

The effects of the Nationalization Campaign: the Prohibition of the German Language in Southern Brazil during the Second World War

Cynthia Machado Campos

1. Introduction

My research concerns the effects of the Nationalization Campaign and specifically, the prohibition of the German Language in Southern Brazil during the Second World War.

The project looked at three main areas: how the Nationalist campaign worked and the forms it took; the reaction people had to the campaign; and what kind of long term effect the campaign had on the German population and whether it led to the eventual loss of German language and traditions in this community.

The methodology was to contrast written texts, focusing on the linguistic side to see how certain words and concepts emerged. I encountered two types of written documents: official texts such as scientific texts and official propaganda, which sought to impose the National language; and texts produced by immigrants in their own language (literary publications, school documents and sport club documents). These sources allowed me to observe the effects of campaign and the different reactions to it.

I also looked at oral history which was a very important way to understand the true impact of the campaign, the reactions to it and the feelings it provoked. Through certain testimonies it was possible to see the impact of the Brazilian nationalist campaign on the immigrant population and whether these people changed their behaviour by adopting the new nationalist rules, or resisted change by maintaining the German language of their parents.

2. Historic-political Background

Getúlio Vargas, was Brazilian President for eighteen years in total. From 1937 to 1945 Vargas established the “New State”, through a coup d’état in 1937. He formed a dictatorship on November 10th, 1937, broadcasting a speech by radio to the whole country.

This political regime was similar to the Antonio Salazar dictatorship in Portugal. In the New State Vargas ordered the dissolution of Parliament (the National Congress) and of political parties. A new constitution was approved, which gave him total executive control, with the right of intervention in local government. This allowed Vargas a high level of control over all the regions of Brazil, including the previously rather isolated South. No elections ever took place in the New State: it was a regime under which individual liberties were ignored in favour of certain political interests. The interests central to Government propaganda campaigns were presented as

though they were those of the working class but in reality they benefited the elitist class. Therefore this leadership was the very definition of a 'populist' government.

The main aim of this campaign was to homogenize Brazilian society (which had been very diverse), to adopt a Brazilian culture and to preserve Portuguese traditions. This involved the affirmation of Portuguese as a national language. An important word at this time was *regeneration*. Vargas' government was concerned with citizenship and wanted to create a new type of citizen and a strong national identity.

3. Southern Brazil

This part of Brazil was the main focus of the Nationalization campaign. It was different from other areas of Brazil in that it contained diverse immigrant communities and was culturally very mixed. German immigrants living there maintained stronger links with Germany than with Central Brazil via the ports. There was a perceived lack of unity within the region, and there were tensions and conflicts of both a political and socio-cultural nature. The south had been rather isolated from the central government. Vargas attempted to bring order to and renew the south through his Nationalization program.

Vargas' government came to power with two main policies: the Nationalization project and their 'Labour Proposal', which was similar to the European idea of a Welfare State and aimed to improve conditions for the working classes. It became increasingly evident to the whole governing body that the goal of social regeneration for South Brazil was to be put into practice with efficiency and with the aim of promoting the well-being of society as a whole.

In the 30s and 40s, southern Brazil can thus be considered a site of political and socio-cultural confrontations. Vargas' government undertook series of interventions between 1930 and 1945, in which he was represented by regional political agents. Working against the ethos of these official campaigns were immigrant groups who preserved their highly diversified traditions and historical memories. The descendants of the immigrants manifested their resistance by expressing their own identity.

Southern Brazil was indeed a place where signs of rebellion were emerging against homogenizing practices. Prominent among the policies of an administration facing various forms of resistance from its urban populations was the affirmation of the national language: Portuguese, at the expense of any other language in southern Brazil. This affirmation of national language, in conjunction with national identity can be observed in particular in the attention devoted by the state to institutions, especially within the official education network. A new central school network was created which was carefully controlled by central government. Schools lost their autonomy

and German schools were no longer permitted. The Brazilian Government invested in various institutions within a system of state education in order to create a Brazilian national consciousness.

The government imposed more regulations on industries and higher taxes. This was problematic for the German people as previously the main industries in the South (textiles, food) had been dominated by immigrant workers from Germany. Now industries were encouraged to employ Brazilians.

4. Changing perceptions of immigrants in Brazil

In the First Republic (1889-1930) immigrants had been seen positively, as hard-working members of society, with the exception of the Portuguese (from the Azores Islands) who were not seen as good workers. This changed during the 1930s and 1940s, in the middle of the Nationalization Campaign, when the image of the Portuguese was promoted to be seen positively. The Portuguese people from Azorean Islands who had gone to the South were mainly fishermen and government propaganda emphasized the importance of this work.

By contrast, German and Italian immigrants came to be seen as enemies of the nation, who were dividing the country. Propaganda was successfully used to encourage suspicion of German immigrants, connecting them with Nazism. As a result German immigrants were persecuted in society.

5. The Research Project

This research investigated the campaign of state investment in southern Brazilian society, which was part of a nationwide attempt to impose certain values, forms of behaviour and conformity. The campaign affected family, school, work and leisure. What was of interest to us was the change in the behaviour of people in urban environments in relation to the changes that were taking place in these areas. Our sources included both literary documents and Government documents; German folk tales which were read or told to children; poetry recited at civic or scholarly events; and theatrical performances in cultural and leisure societies and on various commemorative dates.

This study took as a point of methodological departure, the contrast between official texts and those produced by immigrants and descendants of German immigrants in the south of Brazil. We focused our attention on the linguistic side of these texts, through literary publications and through school and sports club documents. We used these texts to assess the effectiveness of the campaign to unite and integrate the immigrant population into "Brazilian" values. These texts produced in Santa Catarina, Rio Grande do Sul and Paraná in the 1930s and 40s, appeared to be a concerted attempt to confirm

Portuguese as the national language, over populations and forms of manifested resistance.

These texts showed the investment that the Brazilian government had made in different institutions, especially in the official school network, to direct the education of youth in “*brasilidade*”, and to extend the nationalist spirit to all citizens. The texts showed the way the State permanently used the written language, through the publication of scientific texts or official propaganda, and diffused this among the whole population.

6. Research findings: Impact of Nationalist Campaign

During our research, the impact of State investment on the immigrant population and the extent to which it changed values and behaviour gradually became clear. I observed some connections between the behaviour that people manifested and the authoritarian State. In the course of this campaign to change Brazil’s immigrant groups in the 1930s and 1940s it seemed likely that the Brazilian elite of the time developed a new concept of the ideal inhabitant for areas undergoing a process of urbanisation. From the point of view of the elite, the original inhabitants tended to be less efficient in their working practices than the immigrants. The research focused on how the government dealt with the many descendants of immigrants and their great cultural diversity, and how the government tried to change habits and customs, by imposing a Brazilian culture on them. The nationalism campaign was largely directed towards these groups, because the authorities suspected that all German-speaking citizens were Nazis, and thus their persecution became generalized.

In the thirties and forties there were more and more urban problems in the rapidly growing cities. One strategy of the State was to improve the citizens’ lives by creating institutions to influence the people in the streets. Government officials gathered vulnerable people in “safe” places, isolated from society. A number of institutions were created: prisons, hospitals for Tuberculosis and Leprosy, psychiatric hospitals, orphanages and homes for old people and abandoned children. Another important strategy to combat the urban problems was education. In the cities of south Brazil between 1930 and 1945 education was used to build city life and the discourse used within the system was aimed at creating desirable types of citizens for this society under construction.

During this period, communications were improved in all aspects of life in Brazil. This was the time when everyone throughout the Brazilian territory began to have their own radio sets. One aspect of modernity was the introduction of the radio, which became an important propaganda tool. Radio sets became common first among the middle-class then workers used them for receiving news from the government. Working class life was deeply affected by radio government propaganda and the domestic space was

invaded by the voice of power. Radio created the image of Vargas as a hero of the Brazilian working classes, an image which persists to the present day.

People from the middle-classes and workers developed the habit of listening to their radios to receive the news. Getting news from around the world became very important for the first time, because, through the radio, it was now possible to be better informed. People who bought a radio obtained prestige in the eyes of the community and it was a status symbol among groups descended from German immigrants. Most importantly, radio allowed a direct line of communication with Germany. In addition to the radio, the German-speaking groups also received news direct from papers and almanacs from Germany,

Among the immigrant population in Brazil there were those who did not speak Portuguese but only German or Italian. The State, represented by the President, tried to control the use of languages in schools and recreational associations. In the past foreign schools had symbolized modernism to the elite groups and administrators of the times but during the thirties and forties these schools began to have difficulties particularly after 1938, following the introduction of rules that prevented teachers and students speaking in foreign languages.

In terms of leisure, there had been many societies and clubs built by immigrants where only German was spoken. The government now tried to control these, forcing the members to speak Portuguese, for example.

7. Research findings: Propaganda

Propaganda was also an important tool to affirm a sense of nationality and encourage suspicion of Nazism. Before the campaign there had been a lot of written materials in German, but few in Portuguese. Vargas wanted to replace all this German material with Portuguese and therefore encouraged the people to publish a great deal in Portuguese.

The quantity of propaganda was enormous, not only in terms of written materials but also the many speeches Vargas made. The goal was to try to unify the nation and capture people's imagination; to integrate the population and create a new concept of citizenship. Another goal was to promote 'Brazilian values', to spread a Brazilian culture, and confirm the Portuguese language and the nationalist spirit.

Many Brazilian intellectuals worked with the government to create a wealth of materials which supported the government's aims. They created a kind of discourse which affirmed nationalism. This was not confined to politics, but crossed over to literature and the arts in general, helping to transform people's ideas. These intellectuals invoked the values of 19th century Romanticism and applied these ideas to their context. A key feature of the Romantic School had been the collective sentiment of fatherland and the intellectuals used this to promote the concept of Brazilian national

identity. Ironically these ideals had originated in Germany, but now were being used to oppress the German immigrant population in Brazil. The school of Modernism was also developing during this period in the field of art and aesthetics. Although these two movements may seem opposed to one another in some ways, government intellectuals also incorporated Modernism into their ideology, using it to promote the emergence of a new and modernized Brazilian State.

8. Research Findings: Reactions to the campaign

In my research, I found a variety of different reactions to the campaign. Some citizens embraced the Brazilian identity while others rejected it, but the extent to which people collaborated with the campaign differed greatly, even within the same families. For example, a marriage might include a wife who spoke German at home and a husband who worked for the government promoting Brazilian identity. It is not possible to divide people simply into groups of supporters and those against the campaign, as this campaign affected people's daily lives and communities.

9. Reactions to the campaign: Collaboration

Some German immigrants collaborated with the campaign. They began to speak Portuguese in all situations and avoided German. They changed their behavior, affirming Brazilian culture and values. Some valued the culture that was being promoted and for example, instead of traditional German festivals, they began to celebrate religious and fishing festivals which were typical of the Azorean way of life.

Communities were also affected. There was the active participation of neighbourhoods in which some Brazilians denounced their neighbours for speaking German and this divided communities. They also denounced the clandestine activities of Germans such as home schooling.

Because children of German immigrants were facing prejudice in schools, they also influenced their parents by rejecting the German language. German children wanted to have a rich Portuguese vocabulary like the Brazilian children and not speak German at home. In particular, they wanted to avoid having a German accent so they would not be teased by the other children. In this way the children were controlling their parents' language, and for the generation of children under the campaign, many lost their connection with the German language.

10. Reactions to the campaign: Resistance

Many German immigrants resisted the Nationalist campaign. They worked hard to maintain their sense of German identity. They would read German literary texts, and traditional written communication such as weekly

newspapers and almanacs from Germany. Some immigrants also managed to maintain a German-language press and some German institutions such as societies and home school projects.

Some families retained their connection with their German identity. They preserved German traditions and continued to pass on their history and culture to their children. Some families were proud of their German identity, but they were the minority and faced a lot of opposition from their communities, becoming very isolated.

Resistance to the campaign also took the more direct form of a general strike in a former German colony, Blumenau City in 1934. Workers closed all the shops and the city came to a standstill. This event narrowly avoided escalating into a significant battle:

Commerce and industry closed their doors as a protest and for over a week the city presented the aspect of a veritable military stronghold. If it were not for the prudence of some authorities and the good sense of some better informed citizens, the situation would have reached end proportions of real disaster with certain bloodshed, because the state government had already sent an armed force against Blumenau and the population of this city was prepared to receive them with bullets.¹

Prior to the Nationalist campaign the production of written materials in the South of Brazil was dominated by the German language press. A large quantity of written materials (books, newspapers, almanacs and teaching materials for use in schools) was produced entirely in the German language. The nationalist campaign sought to replace this dominance with the production of a constant flow of propaganda material, in Portuguese, much of which was information about the new institutions which had been created. The government was effectively attempting to crowd out the German press.

The daily production of non-Portuguese literary texts and reading matter can be interpreted as a form of resistance and is also connected to the various institutions and societies of the German immigrant community. These societies sustained the German-language press and published several weekly journals, which was unacceptable to Brazilian officialdom.

To see how the people felt about the nationalist changes we collected testimonies from descendants of German immigrants. In some it was possible to glimpse forms of resistance to the New State and Vargas' policies. This was the case in the testimony of Cecilia Raush, a immigrant descendant: collected on 7th July, 1998:

Our family always encouraged us to preserve German culture in the hope of maintaining communication with our paternal grandparents and friends who never learned to speak Portuguese, and to enhance our personal development. During the years that my parents were taking high school evening classes, I kept my grandmother company at night, and she spent this time teaching me German reading and writing skills.²

11. Conclusion: The effects of the campaign

The campaign tried to control language. There had been a very lively German cultural life, with direct links to Germany via plays, books and actors and many societies which had generated a lot of written German texts. Under the Nationalization campaign all German clubs and associations (cinemas, libraries, sports clubs and theatres) were prohibited. German schools were also closed and in 1938 the language was completely banned.

Radio had allowed the German immigrants an important link to their own culture, as they were able to listen to programs in their mother tongue. Clearly this went against the aims of the Government campaign therefore this was banned and radios were seized from German people. People were humiliated in 'radio demonstrations', which involved German people carrying radios to prison on their backs, walking in line along the streets, watched over by the army.

The campaign succeeded in associating the German language with Nazism and created a stigma around the German language which persisted for many years. For many generations of German immigrants there was resentment towards the government because of the loss of their traditions.

A change in attitudes began in the 1980s when there was a huge increase in tourism, encouraged by the government. People came to witness the many festivals in the South and the multiculturalism of this area became an attraction. Therefore the government began to value and even promote multiculturalism. At this point German culture began to be valued and German schools reappeared.

¹Notes

¹ SILVA, José Ferreira. 'História de Blumenau', In: *Centenário de Blumenau (1850-1950)*. Blumenau, 1950. p. 45.

² Testimony of Cecilia Raush, collected on 7th July, 1998.

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