

# Brazil and the Second World War

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## Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- evaluate Brazilian foreign policy initiatives in the 1940s.
  - determine the rationale behind Brazil's entry into World War II.
  - analyze the military situation faced by Brazilian forces.
  - assess the Brazilian contribution to Allied victory.
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## Teacher Note

This lesson is best utilized in social science classes when discussing the Allied military campaigns of the Second World War.

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## Materials

- Student Handout: **The Italian Campaign**
  - Student Handout: **Brazil Goes to War**
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## Activities

1. Distribute the student handout entitled **The Italian Campaign**. (If available, display a topographic map of Italy in the classroom.)
    - a. Review with the class the rationale behind the Allied decision to invade Italy in 1943.
    - b. Explain that the government of Mussolini had collapsed in 1943, but that the Germans still had a strong hold on Italy. Those forces had to be dealt with.
    - c. Explain that some of the Allies, particularly Winston Churchill, viewed Italy was the "soft underbelly" of the Axis," easily cut through to reach Germany.
    - d. At the same time, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, did not want to divert extensive forces from the full scale invasion of Nazi occupied Europe. The Italian front was seen as secondary.
    - e. Direct students to trace the course of Allied progress from September 3, 1943 to the Gothic Line. How long had it taken the Allies? How do they account for this? (If a topographic map is available, illustrate the mountainous nature of the Italian peninsula.)
    - f. If available, show clips of the fighting in Italy from *The World at War* series, Volume 13: "Tough Old Gut." Explain that the Italian Front saw some of the toughest fighting of the war. Was Churchill correct in calling it the "soft underbelly?"
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**Activities  
(continued)**

2. Distribute the student handout entitled **Brazil Goes to War**.
    - a. Direct students to read the first section: “Brazil in the 1940s.”
    - b. Ask students to describe the nature of the Brazilian government in the 1940s. Was it democratic or authoritarian?
    - c. Ask students to explain why the Brazilian Foreign Minister believed that Brazil had “to decide: the United States or Germany.”
    - d. Direct students to read the second section: “The Path to War.”
    - e. List the following on the chalkboard: Power, Protection, Prestige, Profit, Principles.
    - f. Explain that these are the five primary reasons, according to political scientists, why nations go to war. Based on the information given in the handout, ask students select the reason(s) that motivated Brazil to enter the Second World War.
  3. Direct students to read the section entitled “Getting Ready.”
    - a. Ask the class to assume the role of a platoon of Brazilian soldiers recruited for this war effort. What would they know about the war in Europe? What would be their concerns?
    - b. Direct students to read the section entitled “On the Front Lines” and to compare the map in this section with The Italian Campaign map.
    - c. Ask students to locate the IV Corps position on both maps. If they were part of the Brazilian DIE, would they really be prepared to fight a campaign in this mountainous country? What difficulties might they face, particularly in winter?
  4. Direct students to read the section entitled “In Combat.”
    - a. Ask students to place themselves in the Brazilian DIE. If they were members of the *Cobras Fumantes*. How would they feel about what they achieved during the Italian campaign?
    - b. Direct students to locate the term “Monte Castello” in the first paragraph. Although not of the same significance as D-Day or Iwo Jima in the big picture of the war, why would Monte Castello hold special significance for the Brazilians?
  5. Direct students to read the final section entitled “The Aftermath.”
    - a. As a concluding activity, ask students to assume the role of a Brazilian soldier in Italy at the end of the war, and direct them to write “a letter home” describing their experiences and their feelings about what they have achieved.
    - b. When students have completed their letters, direct them to make a bulletin board collage using the letters to describe the experiences of the *Cobras Fumantes*.
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# Brazil Goes to War

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## Brazil in the 1940s

In the 1930s and 1940s, Brazil was a rapidly industrializing nation popularly regarded as "the sleeping giant of the Americas" and a potential world power. From November 3, 1930 until October 29, 1945, Brazil was led by President Getúlio Dornelles Vargas. Vargas was a wealthy pro-industrial nationalist and anti-communist who favored capitalist development and liberal reforms, but opposition to his policies within Brazil led to a centralized state along Fascist lines. In November 1937, Vargas ended the constitutional, elected government and replaced it with the dictatorial *Estado Novo*. American diplomats and intelligence agents saw the street parades of the fascist-like, green shirted *Integralistas*, and the open admiration for the German army of the Brazilian officers who backed the dictatorship, as signs of Nazi influence.

Nevertheless, the Vargas government skillfully built the foundation of a robust industrial economy. In the process, Brazil attempted to create an economic relationship with the United States that would give the Brazilian economy access to American loans, investments, and markets. At the same time, international trade assumed greater significance, and Germany was a major trading partner. Between 1933 and 1938, Germany became the principal market for Brazilian cotton, and its second largest importer of Brazilian coffee and cacao. As early as November 1938, the Brazilian Ambassador in Washington, Mario de Pimentel Brandão, advised Foreign Minister Oswaldo Aranha that "we have to decide: the United States or Germany."

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## The Path to War

Brazil maintained an initial position of neutrality when World War II began in 1939 with the German invasion of Poland, as did the United States. However, Brazilian trade with Germany flourished until the outbreak of hostilities, and thereafter was shut off by the British naval blockade. At the same time, American willingness to commit financial, technical, and physical backing for Brazil's industrialization led to increased economic and diplomatic ties.

In 1941, Brazil agreed to permit the United States to establish air bases in the states of Bahia, Pernambuco, and Rio Grande do Norte. (Indeed, Natal in Rio Grande do Norte served as a "trampoline to victory" by helping to solve Allied supply problems in 1942 and 1943.) The increasing cooperation with the Allies led the Brazilian government to announce, on January 28, 1942, the decision to sever diplomatic relations with the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan). German U-boats began targeting Brazilian shipping, and by August 1942 over 20 Brazilian ships had been lost with the coast of nearly 1,000 lives. One ship, the *Baependi*, went down with two-hundred and fifty soldiers and seven officers, along with two artillery batteries and other equipment. The army cried for revenge. On August 22, 1942, Brazil declared war on the Axis Powers.

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## Getting Ready



Soon after Brazil declared war, it began to create an expeditionary force to fight in Europe: the 25,300 man **Brazilian Expeditionary Force** (*Força Expedicionária Brasileira*, or FEB). It was commanded by General Mascarenhas de Moraes. The Brazilian 1st Expeditionary Infantry Division (1st DIE, for *Divisão de Infantaria Expedicionária*) was composed of the following Infantry Regiments:

- 1st Infantry Regiment (*Sampaio*) from the area of Rio de Janeiro
- 6th Infantry Regiment (*Ipiranga*) from the area of São Paulo
- 11th Infantry Regiment (*Tiradentes*) from the area of Minas Gerais

The FEB called themselves *Cobras Fumantes* (literally, *Smoking Snakes*) and wore a divisional shoulder patch which showed a snake smoking a pipe. According to popular belief, this was because someone supposedly said "snakes will start smoking pipes before Brazil joins the Allies."



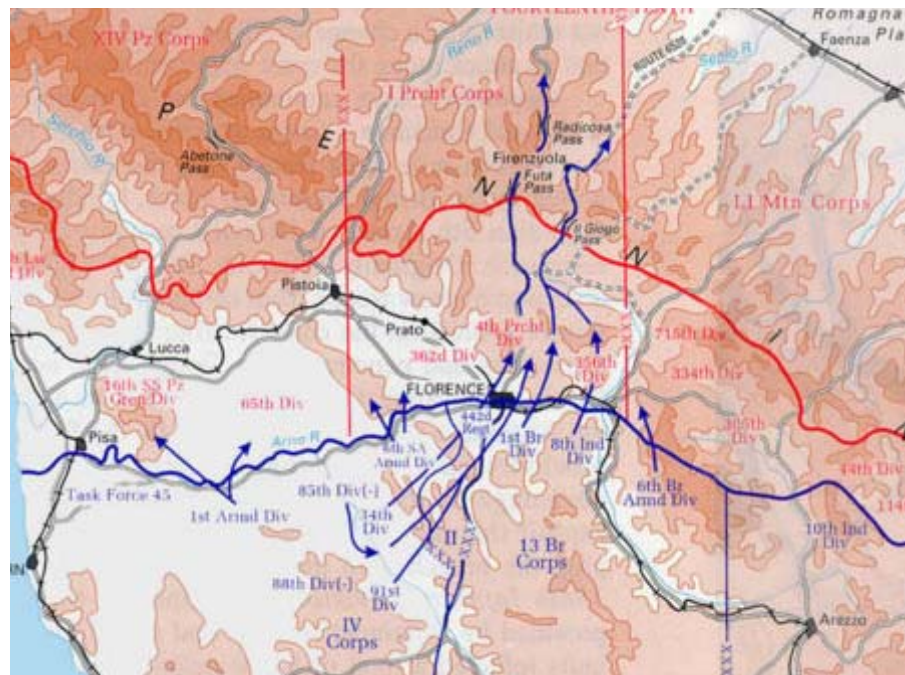
The FEB also had a group of 500 air force personnel (1st Fighter Group), sent to Italy and incorporated in the 350th U.S. Army Air Force Fighter Group. The pilots actually one of the 20 squadrons of the XXII Tactical Air Command, flying P-47s. Their role was very important to the actions of all Allied forces in Italy and the Brazilian pilots were also praised for their important air-to-ground operations.

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## On the Front Lines



Arriving in the summer and fall of 1944, the 1st DIE was incorporated into the IV Army Corps of the Fifth U.S. Army. Upon arrival in Italy, they began taking position in the mountainous terrain facing German forces arrayed along the defensive position known as the Gothic Line.



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## In Combat



The Fifth Army's objective was to break through the German's so-called Gothic Line and descend into the Po Valley to take Bologna. The Fourth Corps confronted an imposing mountain ridge from which German artillery and mortars could harass traffic on the west to east highway #64. The American 92d "Black Buffalo" Division and then the 10th Mountain Division faced this ridge, and the FEB confronted a hill that juts out below the top of the ridge. From that hill, the Germans could rake the lower slopes to the west (left) from well-prepared positions. That hill, which German maps labeled simply "101/19", was what local people called Monte Castello.

Walking up it today is hardly even tiring, but going up it under artillery, machine-gun, mortar, and rifle fire would be suicidal. Monte Castello held the Brazilians at bay in four assaults - November 24, 25, 29, December 12- before falling to them on February 21, 1945. A German captain told a captured FEB lieutenant: "Frankly, you Brazilians are either crazy or very brave. I never saw anyone advance against machine-guns and well-defended positions with such disregard for life ... You are devils."



On April 16, the FEB took Montese after a four-day grueling battle, suffering 426 casualties. In the next days it fought to a standstill the German 148th Division and Fascist Italian Monte Rosa, San Marco, and Italia Divisions, which surrendered to General Mascarenhas on April 29-30. In a matter of days the Brazilians trapped and took the surrender of 2 generals, 800 officers, and 14,700 troops. The 148th was the only intact German division to surrender on that front. Although they had little preparation and served under foreign command, against a combat-experienced enemy, the "Smoking Cobras," had shown, as one of their songs put it, the "fiber of the Brazilian army" and the "*grandeza de nossa gente*" (greatness of our people).

On May 2, the Brazilians reached Turin and met French troops at the border. Meanwhile, in the Alps, the FEB was on the heels of German forces still on the run when word came that Hitler had committed suicide and Germany had surrendered.

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## The Aftermath



During eight months of the Italian Campaign, the Brazilian Expeditionary Force managed to take 20,573 Axis prisoners (two generals, 892 officers and 19,679 other ranks) and had 443 of its men killed in action, 2064 wounded and 34 MIAs.

The 443 soldiers buried in the FEB cemetery in Pistoia, Italy, were later removed to the WW II mausoleum and monument built in Rio de Janeiro, in the beginning of the 60's, which includes the eternal flame lit in the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

The participation of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force in the Italian Campaign may seem a minor detail of a war that involved millions of men and women, but it is worthwhile to remember that the simple but valorous soldiers of the division overcame terrible odds and emerged victorious.

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## Source

- *Brazil and World War II: The Forgotten Ally* by Frank D. McCain
- *Brazilian Expeditionary Force* (Wikipedia)