

## *The Brazilian Army and the Political Instrumentalization of Memory*

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### ABSTRACT

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The involvement of high-ranking military personnel in Brazil's politics has become common, especially after Jair Bolsonaro's election as a former army captain. Their political statements often reference the 1960s-1980s authoritarian military regime, keeping the dictatorship's memory alive in debates. Using sources like the *Military Club Magazine*, this article explores the Brazilian Army's narrative on the dictatorship, the movement to preserve its memory, and its political use by officers outside military headquarters in the past decade.

**Keywords:** memory disputes, military in politics, civil-military dictatorship, Brazilian Army.

A presença de oficiais militares de alta patente na política brasileira tornou-se comum, especialmente após a eleição de Jair Bolsonaro, ex-capitão do exército. Suas manifestações políticas frequentemente fazem referência ao regime autoritário das décadas de 1960-1980, mantendo viva a memória da ditadura nos debates. A partir de fontes como a *Revista do Clube Militar*, este artigo explora a narrativa do Exército sobre a ditadura, o movimento de preservação dessa memória e seu uso político por oficiais fora do quartel-general na última década.

**Palavras-chave:** disputas de memória, militares na política, ditadura civil-militar, Exército Brasileiro.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present the construction of memory about the Brazilian military dictatorship by the Armed Forces in the post-democratization period. Based on an analysis of the Military Club magazines, we found that the Army developed its own narrative of authoritarian events, which stands out for its consistency and offers minimal room for internal contestation. There is also intense questioning of how the history of the military governments is portrayed in school and university teaching, showing a certain frustration in the dispute over memory. We observed an assumption on the part of the military that the Workers' Party would be a serious threat because it represented the rise of former opponents to institutional power. Finally, the sources showed us that the military already had the narrative and discourse of memory necessary to legitimize the election of Jair Bolsonaro and the return of military officers to institutional politics in 2019. We opted for an inductive analysis as the method for this work, since the Military Club Magazine, founded in 1926, covers subjects of interest to the Brazilian Army, which allows us to observe the subjects that the barracks consider to be relevant and how they are dealt with. It is important to note that although the Military Club is not an entity directly linked to the Army, its magazine serves as a vehicle for the active and reserve military, defending their interests and national interests. Both the columns signed by officers and the articles reproduced from major media outlets represent the Clube Militar's position on the political conduct of the country, as pointed out in the editorial of the magazine No. 445 of 2012:

Readers will, as always, have at their disposal a variety of articles dealing with current affairs linked to the different fields of power. Through its Editorial Board, the Military Club Magazine seeks to select the most comprehensive works that are in line with the principles that guide the basic line of thought deemed appropriate to the political-institutional moment that the Brazilian nation is going through and the international context in which it is inserted. (Editorial 2012, 2)

In the editorial of issue 448, 2013, it points out that the Club acts as a forum for ideas for members, military and civilian, as well as their guests. The purpose is to address issues considered to be of national interest. The editorial highlights the inauguration of a debate space dedicated to university youth. This space aimed to provide an opportunity for these young people to get closer to knowing the true historical facts, which are supposedly omitted from schools and the media (Editorial 2013, 2).

Thus, the period from 2009 to 2019, covered by this analysis, is significant for understanding the construction of the military narrative about the dictatorship.

During this interval, there were changes in perspective regarding the treatment of the authoritarian legacy, with Jair Bolsonaro's highly militarized government standing out. The choice of ten editions of the Military Club magazine as a sample allowed us to illustrate how the Army shaped its memory, covering commemorations of March 31, 1964, and tributes to military governments. The editions selected include commemorations and tributes to the coup and military governments, covering part of the terms of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Dilma Rousseff, Michel Temer, and the beginning of Jair Bolsonaro's government. This period also coincides with the implementation of the Workers' Party's memory policies, including the National Truth Commission (2012-2014), as well as the subsequent interruption and destruction of institutional memory and reparation mechanisms under Temer and Bolsonaro.

We focused specifically on articles related to the military governments of 1964 to 1985, analyzing thematic content, argumentative strategies, and the construction of memory. The magazine's editions, distributed among active and reserve military personnel and their families, include articles signed by military officers, journalists, and politicians, as well as reproductions of newspaper articles aligned with the principles considered appropriate to the political-institutional context. Prominent figures from the Brazilian far right, such as Rodrigo Constantino and Olavo de Carvalho, are featured in the reproductions. The analysis of the selected editions of the Military Club magazine made it possible to understand how the Brazilian military structures its narratives about memory and how these narratives are mobilized internally. The research focused exclusively on sources produced by members of the Army, excluding the Navy and Air Force due to the greater political activism of the Army military.

Finally, this paper is structured into five sections to cover the main themes observed in the sources. The first section deals with a brief contextualization of the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Brazil, considering examples from other South American countries, and arriving at the issue of amnesty and its consequences on the Brazilian political scene. Next, we present how the Brazilian Army military developed its justifications for the military intervention and deposition of President João Goulart in 1964. The third section covers an understanding of the dispute over memory in which the military perceive themselves to be disadvantaged in relation to the "version of the defeated". The fourth section addresses a supposed threat to political morality represented by the Workers' Party (PT) in the presidency of the Republic, as well as the fear of potential "revanchism" by former opponents. In the fifth and final section, we discuss the presence and actions of the military during the government of former army captain Jair Bolsonaro.

## Political transition to democracy: implications of amnesty in the post-dictatorship scenario

How the "oppressors" narrative is operationalized, even in democracies, is directly related to how the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule occurred (Wasserman 2016). A tutored, controlled, and negotiated transition, as was the case in Brazil, allows dictatorial political forces to remain active and relevant even in democratically elected governments. Brazil's 1979 Amnesty Law (enacted six years before the end of military rule) allowed the military to influence public policy decision-making processes and government policies even after the end of the dictatorship, including exercising veto power (D'aráujo 2012, 573–597). Thus, dissident narratives about the recent past face greater obstacles in overcoming local barriers and reaching public understanding. In addition, under the influence of the remaining actors and heirs of authoritarianism, there are limitations in the process of accessing the memory of the resistance, of those politically affected, and even of the repression itself (Abreu Silva 2021b).

On the other hand, countries that have undergone transitions by rupture have found more fertile ground for the voices of the oppressed immediately after the end of dictatorial rule, although the battle of memories is just as intense and contested. A well-known example of a transition by rupture is the case of Argentina, which, after the crisis caused by the Falklands War, witnessed the end of the dictatorship and the civilian government of Raúl Alfonsín revoking the military's self-amnesty, promoting judicial trials of high-ranking officials and creating the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP). However, as it was still a highly disputed issue, the next president, Carlos Menem, promoted a new amnesty, pardoning all military personnel and guerrillas. In a new twist to this battle, in the 2000s, the Argentine Supreme Court declared the amnesty laws unconstitutional. Hundreds of trials have been held since the early 1980s, mobilizing collective memory in a country that is still deeply polarized.

Similarly to Brazil, other Latin American countries were reluctant to initiate policies to deal with the legacy of authoritarianism. Even after the 1988 plebiscite, in which the population voted to not extend Augusto Pinochet's rule in Chile, the general remained supreme commander of the Armed Forces and a senator for life, not only influencing but also retaining decision-making power. The country's amnesty law was enacted ten years before the end of Pinochet's term and, due to the immunity of high-ranking officials, the Chilean transitional justice process was permeated by negotiations and ruptures. Similarly, in Uruguay, the transition was a process of negotiation that also included an amnesty law in 1984 for the agents of repression who obeyed orders. Although the Peace Commission was created in 1985, the following year the Law on the Expiration of the State's Punitive

Intentions was passed, further restricting investigations into human rights violations (Wasserman 2016).

Controlled, negotiated, and tutored transitions hinder transitional justice processes and, therefore, accountability for authoritarian pasts. In the same way, they impact memory disputes in which winners and losers seek to promote their narratives. Officially, the transition in Brazil lasted eleven years - from 1974 to 1985, considering the end of the dictatorship with the beginning of José Sarney's civilian government (Bauer 2016). The openness project was drawn up by the government's top echelon, made up of President General Humberto Geisel, minister Petrônio Portela, and General Golbery do Couto e Silva, who had been head of the National Intelligence Service (SNI). These military officers were considered moderate and open to the idea of transition, unlike the "hardline" wing, which expected a hardening of the regime (Silva 2007). The transition was deliberately delayed so that it could be controlled to avoid disturbances and, above all, the accountability and punishment of public officials involved in the repression (Fico 2012).

At the end of the 1970s, with the process of opening up underway, segments of society began to demand amnesty. The campaign for amnesty began as a women's movement with the Women's Movement for Amnesty (MFPA) across the country - which later gave way to the Brazilian Committees for Amnesty (CBA) with the slogan "amnesty broad, general and unrestricted" to include all those politically persecuted and others. However, the dictatorship appropriated the campaign to ensure that the amnesty served its interests (Fico 2010), realizing that civil society demonstrations could put pressure on and even overcome military control (Silva 2007). As a result, after three months in office, President General João Figueiredo sent a political amnesty bill to Congress. Throughout the drafting and voting process, the narrative of "national reconciliation" was present from the very first meetings and set the tone for the letter of the law (Fernandes 2013).

Finally, the 1979 Amnesty Law granted amnesty to activists who committed political crimes - except for those convicted of terrorism, kidnapping, and assault, as these were considered by the dictatorial government to be crimes against humanity. Purposely worded ambiguously, the law also granted amnesty to those who committed "related crimes" to political crimes, associating this section with the interpretation that the violations committed by agents of repression occurred to inhibit subversive (political) practices, so the violations would also be crimes related to political ones. Thus, all public agents with any degree of involvement in human rights violations were granted collective amnesty. This is a type of general amnesty that ends up provoking a feeling of impunity because it is collective without submission to the individual since the perpetrators do not individually take responsibility for their actions (Daly, Sarkin 2007).

Since it was proposed, the Amnesty Law has taken on a form not only of reconciliation but also of forgetting. To maintain control over both the process and the amnesty narrative, the military government appropriated the discourse mobilized by opposition sectors: it would be an instrument for the "pacification of the Brazilian family". However, by associating amnesty with the reconciliation of polarized families and forgetting so as not to create further conflicts, as President General Figueiredo himself emphasized in his message to the National Congress, the government would avoid traumatizing society "with the knowledge of facts that must be buried in the name of peace" (1982). He was referring to the ongoing cases of those imprisoned for terrorism, which would be halted (but not amnestied), and not to any "events" committed by the agents of repression. Thus, after the law was passed, any initiatives to break the imposed silence were labeled as revanchism (Rodeghero 2012). In the adjustments to the narratives, the understanding was formed that amnesty for the torturers had been the price to pay for the approval of the law (FICO 2010). The Amnesty Law in Brazil was, therefore, a social demand imprisoned by the military government in the face of the great mobilization generated and, for this reason, dictated its composition in order to meet its interests in maintaining its prerogatives.

Amnesty and its consequences are a tangent in the articles of the Military Club magazine, which deal with issues related to the dictatorship, but especially with the potential dangers of what they call "revenge". In No. 432 of 2009, General Leônidas Pires Gonçalves, Minister of the Army during the first civilian government after the end of the dictatorship in 1985, is asked in an interview what his opinion would be on the attempts by members of President Lula da Silva's second government to hold public officials accountable and bring them to justice for their crimes. The general replied that this would be "revanchist blindness":

Amnesty has buried any further discussion on the subject and there is no room for revisionism for basic reasons: it is a final legal act; it has made national pacification possible; it consolidates democratic improvement and, above all, it leads all good Brazilians to think, together and in solidarity, about the future of greatness for the country<sup>1</sup>.

In the same interview, we can find examples of the maintenance of political power and negotiating strategies in the transition to remain relevant to the military. The general describes his role on the night of the death of president-elect Tancredo Neves. He would have suggested that José Sarney, the vice-president-elect, be sworn in, based on articles 76 and 77 of the 1969 Constitution. He positioned

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<sup>1</sup> Entrevista Concedida pelo General-de-Exército Leonidas Pires Gonçalves, à Revista do Clube Militar, Revista do Clube Militar, n. 432, p. 8–11, 2009, p. 10.

himself with the natural authority to make this decision: "My argument was accepted immediately, without any reaction. It seemed that everyone wanted someone, with argument and firmness, to decide the impasse"<sup>2</sup>. The general assumed the post of Minister of the Army in the first civilian mandate, after 21 years of military rule, in 1985. During the interview, he points out that at the time he identified a complex and difficult situation in the country, which would require some changes of direction for the Army. He therefore outlined three fronts for action, which he called political-institutional, professional-military, and administrative.

The political-institutional front referred to the active participation of the Armed Forces in the National Constituent Assembly so that "vital issues" for the institution could be preserved and defended. On this front, there was also an interest in safeguarding the Army's image and prestige "by valuing its role in the transition and neutralizing possible manifestations of revenge". The professional-military front aimed to modernize and professionalize the officers, seeking to meet operational criteria, distance itself "with opportunity" from the country's political decisions, and, finally, boost the military's self-esteem, which was shaken after losing prestige in society. On the administrative front, the aim was to obtain resources to restructure the army.

Regarding the political-institutional front, General Leônidas mentions the parliamentary consultancy formed by the military during the Constituent Assembly, with active participation, including preparing and sending a document to the legislators with the military's interests in the Constitution. He also mentions his efforts to safeguard the Army's interests among the political leaders of the time, as well as "neutralizing the rare intentions of revanchism that were attempted". In an interview with journalist Luiz Maklouf Carvalho years later, the general said that he was personally involved in the debate over the creation of Article 142 of the 1988 Constitution<sup>3</sup>. He felt he was a "great contributor to the Constituent Assembly" and shared the interpretation of conservative jurist Ives Gandra Martins that the article "places the Armed Forces as the moderating power of the nation" (Carvalho 2017). As for the professional-military and administrative fronts, according to him, they have also been successful, with the creation of courses and schools and curriculum reform, as well as the raising of a billion dollars in resources over budget.

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<sup>2</sup> Entrevista Concedida pelo General-de-Exército Leonidas Pires Gonçalves..., 9.

<sup>3</sup> The Armed Forces, consisting of the Navy, the Army, and the Air Force, are permanent and regular national institutions, organized based on hierarchy and discipline, under the supreme authority of the President of the Republic, and are intended for the defense of the Homeland, the guarantee of constitutional powers and, at the initiative of any of them, law and order.



This influence of the military during the formulation of the new constitution would not have been possible without the guarantee of the Amnesty Law. As we can see in issue no. 440, in which lawyer Almir Pazzianotto Pinto interprets the bill as proof of the military's commitment to restoring the democratic rule of law. In addition, the amnesty, as it had been drafted, was intended to pacify the nation, traumatized since its division in 1964: "In this circumstance, an attempt was made to erase the past, exempting civilian and military defendants, subversives and torturers from guilt and serving sentences" (Pinto 2011).



Figure 1: Clipping of a reading recommendation page from the Military Club magazine, *Military Club magazine*, issue 456, p. 38, 2015.

In this way, the amnesty granted was presented as a kind of conciliation pact whereby it would be necessary to "turn the page" on the past, to forget it, to move forward. The idea of a pact concluded by two parties, as if these supposedly two sides were in equal negotiating positions, is continually brought up in every attempt to discuss the validity of the law. For example, in 2010, amid advances in memory policies led by the Workers' Party (PT), the Federal Supreme Court ruled on the constitutionality of the Amnesty Law in a case brought by the Brazilian Bar Association, using the argument that the law had resulted from a political pact. The reporting judge, Eros Grau, himself a former politically persecuted person, argued that there had been an agreement signed after the amnesty campaign and



that the law represented the construction of this pact. In his interpretation, the transition to democracy was "conciliated, smooth due to certain commitments" and the revision of the Amnesty Law would be an attempt to "rewrite, to reconstruct history"<sup>4</sup>.

In the following years, the supposedly veiled amnesty pact was transformed into a tacit agreement between the Armed Forces and the civilian governments. The military maintained its political influence behind the scenes, guaranteed by the controlled transition. With their prerogatives preserved during the New Republic, there was a tacit understanding that the military could provoke a new institutional rupture if pressured or in any way attacked. For this reason, the civilian governments adopted a stance of inertia concerning holding to account and punishing the military agents who committed human rights violations during the dictatorship. The tone of reconciliation dictated the practices and speeches of the civilians in power, and transitional justice measures emphasized the right to reparation, while justice took a back seat. In this context, the Amnesty Law has become a kind of guaranteeing limit to this agreement: as well as making it impossible to seek justice, any about memory and truth also legally comes up against the limits of the law.

### **Communism and hierarchy: the construction of justifications for the military coup of 1964**

The military's memory of 1964 follows a script in which the arguments are repeated almost *ipsis litteris*: an ongoing communist threat, breaches of hierarchy and discipline within the Armed Forces, and a social outcry for intervention. Below we will present some articles from the Military Club's magazines that deal with these points, defended as justifications for the military's intervention in the government of then president João Goulart.

In issue 432 of 2009, General Clovis Purper Bandeira, vice-president of the Military Club, tells the new officers about the "historical truth" of the events related to the Democratic Movement of March 31, 1964 (Bandeira, 2009). The very first paragraph highlights a supposed distortion of the facts in order to reinforce political positions that would have been defeated in 1964. It then reiterates the myths surrounding the founding of the military government, arguing that democracy was threatened and that the Armed Forces responded to popular clamor to avoid imminent danger to the country.

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<sup>4</sup> BRASIL; SUPREMO TRIBUNAL FEDERAL, Arguição de descumprimento de preceito fundamental n. 153/DF. Arguente: Conselho Federal da Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil. Arguidos: Presidente da República e Congresso Nacional. Relator: Ministro Eros Grau.

The general highlights three events that led the Armed Forces to intervene in politics: the *Central do Brasil* Rally, the Sailors' Revolt at the Metalworkers' Union, and João Goulart's meeting with sergeants at the *Automóvel Clube* in Rio de Janeiro. These were events in which the "leftists" allegedly recruited civilians and military personnel, threatened those who opposed the "pro-communist changes" and pointed to the unions as the centers of left-wing agitation and propaganda. Thus, the country was immersed in an insurrection with the economy and politics paralyzed. The general describes the rally and the meetings of low-ranking military personnel with President Goulart as a "riot" and a "shambles" and accuses the military's chain of command at the time of being "dominated by leftist ideas", as well as social movements, political parties and the press, which were "infiltrated" and "rigged" by leftists.

However, the communist threat is not the only concern mentioned. According to this interpretation, the Armed Forces were deeply affected in terms of their values of hierarchy and discipline. The creation of soldiers' unions, such as the Association of Corporals, Sailors, and Marines, which led the revolt in the Metalworkers' Union, represented, according to the general, an attack on military hierarchy and discipline that demanded a reaction from the conscious military. From this perspective, the presence of President João Goulart at the Armed Forces sergeants' event is seen as evidence of a tactic to divide and weaken the military by separating them into officers and non-commissioned officers, since they were the "last bastion standing against the communization of the country". Thus, the idea of "counter-revolution" is affirmed by the belief that there was a unionist and communist coup in progress, and the Armed Forces had fulfilled their role and safeguarded the nation.

Also in the same edition, Aristóteles Drummond, journalist and politician, outlines the military's version not only about the coup but also about the entire dictatorial period (Drummond 2009). Drummond argues that, although it was an authoritarian time, it cannot be categorized as a dictatorship per se, because, according to him, Parliament was composed of diverse tendencies, including the opposition. He highlights the victory of the opposition Brazilian Democratic Movement party in 1974 for the Senate as an example of what would not have been possible if the country had been under a dictatorship. Drummond then praises the achievements of the military governments, which were responsible for the greatness of the Brazilian nation. He points out that re-democratization was the initiative of President General João Figueiredo, with the "support of a responsible opposition". Regarding amnesty, he claims that the law passed was more generous than the one proposed by the opposition, forgiving even "blood crimes".

For the author, during the dictatorship, there was a "responsible opposition" and another that acted "boldly and financed by international

communism", in which communist leaders influenced a "disoriented youth". Drummond also criticizes current historiography, accusing "radical left-wing revolutionaries" of slandering and defaming the military. He maintains that the "historical truth" will survive and that the slander of the Armed Forces has not been accepted by the population. The author also criticizes the politically persecuted who are seeking reparations via amnesty, which he believes would be an affront to the victims' families.

Continuing his discourse on the memory of the military, Drummond repeats General Clóvis Bandeira's argument, stating that the seizure of power in 1964 saved Brazil from communist chaos thanks to the prayers of the "mothers" during the Marches of the Family with God for Freedom, which took place between March and June 1964 in a "peaceful and polite" popular mobilization. The author concludes the article by criticizing the "exaggerations of revanchism" and stressing that the "spirit of '64 lives on".

In the same issue, Colonel Hiram de Freitas Câmara takes a detailed overview of the career of Marshal Castello Branco, emphasizing his role as the first military president of the regime that began in 1964 (CÂMARA 2009). The author repeats the arguments mentioned above to reinforce the supposed communist coup in progress, highlighting key events such as the Rally at *Central do Brasil*, the meeting at the Metalworkers' Union, and the meeting of the squares with President João Goulart at the *Automóvel Clube*. The author argues that there was a clamor from society for the intervention of the Armed Forces represented by the Marches for Freedom for God and the Family. In addition, there was support from the National Congress for the "March 31st movement", represented by the indirect election of Castello Branco in which the marshal received 361 votes - in addition to 109 abstentions and absences.

The contribution by Colonel Pedro Figueira dos Santos covers the celebration of the 45th anniversary of the "Democratic Revolution of March 31", held at the Military Club headquarters (Santos 2009, 25). During the official event, organized by the presidents of the Military, Naval, and Aeronautics Clubs, together with the Institute of Geography and Military History of Brazil (IGHMB), commemorative plaques were unveiled at the Clubs' headquarters. These plaques bear the names of the people who would have lost their lives in clashes with guerrillas, being recognized as the "victims of terrorism, immolated in the faithful performance of duty" while trying to prevent the "insane project of seizing power" by "senseless terrorists".

Before handing out the plaques, the president of the Military Club, General Gilberto Barbosa de Figueiredo, addressed those present, speaking about the role of the Armed Forces as a barrier against the communist revolutionary movement. He said that the "civic-military cycle of 1964" would have come to an end after

President General Costa e Silva's term in 1969 if it hadn't been for the explosion of communist violence, which foolishly delayed "the restoration of full democracy in the country".



Figure 2: Clipping from the tribute page to those who were allegedly killed as victims of terrorists during the military dictatorship, *Military Club magazine*, issue 432, p. 2, 2009.

In the celebratory edition of 2014, in the article "The Communist Attempt of 1961-1964: Background to the Democratic Revolution of 1964," (Coutinho 2014) General Sérgio Augusto de Avelar Coutinho presents his interpretation of the events, highlighting two ongoing threats: a nationalist-populist coup led by President Goulart with the support of Leonel Brizola, and a communist revolution promoted by Luiz Carlos Prestes and the PCB. Coutinho points out that indiscipline and the breakdown of hierarchy among sergeants and marines once again emerged as relevant factors for the mobilization of officers in 1964. These elements are considered fundamental in the narrative about the background to the "Democratic Revolution of 1964", indicating the military's concern for stability and internal order in the face of perceived threats.

In "Military Regime: the period between 1964 and 1985", General Luiz Eduardo Rocha Paiva characterizes the military governments as a regime of exception in which the President Generals recognized the need for redemocratization (Paiva 2015). However, even if there was authoritarianism, limiting democratic freedoms, the regime would not be totalitarian, as it did not eliminate them completely. To illustrate this, the author mentions the existence of the opposition party, the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), which had space in the media and demanded: "democracy now". The general argues that the regime was not totalitarian, citing cultural manifestations such as protest songs, newspapers critical of the government, and artistic manifestations that, in his

interpretation, freely criticized the military administration. However, he acknowledges the presence of censorship in various cultural sectors, such as newspapers, theaters, and record labels.

When addressing the government's reaction to the armed struggle movements, Rocha Paiva considers it hypocritical to condemn the military governments for their "excesses" in this response. He concludes that the revolutionary left had merely changed its method, abandoning the armed struggle to rise by electoral means. The general therefore defends the need to remain vigilant and willing to fight and defeat these groups with the necessary legal means.

### **Contested Memory: the perspective of the military and the dispute over the post-1964 historical narrative in Brazil**

The dispute over memories of the dictatorship became a cause for concern at the beginning of re-democratization. In 1987, General Tamoyo Pereira das Neves, commander of the Army Information Center (CIE), expressed concern in his monthly report about the lack of knowledge among young officers about the facts that led to the "intervention of the Armed Forces in 1964, in response to the wishes of society" (Godoy 2021). He indicated "constant clarification" through lectures, speeches, and talks at events such as cadet graduations to mitigate the "deleterious effects of distorted historical interpretations". These distorted interpretations were allegedly drawn up by the "defeated in the March 31 Revolution", who wanted to dishonor the military intervention (Ibidem). In the same year, the CIE prepared a book to challenge the report "Brazil: Never Again" (ARQUIDIOCESE DE SÃO PAULO 1985), from the perspective of the military during the dictatorship. Organized by General Agnaldo Del Nero Augusto, Lieutenant Colonel Lício Maciel, and Lieutenant José Conegundes, the book "Orvil - Tentativa de Tomada do Poder"<sup>5</sup> was vetoed by the Minister of the Army, General Leônidas Pires Gonçalves.

Years later, under the civilian government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a former political prisoner exiled during the dictatorship, army reserve officers began to move to create the group "*Terrorismo Nunca Mais*" (Terrorism Never Again) within the Military Club's premises - the name refers to the opposition to the group "*Tortura Nunca Mais*" (Torture Never Again), composed of former political persecuted and family members of dead and disappeared political

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<sup>5</sup> Orvil (the Portuguese word for "book" written backward) was a book produced by a group of ultraconservative military officers between 1986 and 1989 to revise the narrative of the *Brasil Nunca Mais* (Never Again) project, which denounced the crimes committed by the military during the dictatorship.

prisoners. At the same period, in 1996, another like-minded group, *Estácio de Sá*, took over the presidency of the Military Club under the leadership of General Hélio Ibiapina de Lima. At the helm of the organization, they began a work of memory in the Military Club Magazine to propagate the military's memory of the dictatorship (Santos 2018). The then Minister of the Army, General Zenildo de Lucena, sent a letter in support of the effort to publicize the military's version: "My suggestion is that the members of the Military Club, particularly our Reserve officers, take to heart the task of pointing out the authors and to the press the distortions, whether intentional or not" (Santos 2018). The previous year, the same general had appointed General Tamoyo Pereira das Neves as an advisor to Justice Minister Nelson Jobim. At the Ministry of Justice, he was appointed to coordinate with the military the bill that would become the Law on the Dead and Disappeared (No. 9.140/1995) and the Special Commission on Political Dead and Disappeared (CEMDP). In addition to political coordination, General Neves allegedly helped the minister "improve" the final draft of the law proposed by Chief of Staff José Gregori (Abreu Silva 2021a).

In his letter to the president of the Military Club, General Zenildo Lucena stated that the books were presenting partial versions of reality, showing only negative aspects. Therefore, the club's position in propagating the institutional version of the facts from 1964 to 1985 would be an "important contribution to re-establishing the historical truth" (Santos 2018). Three years later, the Army began an oral history project in which military personnel and civilians testified about the period of authoritarian rule. They emphasize points that remain in the official discourse that the seizure of power in 1964 was an intervention provoked by society to rid Brazil of imminent communism. This institutional discourse permeates the Armed Forces and remains present both in their speeches and in their publications, especially in the Military Club Magazine.

Along with the arguments about the background and motivators of the coup, the military emphasized a supposed "corruption of history" in which the version of the left-wing groups "defeated in 1964" would be present in schools and universities, as well as in the media. As we can note from General Clovis Purper Bandeira's statement in issue 432 of 2009:

You, New Comrade, were not born at that time and you have certainly heard many stories about those events, most of which, unfortunately, do not correspond to the historical truth and constitute a distorted retelling of the facts, with the aim of confirming, under a false cloak of pretended veracity, the political positions and convictions of those defeated in 1964. (Bandeira 2009, 5)

In issue 452 of 2014, in "By way of introduction," General Pedro Luiz de Araujo Braga strongly criticizes the press for disseminating terms such as "military



dictatorship," which are wrongly attributed to the period when the generals were in charge of the country (Braga 2014). He argues that those who label this period as a dictatorship do so out of pure ignorance, attributing it to the supposed "low cultural level of the Brazilian people". He also justifies the military's intervention as a necessary counter-revolution to contain the "galloping advance of communism", arguing that only through this intervention would it have been possible to guarantee the stability necessary for the country's development.

Another crucial point addressed in military publications about the period is the preservation of essential military values, which, according to the general, were under threat. Discipline and hierarchy were said to have been "attacked" by the sergeants' revolt, by the officers' meeting with President Goulart at the *Automóvel Clube*, and by the sailors' revolt. Finally, the general emphasizes: that Army of the past is the same Army of today. This continuity in the values and principles adopted by the Army is frequently mentioned by the officers in the magazine.



Figure 3: Cover of the reprint of the issue commemorating the 55th anniversary of the "Democratic Movement of March 31, 1964", *Military Club magazine*, issue 452, 2014.



In issue 452 of 2014, Heitor de Paola, a conservative writer associated with Olavo de Carvalho's circle, shares his version of the events leading up to the coup, aligning himself with the military's interpretation. In his article "Undoing some myths about 64", Paola addresses the need to dismantle what he considers to be the myths related to the so-called "years of lead" (Paola 2014). He argues that the mythology surrounding this period was built on "disinformation and Gramsci's theses". In addition, Heitor de Paola believes that the military lost the battle for memory, indicating that those defeated militarily in 1964 managed to succeed in one of the most crucial battles: the cultural one. Evidence of this supposed cultural triumph could be found in the political actions of the opponents who have risen to institutional power in recent decades.

In "Deformations of Brazilian History: the Goulart Government, the Myth of Basic Reforms and the Historiographical Manichaeism Surrounding the 1964 Military Movement" (Almeida 2014), diplomat Paulo Roberto de Almeida argues that the representation of the "political-military movement of March-April 1964" in Brazilian historiography is distorted and biased, following only the version of the left, that is, the groups and movements that were defeated in the clashes. He also strongly criticizes the prevalence of this "view of the defeated" in schools, universities, and the press.

Almeida warns that this interpretation would guide current "historical memory" policies, manifested in initiatives by the left-wing currents that dominate the Brazilian government and political system, under the hegemony of the Workers' Party since 2003. Culminating in the National Truth Commission, which would be partial and contrary to the "historical truth": "very far from seeking or establishing the truth, it is much more a vengeful movement against those who defeated them in that distant past" (Almeida 2014, 122). In contrast to the "vision of the defeated", the diplomat presents what could be called the "version of the victors" about the background of the coup. To do so, he seeks to deconstruct the supposed "myths" created by historiography around Goulart's basic reforms.

Finally, the diplomat states that the historiographical production on the dictatorship would be a "subliterature" that would not serve history or the "correct memory" of Brazil. He considers the "myths surrounding 1964 to be especially mystifying and distorting of real history" (Almeida 2014). Despite not mentioning the economic challenges following the dictatorship, he highlights the positive balance of the period, noting that the country rose in the ranking of the world's largest economies - ignoring the economic issues faced in the 1980s.

Likewise, General Ulisses Lisboa Perazzo Lannes points out in his article that an impartial analysis of the period would reveal extremely favorable results, different from the "version constructed by the left, based on inconsistent and outdated ideological references" (Lannes 2014, 124). His interpretation is

corroborated in the same issue by an interview with journalist Ruy Mesquita, published in the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* on March 31, 2004.<sup>6</sup> In the excerpt, the journalist states that there would be no support in history or the archives to prove that the movement was a right-wing coup or a military coup.

In issue 472 of 2019, in his article "A Role and Meaning for History", Colonel Sérgio Paulo Muniz Costa discusses the situation of history teaching in Brazil, which is facing a serious ethical and moral crisis (Costa 2019, 20). In his argument, the curricula of the discipline were saturated with subjects unrelated to history and textbooks omitted important historical events in the formation and evolution of the country.

He claims that, instead of addressing historical events, textbooks would focus on "social situations" to highlight injustices according to a left-wing ideological perspective. The colonel expresses concern that this ongoing process will lead to a complete break with Brazil's historical memory, resulting in a society with no knowledge of its past. In his final appeal, the colonel highlights the need to revitalize history teaching in the country, arguing that the subject should play a fundamental educational role in shaping Brazilian society.

Also, in issue 452 of 2014, there is a contribution from General Agnaldo Del Nero Augusto, head of the Information Section of the Army Intelligence Center in the 1980s and also coordinator of the "Orvil" project mentioned above (Augusto 2014, 90–91). Entitled "The Counterrevolution of '64 and Mythology", the general argues that the left has created a "historical mythology" about the country's recent past, contaminating young Brazilians through psychological induction techniques. In his words: "Total surrender seemed imminent... and then the people said: NO! The only people who aren't proud of their Armed Forces are those who don't know HISTORY. There is only one antidote to lies: the TRUTH" (emphasis in original).

### **The Workers' Party in power and the fear of revanchism in Brazilian politics**

The battle of memory goes beyond what is taught in schools and universities or presented in the media. Below are some excerpts from articles whose main concern is the threat posed by the presence of former opponents in institutional politics, such as the Workers' Party (PT) in the presidency of the Republic.

In issue 440 of 2011, the magazine reproduced the article "While the Revolution doesn't come", by João Mellão Neto (Neto 2011, 17–18), originally published in the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, in which the author accuses the Workers' Party of "rigging the state" based on a Gramscian conception. Mellão

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<sup>6</sup> Derrotados escreveram a História: entrevista com Ruy Mesquita, *Revista do Clube Militar*, n. 452, p. 141, 2014.

Neto argues that the left, which had previously led many people into guerrilla warfare and clandestinity during the dictatorship, in which "most were tortured and a good number died", has achieved power through electoral means and is altering society's way of thinking. He claims that this would affect informal institutions, such as religious precepts, ethics, and morality. According to the author, the party is replacing capitalist values with socialist ones, using militants strategically positioned in academia and public administration. In this way, the party would be acting in key places to "change the general mentality" of society.

In "The Armed Struggle in Brazil: Testimony of an Almost Combatant", in issue 448 of 2013, Paulo Roberto de Almeida once again shares his experience in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when he allegedly worked as a militant against the dictatorship (Almeida 2013, 20–21). Throughout his report, he describes this experience essentially as a childish and idealistic utopia. His disappointment with militancy arose when he noticed the "intellectual poverty of the documents" prepared by his colleagues, realizing that the cause was poorly justified, characterized only by a revolt that seemed almost childish against the powerful dictatorship. He considered the armed struggle to be insanity, saying that the militants thought they were making a revolution, when they were involved in bank robberies, kidnapping ambassadors, and stealing weapons. As a result, he decided to leave the country to study in Europe, a period he calls a "long exile".

In this article, he endorses the narrative of the military's memory, offering his own justifications as a "quasi-combatant" for all the repression that he points out in the text. He would have realized that there was nothing to be done intellectually among the militants and that it was time to try to save his comrades before they disappeared in the repression. His criticism, however, is directed at the former militants who, according to him, had not detached themselves from their old beliefs. For Almeida, this is evident when he analyzes the actions of the Workers' Party government in the National Truth Commission, concluding that its work is biased and far from seeking or establishing the truth, characterizing it more as a vengeful movement against those who defeated them in the distant past.

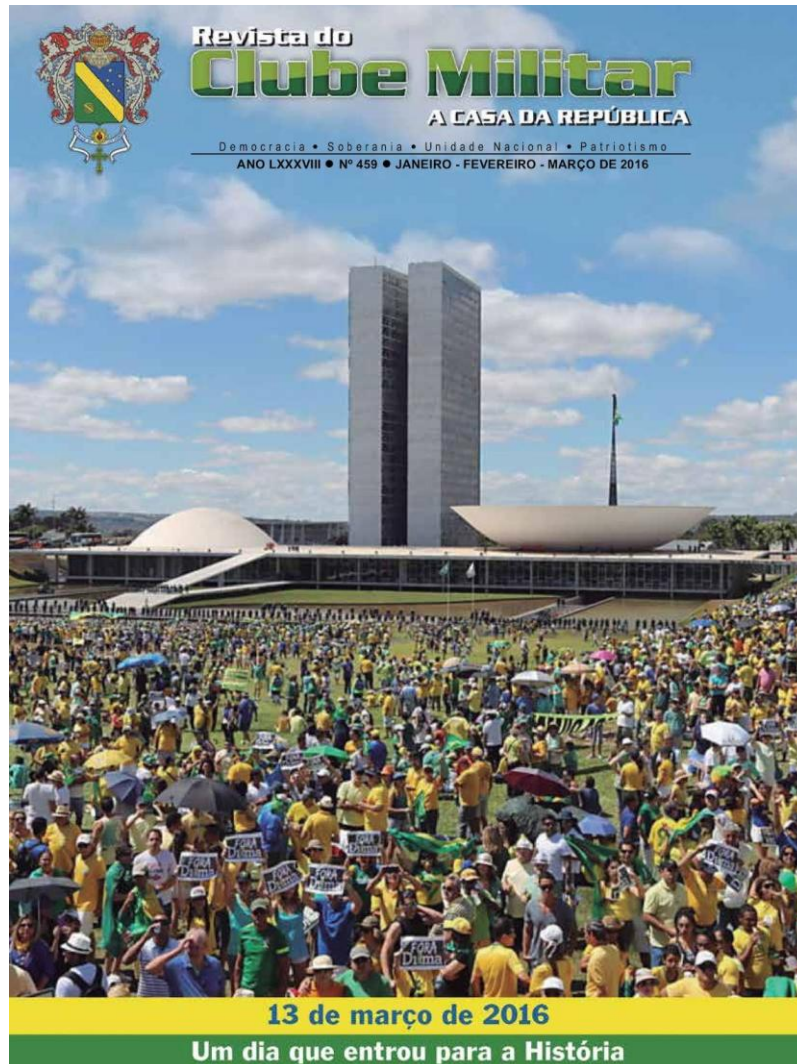


Figure 4: Cover depicting a demonstration for the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, Military Club magazine, issue 459, 2016.

In the 2017 issue, number 464, the "Word of the President" column entitled "March", features a criticism by General Gilberto Rodrigues Pimentel of the press for publishing stories related to an Araguaia guerrilla, "whose body has still not been found, or of fanciful massacres of the indigenous people sponsored by the regime" (Pimentel 2017, 2). The president of the Military Club questions the freedom defended by the media in not addressing the supposed great achievements of the military governments that saved the nation. He also reinforces the democratic nature of the Armed Forces as a matter of principle and stresses the importance of young people knowing the facts as they occurred, because the "bad Brazilians" would be ready to repeat their mistakes.

Another example of the intense disquiet generated by the Workers' Party is the text "The good tree (2)", in the same issue, in which General Rômulo Bini Pereira expresses the view that Brazil is facing a battle in which, on one side, there

are those who seek a dignified and just country, repudiating the "banality of evil" and fighting the erosion of ethical and moral values; and, on the other side, there are those who have taken the "Nation to the bottom of the pit" (Pereira 2017, 18–19). The general concludes by saying that the country's future is uncertain but expresses the hope that the battle will be won by the first group, whose principles, in his view, fully identify with those adopted by the Revolution of '64.

In an even more radical tone, in issue 468 of 2018, the article "The perennial Socialist Revolution in Brazil" by General Luiz Eduardo Rocha Paiva (Paiva 2018, 6) argues that redemocratization in 1978 was not the result of the armed struggle, which was totally dismantled at the time, but rather a conquest achieved by the government, the legal opposition, and an orderly society. The general maintains that there is a socialist revolution underway in Brazil, with the Workers' Party being the current leader of this movement, succeeding the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB). He points out that the socialists rose to power in 1994 under Fernando Henrique Cardoso, characterizing this period as Fabian socialism. The continuation of this movement occurred in 2002, with the election of Lula, and later in 2010, with Dilma Rousseff, which, according to the author, is Marxist socialism. The general concludes by saying that anyone who denies the socialist character of the Workers' Party has not read the party's successive documents.

In issue 472, 2019, Eduardo Diniz's article, "The Armed Forces and Democracy", was a response to a statement by Supreme Court Justice Marco Aurélio Mello, in which he said that democracy is guaranteed by the people, not by the Armed Forces (Diniz 2019, 14). The lawyer argues that this interpretation would be mistaken and refers to the aforementioned article 142 of the 1988 Federal Constitution, which has been interpreted as a justification for military action in politics. He concludes by saying that, given the circumstances of corruption, legal insecurity, and lack of ethics in Brazil, the country would not be in a normal situation. Therefore, relying on the Armed Forces to preserve democracy would be necessary, as the situation would already be "very bad".

Along with amnesty, the military constantly brings up the notion of revanchism when addressing any measures or intentions to hold accountable the serious human rights violations that took place during the repression. In magazine no. 448, from 2013, General Jonas Correia concludes his essay by stating that the Armed Forces had saved the country from terrorists who "only wanted to impose their own dictatorship" and, by stopping them, the military would be suffering revenge and would be constantly injustice (Neto 2013, 16–17). Similarly, years later, in issue 468 of 2018, General Clóvis Purper Bandeira comments on the request by the Attorney General's Office to the Supreme Court to reopen the case of federal deputy Rubem Paiva, who disappeared politically (Bandeira 2018, 4–5). The general believes that the prosecutor's request would be an attempt to attack



the military who fought communism: "to canonize the terrorists and criminalize the agents of law and order who fought them, with reciprocal and necessary violence" (Bandeira 2018, 5). He concludes by calling on the military to remain alert against counterattacks.

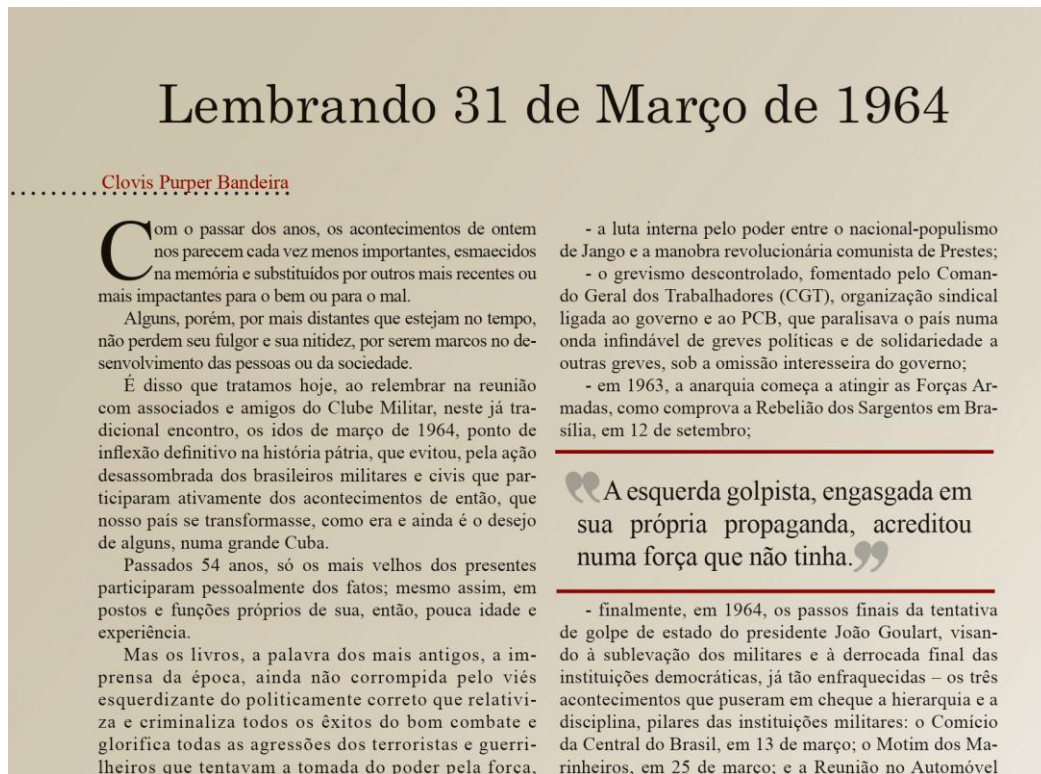


Figure 5: Clipping from General Clovis Purper Bandeira's column. Source: Military Club magazine, issue 468, p. 4, 2018.

The three reserve officers' clubs of the Armed Forces also expressed their opinions on the matter in a message called "The Thoughts of the Military Clubs" about the Rubem Paiva case.<sup>7</sup> They argue that the Amnesty Law enabled the democratization of Brazil and the reconciliation of society, and, despite this, "revisionist" and "revanchist" voices would still try to change it. They point out that these "voices" would succeed in making the National Truth Commission investigate "only one side". The message then reproduces an excerpt from Justice Eros Grau's vote in the ADPF 153 trial, in which he states that the Amnesty Law would have benefited everyone from its incorporation into the 1985 constitutional amendment. They conclude by saying that it is not a matter of "defending any violation of fundamental rights and guarantees", but of preserving them, because "revising history is the task of historians".<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> O pensamento dos Clubes Militares: Insegurança jurídica, *Revista do Clube Militar*, n. 468, p. 2–3, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> O pensamento dos Clubes Militares..., p. 3.

### **The military on stage: influence and performance during Jair Bolsonaro's government**

The threat represented by the Workers' Party provoked a perception among the military that the country was in a "very serious situation from the point of view of public morality, of society's values", as General Etchegoyen described in a lecture given in 2019 (Victor 2022, 55). For him, it was noticeable among the military that some limits had been crossed and were not accepted by society. However, there was a conviction that these values would, at some point, be recovered by society: "I didn't imagine it would happen so soon, or in the way it did, with the election of President Bolsonaro, who was elected on the back of these issues" (Victor 2022, 55).

Therefore, it would be possible to infer from General Etchegoyen's speech that the victory of Captain Jair Bolsonaro would have represented for the military the return of values and political morality. Unlike in 1964, this "return to morality" would have occurred through elections. And this supposed moral renaissance was accompanied by the return of the military to institutional politics, either as ministers or as civil servants. Thus, according to the report by the Institute for Applied Economic Research (Schmidt 2022), during Bolsonaro's term in office, there was a 193% increase in the number of military personnel employed in civilian positions in the federal executive. In relation to the decision-making hierarchy, there has been an increase in the number of military personnel in high-ranking commissioned positions. Most of the military personnel involved come from the Army. In all, by 2020, there were more than 6,000 military personnel in different positions in the federal government.





Figure 6: Clipping from Bianor Scelza Cavalcanti's column, *Military Club magazine*, issue 472, p. 23, 2019.

According to Akkoyunlu and Lima, this movement would have been a "stealth intervention": “the gradual yet systematic attempt to interfere in and redesign national politics without formally stepping outside the law, suspending the democratic process, or overthrowing elected leaders” (Akkoyunlu, Lima 2021, 33). This concept would be appropriate for the Brazilian reality because it designates the intentional movement of highly politicized military officers to regain institutional political power without resorting to a "coup" or similar rupture, but still a threat to democracy. The authors point out that there is a causal relationship between the prerogatives maintained by the military during the transition from dictatorship to democracy and democratic regression. They explain that the choice of "stealth" to describe these interventions is not because they are conducted in secret, but because of their gradual nature and lack of rupture, which makes them difficult to perceive and react to, even though they take place in plain sight (Akkoyunlu, Lima 2021, 35).

A stealth intervention could not be identified by a single event, but by observing the changes in civil-military relations over time. The authors also indicate that the generals involved were driven by a political agenda aimed at putting the country "on the 'right' path under patriotic leadership" and preventing the return of the Workers' Party to power (Akkoyunlu, Lima 2021, 36). They point out that the generals' opposition to the party was due more to an ideological aspect laden with anti-leftism and anti-communism than to a reaction to a possible threat to military institutional interests.

The increase in the number of military personnel in the public administration began in 2016, during the government of Michel Temer. Dilma Rousseff's vice-president had assumed power for the remainder of his term but faced unpopularity and allegations of corruption. To maintain power, Temer allegedly sought the support of the military. During this period, not only did the number of military personnel in public office increase but there was an escalation of political commentary and demonstrations among officers, demonstrating the deterioration of civilian control over military power (Vitelli 2022, 17–18). The height of this public appearance movement was a tweet by General Eduardo Villas-Bôas, then commander of the Army, in 2018. There was a warrant out for the arrest of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who at the time was leading the polls for the presidential elections, ahead of Jair Bolsonaro, in second place. The day before the Supreme Court's judgment on a habeas corpus that would allow him to participate in the election, General Villas-Bôas declared on his Twitter account: "I assure the Nation that the Brazilian Army believes it shares the desire of all citizens to repudiate impunity and respect the Constitution, social peace and democracy while remaining attentive to its institutional missions." Two days later, candidate Lula da Silva was arrested. As Vitelli points out, it cannot be said that the Supreme Court's decision was in any way influenced by the commander's message. However, as the speech was planned in conjunction with the entire Army High Command (Castro 2021, 189), it is an indicator that the Army was politicized from top to bottom (Vitelli 2022, 19).

### **Final considerations**

In this paper, we try to demonstrate how the memory of the dictatorship was constructed among the Brazilian military, especially in the Army, by analyzing selected editions of the Military Club Magazine. In this analysis, we noticed some of the most important points in the development of this narrative, such as the justification of the 1964 coup through its conjunctural antecedents. We observed that the clash of memories became more evident with the barracks' perception that the history taught in schools and universities was corrupted by the "version of the defeat of 1964". Even more so when we note that the Workers' Party is seen as a threat precisely because of the trajectory of its members, and for this reason the memory of the dictatorship is continually mobilized in opposition to the party.

In this way, we could conclude that the military already had a well-constructed narrative ready to go beyond the gates of the barracks when Jair Bolsonaro became a viable presidential candidate. After his electoral victory, this narrative was widely used throughout the former captain's government, both by

him and by his ministers - military and civilian - and other collaborators. Even with the evocation of figures such as Colonel Carlos Brilhante Ustra, indicated by the National Truth Commission as a direct author of serious human rights violations during the dictatorship, with 46 deaths and disappearances associated with him (Brasil, Comissão Nacional Da Verdade 2014).

This topic is certainly not exhausted here; this work is part of ongoing research and represents only the initial results. We hope to disseminate the Military Club magazines as sources of research and, above all, to study the "memories of the oppressors", which are not widely explored, since we believe that analyzing political processes from the perspective of memory allows us to observe the nuances from which concerns, frustrations, fears, and expectations emerge.

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