



# The Second World War and the Rise of Mass Nationalism in Brazil

Class, Race and Citizenship

Alexandre Fortes

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*To those who struggle against fascism in all its forms*

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Front Matter illustration: Shouting Brazilians, one of them carrying a shattered plaque from Italy Square, give the “V for victory” sign as they demonstrated in reaction against a German submarine’s sinking of Brazilian ships. Rio de Janeiro August 18, 1942. (AP Photo)

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## The Second World War in Brazilian History: From the Background to the Forefront

In mid-1942, as anti-Axis demonstrations spread across Brazil's cities, the "V for Victory" became omnipresent. During a march in Rio de Janeiro on July 4, Independence Day in the United States, a theatrical skit featured a black student "strangling" a colleague dressed as Hitler. Both were surrounded by other youths in Nazi costumes, who, ironically, made the V with their fingers. At the same demonstration, the symbol was also formed by crossing the poles of the Brazilian and US flags carried by the participants. On the banners and posters praising President Getúlio Vargas as the nation's leader, the first letter of his last name was written in disproportionately large print. Students from Pedro II High School carried a drawing of a nutcracker stylized to look like a V smashing the head of the German dictator. In the front of a float memorializing the victims of Brazilian ships sunk by German submarines, the point of a sizeable V-shaped structure pierced a prone swastika (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2).

The "V" had been proposed by the Belgian refugee Victor de Laveleye as "a multinational symbol of solidarity for the oppressed" in early 1941 when many still saw the Axis as unbeatable. A few months later, the BBC started to publicize it in a radio show broadcast to the occupied countries hosted by "Colonel V. Britton," a character created to serve as a "cover for individuals fluent in the native languages of the various audiences." Since the beat of the opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony looks like the three dots and a dash of the Morse code for V, the composition was promptly put to various propaganda uses. Churchill helped promote the



**Fig. 1.1** An African-Brazilian student “kills Hitler” in a theatrical skit. Rio de Janeiro July 4, 1942 (CPDOC/FGV)

campaign by “flashing the V sign with his index and middle finger, palm out,” and he was soon followed by other Allied leaders such as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Charles de Gaulle.<sup>1</sup>

Although it was initially restricted to the student movement in Brazil, the symbol was adopted by a growing cast of social actors after August 1942 in the wake of the national uproar caused by the sinking of six Brazilian ships by a single German submarine, with a loss of over 600 lives. On August 18, in Rio de Janeiro, both the group of men and children who posed for the cameras holding up like trophies pieces of the bronze plaque pulled from *Praça Itália* and the multitude that marched to the Army General Barracks to demand a declaration of war held up their arms to show their fingers positioned in the shape of a V. In Belém, “shops

<sup>1</sup>David Boyle, *V for Victory: The Wireless Campaign That Defeated the Nazis* (The Real Press, 2016); “The ‘V for Victory’ Campaign,” *Defense Media Network* (blog), accessed June 18, 2023, <https://www.defensemianetwork.com/stories/the-v-for-victory-campaign/>.



**Fig. 1.2** A big V pierces a swastika on a float covered with the names of Brazilian ship sunk by German submarines at the anti-Axis demonstration on July 4, 1942, in Rio de Janeiro (AP Photo)

downtown stressed their sentiments toward the democratic cause by placing V for Victory in their display windows” to prevent looting. In Salvador, a large V scratched in crayon below the lettering of E. W. Luch, an agency of the Hamburg South American Company, alerted businesses with German ties that they were being watched not only by the Vargas regime’s repressive forces but also by anti-fascist militants. On an official propaganda poster, the phrase, “Bahia trusts in Victory,” was accompanied by a collage of a V made of the photos of the main tourist attractions. On the posters calling for Northeasterners to become “soldiers of rubber” in the Amazon, a V was formed by the cuts carved in the trunk to extract the rubber (Figs. 1.3 and 1.4).



**Fig. 1.3** Shouting Brazilians, one of them carrying a shattered plaque from Italy Square, give the “V for victory” sign as they demonstrated in reaction against a German submarine’s sinking of Brazilian ships. Rio de Janeiro August 18, 1942. (AP Photo)

As Brazil’s involvement with the global conflict deepened, the letter V and the word to which it referred came to crystallize the expectation that the end of the war would bring democratic advances and the securing of new rights, even as they showed how domestic social struggles were connected to the international antifascist movement. In April 1942, when trade unions in the U.S. wrote the U.S. ambassador in Brazil asking him to intercede with Vargas to free the communist leader Luís Carlos Prestes, they closed their letters with “Yours for Victory.”<sup>2</sup> Five months later, at the

<sup>2</sup>“Telegrams Sent by United Furniture Workers of America; United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America; Bakery and Confectionery Workers’ International Union; International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers; Fur Floor and Shipping Clerk’s Union—Local 125, United Office and Professional Workers of America—Local 16; International Jewelry Workers Union—Local 1; National Maritime Union of America; State, County, and Municipal Workers of America to the United States Embassy in Brazil,” October 15, 1942, Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State (Record Group 84), Entry 2133, Brazil, Rio de Janeiro Embassy, Classified and Unclassified General Records, Vol XLV, 1942, Box 150, US National Archives and Records Administration.



**Fig. 1.4** Middle and high school students from Colégio Pedro II participate in an anti-Axis demonstration. Rio De Janeiro, Brazil July 4, 1942. (AP Photo)

official parade that opened *Pátria* Week, and fifteen days after Brazil declared war, Rio de Janeiro unions carried banners with phrases such as “Victory through Work.” An illustration by the sculptor Calmon Barreto portrayed Victory as a black-haired woman in a blue dress, hair hanging loose and adorned with a flower, arms open in a V pointing toward a sky filled with military aircraft. The allegorical woman was placed over a background covered entirely with the U.S. and Brazilian flags, and on either side of her were positioned busts of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Getúlio Vargas, confidently gazing into the future.



In late 1942, the black communist student Aldenor Campos wrote an article praising the African-American “Double V” campaign in the U.S.—victory over Nazi fascism in the war and over racism at home—as a model to be followed in Brazil.<sup>3</sup> The next month, young women who worked in dance clubs in Rio de Janeiro posed for news photos with their fingers in the V shape during a dinner celebrating the founding of their professional association.<sup>4</sup> In 1944, the National Student Union (UNE) organized its “Congress of Victory,” and the Communist Party of Brazil (PCB) created the “Youth Victory League.”<sup>5</sup>

Expressing the many meanings attributed to the anticipated Allied triumph, the V was translated into gestures, codes, songs, and illustrations, as well as in newly created objects and old objects imbued with new meanings. As it spread internationally, it became a least common denominator that evoked hopes for a postwar world nurtured by the groups comprising the heterogenous antifascist sociopolitical coalition. This complex and potent semiotic operation synthesized the connections between the diverse historical processes established by total war in a single letter. Just as a symbol invented by a resistance fighter in an occupied European country popularized by official broadcast outlets and Allied statesmen was recreated and re-signified in the streets of Brazil, economic, political, social, and cultural processes crisscrossed and connected the world’s regions amidst intense diplomatic and military disputes.

\* \* \*

The Second World War was a decisive moment in human history in which radically different visions for the future confronted one another. These visions encompassed not only a reconfiguration of international relations

<sup>3</sup> Aldenor Campos, “Os Negros e Os Mulatos Têm Duplo Motivo Para Lutar!,” *Diretrizes*, December 10, 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Mariana dos Santos Cardoso, “Dancings e Cabarés: Experiência de Trabalho e Organização Sindical Das Bailarinas No Rio de Janeiro (1930–1946)” (Dissertação de Mestrado, Seropédica, RJ, Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, Programa de Pós-Graduação em História, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Office of Strategic Services, “National Students’ Union,” October 21, 1944, Records of the Office of Strategic Services (RG 226), Series UD153B, Box 3, US National Archives and Records Administration.

but also a rethinking of the internal organization of the state and its relationship with the citizenry. Any analysis of the period that does not give pride of place to the war is historically incomplete. However, most of the vast, competent, and diverse historiography produced on Brazil in the 1930s and 1940s does not even mention the country's involvement in the global conflict or, when it does, places the war in the distant background. The war tends to be seen as a topic restricted to international relations experts or military historians.<sup>6</sup>

The country's history during this period is generally explained by such factors as the impact of the Great Depression on the agricultural export economy, the crisis and collapse of the First Republic (1889–1930), the discrediting of liberalism, and the emergence of new social actors, particularly in the major cities. The rise of Getúlio Vargas to power in 1930 is thought to have established new paradigms in response to all these challenges, which would consolidate gradually over his first period in power (1930–1945), obeying a predominately internal logic. *Varguismo* is seen as a political project with a clearly defined identity from the beginning, which took on a variety of circumstantial expressions as a function of its internal maturation and the dictates of domestic politics. The hypothesis that transnational processes could have played a decisive role in these transformations is generally ignored.

There are two reasons for this relative insularity in historical metanarratives. On the one hand, the country's limited and late military involvement in the war, which began with the sinking of Brazilian ships by German and Italian submarines in 1942 and culminated in sending the Brazilian Expeditionary Force to fight in Italy in 1944. Despite the uproar

<sup>6</sup>This panorama has begun to change in recent years. Some of the most relevant contributions in this regard are: Francisco Cesar Alves Ferraz and Vinicius Mariano de Carvalho, "Brazil at War: An Unexpected, but Necessary, Ally," in *The Routledge History of the Second World War*, ed. Paul R. Bartrop, 737th–763rd ed., The Routledge Histories (London New York: Routledge, 2022); Frank D. McCann, *Brazil and the United States during World War II and Its Aftermath: Negotiating Alliance and Balancing Giants* (New York, NY: Springer Science+Business Media, 2018). Francisco Carlos Teixeira Silva, ed., *O Brasil e a Segunda Guerra Mundial*, 1a ed (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Multifoco, 2010); Dennison de Oliveira, "Brazil and World War II: Conflict and Cooperation in the Brazil-United States Military Alliance, 1939–1950," in *World War II: Background, Aftermath and Impact*, ed. Allison L. Palmadessa, Political Science and History (New York: NOVA Science Publishers, 2021), 55–84; Flávia de Sá Pedreira, Ed. *Nordeste Do Brasil Na II Guerra Mundial*, (São Paulo: LCTE Editora, 2019).



generated by the lives lost in the submarine attacks and the front, the country did not experience traumas comparable to those of millions of civilians and soldiers in other parts of the world. On the other hand, the prolonged presence of Getúlio Vargas and his political heirs at the center of the Brazilian political process contributed to strengthening the influence of “methodological nationalism” in the historiography.<sup>7</sup> The analysis of the Second World War tends to be subsumed into the debate surrounding the *Estado Novo*, one of the various chapters of the Vargas era.

The traditional historiographic periodization, which situates the war between the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and Japan’s surrender in 1945, also favors this perception that it was an external situation imposed late on *varguismo*. In a presidency that lasted a decade and a half, Vargas only took a definitive position in the dispute between the Allies and the Axis that polarized the world in the final three years. In an even more restricted reading, sending troops into combat on European soil in 1944 appears as only a brief episode before the dictator’s fall.

The interpretation of the meaning of the Second World War and the definition of its chronology, however, has been the subject of continuous historiographical debate. For Buchanan, the period that began with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and lasted until the end of the Korean War in 1953 should be understood as a series of regional wars that were increasingly articulated. In the paroxysm between 1941 and 1945, all the major powers were simultaneously involved in the confrontation, and all the battlefronts in the various parts of the world were interconnected. This process led to the consolidation of the global hegemony of the United States.<sup>8</sup>

From that perspective, the relationship between the war and the Vargas government can be divided into four distinct periods. The arrival of the Nazis in power in 1933, followed by the definitive rejection of the economic and military restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles and the adoption of a policy of territorial expansionism, created the conditions for the establishment of economic accords that by 1936 turned Germany into Brazil’s largest trading partner. Berlin also consolidated its position as the

<sup>7</sup> Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism and beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences,” *Global Networks* 2, no. 4 (October 2002): 301–34.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Buchanan, *World War II in Global Perspective*, First edition, Wiley Short Histories (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019).

leader of international anti-communism, which became a central aspect of the identity of the Vargas government in the wake of the attempted insurrection led by Luís Carlos Prestes with Comintern support in 1935.

The invasion of Poland in 1939, followed immediately by England and France's declarations of war on Germany, marks the start of the second period. The Atlantic blockade began adversely affecting Brazil's commercial relations with the Reich, including shipments of arms and munitions seen as vital for the Brazilian Armed Forces. The U.S. began to prepare for war, although overcoming resistance among the public and Congress would still be necessary. Pressure thus grew for an alliance among the American republics based on Hemispheric Defense. However, the Germans' overwhelming military wins until 1941, along with the belief that they could invade Great Britain and topple the Soviet government, led many to believe that the Axis would emerge victorious.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 began the third period. Getúlio Vargas and his aides, still unconvinced of an Allied victory, realized they had to abandon neutrality and follow U.S. leadership. On the other hand, the U.S. became willing to make more significant concessions to Brazil's strategic economic and military interests. The fourth period began between 1942 and 1943. After the U.S. defeat of the Japanese at the Battle of Midway in June 1942, the British victory at El Alamein in November 1942, and finally, the Soviet victory at Stalingrad in early 1943, it became clear that an Allied victory was only a matter of time. Attention in Brazil thus shifted to defining the country's place in the post-war order.

Throughout this process, in an aggressive international environment, peripheral states like Brazil were challenged to rethink the foundations of their national identity and the bases upon which they demanded their place in the global sun. For a country of continental dimensions with obsolete armed forces and grave social inequalities, with most of the population condemned to extreme poverty, the war simultaneously brought immense opportunities and fearsome threats.

As the foremost U.S. ally in the Western Hemisphere, Brazil played an important role in the processes that would shape the world that emerged after the war. These processes did not only affect Brazil's foreign policy but also triggered cultural changes and political-ideological disputes at home. The importance of the Second World War for Brazil cannot be measured by the 25,000 soldiers sent into combat in Italy, of whom 471

died.<sup>9</sup> Nor can it be gauged by the 1074 who died when German submarines torpedoed ships off the Brazilian coast. These are small numbers in a conflict that caused the deaths of at least sixty million people. However, involvement in the global conflagration produced transformations that would shape Brazilian history in the second half of the twentieth century.

The primary sources for the period, including newspapers, public or secret official documents, interviews, and literary texts, leave no doubt that the Vargas Era took place under the shadow of war. As the threat of a new global conflict became a reality, news about the unfolding of battles, the appearance of new fronts, the evolution of countries' positions, and speculations about the new balance of power that would emerge after the war were followed with interest not only by civilian and military leaders but also by a wide cast of actors at various levels of the social hierarchy. The war progressively intruded upon everyday life, affecting routine activities like work, leisure, and consumption.

As it exploited the conflicts among the great powers, Brazil unleashed a cycle of rapid economic growth that benefited both the agricultural and industrial sectors, overcame the initial effects of the Great Depression, and built the foundations for a new level of industrialization.<sup>10</sup> The international debate surrounding the relationship between citizenship, nationality, and race intensified over the war and underwent essential changes. On one side, the Nazi regime utilized the judicial expertise of U.S. segregationists to establish a system of "second-class citizenship" for Jews through

<sup>9</sup> Approximately 12,000 were injured during the war, and accidents or illnesses later caused 2000 more deaths. On the Brazilian Expeditionary Force: Frederico Soares Ribeiro, "Os Febianos: Experiência, Consciência e Agência Dos Trabalhadores Brasileiros Convocados Para a Guerra Na Força Expedicionária Brasileira—FEB (1943–1945)," *Mundos Do Trabalho*; v. 11 (2019) *DO – 10.5007/1984-9222.2019.E66536*, December 17, 2019, <https://periodicos.ufsc.br/index.php/mundosdotrabalho/article/view/1984-9222.2019.e66536>; Francisco Cesar Alves Ferraz, "Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Brazilian and American Troops of World War II: A Comparative Study," *Antíteses* 7, no. 13 (July 12, 2014): 467, <https://doi.org/10.5433/1984-3356.2014v7n13p467>; Francisco César Alves Ferraz, "Considerações Historiográficas Sobre a Participação Brasileira Na Segunda Guerra Mundial: Balanço Da Produção Bibliográfica e Suas Tendências," *Esboços – Revista Do Programa de Pós-Graduação Em História Da UFSC* 22, no. 34 (August 1, 2016): 207, <https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-7976.2015v22n34p207>; Cesar Campiani Maximiano, *Barbudos, Sujos e Fatigados: Soldados Brasileiros Na Segunda Guerra Mundial* (São Paulo: Grua, 2010), <http://search.library.duke.edu/search?id=DUKE005136583>.

<sup>10</sup> Marcelo de Paiva Abreu, "The Brazilian Economy, 1930–1980," in *Brazil Since 1930*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 281–394.

the Nuremberg Laws.<sup>11</sup> On the other, upon joining together against this new form of “political racism,” Brazil and the U.S. were challenged to face their paradoxes as post-abolition racist societies with new paradigms, such as “racial democracy” and “civil rights.”<sup>12</sup>

Like previous experiences of total war, the social mobilization and shared suffering of the Second World War produced transformations in notions of patriotism, citizenship, and democracy. An intense conflict that lasted several years and made colossal demands on the battlefield and at the economic rearguard required the state to develop more robust social policies. Submitted to economic hardship and wartime authoritarianism, society in general and the working class in particular awaited peace to “cash the patriotic check” of prosperity, democracy, and social rights.<sup>13</sup>

This book re-examines Brazilian history in the 1930s and 1940s considering new international historiographic perspectives about the origins and development of the Second World War. In doing so, it seeks to start a more fruitful dialogue between the historiography focused on Brazilian specificities and “global history.”<sup>14</sup> It discusses the conflicts between the great powers and the global ideological struggles of the period that intersected with the Brazilian historical process. It does not intend to be a general history of the country at that moment but to offer a transversal approach that integrates topics traditionally treated separately under a new framework.

My central argument is that Brazil’s involvement in the Second World War created conditions for the emergence of mass nationalist movements that would ultimately transform the nature of Brazilian politics. They expressed how Brazilian society engaged with the great dilemmas the

<sup>11</sup> James Q. Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*, First paperback printing (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Jessica Lynn Graham, *Shifting the Meaning of Democracy: Race, Politics, and Culture in the United States and Brazil* (University of California Press, 2019); Arthur Ramos, *Guerra e relações de raça*. (Rio de Janeiro: Departamento editorial da União Nacional dos Estudantes, 1943); Waldo Frank, “Our Island Hemisphere,” *Foreign Affairs* 21, no. 3 (1943): 513.

<sup>13</sup> Geoff Eley, “War and the Twentieth-Century State,” *Daedalus* 124, no. 2 (1995): 155–74.

<sup>14</sup> Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World : Essays toward a Global Labor History*, Studies in Global Social History, (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2008); Jan Lucassen and International Institute of Social History, eds., *Global Labour History: A State of the Art*, International and Comparative Social History, vol. 9 (Bern, Switzerland ; New York: Peter Lang, 2006); Patrick Manning, *World History : Global and Local Interactions* (Princeton, NJ: M. Wiener, 2006).

world faced at that moment and left its mark on determining the country's place in the new international system being formed.

The second chapter offers an overview of historiographic debates surrounding the conceptualization of the Second World War and its sociopolitical effects. The third reexamines the nature and evolution of the government of Getúlio Vargas, emphasizing its relationship, on the one hand, with the international context and, on the other, with the struggle of Brazilian workers for social rights. The following two chapters analyze the persistence of ideology promoting the whitening of the Brazilian populace as a condition for "civilizing" the country. Such thought was revitalized with the Nazis' rise to power in Germany and played an essential role in the eugenicist policies of the Vargas government.

The sixth chapter deals with the antifascist protests that swept the country in 1942. The seventh and eighth chapters analyze, respectively, the racist gaze of Allied diplomats toward Brazil and the connection between antifascist militancy and the emergence of the concept of racial democracy. The ninth chapter examines the reconfiguration of the country's working class through the war effort, which combined the construction of the material bases of national developmentalism with meeting the short-term strategic demands of the Allied powers. In the tenth chapter, we look at the effects that the national security doctrine had on changes to the meaning of citizenship, particularly the tension that built between, on the one hand, the recognition that national defense required the wellbeing of the populace (expressed through the promulgation of a new labor code, the CLT, in 1943), and, on the other, the criminalization of social struggles for the entitlement to individual and collective rights and for their effective enactment. The eleventh chapter analyses the connections between workers resistance to the repression of the Estado Novo and the wave of strikes that took place amidst Brazil's democratization. Finally, we examine the participation of the working class in the postwar political system, focusing on the brief experience of legal communism aborted by the start of the Cold War, the polemics surrounding the concept of populism, and the debate on the nature of *trabalhismo*.



## Total War, International Systems, and Social Change

In June 1942, an author identifying himself by the initials A. L. M. explained to the select group of readers of *Cultura Política*, the semiofficial intellectual journal of Brazil's Estado Novo regime, that events taking place in the “theater of the world” could be expressed by the following equation: “Political War + Subversive War + Economic War + Military War = Total War.” As the heir of the concept of “Absolute War” formulated by von Clausewitz in the nineteenth century, “Total War” was said to have been described after the 1918 armistice by marshal Ludendorff as “a tremendous life or death struggle, not only between professional armies, but between peoples,” in which “all citizens [have] the duty of collaborating for national defense.”

This new reality highlighted the necessity of “reorganizing the entire nation, including the armed forces, along new lines.” In a diagram spread over a page three times larger than those used for the journal's articles, A. L. M. detailed each component of “Total War.” “Military War,” with its land, naval, and air aspects, comprised around 20% of the plan for “Total War.” At the same time “Psychological War” (which included the “Political” and “Subversive” dimensions) and “Economic War” (commercial, financial, and industrial) occupied about 40% each.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>A. L. M., “Os Grandes Aspectos Da Guerra Total,” *Cultura Política* Ano II, no. 16 (June 1942): 249–51.