



MINIATURES

A Reader in
the History of
Everyday Life

EDITED BY

**KATE FERRIS
& HUW HALSTEAD**

EXETER

Miniatures

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Miniatures

*A Reader in the History of
Everyday Life*

Edited by
Kate Ferris and Huw Halstead

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Note on Translations and Abridgement

All translations from languages other than English in this book are the individual contributors' own translations, unless stated otherwise. We use the symbol [...] to indicate where contributors have abridged their sources for the sake of brevity. Ellipses not contained within square brackets are either found in the original sources or deployed to indicate trailing off in transcription of speech.

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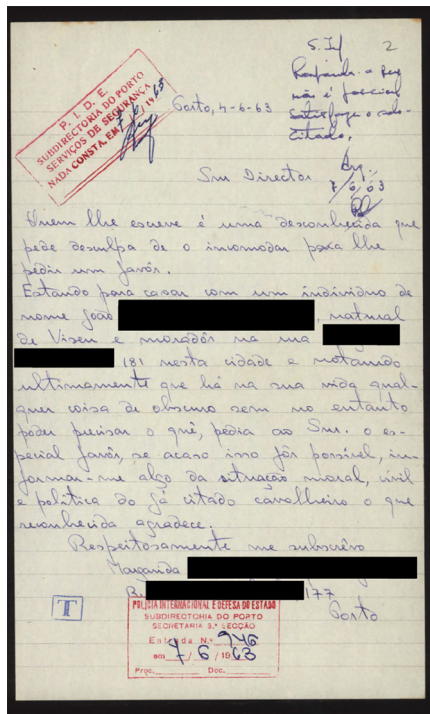
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Writing Letters to the State: The Normalization of Salazar's Political Police

Duncan Simpson

Duncan Simpson discusses a letter of denunciation written to the political police during Salazar's dictatorship in Portugal. Simpson shows how the letter—written by a woman entreating the police to investigate the morality and the politics of her husband-to-be—demonstrates the complexity of the relationships between individuals and the dictatorial state, something that a more top-down, zoomed-out analytical lens may fail to reveal.

Source 7: Letter written by a member of the public to the director of the PIDE delegation in Porto, under the Salazar dictatorship, 4 June 1963. © Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (ANTT, National Archive of Torre do Tombo). Arquivo da PIDE, Del. P., P. Ind. 32808, NT 3958, p. 2. Courtesy of ANTT. In Portuguese with English translation.



Porto, 4-6-63

Mr Director,

The author of this letter will be a stranger to you and apologizes for bothering you in order to ask for a favour.

Having been engaged to marry an individual whose name is João A. [full name redacted], born in Viseu and resident in M. Street [address redacted] in this city, and having noticed of late that there is something shadowy in his life, without however being able to define exactly what, I would ask you Sir for the special favour, should this be possible, of informing me of the moral, civil and political situation of the above-named gentleman, for which I would gratefully thank you.

Respectfully yours,

Margarida N.
M. Street [address redacted], 177
Porto

Commentary

Source 7 is a handwritten letter sent on 4 June 1963 by a member of the public, Margarida N., to the director of the Salazarist political police's delegation in Porto (Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado, or PIDE). It is a typical example of the multifaceted process of 'spontaneous interactions' between individual citizens and the PIDE which developed during the final two decades of the Portuguese authoritarian conservative regime (or Estado Novo, 1933–74), led by António de Oliveira Salazar.

In terms of content, the letter belongs to the broad category of individual petitions, which many ordinary citizens addressed to the main institutions of the regime, including the political police. Margarida N. starts her letter by indicating that she is writing to the director of the PIDE delegation in order to 'ask for a favour'. She then elaborates on her personal situation. Having become engaged to João A., whose address she also provides, she has 'noticed of late that there is something shadowy in his life', though she is unable to determine what this might be exactly. In surprisingly candid fashion, she proceeds to ask the official whether the PIDE can provide her with information on her husband-to-be's 'moral, civil and political situation'—that is, effectively launch a fully fledged investigation into his private life.

This document is part of the archival corpus of 1,576 letters which I have gathered from various archives of the Estado Novo and used as the primary source in much of my recent research on the history of the PIDE from below.¹ It encompasses denunciations, petitions and applications sent by citizens eager to join the ranks of the PIDE as agent or informant between 1958 and 1968. The originality and heuristic value of this type of source, and of the letter written by Margarida N. in particular, must be considered in light of the dominant

interpretation of the relation between society and Salazar's political police in the established historiography of the PIDE. While some scholars of the *Estado Novo* have sought to unravel the intricacies of the PIDE's operation on the ground—such as the effect of recalcitrant local elites² or internal conflicts between police entities³—and to relativize the regime's use of violence by setting it in comparative perspective,⁴ the main scholarly works devoted exclusively to the PIDE have continued to focus overwhelmingly on processes of top-down repression as the only form of relation between society and the political police. Consequently, the historiography of the subject area remains defined by its strong emphasis on such aspects as the persecution of the (small minority) of oppositionists through arbitrary internment and torture, and, more importantly, the PIDE's influence as a fear-inducing deterrent on the rest of the population, systematically reduced to the role of 'passive victims'.⁵

The letter by Margarida N., seen in the context of the hundreds of similar cases of everyday interactions between individual citizens and the PIDE, directly challenges this interpretation. In particular, it contradicts the idea that the PIDE acted as an efficient, all-pervading agent of preventive repression across society. Margarida N. shows neither fear of the PIDE nor the desire to steer clear of it. On the contrary, she willingly engages with the political police as an institution whose agents she believes are likely to dispense personal favours and satisfy her individual needs. In this particular case, the petition was unsuccessful. On 7 June 1963, the PIDE's subdirector wrote a reply informing her that 'it is not possible for this Police to satisfy [your] request'.⁶ The treatment given to Margarida N.'s plea is not representative of the PIDE's usual stance on petitions, however, and probably owes much to its exotic nature—effectively treating the PIDE as a kind of 'pre-nuptial agency'. For the purpose of historical analysis, this merely emphasizes the need to use such source material not only in terms of the content of individual letters but also in light of the broader archival sample. Indeed, more frequently than not, the agents of the political police tried to use their discretionary powers to satisfy the multitude of requests addressed to them, in what was effectively tantamount to a system of clientelism—their role as influential 'sponsors' in turn guaranteeing the compliance of their 'clients' to the established socio-political order. To give only one example, when in February 1964 the high-ranking PIDE official António Faria Pais started renting a secondary home in the semi-rural locality of A-da-Beja, on the outskirts of Lisbon, the local villagers promptly petitioned him in order to obtain the installation of public street lighting in the municipality, which the local authorities had previously committed themselves to but thus far failed to implement. As the villagers expected from the member of an institution widely perceived at the time to carry significant clout within the regime, Faria Pais duly activated his personal contacts and a few weeks later was informed by the Secretariat of State for Industry that his request 'would be attended to in the current year'.⁷ Within the context of a rigidly hierarchical social order, endemic poverty and the ensuing clientelistic society that marked the lives of the majority of the population (all of which pre-dated the *Estado Novo*), the PIDE itself figured among the institutions whose representatives could be mobilized from below in the hope of

superseding the obstacles of an opaque bureaucracy and a dictatorial system that was non-inclusive by nature.

From a methodological perspective, Margarida N.'s letter raises important questions on the issue of representativeness of the source material and, more specifically, its capacity to allow for the transition from micro-level analysis to broader generalization. What is immediately striking in Margarida N.'s 'spontaneous interaction' with the PIDE is the triviality of its motive. Whilst undoubtedly extreme in nature, her case is far from an isolated one within the broader corpus of letters used in my recent research. The fact deserves to be emphasized and interpreted. Indeed, directly associated to the triviality of such requests as Margarida N.'s is the notion that the petitioning of PIDE agents was (or had become) somewhat of a banal act. The point is further emphasized by the homogeneity of the letters in terms of style and vocabulary, including the adoption by their authors—whether opportunistically or not—of formulaic phrases directly associated with the regime and of a narrative structure signalling the interiorization of the *Estado Novo*'s main ideological tenets.⁸ This line of interpretation is reinforced by the extremely variegated nature of the petitions addressed to PIDE agents. In terms of content the corpus is to such an extent suffused by a multiplicity of personal needs and interests as to suggest that these types of 'spontaneous interactions' with the PIDE were by no means a marginal social process. In this sense, Margarida N.'s letter also serves as a contribution towards assessing the importance of the phenomenon beyond (or in complement to) the mere accountancy of cases associated to quantitatively based studies.

As a historical source, the letter by Margarida N., and the associated dual process of apparent trivialization and banalization of the PIDE, also suggest broader interpretative hypotheses regarding the perception of the PIDE as an integral part of the institutional framework within which the population had accustomed itself to carry out its daily life since the dictatorship had come to power in the early 1930s. The concept of normalization, in the definition given by historian Mary Fulbrook, lends itself particularly well to the analysis of the Portuguese case. The exceptional longevity of the Salazar regime, by allowing for a significant period of 'stabilisation', in turn led to the 'routinisation of institutional structures and regular patterns of behaviour' among the population. As processes of political, economic and social change took place, the population in turn 'adapt[ed] to new circumstances and s[ought] to realise their interests in changing socio-political environments, in the process also changing their own conceptions of "normality"'.⁹ The concept of a transformed or newly experienced 'normality' is extremely valuable in highlighting the importance of the contextual conditions that fomented the type of spontaneous interactions with the PIDE by individual citizens such as Margarida N. By the mid-1960s the vast majority of the population, depoliticized and engaged primarily in the daily struggle for subsistence, had long assimilated the fact that their lack of political activism greatly reduced any potential threat from the PIDE.¹⁰ This in turn encouraged the development of an increasingly opportunistic relation with the political police, either as a means of bypassing the blockages typical of a non-inclusive political system (through petitions or application letters) or to further a personal

agenda (often through denunciations). Calling upon the PIDE to investigate the suspicious behaviour of one's husband-to-be is in this sense but one expression of the process of social normalization of the political police. To give another practical example, so 'normalized' had the PIDE become that in the northern village of Miranda do Douro, in August 1962, even a beggar did not hesitate to repeatedly threaten those who ignored him with denouncing them to the PIDE as communists.¹¹ In the new 'normality' engendered by Salazarism, the political police constituted but one amongst the many state institutions envisaged as potential resources in the effort to improve one's daily life.

Ultimately, Margarida N.'s letter provides a particularly telling example of the type of primary source material likely to renovate a particular subject area, in this case the relations between society and the PIDE under Salazar. Combined with the larger corpus of letters, it firmly emphasizes the existence of a much closer, more interactive and more multifaceted relation than has been acknowledged until now—one which in many cases could have serious implications for those being denounced. It also contributes to emphasizing the need to move beyond the traditional narrative of violence and repression exercised by the PIDE against the small minority of active oppositionists, and into the 'grey zone' of accommodation, adjustment and collusion characteristic of the (inter)relation of a large part of the population with the political police—as has already been done in other historical contexts. Doing so does require caution and a particular meticulousness in the process of interpretation, both in relation to the broader corpus of letters and to the specific social and political context that fashioned the dynamic relation between society and the PIDE. Nevertheless, sources such as these that explicitly connect the micro-level of individual lives and subjectivities to the macro-level of state institutions and politics have an essential part to play if we are to reach a better understanding of how society functioned under the Salazar regime, and of the multiple factors that contributed to the dictatorship's exceptional longevity—and, more broadly, if we are to unpick the 'patchwork'¹² nature of societies generally.

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Notes

- 1 Duncan Simpson, 'The "Sad Grandmother", the "Simple but Honest Portuguese" and the "Good Son of the Fatherland": Letters of Denunciation in the Final Decade of the Salazar Regime', *Análise social*, 226 (2018), pp. 6–27; Duncan Simpson, 'Approaching the PIDE "From Below": Petitions, Spontaneous Applications and Denunciation Letters to Salazar's Secret Police in 1964', *Contemporary European History*, 30 (2021), pp. 398–413; Duncan Simpson, '*Tenho o prazer de informar o Senhor Director: cartas de Portugueses à PIDE (1958–1968)*' (Bookbuilders, 2022).
- 2 Alexander Keese and Beatriz Valverde Contreras, 'The Limits of Authoritarian Rule at the Periphery: The PIDE, the American Airbase, and Social Control on Terceira Island, Azores, 1954–1962', *Journal of Social History*, 52.4 (2019), pp. 1307–29.

- 3 Victor Pereira, 'El poder de la impotencia: policías y migración clandestina entre Portugal y Francia (1957–1974)', *Política y sociedad*, 42.3 (2005), pp. 103–20.
- 4 *História de Portugal*, ed. by Rui Ramos (Esfera dos Livros, 2009), pp. 650–53.
- 5 See Maria da Conceição Ribeiro, *A polícia política no Estado Novo 1926–1945* (Editorial Estampa, 1995); *Vítimas de Salazar*, ed. by João Madeira (Esfera dos Livros, 2007); Irene Pimentel, *História da PIDE* (Círculo de Leitores, 2007); Fernando Rosas, *Salazar e o poder* (Tinta-da-China, 2012), pp. 190–210; Irene Pimentel, *Os cinco pilares da PIDE* (Esfera dos Livros, 2019). The notable exception is, in addition to my own work, the recent and insightful article by Beatriz Valverde Contreras and Alexander Keese, 'Living at the Margins of Repression: Everyday Life and Hidden Challenges in the Azore's Central Group', *European History Quarterly*, 52.2 (2022), pp. 221–44.
- 6 ANTT, PIDE, Del. P., P. Ind. 32808, NT 3958, p. 1.
- 7 ANTT, PCOS/MC, PRC11/A-30-7, NT149, April 1964, p. 1.
- 8 The homogeneity of a certain type of spontaneous letter to the political authorities was first highlighted in relation to 'confessional letters' in the years of late Stalinism by Juliane Fürst, 'In Search of Soviet Salvation: Young People Write to the Stalinist Authorities', *Contemporary European History*, 15.3 (2006), pp. 327–45.
- 9 Mary Fulbrook, 'The Concept of "Normalisation" and the GDR in Comparative Perspective' in *Power and Society in the GDR 1961–1979*, ed. by Mary Fulbrook (Berghahn Books, 2009), pp. 14–15.
- 10 Duncan Simpson and Ana Louceiro, 'Everyday Life under the PIDE: A Quantitative Survey on the Relations Between Ordinary Citizens and Salazar's Political Police (1955–74)', *International Journal of Iberian Studies*, 34.3 (2021), pp. 195–216.
- 11 ANTT, Min. do Interior, Registo de Correspondência Recebida, entry no. 6240.
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This book is the first of its kind to present readers with the rich and innovative source base deployed by scholars studying everyday life in the modern era. Through twenty-eight chapters, researchers from diverse intellectual and disciplinary standpoints present a favourite primary source for studying the history of everyday life, accompanied by a reflective commentary on the benefits, challenges and potential pitfalls of using their chosen material.

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This book demonstrates not only the texture and fascination of people's everyday lives, but also what a critical reading of this microscale can reveal about the broader sweep of history. It will be an invaluable resource for researchers and students alike interested in everyday life, in micro- and local-scales of analysis, and in the study of history and society 'from below'.

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