

The Brazilian Army, Nation Building and the Vargas Dictatorship (1937-1945)

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Presentation

The establishment of the Dictatorship of the Estado Novo (1937) under the leadership of Getúlio Vargas marked a turning point in the relationship between the Society and the Armed Forces in Brazil. Both in the coup d'état that instituted the dictatorship and in the overthrow of Vargas, the military played a fundamental role. It was in this period that the Brazilian Army became a nationwide political institution, influencing the political system ever since. The text proposed here intends to synthesize the main recent discoveries about the military's political action, emphasizing the Army's participation in the nation-building process during the Estado Novo in the interest of strengthening its own political power.

Four specific aspects are important in this process. The first and most important is the expansion of political power and the deepening of the Army's social importance through the imposition of mandatory military service and the implementation of a policy of military occupation of the territory itself, which, not by chance, continues to this day of today. A second aspect concerns the participation of the Army in the Nationalization Campaign, which sought to integrate the colonial settlements of foreign immigrants who were seen as a threat to the nation's territorial integrity and cultural homogeneity.² The role of the military in the creation of state-owned companies in the period is also of great importance. Finally, it is worth mentioning the political role of the Army during World War II. In this period, the project of using the technical and financial support provided by the Lend Leasing Act to increase the military strength of the Army, through industrial self-sufficiency in the production of weapons, vehicles and ammunition, assumed central importance.³

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² Oliveira, D. Dilemas estratégicos do Brasil na Segunda Guerra Mundial: Defesa Hemisférica, política de nacionalização e subversão nazista no Sul do país (1939-1943). *Fronteiras - Revista Catarinense de História*, v. 1, p. 50-73, 2015. <https://periodicos.uffs.edu.br/index.php/FRCH/article/view/8021>

³ Oliveira, D. Brazil and World War II: Conflict and Cooperation in the Brazil-United States Military Alliance, 1939-1950. In: Allison L. Palmadessa. (Org.). *World War II: Background, Aftermath and*

The influence of joint combat actions with the United States Army on the military's perception of Brazil's domestic and foreign policy was also an event fraught with consequences. Due to reasons of time, this text will focus on the imposition of mandatory military service and the implementation of a policy of military occupation of the territory itself.

Research question

The central theme of the research is the relationship between the imposition of mandatory military service and the implementation of a policy of military occupation of the territory itself. Although these themes have long been considered relevant for researchers, the connection between both with their implications and consequences has not a more systematic examination.

Method

The methodology adopted includes a bibliographic review, including authors who have been dedicated to the study of the imposition of mandatory military service or the implementation of the policy of military occupation of the Brazilian territory, also known as presence strategy (*estratégia de presença*). These include authors of theses, dissertations, articles, and books.

Official documents were also consulted. These include reports by the Minister of War General Eurico Dutra to President Getúlio Vargas, as well as official documents of Brazil's current national defense policy.

Hypothesis

The imposition of mandatory military service should not continue to be examined independently of the implementation of the presence strategy. So far, both processes have been treated in isolation. The hypothesis that we intend to

demonstrate is that such processes only became viable when they were analysed jointly.

According to the approach proposed here, it would not have been possible to impose mandatory military service without having at the same time implemented a presence strategy. And vice-versa. It would not have been possible to implement a presence strategy without imposing mandatory military service at the same time.

Contributions to the conference theme

The study of the military's relationship with politics has a growing interest in Brazil. The extensive and prolonged accession of important military leaders to the current federal government is, certainly, an important factor to increase such interest. This text aims to contribute to this debate by examining factors of longer duration that, since the Second World War and the Dictatorship of the Estado Novo, have structurally conditioned the participation of the military in politics.

This text will not do a thorough examination of all the important transformations that the armed forces went through, especially the Brazilian Army during the Dictatorship of the Estado Novo. This is a text that deals much more with the current legacy of the transformations carried out at the time of the Second World War than with the examination of the transformations themselves.

Findings

It has become common to refer to the Brazilian Army as the only truly national institution or, even more, a type of political party with national scope. Although it can be argued that this situation dates to the time of Colonial Brazil, the phenomenon is much more recent. In fact, it was only after the Second World War that all states of the Brazilian federation began to count on several military organizations scattered throughout its territory.

Another manifestation of the Brazilian Army's national power is the imposition of the Mandatory Military Service (*Serviço Militar Obrigatório*, SMO), which also dates from the time of World War II. Since then, through the SMO, tens of thousands of young Brazilians have been recruited annually to serve the

armed forces for a year. Thus, belonging to a military organization, introjecting its values, and adapting to its practices, is an experience widely disseminated among men from the most diverse social groups throughout all regions of Brazil.

The imposition of mandatory military service, legally in force since 1916, becomes irreversible during the Estado Novo. From then on, the Brazilian armed forces, particularly the Army, began to form vast reserves of conscripts. The initiative was in accordance with the doctrinal assumptions since the Franco-Prussian War (1871). This war demonstrated the importance of having vast and massive reserves of citizens who, having already gone through compulsory military service, were able to fight the great mass wars in the Industrial Age.

After World War II, however, such practice began to prove to be increasingly dysfunctional. On the one hand, in the context of the Cold War, the great mass wars in the Industrial Age ceased to exist. On the contrary, there was a profusion of localized conflicts of small scale and short duration in the most diverse regions of the planet. On the other hand, the impact of the Third Industrial Revolution led to an increasing complexity of weapons and weapon systems operated by military land, sea, and air organizations. With each new technological advance applied to armaments, the process of training the personnel in charge of operating them became more expensive, time-consuming, and complex.

From the second half of the twentieth century, different military powers abandoned the SMO and incorporated volunteers to serve for long periods. Of the ten largest military powers, only three still adopt the SMO (South Korea, Russia, Turkey); five countries abandoned it as Japan (1945), Great Britain (1960), USA (1973), France (2001), Italy (2005) or never adopted it as Canada and India. China formally still adopts the SMO but, given the immense availability of human potential and the small number of posts to be filled, volunteering ends up in practice. The case of Brazil is like that of China, allowing only volunteers to be admitted to the SMO, which, legally, should be mandatory for everyone.

The incompatibility of the SMO and its constant annual rotation of new recruits with the increasing complexity of the new weapons and weapons systems was manifested in Brazil as early as in the context of the Second World War. The research carried out on the creation of Brazilian armoured forces illustrates the problem.

The biggest difficulty when it came to organizing the new tank units and other armoured vehicles was to train the necessary specialized personnel. The main Army establishment dedicated to this formation was in Rio de Janeiro, rarely meeting the demand. Another difficulty was added to that of retaining personnel already trained and experienced in the use and maintenance of vehicles at the service of the Brazilian Army.

Perhaps this was the first concrete experience of the Brazilian military authorities with the evident and unavoidable limitations of mandatory military service. Although they could summon an enormous mass of conscripts to active service in their armed forces, the Brazilian military authorities had to return them to civilian life after the provision of a one-year period of compulsory military service. For motorized and armoured units, lacking trained and experienced technical personnel, this practice was an unavoidable complicator.

Thanks to the Lend Lease program developed by the USA to supply and arm its allies during the war, Brazil acquired hundreds of tanks and thousands of other motor vehicles. But if the vehicles were plentiful, the men were missing to operate and maintain them. Even though Brazilian participation in World War II ended, armoured, and motorized units in organization in Brazil continued to struggle with the problems caused by the lack of trained personnel. The eternal rotation of personnel, derived from the period of one year of compulsory military service imposed on citizens, made the situation difficult. The challenge was to convince the military specialized in maintenance to remain in the ranks, under the risk of seeing many available vehicles paralyzed.

When the Second World War had already ended even on the Pacific front and the State of War was suspended throughout the national territory, even so the Army was not able to solve the problem of completing these troops. The incompatibility of compulsory military service with the training and retention process in the armed forces of the indispensable technical staff who make them work was manifest. To make the adoption of compulsory military service compatible with the expansion of the armoured force, two steps were taken: volunteering (including ex-military) and the personal interest of those engaged in serving in the Federal Capital, where was still concentrated most part of the armoured force.

Despite publications produced within the scope of military education establishments that, albeit indirectly, recognize the superiority of the professional military over those conscripts, the extinction or revision of the SMO remains a prohibited topic. The official allegations continue to insist on the need for a mass of reservists for reasons of national security and on the alleged virtues of the patriotic and military values that are inculcated in the reservists.

In parallel with the imposition of the SMO during the Estado Novo there was also the process of occupation of the territory. The Brazilian Army has been characterized since then by the wide dispersion of its units throughout practically the entire national territory, generally the size of a battalion. Until today, its largest numbers are stationed in the central and southern regions of the country.

Official rhetoric gives a strategic sense to this dispersion of forces, called the presence strategy (*estratégia de presença*). Through such a presence strategy, the Brazilian Army would be in a better position to guarantee both the integrity of its borders and the exercise of subsidiary activities which it is daily called upon to execute, as are the operations of Guarantee of Law and Order operations (*Garantia de Lei e Ordem*, GLO), assistance in public service campaigns and calamities resulting from natural disasters.

Recent research on the implementation of SMO in the State of Piauí in the context prior to World War II allows to shed new light on this issue. Through the analysis of the reactions to the implementation of the first experience with the new law of military service in Piauí, it was possible for the civil and military public authorities to understand the organizational deficiencies that should be remedied for the law of the draw to become effective. The deficiency of public authorities allowed citizens to create alternatives to undertake escapes from the SMO. The worst of these deficiencies was precisely the lack of military facilities. Such facilities were indispensable to recruit enlisted individuals, to draw those who would be called up and to enable them to provide military service for a period of one year.

Such facilities could be barracks, Centers for the Preparation of Reserve Officers (*Centros Preparatórios de Oficiais da Reserva*, CPOR) or *Tiros de Guerra*. In the barracks the new recruits served full-time, being considered at the end of their military service as first-class reserve soldiers. At the CPOR, those with the highest level of instruction were prepared, on a part-time basis, to

compose a reserve of officers. Finally, the *Tiros de Guerra*, maintained by the Army and local city halls, allowed the SMO period to be exercised on a part-time basis, usually two hours a day. At the end of a year, their former members were designated *Atiradores*, constituting a set of second-class reservists.

The imposition of the SMO required military installations to carry out recruitment. At the same time, military installations required recruited personnel to function. In this way, the Brazilian Army forced itself to build a variety of military installations, usually within or close to urban centres, to impose the SMO. This number of facilities, in turn, demanded a constant flow of new recruits to be able to function. What is found is a symbiotic relationship between SMO and the strategy of presence throughout the territory, according to which one thing cannot exist without the other.

The combined effects of the SMO with the presence strategy, implemented during the Vargas Dictatorship, guaranteed the Army at least two major political advantages. The first and most important was to convert the Army into an organization - perhaps the only one - with national scope. The second was the possibility of inculcating military values, ideas, and doctrines in a large portion of the recruiting youth, with important political and social effects.

It is important to note that neither one thing nor the other has nothing to do with military efficiency. The reduced SMO time is incapable of training recruits in any of the specialties of modern warfare (armoured, chemical, cybernetics, etc.), and part of this time must be dedicated to the preparation and professional training of the recruit for the return to civilian life.

The strategy of occupation of the territory is in contradiction with the classic principle of concentration of forces. One of the most important indicators of military efficiency is the greater or lesser capacity of the military organization to concentrate the maximum forces at the right moment and place that are decisive for the outcome of operations. In the case of the Brazilian Army, to react to a threat to its land borders or coastline, this would involve bringing together and concentrating a myriad of combat and support organizations, divided into battalion sizes, and then sending them to the threatened point.

Obviously, this demands the availability of a huge and updated transport network, articulating different transportation facilities by land, sea, and air. And even in these circumstances, it would be necessary to take considerable risks,

such as seeing the concentration of forces delayed or made impossible by enemy action. It should be noted that the reduced size of the road and rail network, in addition to the inadequacy of waterways and port facilities, makes the presence strategy a complex and problematic activity in peace, in addition to offering an enormous risk in war time.

As a result of the legacy of the Vargas Era until today, most of the Brazilian Army's personnel (85.86%) is concentrated in the south, southeast, northeast and centre regions. The northern and Amazonian regions, which were unanimously considered to be the most exposed and threatened and which correspond to most of the Brazilian territory, have ridiculously small numbers (14.13%). This is evidence that this practice serves the political interests of the army, not national security.

The other armed forces have an even more uneven distribution of personnel. The Brazilian Air Force maintains most of its personnel in the southeast of the country (48.26%) while the Navy is concentrated almost exclusively in Rio de Janeiro (68.97%).

Conclusion

What can be concluded is that the SMO and the corresponding presence strategy are archaisms that date back to World War II. In the context of the Estado Novo, they were important initiatives to lead to an extraordinary increase in the political power and social influence of the Army, within a broader nation-building process. However, in the current context of hybrid wars, they are manifestations of an outdated way of guaranteeing national security and should be the object of urgent reform or extinction. In the meantime, it is essential that the northern and Amazonian regions have personnel at least proportional to their area of coverage.

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