trade, smuggling became Mindello's single greatest industry. Each ship that docked presented an opportunity for evading the official customs regulations. In collusion with sailors from the ships contraband of every sort was landed and retailed in the black market.

Mindello also became the focus of another form of smuggling, that of people. António Carreira has charted the droughts, famines and migrations that marked the rhythms of life and death in Cape Verde. Legal emigration was handled from Praia but it was Mindelo that offered endless opportunities for illegal emigrants. Large numbers of the destitute collected in the port waiting for the opportunity

18 NA FO 371/11094 British Vice-Consul to Lancelot Carnegie, St Vincent, 26 September 1925, enclosing article from *Gazeta das Colónias*, no 24, 8 August 1925.

to stowaway on passing steamers or for a passage on the small sailing boats that brought cargoes of boots, shoes and timber from the US. (*Portugal. Report for the Year 1911 1912*, 3) By 1916, such large numbers were stowing away on ships at São Vicente that Millers and Corry published a special announcement in the press to the effect that stowaways on their ships would be handed over to the authorities. (Carreira 1985, 93-4) The United States and Brazil were the favoured destinations and this emigration was eventually to generate the flow of remittances, which sustained the economy of the city when the coaling trade, which had provided the escape route for so many migrants, died.

This is the context and the explanation of the events that so troubled Captain Ashby of the *Hypatia* in 1922.

5. Mindelo Caught Between Rival Imperial Powers

In the protectionist world of the late nineteenth century, Porto Grande was only able to survive by becoming another incarnation of the old Anglo-Portuguese alliance. Threats to its survival came not only from the Spanish Canaries where, by the end of the nineteenth century, the free port was thriving, but nearer to home from the French decision to develop Dakar. This diverted French traffic and, incidentally, cut deeply into the salt trade from Cape Verde to Senegal. This made Porto Grande all the more dependent on the British who maintained the coal trade as a British monopoly, closed to international competition. German attempts in 1905 to establish coaling facilities in competition with the British were severely discouraged – a Foreign Office minute commenting on the scheme reflected that “Sr Villaça promised that he would never consent to granting a coaling station in Madeira or the Azores [or by implication Cape Verde] to a foreign power”.¹⁹ Foreign, of course, meant anyone other than the British.

19 NA FO 63/1427 Minute attached to Vice-Consul Rice to FO, St Vincent, 1 June 1905.

As Augusto Vera Cruz, Cape Verde's representative in the Portuguese Senate, put it in an article published in *Gazeta das Colónias* in 1925, "these attempts [to introduce foreign competition] are frustrated because the British Government at once brings the project to the notice of our Government, which, always faithful to its ally, gives way (...)." ²⁰ Porto Grande remained of great strategic importance to British imperial commerce as can be seen in the figures for 1913. In that year 870 British ships used the port, twice the number of Portuguese and four times the number of German vessels. That year, however, only 16 French ships used Porto Grande. (Almeida 1929, 35) When workers in the port struck for better pay in 1910, the British Government sent a cruiser squadron to São Vicente, ostensibly to protect British lives and property but in practice to overawe the strikers and to force the Portuguese authorities to take appropriate action. ²¹

The Portuguese recognized the strategic importance of Porto Grande for the British and cooperated reluctantly as a member of the alliance, aware that in practice they had little alternative. Porto Grande had been used by the British as a port of assembly during the Ashanti War and the Portuguese regularly welcomed visits by British warships. In 1908 the Rear-Admiral commanding the second British cruiser squadron reported that

on the occasion of his recent visit to St Vincent the usual port dues and customs duties, amounting in all to nearly £200 were remitted on the coal which was sent out for the squadron in the steamship 'Rosario', exemption having been specially granted to her by order of the Portuguese government. ²²

During the First World War, Porto Grande was regularly used for refueling British warships. At the peace conference, the British suggested that they should take over the port "as a set-off to financial claims of Great Britain on Portugal, or in exchange for territory

20 NA FO 371/11094 British Vice-Consul to Lancelot Carnegie, St Vincent, 26 September 1925 enclosing article from *Gazeta das Colónias*, no 21, 25 April 1925.

21 NA FO 371/974 Sec of State for Foreign Affairs to Sec Board of Trade, 24 Oct 1910.

22 NA FO 371/510 Admiralty to Foreign Office, 16 November 1908.

captured from Germany" – just as they also considered annexing Delagoa Bay.²³

However, important as it was for British interests, the British government did next to nothing to develop the port and even blocked Portuguese initiatives in this direction. Ever since the 1890s, when concern was being expressed about the future of Porto Grande, numerous plans for improving the port and reviving its fortunes were prepared – "the harbour scheme bacillus is very prevalent in Portugal" commented a Foreign Office minute.²⁴ In 1925, among many plans for the rejuvenation of the port, a scheme to convert Porto Grande into a naval base was put forward by the head of 'Obras Publicas' in the island. Like all other such schemes this one fell on deaf ears in both London and Lisbon. Lancelot Carnegie, the British Minister in Lisbon, commenting on the scheme did, however, agree that Porto Grande with all its advantages had fallen far behind its rivals. In 1889 Las Palmas and São Vicente had serviced the same number of ships but in 1924 9,108 ships had called at Las Palmas compared with only 1145 visiting Porto Grande. He summarized the British perspective on why this was so – excessive import duties on coal leading to higher prices, exaggerated price of water, bad arrangements for loading and unloading, no prepaid facilities, lack of fresh provisions, customs difficulties and the lack of attractions for tourists on shore – all by implication the fault of the Portuguese.²⁵ By the mid-1930s little had changed. Archibald Lyall, writing in 1938, observed

The subject of the construction of a new harbor is on the tongue of every after-dinner speaker in Cape Verde, every new governor and every grumbler and reformer, but nothing has been done and I doubt whether it ever will be (...). If it had been done forty years ago, St Vincent would have kept her trade (...). (1938, 77)

23 NA FO 608/119/23 Admiralty to Foreign Office, 18 January 1919.

24 NA FO 371/11094 Minute to dispatch from Vice-Consul St Vincent, 21 October 1925.

25 NA FO 371/11093 Lancelot Carnegie, British Minister in Lisbon to Austen Chamberlain Lisbon, 13 July 1925.

Porto Grande, however, had by then ceased to hold any importance for British or American commercial or naval power. The port and the city of Mindelo had only come into existence because of the unusual set of circumstances that made its geographical location so important. As oil-powered vessels, with their greater range, replaced coal-fired steamers, and wireless replaced the undersea cables, the geographical location of Porto Grande ceased to have attractions. As the British Vice-Consul wrote in 1925, "nobody would go to St Vincent for coal or anything else, if they could get it elsewhere: the decline of the port is perfectly natural."²⁶

The growth of international air traffic in the 1930s promised to give the Cape Verde Islands a key role in early aviation similar to the one they had played in early steam navigation. But it was on Sal not São Vicente that the international airport was built, initially by the Italians, not the British.

6. The Second World War²⁷

The last time that Mindelo became entangled in the fortunes of the two rival empires was at the start of the Second World War when plans were prepared by the British to take control not only of Porto Grande but of the airfields in Cape Verde.²⁸ A report by a British naval officer in January 1941 described Britain's concerns:

On Christmas Day St Vincent was virtually undefended. The Senior Officer present was the Officer of the Port, [he] is a political exile who will accept little responsibility and who lacks decision, and a lieutenant in charge of the garrison, a man miserable in appearance, who commands fifty native troops, recruited locally (...). Four to six determined armed men with iron bars and a can of petrol could put the [cable] station out of commission in from five to ten minutes.²⁹

26 NA FO 371/11094 Minute to dispatch from Vice-Consul St Vincent, 21 October 1925.

27 For this section see Newitt 2015, 220-237.

28 NA WO 106/2947 Operation No2, 1940.

29 NA FO 371/26842, Lt Cumberlege RNR to FO, Jan 1941.

Britain, like the Germans, preferred Iberian neutrality but with the proviso that "should Spain enter the war against us [it was proposed] to seize and hold both the Cape Verde Islands and the Azores as soon as possible, irrespective of the attitude of the Portuguese."³⁰ Salazar responded to British concerns by sending a warship and a force of 3,000 men to defend the islands. But in spite of these measures the British complained that German U boats were operating around the islands and were even receiving aid from the islanders.³¹ However, it was not to be a British or German occupation that brought disaster to wartime Cape Verde, but drought.

The Cape Verde Islands had always been liable to severe and prolonged droughts and wartime conditions made the islands particularly vulnerable. In 1939 the rains failed and over the next three years, the islands faced steadily worsening famine conditions which were described in the dispatches of the British Vice-Consul. In August 1941, he wrote

from 70% to 80% of the inhabitants of the Cape Verde Islands live within the poverty zone, dependent on the annual rainfall for their next years supplies of foods and necessities. A bad year means hunger and shortage, two bad years in succession may bring starvation in many islands (...). Towards the end of 1940 rumours were constant of serious want in many of the islands, as 1941 advanced food riots due to want were reported from S. Antão and death from hunger from S. Nicolau and Fogo (...). Children from this island [S. Nicolau] are being landed in St Vincent just skin and bone and have to be carried to the houses of their friends.³²

By December the situation was worse. Patrols had been out turning back people from the countryside trying to get to one of the towns to find relief:

30 NA FO 371/24494 C10637, FO to Lord Lothian, Ambassador in Washington, 9 October 1940.

31 NA FO 371/26842, Vice-Consul St Vincent to British Ambassador in Lisbon, 7 October 1941.

32 NA FO 371/26842 British Vice-Consul St Vincent to Ambassador in Lisbon, 28 Aug 1941.

The starving seem to accept the situation with an oriental fatalism. They do not press their claims to live, they scarcely beg, may ask you for alms once or twice, and then simply stare at you as if resigned to what is to happen.³³

The authorities “are very reticent regarding information about the famine (...) and it is evident the government do not wish for any outside assistance.”³⁴ The only measures being taken were to establish relief works but many people were too weak to work. Foodstuffs were continually running out because the recently reinforced Portuguese garrison had to be fed and visiting Portuguese ships were not running to schedule or were too full to carry goods for Cape Verde.³⁵ However, the Vice-Consul was emphatic that

the Island Government can deal with the situation if they wish to (...) [and] Portugal can also help if required without any inconvenience, it has no war expenditure and is probably at present one of the wealthiest nations in Europe.³⁶

António Carreira estimated that during the years 1941-43 there were 24,643 deaths attributable to the famine. (1985, 166) Alexander Keese has shown how the inertia of the Portuguese administration encouraged some Cape Verdians to look to Britain for help:

In 1942/3 the situation was grave enough to motivate some members of the Cape Verdean elite to act clandestinely. In a letter to the British Consulate in São Vicente, an anonymous writer – very probably a Cape Verdean member of the administration – sent a report to the “United Nations” (meaning in this case the alliance against the Axis during the Second World War), hoping for British, United States, and Soviet support, and requesting the “liberation” of the islanders from Portuguese mismanagement. He underlined his claim with numbers about death rates and photographs depicting starving peasant communities. (2012, 55)

33 NA FO 371/26842 British Vice-Consul St Vincent to Ambassador in Lisbon, 28 Aug 1941.

34 NA FO 371/2684 British Vice-Consul St Vincent to Ambassador in Lisbon, 3 December 1941.

35 NA FO 371/26842 British Vice-Consul St Vincent to Ambassador in Lisbon, 28 Aug 1941.

36 NA FO 371/2684 British Vice-Consul St Vincent to Ambassador in Lisbon, 3 December 1941.

There were also approaches made to Britain by some of the settlers in the mainland Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique.³⁷ Salazar believed that British offers of assistance would prove to be excuses for political or military intervention and refused all offers of aid from Britain. Eventually some 1700 starving islanders were sent to São Tomé to work in the cocoa plantations, but apart from this the Portuguese government did little to mitigate the effects of the famine.

In August 1943, Salazar agreed to lease the Lajes airbase in the Azores to the Allies and this finally removed any threat that Britain might at last wrest possession of the Cape Verde Islands from Portugal.

Epilogue

For Mindelo, even when Porto Grande fell into disuse and the coal trade died, there was to be a brighter future. Hormuz and Mozambique Island, two other waterless island cities of importance in the history of Portuguese overseas expansion, declined with the passing of the trade that had sustained them. Mindelo, however, survived the death of the bunkering trade. As a city it began to benefit from an increasing flow of remittances from abroad and was able to draw cultural sustenance from the cosmopolitan links provided by the clandestine emigration to Europe and the Americas. It began to experience a cultural vivacity that fed off both the internal social conflicts and the international horizons of a city which for nearly a hundred years had played such a pivotal role at the heart of two world-wide colonial empires. In 1936 the first number of *Claridade* was published in Mindelo, a literary review that was to have a profound influence on generations of educated Cape Verdians and which looked forward to a new identity for the islanders and ultimately to their independence.

37 NA FO 371/31120 Report from the Royal Institute for International Affairs entitled *The Political Relations of Angola and Portugal*, by Professor Atkinson, 25 April 1942.

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