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Three Remarkable Escapes from Salazar's Prisons

August 10 2022

After the military coup of 1926, and during the Salazar dictatorship, there were dozens of prisons in Portugal and its Overseas Provinces dedicated to the incarceration of political prisoners.



Redondo with sea escape route

The most famous is the purpose built prison camp at Tarrafal in Cabo Verde. On the mainland of Portugal, the fortress at Peniche on the coast north of Lisbon was considered to be the most secure, and the Fortress at Caxias and the prison at Aljube were located in the capital. The other major political prison was at Angra do Heroísmo on the island of Terceira in the Azores, where the two ancient Philippine forts of São Sebastião and São João Batista were far enough from the mainland to isolate the prisoners from their families and friends.

Any escape from the island prisons was practically impossible, and the maintenance of an iron discipline was relatively easy. Escape attempts in the islands were always unsuccessful, and recaptured prisoners were condemned to barbarous punishment, such as the *frigideira* at Tarrafal (for an English speaker, this word sounds cold, but it means a frying-pan). Cândido de Oliveira described those who emerged from this hot cell: *They looked really shocking, barefooted, dirty, skinny, hair down to their ears, bearded, clothes in rags, they looked as though they had escaped from the torture chamber of a lunatic asylum.*



The Chrysler

Many of the 32 who died at Tarrafal over the years had been inmates of the *frigideira* where the torrid heat of the African day was exacerbated by the cruelty of the guards. *The food was on alternate days bread with hot water and bread with cold water. The punishment in the frigideira consisted of isolation, hunger, slow asphyxiation, dehydration, suffocating heat by day and sudden cooling at night, often accompanied by beatings.*

It is difficult to know exactly how many escapes from the mainland political prisons took place, but there appear to have been more than fifty over the 48 years of military and political repression, 1926 – 1974. The Registo Geral de Presos records 26 375 detainees, and the number who died in prison was 175. Too many of course, but in the context of events elsewhere in Europe at the time, relatively few.



The Redondo at Peniche

The escape which apparently annoyed Dr Salazar more than any was that from Peniche on 3 January 1960. Although the ten communists had been held in a specially built high-security block within the prison, they managed to make their way over the walls and escaped in waiting cars. Their escape plan was minutely detailed, and also relied on those outside the prison to provide get-away cars and secret safe houses. The plan also depended on the cooperation of GNR agent José Jorge Alves, who had been passed over for promotion and was very unhappy in his work at the prison. He escaped along with the group, on the promise of a rich monetary reward and a new life behind the Iron Curtain. Without his cooperation, this escape could not have succeeded.



Cunhal Prison photo

On the night of 3 January, a car passed in front of the prison, and stopped where the prisoners could see it. The boot lid was open, and the driver stopped the car, calmly got out and shut the boot. The Signal! The prisoners moved to overpower a guard with chloroform, and one by one descended from the block by means of a rope of tied sheets. Alves covered each of them with his police cloak as they crossed an open space, and using the shadows afforded by the battlements, they now scaled the highest wall of the prison before again using a sheet rope to descend the five metres to the ground. They crossed the moat, and climbing the further wall, jumped into the branches of a convenient tree on the other side. They gained the street and all ten entered the cars waiting with their sidelights on. People outside a café opposite the prison saw exactly what was happening, and none of them raised the alarm, since they knew that the escaping Peniche prisoners were enemies of the dictatorial government.

Under the control of the censor, radio and newspapers reported nothing. The one journal not censored was *Avante!*, the newspaper of the PCP, the Portuguese

Communist Party, which on 16 January published the following: *Our people salute the freedom of Álvaro Cunhal and his colleagues. Let us defend them against attacks by the enemy!* The police turned the whole country upside down in their search for these escapees. In spite of the torture and other cruelties inflicted by the police on potential witnesses, no-one revealed where the escapers had lodged on their first night, nor did they reveal their current whereabouts. As Secretary-General of the PCP, Cunhal fled to Moscow in 1962, returning to Portugal only after the Carnation Revolution of 1974.



José Jorge Alves

The story of José Alves, the GNR agent, is dramatic. In a recent book (*A Porta para a Liberdade*: 2014) Pedro Protes da Fonseca claims that Alves was the brain behind the escape. He was smuggled into Spain in May, 1960, thence to France, Czechoslovakia and finally to Romania, a country he chose because its language is similar to Portuguese. He welcomed his wife and children to his new home, but could not reconcile himself to his expatriate life and his cycle of alcoholism and violence ended when he hanged himself in 1968. Protes claims that after the Carnation Revolution, the widow and daughter of José Jorge Alves came to Lisbon, where Cunhal, now a government Minister, was reluctant to see them and even denied making a promise to support their claim to return to Portugal.

Perhaps the most famous escape from a political prison took place on 4 December, 1961 at the fort of Caxias, a holding prison just outside Lisbon. This escape has been memorialised in a popular film.

Stored in the basement garage of the prison was a large black armoured Chrysler car which belonged to the state and had been used by the President of the Council of Ministers, Dr António de Oliveira Salazar as his official transport. This car was bought by the Museu de Caramulo in 1969, and has been so carefully restored that

it retains its original upholstery and armoured windows. It has about 30,000 km on the clock, and is apparently even today in perfect working order, and it forms a part of the permanent collection at the Museum.



Redondo and Guarita, Peniche

In November 1961, a group of eight communist prisoners made a plan. Seven of them were awaiting transfer to the prison fortress at Peniche, and the eighth was António Tereso, an acknowledged master mechanic, who was on the point of being released. Seven prisoners jumped into this car, and the driver Tereso accelerated and burst through the one-arm barrier at the gate. Taken totally by surprise, the guards took a few seconds to react before they began to shoot at the fleeing armoured machine. About a minute after smashing its way out of the fortress-prison, it was already on the autoestrada (nowadays the A-5) on its way to Lisbon, where it was later discovered abandoned in the district of Campolide. The fugitives found their way to safe houses, and all managed to escape recapture and to make their way out of Portugal.

In Caxias prison, many escape plans had been hatched, analysed and discarded, but this successful manoeuvre had been well planned down to the minutest detail. One of the difficulties was that the escape of Cunhal from Peniche in the January of the previous year had caused the prison authorities to be more watchful and to employ more guards. The leader of the communist group at Caxias was José Magro. He persuaded his unwilling comrade António Tereso to become a *rachado*, an informer. Convinced at last, and loyal to PCP demands, Tereso lost the

friendship of his fellow inmates as he befriended the prison guards and even the managers of the prison.



Woodcut of Escape from Peniche

Through his relationship with the guards, Tereso won a certain amount of freedom within the prison, where he had discovered in the basement garage the 1937 Chrysler Imperial (with the registration number HE-10-32) which had been Salazar's official car. The car seemed to be abandoned and Tereso suggested to the authorities that he could return it to working order. It was a race against time, since Tereso himself was about to be released, and the other seven were on the point of being transferred to Peniche.

The plan was this. The seven participated in a game of football on the patio during their exercise period which would end at 09h40. At 09h34, after unlocking the car doors, Tereso reversed at speed up the tunnel from the garage, and came to a halt on the patio facing the exit from the prison. Even though the ball was nowhere near the net, José Magro shouted "Goal!" and the seven rushed to the car and piled in, Tereso jammed his foot on the accelerator and the car shot forward, smashing the flimsy barrier, and the eight were on their way to freedom.

The story which I found most touching concerned António Dias Lourenço, another senior member of PCP. On the morning of 18 December of 1954, a fisherman's lorry turned to exit the wholesale fish market at Peniche. A shivering half-naked man approached and asked where they were going. *Up to Torres Vedras*, he was told, and he asked if he could have a lift. The lorry was full of fishermen, and one said that they could not take him without a paper from the Traffic Police. Desperate, and shivering to his bones, the man opened his heart. *Well, you are all workers, and I*

too am a worker. I am also a member of the Central Committee of the PCP, and I have just escaped from the fort. You cannot give me up to the police, and you have to help me get out of here. The men looked at each other, and after a hurried conference, *All right, you can count on us.* An hour later, at Bombarral, the freezing Lourenço thanked his brotherly fishermen, and jumped from the lorry onto the road, and found secret shelter in the house of a comrade.

Lourenço had escaped from the Redondo, the circular part of the fortress closest to the sea. This was the punishment block, and Lourenço ensured that he was punished frequently. During his imprisonments in this block, he gradually cut a hatch through a hardwood door, using a sharp bootmaker's blade. No-one, and certainly not the prison guards, ever discovered how he had hidden this tool. The hatch was held in place at only one or two points, and on the night of his escape, he completed the cut, and wriggled through the hole. Using a rope of tied blankets, he let himself down into the sea, carrying his clothes on his head wrapped like a turban, but they fell and he lost them in the choppy sea. He swam a fair distance before hauling himself ashore at the fish market.

As he jumped out of the lorry at Bombarral, the prison guards were already searching for him, but believed that he must have died in the sea, since the waves had thrown his clothes and his shoes back onto the shore.

These three histories show that the most persistent of Salazar's opponents were communists, and it is certain that, if Cunhal's escape had not taken place, the history the eventual fall of the regime might have been different. The successful and unfortunate José Alves therefore has his own place in the history of Portugal.

Read more from [Peter Booker](#) about [Salazar's rise to power](#) or [Opposition to Salazar's Regime](#).

Peter Booker

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www.algarvehistoryassociation.com