

World War II in Northeastern Brazil: Everyday Life and Social Transformation

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Abstract: This paper examines the social and cultural impacts of the World War II on Northeastern Brazil, with a focus on the consequences of the German submarine U-507's attacks on Brazilian merchant vessels off the coasts of Bahia and Sergipe in August 1942. Often referred to as the "Brazilian Pearl Harbor", these events prompted Brazil's declaration of war on the Axis powers and profoundly shaped local experiences of fear, nationalism, and social transformation. Drawing upon police reports, newspapers, oral testimonies, and archival documents, the study adopts a comparative and microhistorical approach to investigate how the global conflict was interpreted, experienced, and reconfigured within local contexts. The analysis suggests that the war was not only fought in distant theaters but also lived, narrated, and reimagined in the everyday life of Northeastern Brazil.

Keywords: World War II; Northeastern Brazil; Everyday Life; Submarine Warfare; Social Transformation.

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La Segunda Guerra Mundial em el Nordeste de Brasil: Vida cotidiana y transformación social

Resumen: Este artículo examina el impacto social y cultural de la Segunda Guerra Mundial en el Nordeste de Brasil, centrándose en las consecuencias de los ataques del submarino alemán U-507 contra buques mercantes brasileños frente a las costas de Bahía y Sergipe en agosto de 1942. Conocidos a menudo como el *“Pearl Harbor brasileño”*, estos acontecimientos llevaron a Brasil a declarar la guerra a las Potencias del Eje y moldearon profundamente las experiencias locales de miedo, nacionalismo y transformación social. A partir del análisis de informes policiales, periódicos, testimonios orales y documentos de archivo, el estudio adopta un enfoque comparativo y microhistórico para indagar cómo el conflicto global fue interpretado, vivido y reconfigurado en los contextos locales. El análisis sugiere que la guerra no solo se libró en escenarios lejanos, sino que también se experimentó, narró y reinventó en la vida cotidiana del Nordeste brasileño.

Palabras clave: Segunda Guerra Mundial; Nordeste de Brasil; vida cotidiana; guerra submarina; transformación social.

Introduction

Between August 15 and 17, 1942, the German submarine *U-507* torpedoed five Brazilian ships — *Baependy*, *Araraquara*, *Aníbal Benévolo*, *Itagiba*, and *Arará* — along the coastlines of Bahia and Sergipe. The attacks claimed more than 600 lives and shocked a nation that, until then, had sought to preserve a precarious neutrality. The Uruguayan newspaper *La Crítica* famously referred to the tragedy as the "Brazilian Pearl Harbor", and the *New York Times* reported that "the city of Aracaju, capital of Sergipe, will be blacked out nightly, and any person on the streets after 11 p.m. will be arrested" ("City of Aracaju to Be Blacked Out", Aug. 25, 1942).

The torpedoings forced the Brazilian government to declare war on Germany and Italy on August 22, 1942, integrating the country more decisively into the Allied cause. Yet the immediate consequences of the conflict were not confined to diplomatic or military spheres. Across the Northeastern region, the war permeated daily life: rationing, curfews, and censorship altered routines; foreigners faced surveillance and arrests; and public spaces such as cafés, movie theaters, and beaches became arenas for the negotiation of fear, patriotism, and identity.

While the cities of Natal and Recife witnessed the arrival of thousands of American soldiers and the construction of strategic air bases, smaller capitals such as Aracaju experienced the war primarily through its echoes: espionage rumors, the sight of corpses washed ashore, and the propaganda campaigns orchestrated by the Estado Novo regime. These experiences

reveal the extent to which the war, despite its physical distance, infiltrated Brazilian society at multiple levels — political, emotional, and symbolic.

This paper seeks to interpret such phenomena by situating the Brazilian Northeast within broader historiographic debates about the World War II. It argues that the region's engagement with the conflict — through media representations, local initiatives, and popular reactions — exemplifies how global processes are reinterpreted in peripheral contexts. The study, therefore, contributes to ongoing efforts to "decenter" the narrative of the World War II, moving beyond Eurocentric and metropolitan perspectives to include the experiences of societies that, though geographically distant from the frontlines, were nonetheless deeply entangled in the global conflict.

Historiographic Background

The historiography of Brazil's participation in the World War II has traditionally focused on two primary fronts: the country's diplomatic alignment with the United States and the military involvement of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force (FEB) in Italy. Seminal works such as Frank McCann's *The Brazilian-American Alliance* and Francisco Ferraz's *Os brasileiros e a Segunda Guerra Mundial* examine the strategic and political aspects of Brazil's wartime policies. However, as historians have increasingly turned to social and cultural dimensions, new perspectives have emerged that illuminate how the war affected civilian life across the nation (Cytrynowicz; Schurster).

WORLD WAR IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL: EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
MAYNARD, D. C. S.

Research on the Brazilian Northeast has grown significantly since the 1990s, challenging earlier assumptions that the region remained marginal to wartime dynamics. Luiz Cruz's studies on U-boat activity along Bahia and Sergipe's coasts, for example, demonstrate the extent of German submarine operations and their consequences for local populations. Flávia de Sá Pedreira's work on the American base at Parnamirim Field, known as the "Trampoline to Victory", reveals how military installations reshaped urban and cultural life in Natal. Similarly, Antonio Silva Filho's research on Fortaleza highlights the social tensions and transformations brought by the presence of U.S. forces in Ceará.

The historiography concerning Sergipe, though smaller in scope, offers valuable insights into how peripheral states experienced the war. Dilton Maynard's analyses of Aracaju's daily life between 1942 and 1945 trace the interplay between state propaganda, urban leisure, and popular anxiety. The torpedoings off Sergipe's coast became a local trauma that crystallized collective memories of vulnerability and patriotism. Later works by Andreza Maynard and collaborators expanded this approach, investigating the intersections between cinema, radio, and moral regulation during wartime.

Beyond local case studies, the broader historiographic context invites a reflection on how historians conceptualize "home fronts" in regions outside the main theaters of war. As Peter Burke and Michel de Certeau have shown, cultural history and the study of everyday practices can illuminate the subtle ways in which individuals internalize and respond to global upheavals. Likewise, Carlo Ginzburg's microhistorical approach — with its focus on evidence, clues, and the exceptional within the ordinary — provides a

methodological framework for interpreting how war was experienced at the margins of official narratives.

In this sense, the study of the Brazilian Northeast during World War II contributes to both national and transnational historiographies. It not only reveals the adaptive strategies of communities confronted by sudden violence but also demonstrates how peripheral societies participate in global history. The region's experience underscores Eric Hobsbawm's observation that the "Age of Extremes" reshaped even those societies far removed from the central battlefields.

Sources and Methodology

This research is grounded in a critical reading of primary and secondary sources that document the experiences of Northeastern Brazil during the World War II. The investigation combines methods derived from social history, cultural history, and microhistory, seeking to connect individual and collective experiences with broader structural processes. By exploring how the war was lived, narrated, and reinterpreted at a local level, this study follows Carlo Ginzburg's principle of the *indizio* – the interpretive reading of traces that reveal the broader dynamics of historical experience (*The Cheese and the Worms*).

Sources

WORLD WAR IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL: EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
MAYNARD, D. C. S.

The primary corpus consists of printed, audiovisual, and oral sources. Periodicals published during the war years provide the richest material for understanding the circulation of information, the shaping of public opinion, and the dissemination of propaganda. Newspapers such as *Folha da Manhã*, *Correio de Aracaju*, *O Nordeste*, and *Diário Oficial do Estado de Sergipe* are central to this inquiry, as they capture both the immediacy of local reactions and the ways in which official discourse was refracted through regional sensibilities.

In addition to the local press, national and international newspapers — including *O Globo*, *Diário de Pernambuco*, *The New York Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Newsweek*, and *La Vanguardia* — are analyzed to trace how the Northeast was represented beyond its borders. These sources reveal the intersection of local narratives with global frameworks of meaning, illustrating how regional events were appropriated by the national and international media to construct a coherent picture of Brazil's wartime participation.

Official records, such as police reports, telegrams, and administrative correspondence, provide further evidence of the government's efforts to maintain order and control public perception. Among these are reports from the Department of Press and Propaganda (DIP) and the Departamento Estadual de Imprensa e Propaganda (DEIP), institutions that coordinated censorship and disseminated patriotic campaigns in line with the Estado Novo's authoritarian project. These documents allow for the reconstruction of how state apparatuses attempted to discipline emotions and to convert the shock of the torpedoings into a rallying cry for national unity.

Methodological Approach

The methodological foundation of this article is twofold: it combines a microhistorical perspective with the analytical tools of global history. The former enables a close reading of individual experiences and local records, while the latter situates these experiences within a network of transnational interactions. Jacques Revel's notion of *jeux d'échelles* – the "games of scale" between micro and macro levels – guides the interpretive movement between local events and global structures.

From an epistemological standpoint, the study rejects a deterministic or hierarchical view of historical causality. Instead, it adopts a relational framework that privileges the interaction between actors, institutions, and discourses. This approach resonates with Michel de Certeau's concept of the "arts of doing", which emphasizes the creative tactics through which individuals navigate structures of power (*The Practice of Everyday Life*). In this case, the residents of Aracaju, Estância, and other Northeastern towns are not treated merely as passive recipients of national propaganda, but as agents who interpreted and reworked wartime experiences according to their own logics and needs.

The use of press materials requires particular methodological caution. Following Tania de Luca's reflections on printed sources, newspapers are approached not as transparent windows onto public opinion but as cultural artefacts shaped by institutional routines, ideological constraints, and material conditions of production. Their content is analyzed through cross-

referencing, comparison, and contextualization rather than direct acceptance. This triangulation between different publications helps identify biases, omissions, and rhetorical strategies, revealing how the press simultaneously reflected and produced social reality.

Analytical Procedures

The analytical process involves three complementary levels:

1. **Descriptive Reconstruction:** Reconstructing the chronology of events — torpedoings, official responses, and public reactions — through corroborated documentary evidence.
2. **Discourse Analysis:** Identifying the recurrent tropes and metaphors that structured wartime representations, such as "foreign treason", "Christian heroism", and "national purification". This step reveals the moral economy that underpinned public narratives.
3. **Comparative Contextualization:** Situating the Brazilian Northeast within global and hemispheric frameworks, particularly the Allied propaganda of the "Good Neighbor Policy". By juxtaposing Brazilian sources with North American media, the study assesses how discourses of cooperation and modernization were internalized and adapted locally.

Throughout these procedures, the focus remains on the **interaction between local agency and global structures**. The study seeks to highlight how individuals in Northeastern Brazil made sense of an international conflict that was simultaneously distant and immediate, foreign and domestic.

The Torpedoings and Local Reactions

The series of submarine attacks carried out by *U-507* between August 15 and 17, 1942 marked a dramatic turning point in Brazil's wartime trajectory. The vessels *Baependy*, *Araraquara*, *Aníbal Benévolo*, *Itagiba*, and *Arará* were targeted in rapid succession along the coasts of Bahia and Sergipe. Among them, the *Baependy* carried the highest number of passengers – including families of military personnel – and suffered total loss of life. The unprecedented scale of destruction shocked the Brazilian public: in just three days, more people died than in all previous naval incidents since the outbreak of the war in 1939 (Sander 249).

The bodies of the victims soon began to wash ashore. Eyewitness reports from Estância and Aracaju described scenes of horror: bloated corpses, mutilated limbs, and unrecognizable remains deposited along the beaches. Local residents joined rescue efforts, burying victims in mass graves or attempting to identify bodies through personal belongings. Newspapers alternated between patriotic fervor and sensationalism, transforming tragedy into moral spectacle.

The *Correio de Aracaju* described how "the sea has returned our martyrs; their bodies bear the marks of barbarism" (*Correio de Aracaju*, 18 Aug. 1942, translated by the author). Such language linked local suffering to a global struggle between civilization and barbarity, echoing the rhetoric employed by Allied propaganda. The *Folha da Manhã* likewise published appeals for vigilance, urging citizens to "denounce suspicious foreigners and remain alert to fifth column activity".

WORLD WAR IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL: EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
MAYNARD, D. C. S.

Rumors proliferated that German spies operating in Bahia and Sergipe had signaled the submarines or transmitted information about shipping routes. These suspicions found fertile ground in a political environment shaped by the Estado Novo's authoritarian control and its discourse of national purification. As fear turned to anger, foreign residents — especially Italians, Germans, and even Portuguese — became targets of harassment, denunciation, and police scrutiny.

Police reports from 1942–43 indicate an increase in detentions and interrogations of foreign nationals accused of espionage. Many of these accusations were baseless, fueled by xenophobic hysteria and competition within local communities. Yet they reveal how wartime paranoia intersected with existing social hierarchies and tensions. Small traders, bakers, and craftsmen of European origin found themselves redefined as potential enemies.

At the same time, the local clergy and civil authorities organized religious ceremonies to honor the victims. Processions and collective funerals became ritualized responses to trauma, transforming fear into piety. The rhetoric of sacrifice dominated official speeches, portraying the dead as martyrs of the nation. This religious–patriotic discourse helped channel collective anguish into moral renewal, reinforcing the Estado Novo's image as the guardian of national unity.

In Aracaju, public spaces were transformed by the imposition of blackouts and curfews. The *New York Times* reported that "any person on the streets after 11 p.m. will be arrested", while municipal ordinances required that all lights be extinguished to prevent possible aerial or naval attacks. These

measures altered the rhythms of urban life, creating an atmosphere of suspense that blurred the boundaries between security policy and social discipline.

The fear of further attacks lingered well beyond 1942. In July 1943, the sinking of the *Bagé* off the coast of Sergipe revived public anxiety, while the destruction of the *Itapagé* in Alagoas a few months later confirmed that the threat persisted. Each incident reinforced the perception that the Northeast was not merely a passive observer of the war but a vulnerable frontier exposed to its violence.

The reaction of the population to these events reflects the intersection of emotion, politics, and cultural imagination. The torpedoings became a moral drama through which society articulated notions of belonging, loyalty, and enmity. The war thus penetrated not only material conditions but also symbolic structures – the narratives through which people made sense of catastrophe.

War, Society, and Everyday Life in the Northeast

While the torpedoings represented the most visible manifestation of the war's proximity, their repercussions extended deeply into everyday life. The conflict reconfigured patterns of consumption, sociability, and communication across the region.

Rationing, Scarcity, and Economic Pressure

Rationing systems, though inconsistently enforced, affected essential goods such as fuel, sugar, and coffee. The cost of living rose sharply, leading to public complaints recorded in newspapers and municipal reports. In Salvador, as Luana Moura Carvalho has noted, food shortages and price increase sparked tensions between workers and merchants. Similar conditions prevailed in Sergipe, where inflation eroded wages and provoked small-scale protests.

The federal government promoted patriotic campaigns encouraging citizens to "save for victory", urging women to substitute imported goods with domestic alternatives. These initiatives aligned with broader wartime propaganda that framed consumption as a moral duty. Scarcity became both an economic and a civic issue – a means through which the state mobilized its citizens for moral discipline.

Cultural Propaganda and Americanization

The United States' Good Neighbor Policy profoundly influenced cultural life in the Brazilian Northeast. Through the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA), Washington sought to cultivate hemispheric solidarity by disseminating films, radio programs and educational materials that glorified cooperation against fascism+.

In Recife and Fortaleza, American films dominated cinema screens, while local radio stations aired swing music and news from the Voice of America. In Aracaju, the recently established Rádio Aperipê broadcast

WORLD WAR IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL: EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
MAYNARD, D. C. S.

patriotic messages and popular songs that combined national pride with cosmopolitan rhythms. These media channels contributed to a subtle process of "Americanization", blending admiration for modernity with anxieties about cultural dependence.

The state-controlled Department of Press and Propaganda (DIP) coordinated these messages at the national level. Following the torpedoings, the DIP intensified its efforts to portray Brazil as a moral bastion against totalitarianism. Propaganda posters and newsreels celebrated the country's participation in the Allied cause, while the President's speeches invoked the unity of "faith and fatherland". The DIP's activities reveal how wartime communication served not only external diplomacy but also internal legitimacy.

Public Morality and Gender Roles

The war also reshaped gender relations and moral codes. The mobilization of men for military service and civil defense created spaces of autonomy and anxiety for women. In urban centers, female participation in voluntary organizations such as the Brazilian Red Cross expanded. However, public discourse simultaneously reinforced conservative ideals of femininity, urging women to embody the virtues of sacrifice and domestic patriotism.

Nightlife, in particular, became a site of moral regulation. Authorities targeted bars, dance halls, and cabarets as potential threats to public decency, associating them with disorder and immorality. Police reports from Aracaju mention raids on establishments suspected of harboring prostitutes

or "unpatriotic activities". Such moral campaigns reflected broader attempts to domesticate leisure and control urban spaces in the name of wartime vigilance.

Everyday Emotions and Collective Behavior

At the emotional level, the war generated both fear and fascination. For many Northeasterners, it represented their first direct encounter with global events, mediated through newspapers, films, and rumors. Children played games imitating soldiers and submarines; families gathered around the radio for news from Europe. The sense of participation in a worldwide struggle endowed ordinary life with new significance.

The result was a complex interplay between compliance and creativity. While official propaganda sought to impose a uniform narrative of unity, everyday practices revealed a diversity of interpretations. Some individuals expressed genuine patriotism; others exploited wartime shortages for personal gain. Acts of resistance – from mocking propaganda slogans to illicit trade – illustrated the limits of state control.

Comparative Dimensions

When viewed comparatively, Northeastern Brazil shared certain features with other peripheral war zones, such as the Caribbean or West Africa, where local populations experienced global conflict primarily through economic and cultural disruptions rather than direct combat. In all these

cases, the war served as a catalyst for modernization, state expansion, and the negotiation of new social identities.

The Northeast's experience thus transcends national history. It illustrates how world wars function as laboratories of social transformation, revealing the capacity of local societies to absorb, reinterpret, and reconfigure external pressures. The "Brazilian Pearl Harbor" becomes, in this sense, both a regional tragedy and a microcosm of global modernity.

Political Uses of the War

The Estado Novo dictatorship (1937–1945), led by Getúlio Vargas, swiftly appropriated the 1942 torpedoings for political purposes. The attacks provided the regime with an opportunity to consolidate its legitimacy, portraying itself as the defender of the nation against external aggression. The official narrative framed the submarine attacks as a moral test of patriotism and unity. Vargas's government mobilized the discourse of "national sacrifice", merging Catholic imagery with authoritarian nationalism.

Through the Department of Press and Propaganda (DIP), the government orchestrated a campaign that combined censorship, information control, and moral persuasion. Newspapers were instructed to emphasize national solidarity and to suppress panic. Reports of looting, dissent, or criticism of official responses were systematically edited out. The DIP's circulars encouraged journalists to frame the tragedy within the rhetoric of civilization versus barbarism – a trope that resonated both with

WORLD WAR IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL: EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
MAYNARD, D. C. S.

Allied propaganda and with the Estado Novo's own ideological framework (Schurster 85).

Public ceremonies served as theatrical manifestations of this political appropriation. Masses were celebrated for the souls of the "martyrs of the sea", attended by government officials, clergy, and the military. Speeches linked the torpedoings to Brazil's destiny as a "Christian and civilized nation". The war thus became a stage upon which the Estado Novo enacted its political theology – fusing religious devotion with authoritarian loyalty.

At the same time, the government used the war effort to justify policies of centralization and surveillance. Emergency measures allowed for increased police powers and the restriction of civil liberties. Foreign nationals, particularly those of Axis descent, were placed under observation or detained. Many faced property confiscation or deportation. In practice, these measures extended the state's reach into everyday life, reinforcing the apparatus of control that characterized Vargas's regime.

Nevertheless, the war also introduced contradictions into the Estado Novo's political order. Brazil's alignment with the Allied democracies required the regime to adopt the language of freedom and democracy in its international relations, even as it maintained domestic authoritarianism. The tension between external diplomacy and internal repression would eventually contribute to the regime's downfall in 1945.

For the Northeast, the war's political uses manifested themselves in the promise of modernization. The construction of landing fields, telecommunication networks, and roads – justified by military necessity – became symbols of progress. In Natal and Recife, American engineers and

WORLD WAR IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL: EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
MAYNARD, D. C. S.

Brazilian officials collaborated on infrastructure projects that transformed the urban landscape. Though Sergipe lacked a comparable level of investment, it benefited from improved transport and communication systems, which would later support postwar development initiatives.

These changes illustrate how war operates as a catalyst for both control and transformation. It provided the Estado Novo with a narrative of unity, but also exposed the fragility of that unity in the face of regional inequalities. The government's use of the torpedoings as propaganda thus reveals a dual dynamic: consolidation of power through emotional mobilization, and the unintentional creation of new social and political expectations among the populace.

Conclusions

The "Brazilian Pearl Harbor" of August 1942 transformed the Brazilian Northeast from a peripheral region into a symbolic front of World War II. The attacks off the coasts of Bahia and Sergipe were not merely episodes of maritime warfare; they were events that redefined collective memory, identity, and governance. Through the convergence of fear, propaganda, and everyday adaptation, the war permeated every aspect of life in the region.

The evidence presented here demonstrates that the conflict's local impact cannot be reduced to military or diplomatic factors. Instead, it must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that reshaped social practices, moral values, and political relations. The war produced a

WORLD WAR IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL: EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
MAYNARD, D. C. S.

distinctive configuration of emotions and discourses — fear of invasion, suspicion of foreigners, faith in divine protection, and loyalty to the state — that structured both personal behavior and collective representation.

By employing a microhistorical approach, this study highlights how global conflicts acquire meaning through local mediation. The experiences of Aracaju, Estância, and other Northeastern towns reveal the interplay between structural forces and human agency, between propaganda and interpretation. The war was not simply imposed from above; it was lived and reinvented from below, through the daily practices of ordinary people.

Moreover, the Northeast's wartime experience contributes to global discussions on the "home front" as a space of social negotiation. Similar to other peripheral regions — from the Caribbean to sub-Saharan Africa — Northeastern Brazil functioned as a site where the global met the local, and where modernity and tradition collided. The torpedoings catalyzed transformations that extended far beyond 1945: the expansion of state presence, the redefinition of gender roles, and the creation of new moral and political identities.

Ultimately, the study suggests that war, even when distant, leaves deep imprints on societies. The violence of the *U-507* reverberated through decades of memory, shaping how communities remembered suffering and reconstructed their sense of belonging. The Northeast's engagement with the World War II challenges conventional hierarchies of historical importance, demonstrating that peripheral experiences are central to understanding the global nature of twentieth-century warfare.

WORLD WAR IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL: EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
MAYNARD, D. C. S.

The "Brazilian Pearl Harbor" remains both a local tragedy and a lens through which is possible to view the processes of national integration, authoritarian control, and cultural adaptation. It stands as a reminder that the history of the war cannot be written solely from the vantage points of great powers, but must also include the voices of those who lived its echoes on distant shores.

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WORLD WAR IN NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL: EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION
MAYNARD, D. C. S.

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