

COMMENTARY FOR DIALOGOS

*Frank D. McCann**

The post-World War II period in Brazilian historiography is badly in need of revision. It has reflected the political currents of that era to an unhealthy degree and as a result it has produced distorted interpretations. In one dimensional fashion it portrays Getúlio Vargas as the scheming dictator who fell before the winds of democracy. And it transforms General Eúrico Dutra, who had been a mainstay of the Estado Novo, into the bearer of constitutional government. Yet curiously, at the time the Department of State in Washington worried that the “nationalist” Getúlio might return, as he did in 1951, elected as the paladin of the people. The immediate post-war years set the patterns of politics, economic development, military and foreign relations down to 1964.

Rather than being an experiment in democracy the Dutra years saw a political closing, as Sidnei Munhoz argues in his essay. He is correct to see linked developments in the onset of the Cold War and the repression of labor protests and strikes in Brazil. For workers the era was a step into the past; they were denied the full rights of citizens “in a return to the Estado Novo’s style of industrial relations.”¹ A former head of DOPS took over as São Paulo’s Secretary of Labor and Dutra made one of the state’s most conservative industrialists his Minister of Labor. The 1946 Constitution was not the guidebook for a democratic society, but rather a continuation of the Estado Novo’s “corporatist control over labor.”² The difficulty is that role of the Communist Party in Brazilian unions was significant enough to allow the government to mask labor repression behind a facade of combating communism.

The repression was not limited to workers, of course, but was aimed at the military, the foreign service, and government employees. Such repression was not seen abroad as limiting the rights of citizens but as protecting Brazil from the Russian bear. As long as Dutra was cooperative about allowing American investors free rein, Washington did not concern itself with the realities of his government.

* University of New Hampshire
Durham, NH, USA

¹ Joel Wolfe, *Working Women, Working Men: São Paulo and the Rise of Brazil’s Industrial Working Class, 1900-1955* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 158.

² *Ibid.*, 140-141.

The Dutra government's continuance of the wartime alignment with the United States did not bring any more benefits than the wartime alliance had already secured. Because Brazil's status during the war was different from that of its neighbors, Brazilian leaders then and since have expected the great powers to accept the country into their councils. They have often been disappointed when the powers, especially the United States, did not accord proper recognition of Brazil's status. Policy makers in foreign capitals, in particular Washington, have frequently been puzzled by, what they considered, the Brazilians' pretensions. Their perplexity was perhaps feigned at times, because such recognition was not in harmony with their own policy objectives, but it is likely that many of them were, like the world at large, ignorant of the history of Brazil's wartime roles.

Those roles had been largely secret, or were lost amidst the news from all the fighting fronts. In 1945, Brazil's 40,000,000 people had many reasons to be proud of their country's contributions to the Allied victory. Brazil hosted, at Natal, the largest United States air base outside its North American territory, and, at Recife, the U.S. Fourth Fleet; and it tied its economy to the American war machine, sent its navy in pursuit of German U-Boats and provided a division-sized expeditionary force and a fighter squadron to the Fifth U.S. Army on the Italian front. It allowed the construction of the air bases before it broke relations with the Axis at the Rio conference in January 1942, and its army lost officers and troops, scarce equipment, and families before Brazil entered the war officially in August of that year. Brazil had sacrificed its blood and material and trusted its American friends for recompense. The trouble was that the Roosevelt administration with which it had negotiated the agreements, discussed mutual dreams for the post-war world, and established ties of empathy, friendship, and alliance was gone after FDR's death in April 1945. The Truman administration's world view was shaped by pre-war prejudices toward Latin America and by the headiness of the victory over the Axis. It had little appreciation for the Brazilian alliance. Many of the mid-level bureaucrats in Washington and a majority of the American population knew nothing or very little about what Brazil had contributed during the war. It is noteworthy that the voluminous documents about the construction of the air bases, improvement of port facilities, and diplomatic relations generally, and, especially, about the FEB were still classified "secret" in the United States archives as late as 1964!³

³ I applied for access to those records in 1963 and it took a year for the army to give me a top secret clearance to do research in them. It took another year for the army to return my censored notes. Even after my *Brazilian-American Alliance, 1937-1945* (Princeton University Press, 1973) it took years before it began to change the accepted narrative on Latin America.

So what was well known in Brazil, was not in the United States.

André Moysés Gaio's essay opens an extremely important line of inquiry. Too often, historians accept the Brazilian military's protestations of political neutrality as reality. It is true that most officers came out of the 1930s with broad and ill-formed ideas about Brazilian politics. The lack of organized parties during the Estado Novo had left opinion-makers thrashing about for ideas on how the now strengthened Brazilian state should best function. After the Estado Novo collapsed, some hoped to undo the Vargas legacy, others wanted to build upon it, some wanted to follow a strictly nationalist development line, others wanted an economy and society open to foreign investment, ideas and participation. The uncertainty was not eliminated by the post-war parties, but heightened by their overly partisan approaches. Moderation and compromise were often the victims in the political arguments and debates of those years. Often debates on, for example, investment in petroleum development were cover for desires for revenge over some aspect or injury of the Vargas years.

In 1945 it was not a surprise that the Estado Novo was at an end. In retrospect it is doubtful that Getúlio intended the regime to continue. He never held the plebiscite that would have ratified the constitution of 1937, he refused to create a party or a youth movement to support the regime, and he knew, as the country did not, that the regime has its origins in the agreement that he, Dutra, and Góes Monteiro [these two speaking for the army's generals] had made in 1937 to close down the existing political system so that they could arm and industrialize Brazil. The decision to close the system based on the 1934 constitution had been, in the first instance, a military one, made by the senior generals, who preferred to act with Vargas at their head than risk possible rivalries among themselves. But they were determined to act with or without Vargas. Given Getúlio's political style as far back to his governorship in Rio Grande do Sul, it is unlikely that he would have tried to create the Estado Novo on his own. In effect, however, by the war's end he was left as the sole parent of the dictatorship, while the generals minimized or denied the importance of their roles.

From the turn-of-the-century the army had worried about the poor state of its arms and equipment, the difficulties of mobilizing and training sufficient soldiers to have adequate armed forces to defend the country against internal and external enemies. In the 1903 Acre Crisis, Sergeant Getúlio Vargas had seen first hand the precariousness of mobilization on the frontier;

It still has not been incorporated into the accepted history of the war. This says a lot about the conservative nature of American foreign relations specialists and the narrowness of their reading on World War II. Brazil rarely enters their world view.

the Revolution of 1930, the Paulista rebellion of 1932, and the communist barracks revolt of 1935 each revealed weaknesses in Brazil's armed forces. With the world stumbling toward some terrible, yet still unknown crisis, Vargas and the generals linked the solution to Brazil's political predicament, with national defense. Governments in France, the United States, not to speak of Germany, Italy, Poland, and Portugal were solidifying their control over national policy formation and execution. Why should Brazil not do so too?

For most of the 1930s General Góes Monteiro had been impressing on Vargas the desperate need for basic political and military reforms. As ministers of war and chiefs of staff had noted for decades, Brazil was all but disarmed; its fleet and its army had human talent and a full array of schools, but scarcely any equipment, arms or munitions. This was not news, but the world panorama in 1937 was exceptionally frightening. The Spanish Civil War indicated that Brazil had been lucky in 1932 not to have attracted foreign intervention, but it likely would not have such good luck twice. The Soviet Union's involvement in the 1935 fiasco raised fears that it would try again, if the chance presented itself; and Nazi Germany had already been much too attentive to the status of German communities in southern Brazil. Argentina had just shown in the Destroyers' Affair that it was a "false friend." Old fears of losing rich, untapped, and often, undiscovered, natural resources gave Brazilian officers and knowledgeable politicians nightmares. That was the complicated scenario in which the fateful decisions for dictatorship were made in late 1937, but those decisions were not those of one man.

Vargas, Dutra, Góes, and even Oswaldo Aranha agreed that Brazil had to modernize its armed forces no matter what the cost. Only a modern army, they asserted, would hold the country together against the centrifugal forces of regionalism, and defend it against foreign enemies. It would also set an example of educated modernity for the Brazilian people. By September 1937 the first three were more or less in agreement as to the course they were following. In a sense Vargas had become a captive, he would have to carry out their plans or risk being deposed. The two generals could back down, but Vargas could not.

Góes and Dutra wanted a modern army with all its attendant arms and equipment. The arrangement that they made with Getúlio was straightforward. They were to give Vargas internal peace and security, and he would get them the arms and the modern industries that would support continued military development. Góes wanted to make the army's 1934 reorganization plans a reality. On September 1, 1937, Vargas presided over a meeting of the National Security Council, which included the cabinet ministers and the chiefs of staff of the army and navy. This was only the third time it

had met since its formation in 1934, so it is not an exaggeration to say that it was an unusual event.⁴ They discussed the equipping of the armed forces and the need to create a new source of revenue to pay for it.

As Stanley Hilton has shown, during 1934-36, the army had been negotiating with the German Krupp Corporation and with the Swedish Bofors company for modern artillery to be paid for with natural resources.⁵ The navy engaged in similar activity with the Italian government for submarines and with the American government for destroyers. In January 1937, the then army Chief of Staff Paes de Andrade had warned “we are practically disarmed.” And in his annual report to the president in May 1937, Minister Dutra had written, “it would be to lie to the Nation to say that we are armed, in condition to guard it and to defend its enormous patrimony. The truth ... is that Brazil is a disarmed State. ... We have a proud, patriotic, and brave people. We know the energy stored in almost fifty million inhabitants. ... It is sad but true to confess that we do not possess sufficient material resources to deal with even our internal requirements. ... We can not stand still while the rest of the world advances.”⁶ National policy was to become a mix of seeking immediate arms purchases abroad and a longer-term goal of developing heavy industry.

Vargas committed himself to arming and equipping the military and building a national steel complex in return for military backing of extending his presidency with dictatorial powers that would eliminate politics and regionalism. The public implementation of this arrangement proceeded in the hesitant, indirect way in which Getúlio usually maneuvered.

The signals that he flashed were certainly mixed. It is most common for historians to see his contradictory moves as deliberate diversions intended to confuse. It is more likely, however, recalling his behavior in 1930, that such moves really indicated his indecision and caution.

I have dealt with the twists and turns of the path to November 10, 1937 in a book now in press, suffice to say here, that if viewed against the scene of 1937, that of 1945 looks as if Getúlio was left holding the bag of responsibility.⁷ Certainly the historiography follows that line, as does subsequent political thinking.

⁴ Vargas, *Diário*, II, 189 (Leticia crisis), 347 (Chaco War & “nosso complete falta de recursos para enfrentar uma situação”), 427 (“precariedade do nosso material belico”).

⁵ Hilton, *Brazil and the Great Powers*, 117-129.

⁶ EME, *Relatorio dos Trabalhos do Estado-Maior ... 1936 ... pelo GD Arnaldo de Souza Paes de Andrade* (Rio de Janeiro: Imprensa do EME, 1937), 4; on Paes de Andrade's career see note 79 above. MG, *Relatorio... Eurico Dutra... Maio de 1937*, 37-38.

⁷ The book is *Soldiers of the Pátria: A History of the Brazilian Army, 1889-1937* (Stanford University Press).

The foregoing set the stage for the developments that Sonny Davis discussed in his paper. To a great extent the wartime alliance had been less an alliance between the two countries than one between their armed forces. The American army was more consistent in its belief in the importance of Brazil, then and for the future, than was the Department of State (especially after Sumner Welles was forced out in August 1943.) Davis takes us through the process of institutional approximation that created what General Leitão de Carvalho called “a brotherhood of arms.”⁸ However, no such protestations could overcome the reality of American strength and Brazilian weakness. Unbalanced alliances are difficult to keep on even keel. This one was a prime example of that truism. American army officers in direct contact with Brazilians came to respect, admire, and have affection for them, but they had difficulty persuading others in the American military and government that they too should have such attitudes. As American geopolitical thinking became obsessed with the Soviet Union and the spread of communism, the Pentagon, and its supporting array of Washington “think-tanks,” had difficulty understanding the importance of Brazil on what they insisted was the “periphery” of the great Cold War struggle.

Even the crisis that resulted in the army’s overthrow of the Goulart Government in 1964 did not move Brazil any closer to the center of the great power conflict. In fact, in terms of holding American interest, it likely made it even less important to the Cold Warriors on the Potomac.

What these papers do is challenge the idea that Brazil and its military automatically adhered to a pro-USA line in the post- World War II decades. Historians should not be willing to accept the “apparent” without first consulting the archives. Foreign and military policies are always the outcome of policy debates, some within ministerial walls, some in public. Only recourse to the archives will tell what really happened, why one course was followed and not another. Professors Gaio, Munhoz, and Davis are in effect challenging their colleagues to follow their lead and to delve deeply into this fertile and exciting post-war era that contributed so much to the Brazil of today. Boa Viagem meus amigos!

⁸ Sonny Davis, *A Brotherhood of Arms: Brazil-United States Military Relations, 1945-1977* (Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1996), xviii, note 10. This was in a speech at West Point in Sept. 1944.