

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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COELHO, António Borges (Murça, 1928)

Born in Murça, the son of a wireman and the third of six children, António Borges Coelho completed primary school in his hometown in 1940. He then entered the Franciscan seminary in Montariol, Braga, but was expelled in 1945, accused of orchestrating a collective escape. His motivation was said to stem from ungodly readings, including works by Balzac and Eça de Queirós. Although he had not organised the escape, he had indeed considered it. After returning to Murça, the harsh local conditions deepened his social and political awareness. With the nearest high school located in Vila Real, he graduated as an external student in September 1948. The following month, he moved to Lisbon and enrolled in the Faculty of Law. In those difficult months, he relied on friends for support until he secured a modest job at the Junta Autónoma das Estradas, the public body responsible for planning, building and managing the national road network.

In early 1949, he became captivated by Norton de Matos' presidential campaign and enthusiastically joined it. Feeling disillusioned with his law degree, he considered abandoning his studies altogether. He was persuaded to continue, and instead he enrolled in the Historical-Philosophical programme at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in the 1949-50 academic year. There, he joined the MUDJ (Juvenile Movement of Democratic Unity). After completing his first year, he dropped out during his second year to fully dedicate himself to the MUDJ, eventually becoming one of its leaders. In 1952, during a protest against a meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty in Lisbon, he was arrested for the first time and briefly detained. He was arrested again in January 1956. By then, he had been working clandestinely for six months as a member of the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and was actively involved with the MUDJ. After periods of imprisonment in the Aljube jail in Caxias and the PIDE prisons in Porto, he was tried in December 1956 and sentenced to two years and nine months in prison, along with a fifteen-year suspension of his political rights. Additionally, he was subjected to a security measure that could be extended beyond its six-month minimum.

The unfairness of this measure was evident when, by the time he was released on probation in May 1962, he had served more than double his original sentence. In 1959, while still in prison, he married Isaura Silva, whom he had met a decade earlier through their involvement in the MUDJ.

Borges Coelho served his sentence at Peniche fort, where he was placed in Pavilion C on the top floor,



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where prisoners considered more politically dangerous were held. It was there that he met Álvaro Cunhal and other communist leaders. Under a particularly harsh prison regime, they made the most of their one hour of permitted daily interaction, a time when prisoners were also allowed to read newspapers. Additionally, and with certain restrictions, the prison administration allowed books to be brought in, though only one at a time.

Towards the end of 1957, Borges Coelho rekindled his passion for history. He read Fernão Lopes' chronicles, particularly the one about King John I, prefaced by António Sérgio; *História da Administração Pública em Portugal dos séculos XII a XV* [History of Public Administration in Portugal from the 12th to the 15th Centuries], by Henrique Gama Barros; *História da Sociedade Portuguesa no século XV* [History of Portuguese Society in the 15th Century], by António Costa Lobo or *Descobrimientos Portugueses* [Portuguese Discoveries]. *Documentos para a sua História* [Documents of Portuguese History] by Silva Marques. He took copious notes and shared books with other prisoners, sparking debates. Álvaro Cunhal, for example, transferred from solitary confinement in the Lisbon Penitentiary, brought with him the manuscript of *As Lutas de Classes em Portugal nos fins da Idade Média* [Class Struggles in Portugal at the End of the Middle Ages], which Borges Coelho had read and discussed, profoundly influencing him. Despite the harsh conditions, his interest in history grew ever deeper, leading to the formation of a sort of history study group within the prison.

When preparations for the Peniche prison escape were made in January 1960, Borges Coelho agreed to participate on the condition that he could resume his life dedicated to studying and research, even if it meant doing so abroad. He refused to take on a role as a clandestine member of the PCP. He was released two and a half years later, having suffered harsher prison conditions and having had his notes and writings confiscated. Coelho managed to bring his notes with him, which enabled him to begin publishing his work soon after. In fact, while still in prison in 1961–62, he had resumed his Historical-Philosophical degree, which he completed in 1967 with his thesis *Leibnitz, o homem, a teoria e a ciência* [Leibnitz: the Man, the Theory and the Science]. Over the years, he struggled to secure a stable job, primarily working as a tutor, translator, and journalist.

While completing his degree, he published two cornerstones of his historiographical work: *Raízes da Expansão Portuguesa* [Roots of Portuguese Expansion], in 1964 and *A Revolução de 1383* [The Revolution of 1383], in 1965. *Raízes da Expansão Portuguesa* was quickly banned, and Borges Coelho was interrogated by the PIDE. He was accused of defaming national history, slandering heroes and saints, and damaging Portugal's international image. These two works reflected ideas that had been brewing in secret conversations and debates at Peniche prison, particularly with Álvaro Cunhal. It was as if it were a cherished research project — the analysis of the historical period from the Revolution of 1383 to the establishment of the Cape Route. They explored the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Portugal, in parallel with the international debate that was taking place on the topic, especially between Maurice Dobb and Paul Sweezy.

Since he was unable to carry out archival work, the primary sources he turned to were Fernão Lopes' chronicles, particularly the one about King John I, which was essential for understanding the revolutionary events of 1383. The work vividly captures the collective spirit of the time, painting a galvanising picture of the



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joy and upheaval in the streets, amplifying the voices of the common people, farmers, craftsmen, and highlighting the alliance formed by the lower classes against a weakened and challenged nobility. Thus, Borges Coelho brings to light the role of the working classes and the emerging bourgeoisie in shaping a new era, driven by the first bourgeois revolution.

Borges Coelho's first two works shared a clear intent: to explain the roots of the expansion and the new world that opened up with the Revolution of 1383. In *Raízes da Expansão Portuguesa* he puts forward the thesis of a bourgeoisie triumph that turned to the sea, drawing on ancient, experiential, and socially transmitted knowledge. This bourgeoisie distanced itself from a medieval culture that largely constrained the challenges posed by this endeavour, thereby objectively restricting the mercantile drive while reinforcing a warrior ethos that favoured territorial expansion. The work reflects the tension and conflict between these two movements.

Borges Coelho's second historiographical focus was on understanding who had culturally passed down the knowledge that ultimately enabled maritime expansion. His research question led him to explore the long-standing Islamic presence in the territory now occupied by Portugal. His curiosity grew while he was at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. A pressing question arose from the peculiar situation where, despite centuries of Muslim dominance, there appeared to be no trace of their cultural influence. As one prominent professor observed, it was as if an apocalypse had buried all evidence of that history beneath the earth.

While still a student, Coelho began reading, researching, translating, and systematising information on the Muslim past, which a few years later led to the publication of the four volumes of *Portugal na Espanha Árabe* [Portugal in Arab Spain] between 1972 and 1975. At the time, this was a groundbreaking revelation — a window offering a perspective beyond official historiography. This perspective had initially been put forward by Alexandre Herculano and, many years later, by David Lopes, but had since been largely overshadowed and marginalised. Through this window one could access Muslim poets, philosophers, geographers, chroniclers, as well as the cultural routes through which this knowledge circulated, all intricately connected to the broader Islamic world. However, the work goes far beyond merely collecting this knowledge and its remnants — though that alone is essential given the lack of historical knowledge of the period. It serves as a foundational framework for systematically revalorising this legacy, which, preserved as an act of resistance, plays a crucial role in fostering a renewed sense of modernity.

Comunas ou Concelhos [Communes or Counties] (1973) appears in this context as another piece in the interpretative framework Coelho pursued. If the Muslim legacy had laid the groundwork for the expansionist vanguard within a context of growing international trade, the municipal realm often served as a space where the bourgeoisie could thrive. Their autonomy from feudal powers created areas of freedom managed by the community of *homens bons*, who gained recognition based on merit rather than through the Crown. This reality emerged from the assertion of the bourgeoisie in a grassroots process. The interpretative framework was as original and thought-provoking as it was controversial. The fall of the dictatorship provided the conditions for this heated, yet unrestricted, debate to emerge.



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Shortly after the Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974, António Borges Coelho, who had been proposed for the position at a student assembly, assumed the role of visiting assistant professor at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Lisbon. From that point on, he taught a wide range of Modern History courses and seminars with an open mind, encouraging debate, inspiring study and earning the esteem of generations of students. He also became a member of various faculty bodies, participated in the management of research units, and led the *História e Sociedade* [History and Society] journal.

His works are continually reedited, incorporating new findings from research conducted in new conditions. His edited works continue to be published, such as *Questionar a História* [Questioning History], which includes essays where he revisits familiar themes with a fresh enthusiasm, such as the origins of scientific knowledge in Garcia de Orta or the philosophy of Benedict de Spinoza. His study of Spinoza, which highlights the philosopher's connections to Portugal, prompted him to explore the role of the Jewish community in Portuguese culture and how the potential contributions of this community were diverted to northern Europe due to repressive forces, with the Inquisition serving as a key instrument of suppression. This led to his initial PhD project, *Os Cristãos Novos Portugueses na Primeira Metade do Século XVII e Bento Espinosa* [The New Portuguese Christians in the First Half of the 17th Century and Baruch Spinoza], which, due to its scope, was incorporated into the study "*A Inquisição de Évora. Dos Primórdios a 1668*" [The Évora Inquisition. From the Beginnings to 1668], which he defended in February 1986.

Focusing on a different period and seemingly heading in a different direction, Borges Coelho's core interest remains unchanged: a deep fascination with topics suppressed by mainstream historiography. Through quantitative analysis of the Évora Inquisition's files, he paints a comprehensive picture of the institution, detailing its organizational structure, financial operations, mechanisms, and methods of operation. He also brings to light the voices of its victims — their cries and suffering — revealing their backgrounds, identities, and the prominence of the *crístãos-novos* (Jews converted to Christianity) within this persecuted group, alongside the targeting of individuals involved in trades and mercantile activities. Borges Coelho attributes the Inquisition's ongoing policy of persecution, terror and diaspora to the kingdom's cultural backwardness and economic underdevelopment.

In 1991, he completed the assessment for the academic title of *agregado* with a lecture on João de Barros, the historian of Asia. In 1993, he became a full professor, retiring in 1998 after delivering his final lecture on Lisbon in the first half of the 18th century, a subject that has always been particularly close to his heart.

Never ceasing to publish, he edited works related to his prolific academic career, including *Quadros para uma Viagem a Portugal no Século XVI* [Paintings for a Journey to Portugal in the 16th Century] in 1986; *Tudo é mercadoria* [Everything is a Commodity]. *Sobre o percurso e obra de João de Barros* [About the Career and Work of João de Barros] in 1992, a biography of João de Barros in 1997, and new volumes of *Questionar a História* with essays published in 1994 and 1996. After retiring, he published *História de Portugal* [History of Portugal] in 2010, with the 5th volume released in 2015, fulfilling a long-held aspiration.



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Through his work, the working classes, the marginalised, and the persecuted are transformed into collective social actors. The Marxist influence in this perspective is evident, not only in his political and ideological stance but also because it led to his imprisonment. However, his approach aligns more with major social and political issues, as if seeking relative autonomy from an economic history typically associated with a rigidly deterministic Marxism, which has limited presence in Portuguese historiography. While António Borges Coelho acknowledges the significant influence of Marxism, he does not consider himself a Marxist historian and rejects this label, finding it both excessive and often prejudiced. Being a Marxist, he recognises and incorporates the significance and impact of Marx's work, particularly for the conceptual tools it provides. These tools have been instrumental in deepening the study of history and the other social sciences, and in opening up new areas of knowledge. He chooses to challenge the restrictive nature of economic determinism by emphasising broad social and human frameworks, where individuals, in their diversity, are the true architects of historical change. In this sense, he has always been attuned to the dialogue between Marxism and schools of thought such as the *Annales*, which aimed to renew the study of history from a global perspective, seeking to cover every aspect of analysis and foster continuous interaction between different levels and forms of social integration.

The rigour he applies to his work as a historian leads him to broaden the concept of historical sources, seeking clarity and vividness in the narratives he constructs by cross-referencing documents from various sources. Much of his evident fascination with Fernão Lopes stems from this approach, as he argued in his controversial analysis of the Revolution of 1383, and it also reflects his deep respect for Alexandre Herculano.

Throughout his career as a researcher and professor, António Borges Coelho has sought to dismantle many of our major historical myths. These include the idea of expansion as a crusade against Islam and the fervour of ecclesiastical institutions that, while invoking faith, spread terror and death in their quest for enrichment, ultimately hindering the progress of modernity. As he frequently noted, in dismantling these myths, he consistently avoided reiterating what was seen as historiographical common sense. Instead, he focused on looking beyond the realms of power to those at the grassroots level who collectively shaped history. His questioning nature and propensity to challenge the immutability of grand narratives imbue him with a dynamic spirit of contestation and controversy that has consistently influenced his work. This reflects the inherent contradictions that drive life. In this context, he has always taken a stance, believing that a historian's mind can never be entirely neutral. Instead, it is in a state of constant tension between objectivity and emotion, embodying the heartbeat of both man and citizen, as he has consistently asserted.

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