On Communism and the Nation  
–Notes from the History of the Colonial Question in the Portuguese Communist Party

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Abstract

This article analyzes the positions adopted by the Portuguese Communist Party in relation to the colonial question. Before doing so, however, the article discusses the general problem of the national question in the history of the PCP, addressing some topics that are important for a discussion of communist historiography. This discussion is part of a larger debate concerning the analytical identification between nation and culture, on the one hand, and between politics and power, on the other. In dealing with these dichotomies, some topics are presented for discussion, relating to studies on both the Portuguese Empire and the Leninist theory of imperialism.

Keywords

Nationalism, communism, internationalism, colonialism, historiography

1. Introduction

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Portuguese king Dom Luís found himself sailing along Portugal’s Atlantic coast. By chance, he and his crew encountered a small boat sailed by fishermen. The king spoke to them and asked if they were Portuguese, but they immediately answered, “No, we are from Póvoa do Varzim”, which was at that time a small fishing village near Porto (Mattoso 1998: 14). I recount this brief story to illustrate one basic point: like other countries, Portugal as an imagined community is a recent construct. As we all know, the process of imagining a national community is a complex and controversial issue that divides social scientists (Anderson 1998; Smith 1995). Nonetheless, there are some points that seem to be widely accepted: states create nations and not the contrary; nations are a modern phenomenon, although we may discuss the pre-modern roots of modern nations; the main producers of the images of a