

Mass Repression in the Heart of Brazil: Facing the Brazilian Military Coup in Goiás

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Abstract

This study scrutinizes the repression and resistance movements in the state of Goiás, Brazil, during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985). Specifically, it explores the establishment of the military government, analyzes its repressive aspects, and highlights significant resistance episodes against the military regime in this state, located right in the heart of Brazil, in its midwest region.

First, I focus on the key episodes of national importance that occurred in Goiás, dividing them into repression and resistance. Against this background, I introduce the testimony of a notable participant, Neso Natal, who experienced arrest, exile, and brutal torture in that barbarous age. Finally, I reflect on the political violence and repression experienced in this state, recognizing the notable marks it left in Goiás and Brazil and observing how the globe might reflect on this dictatorship's implications.

Keywords: Dictatorship; Goiás; Coup; Brazil; Military; Repression; Resistance; Torture; Neso Natal.

Introduction

Almost six decades ago, a coup d'état established a military dictatorship in Brazil, popularly called "Coup of 64." It was one of the longest anti-democratic regimes established in Latin America, lasting twenty-one years (1964-1985). By investigating the impact of the Brazilian military regime, specifically in my home state Goiás, this study aims to answer the question "How was the Brazilian Military Coup faced in Goiás?". The use of this question prompted findings that showed how Goiás played an essential role during this period, including the massive presence of repression and resistance activity there. Thus, the study highlights these events and is accompanied by oral history through an interview with Neso Natal, a resistor and a persecuted victim of the authoritarian military government. Essentially, the research analyzes the military approach to power in Goiás and its repercussions in Brazil.

The coup wrested power from João Goulart, a democratically elected president who assumed his office in 1961. The military perceived Goulart as sympathetic with the communist ideology. His visit to China—a declared communist country—attracted considerable attention. Therefore, the Brazilian Armed Forces' key commanders did not want Goulart as a president and decided to take power in Brazil. They justified the taking of power by saying there was a communist threat that they had to impede. The coup counted on support from conservative groups (e.g., the conservative party, Catholic church, civic anti-communist movements) and foreign contributions from the United States—in the context of the Cold War. Operation Brother Sam was one of the military regime's greatest sources of support, as the United States sent the Navy and Air Force to support the coup. In President John F. Kennedy's words, the reason for Operation Brother Sam was "preventing Brazil from becoming another China or Cuba." Kennedy believed Goulart was becoming too friendly with anti-American radicals in the Brazilian government.

Throughout the military regime, five military presidents assumed power: Humberto Castelo Branco (1964-1967), Artur da Costa e Silva (1967-1969), Emílio Médici (1969-1974), Ernesto Geisel (1974-1979), and João Figueiredo (1979-1985). Also, there were Seventeen Institutional Acts (AIs) issued, so

those in power could manipulate and control the government and civil society through a repressive regime. These Institutional Acts enforced censorship, revoked democratic mandates, and even restricted and eliminated political rights. For instance, AI-1 determined the cessation of mandates, the withdrawal of political rights, and indirect presidential elections, all in the name of the LSN (i.e., National Security Law). But the most infamous AI was AI-5, which marked the radicalization of the dictatorship by solidifying absolute power to the military regime. It was after the establishment of this AI that censorship and torture became more intense. For instance, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), more than 20,000 people were tortured, including children and pregnant women. Worse still, people started disappearing. At least 434 were killed or are still considered missing today. On the other hand, the cultural, artistic, and educational industries were only allowed to produce materials accepted by the military commission. Many had to flee the country, such as Brazilian singers Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, who were a symbol of resistance for criticizing the military regime in their lyrics.

In brief, the 1964 military coup and its use of mass repression marked a troubled period in the recent past of Latin America. Although affecting the entire nation, the dictatorship more severely impacted some specific regions of Brazil. For example, Goiás, which borders Brazil's national capital, Brasília, was a region that first-hand suffered those impacts. There was rigorous political persecution such as the downfall of Governor Mauro Borges, irregular arrests, torture, and severe educational censorship. Goiás experienced major resistance events such as the Assault on the 'War Shot' Barracks (the first-ever armed movement against the military regime), the most significant rebel and rural guerilla movement in the country, and important student revolts as well. Goiás is, therefore, home to many exiled, arrested, and tortured victims, who experienced authoritarianism and censorship during that period.

This study contributes to understanding how mass violence took place in Brazil, which is often debated only on a national level. It aims to break these boundaries and demonstrate that the repression that

occurred in the heart of Brazil, in this state, is relevant for those studying mass violence episodes or simply seeking to learn more about dictatorships and Brazil's history.

Geographical, Cultural, and Economic Context

The occupation of the Goiás' territory began in the 18th century. In 1937, the capital of Goiás, previously located in the city of Goiás, was transferred to Goiânia. The inauguration of Brasília, in the 1960s, also brought economic and population growth to Goiás, due to its proximity to the capital Goiânia. The state of Goiás is located in the central portion of Brazil, more precisely in the country's midwest geographic region. The territory has a wide diversity of fauna and flora, characterized by the tropical climate and the Cerrado vegetation. The state's culture is strongly influenced by the religiosity and traditions of the countryside. The history of the settlement of Goiás is linked to gold mining. The period of gold extraction led to the foundation of historic cities in the state, such as Cidade de Goiás and Pirenópolis. The state has important urban centers, a good infrastructure of services, and an economy based on the primary sector. Tourism is also an important activity in the inland cities of the state.

Under the military regime, the changes in the territorial organization of the states were in charge of the government and were governed by political guidelines. Strong examples of this were the merger of the State of Guanabara, by Rio de Janeiro (1975), and the dismemberment of the South of Mato Grosso (1977). In this context, Federal Deputy Siqueira Campos started a campaign in the Lower House calling for the territorial redistribution of Amazônia Legal (with emphasis on the north of Goiás), since even with investments from projects such as Polocentro and Polamazônia, the north of the state still had poor economic performance and with strong popular movements against the military regime. This way, in 1988, Goiás had its territory divided, and its northern part became the state of Tocantins. Hence, Goiás played a major role during the Brazilian Military Dictatorship, from its geographical localization to its constant urban growth.



Goiânia, capital of Goiás, in aerial view photo, 1960 - Colombo Company

1. Histories of Repression and Resistance

The military takeover meant a democratic rupture, resulting in persecutions, annulment of political rights, imprisonment, repression of students, torture, and exile. Goiás felt the effects of this in many spheres and repeatedly. In this way, this chapter highlights episodes that show the two sides of the military coup: repression and resistance.

1.1. Histories of Repression

The repression in Goiás occurred in several ways, but the most common was through Military Police Investigations (IPMs). The first IPM instituted in Goiás by the military dictatorship occurred soon after the coup with the support of conservative political parties and organized sectors of Brazilian civil society. It covered several segments, such as colleges, unions, peasant leagues, political parties and leftist organizations, the executive and judicial branches, and student movements. In this way, the IPM had the purpose of investigating, from the military point of view, participation in activities considered communist, or that promoted leftist ideologies, which could go against the regime.

Thus, this section elaborates how this organized repression affected Goiás, beginning with the fall of Governor Mauro Borges, re-assessing the massive political persecution, and ending with the severe educational censorship in Goiás.

1.1.1. The Downfall of Governor Mauro Borges (1964)

Goiás Governor Mauro Borges supported the IPMs— and was their victim. A few months after the military coup, on November 26, 1964, troops advanced along the avenues of Goiânia, the capital of Goiás. Airplanes flew low over the capital, threatening to bomb the seat of the state government. In the Esmeraldas Palace, the center of government, Governor Borges, head of the PSD (Partido Social Democrático), tried to resist his deposition, which had been ordered by the military regime. Mauro was also a military man - a lieutenant colonel - but he mistrusted the conservative government. Essentially, he took action in the Legality Network in 1961, together with the governor of Rio Grande do Sul Leonel Brizola, which made Mauro no longer trusted by the military staff. This Legality Network guaranteed the inauguration of João Goulart as president, and because of this, the military junta did not trust Borges and removed the state power of Goiás from his hands.

Controversially, in the beginning, Borges supported the military coup of '64 and took part in a famous meeting called the “meeting of the governors,” which endorsed the nomination of Castelo Branco for the presidency, the first military leader to assume power after the coup. Later, seeing that the dictatorship would not be so advantageous, Mauro made enemies in the new regime, such as the then Minister of War General Costa e Silva, who would be the next president after Castelo Branco. For this reason, after being anti-democratically deposed from the government, Mauro also had his political rights revoked in 1966.

It is crucial to analyze Borge's downfall because it led to a wave of repression in Goiânia and across Goiás. For instance, members of government agencies who were condemned as part of a “communist infiltration of the government palace” began to be persecuted and have their mandates revoked, rights denied, and to be imprisoned. Those politicians, such as the Deputy Chief of the Civil Cabinet João Batista Zacariotti, were preventively arrested, with “habeas corpus” denied. Many people, like Zacariotti himself, ended up being tortured afterward.

1.1.2 Persecution and Censorship

1.1.2.1. Persecution

Arrests, torture, revoked mandates, and censorship became more intense than ever in Goiás after Mauro's downfall. Anyone who opposed the military government or conducted themselves in a manner that did not match the military's ideology was already considered a political enemy. Since it was not a democratic government, the opposition, including communist parties (e.g., Communist Party of Brazil, or PC do B), activists, students, and militants, were not welcome to speak up or even express their opinions.

In the first days of April 1964, the military regime enforced the first political arrests in Goiás. One of the most notable arrests was the student leader Tarzan de Castro, president of the PC do B for his participation in the creation of the Peasant Leagues in Goiás, which had as their objective the struggle for land distribution, based on the model of the Cuban revolution. Such leagues clashed head-on with the ideologies of the military regime. Tarzan was taken to the 10th “Caçadores” Battalion of the Brazilian Army in Goiânia, where he was detained and held incommunicado. He suffered physical and psychological torture.

The ruthless torture methods included but were not restricted to: restraints, firing-simulations, electric shocks, “telephones” (slaps with closed hands on the ears), sticks, tying up of the victim's genitalia, threats against family members, and experiments to cause mental confusion. The military widely used torture to obtain confessions from political prisoners by forcing people to sign anything to end the brutal sufferings. Many militants, politicians, students, or simply civilians suffered from these cruel methods (at least 57 were tortured that year.)

One of the political prisoners arrested with Tarzan, Hugo Brockes, soon after leaving prison went to the Notary Public and registered a Public Declaration Deed. In this act of unprecedented courage, this deed narrated the veracity of the facts of his incarceration at the “10th Caçadores” Battalion Barracks in Goiânia, contradicting the IPM Report regarding his arrest and that of other colleagues. He was one of the very few at that time to expose the reality of the military cruelty, recounting his torture

and other sexperiences in prison.

Political persecution in Goiás and Brazil continued until the end of the dictatorship in 1985.

1.1.2.2. Censorship

Another form of repression in constant use during the military regime was censorship. Censorship affected mainly the educational field in Goiás. The situation of the Federal University of Goiás summarizes how censorship affected the academic boundaries of that state.

On April 25th, 1964, the Center of Brazilian Studies (CEB) of the Federal University of Goiás (UFG) director, Gilberto Mendonça Teles, started yet another collegiate meeting. The agenda of the meeting was to deal with the Circular Letter no. 214, of April 20, 1964, which was concerned with the “purges of subversive elements” from UFG and also the “intervention in the Academic Directory” by determination of the rectory. It was only at the end of the meeting that all those present were informed in more detail about the letter “coming from the rectory.” It was supported by Institutional Act no. 1 (AI-1) and requested the removal of a list of educators who were considered communists because of their professional backgrounds. The letter also recommended that the Board of Directors take control of the Academic Directory so that the student body would be restricted only to culture and sports. The effects of AI-1 were already being felt at UFG, even before the military government had completed one month.

The creation of the CEB, in 1963, according to its first and only director, Gilberto Mendonça Teles, was related to the effort of strengthening the larger sense of a university project in midwest Brazil. However, with the rise of the military regime, this project came to be considered subversive. Gilberto recalls the beginning of the physical military intervention in the CEB on a Monday in August 1964:

“At the door of the Center was an Army jeep and, next to it, a military man in uniform. Well,” said the soldier, “I came to get the communist books that are here. Maria do Rosário answered: ‘I am responsible for the library. Did you bring a warrant?’

No,” replied the arrogant Captain Coutinho, “but I’ll take them anyway and you can consider yourself arrested. Soon I arrived and Maria told me: ‘They’ve come for the books. Then the captain introduced himself, saluting: ‘Captain Coutinho. I’ve come to get all the books from the communist library. Maria told me: ‘He arrested me. The captain heard her and asked me: ‘Is she your wife? Then consider yourself released’”.

(Carolina Melo, Journal UFG reported 03/27/19)

As he recalls, the director of the CEB noticed “the wayward manner” of Captain Coutinho to contest the warrantless seizure. But he only managed to gain time because they took all the books from the Center for Brazilian Studies with the warrant in hand. Gilberto Mendonça Teles managed to keep only about 20 books, which today make up his private library donated to UFG.

The censorship directly impacted the future of the Federal University of Goiás, the foremost higher education institution of the state. Nevertheless, fortunately, after 1985, the university recovered from that repressive period. The university rebuilt a safe and democratic place for its students, even though UFG will never recover some materials.

1.2. Histories of Resistance

Following the repression of the military coup, resistance started to erupt throughout Brazil. I present in this section the main resistance movements against the military regime in Goiás, beginning with the “Assalto ao Tiro de Guerra,” an activity directly connected to PC do B (Partido Comunista do Brasil) militancy. Then, I discuss key student revolts and the largest rural guerilla movement against the military regime.

1.2.1. Before the Assalto ao Tiro de Guerra - Assault on the “War Shot” Barracks (1964)

After the coup, the PC do B, a communist party, began to prepare for armed resistance in August of that same year in response to the repressive events that resulted from the military coup. The Executive Committee of the Communist Party met and wrote a document to the Supreme Court, which warned that

the coup had come to stay and was not something temporary, as many still thought. To combat the coup and defeat the dictatorship, the Communist Party tried to increase the pace of its work in preparation for the armed resistance.

Thus, the first step was to begin choosing locations where the PC do B would deploy future guerrilla and resistance movements. From the beginning - even before the coup - Goiás had called the attention of PC do B's leaders. In their minds, the experience of armed resistance that occurred in the rural Goiás region of Trombas and Formoso was still fresh, a movement in which peasants defeated an extensive process of land grabbing in Goiás (1954-1957). The communist leaders, like Angelo Arroyo and Dynéas Aguiar, had already made a reconnaissance trip to that area in 1963. From there, the party began to establish a presence in the state. Lectures in educational institutes and public spaces to the general populace encouraged, even more, party expansion. Influential activists that would later take part in resistance movements began to join the party, such as Tarzan de Castro, Élio Cabral de Souza, and the student leader Neso Natal. All the reaction to the PC do B's ideology strengthened the idea that only an armed movement would be able to establish a new regime of popular democracy, being a starting point for the crucial resistance movements after the military coup.

1.2.2. The Assault on the "War Shot" Barracks

In November 1964, news of the military's plans to oust Governor Mauro Borges, who threatened to resist, had already spread among the population. The rhetoric became more radical. There was talk of arming the people, as the PC do B was already planning, and the first volunteers for a possible resistance began to appear. The militants were convinced that a grassroots fight was needed at the time. Therefore, this resulted in the idea of an assault on the "War Shot" Barracks to collect armaments and prepare for worse to come.

The assault was planned by a group of people dissatisfied with the military coup who devised a spectacular plan to confiscate weapons from the Brazilian Army to defend the government of Mauro

Borges before his downfall and create conditions for a popular and socialist revolution. It was their objective to execute this revolution, inspired by the USSR and Cuban models. They were all left-wing militants, members of the Communist Party of Brazil - PC do B. The assault took place in Anápolis, which is 67.7 kilometers from the Capital of Goiás, Goiânia. The "Assalto ao Tiro de Guerra" was the first-ever armed resistance movement against the military government to defend democracy.

The assault occurred on the night of November 13th, 1964, and was premeditated and plotted by Neso Natal, Daniel ngelo, Jaime José Mendes, Belmiro Vieira de Rezende e José Mendes Vieira. The operation itself was a success, more so than they expected. Neso Natal had already studied the location and realized that it was practically unprotected against such an action. They did not face any security guards there. This way, their only liability or concern was to load the heavy weaponry into the vehicle. There were sixty-four antique rifles, some grenades, and other armaments.

The following morning it was a mess. Army troops moved into Anápolis and placed barriers on all the roads, closing access to the airport. The governor of Goiás, for his part, declared that "the theft of the guns from Anápolis was nothing more than a farce designed to precipitate persecution by the hard-liners who wanted to see him overthrown as head of the state executive."

Overall, the communist activists' action had a national repercussion. It was covered in newspapers headlines throughout the country, including the *Jornal Última Hora*, from São Paulo. It became an inspiration and symbol of courage to people repressed by the military regime. Flávio Tavares, a journalist who was linked to militancy and resistance, wrote the following in his column in the *Última Hora* newspaper about the Assault on the "War Shot" Barracks: "Everything seems to be a typical provocation, carefully planned and prepared, which would consolidate the idea that Goiás had become a center of guerrilla action." (Source: *Última Hora* Journal Headline about the "Assalto ao Tiro de Guerra". The photo depicts the assaulting militants: Neso Natal, Daniel ngelo, Jaime José Mendes, Belmiro Vieira de Rezende e José Mendes Vieira: November 1964 (ANIGO archives).)

However, the situation of Neso Natal and his companions became more and more difficult. The officials were seeking them, and nothing indicated that the governor intended to resist, much less with weapons in his hands. Everything began to fall apart when frightened by the climate of terror that was being created, the driver of the operation came forward to the state security agencies and denounced the entire scheme. Just two days after the assault, on November 16, Mauro Borges' own police arrested the group and seized the weapons in Belmiro Vieira's house.

After the assault on the "War Shot" Barracks on November 23, the Supreme Court acknowledged the habeas corpus of governor Borges. It confirmed that only a majority of the Legislative Assembly could impeach him. On November 26, General Castelo Branco became determined to intervene in the state and remove Mauro Borges. Thus, as his downfall occurred right after the assault, the group commented that the assault on the 'War Shot' Barracks accelerated the intervention in the state of Goiás. Newspapers and investigators said that this robbery accelerated the process of intervention to depose the Governor of Goiás.

The majority of the group was imprisoned for around four months, but eventually, they were granted habeas corpus and released. Even so, they had to flee to another state or country to avoid being persecuted again. Thus, some flew to Rio de Janeiro and others into exile. Neso Natal, whose personal perspective features prominently in this paper, went to Uruguay, then Rio de Janeiro. Finally, he was exiled in the Soviet Union for almost a decade.

1.2.3. Student Revolts (1968)

In addition to the Assault on the "War Shot" Barracks, which was led primarily by students working with the resistance, Goiás had several student revolts during the military dictatorship.

The first student strike in Brazil after the military coup took place in Goiás. It occurred in the city of Goiás, the old Vila Boa, today declared a World Cultural Heritage Site by UNESCO. In 1965, parents and students of the Colégio Estadual Lyceu de Goiás, who were unhappy with the dismissal of the director of that educational institution, promoted a general strike

protesting for the permanence of their director. He was dismissed for "suspicious subversive behavior," by the military staff. This movement was enough to be declared by the dictatorship authorities as a communist focus. Several police officers were sent there to quell the protests.

In 1968, a student revolt stood out among the others, given the degree of extreme violence associated with this revolt. This year brought intense episodes in Goiás and Brazil. It was when the murder of the student Edson Luiz occurred, in the Calabouço restaurant in Rio de Janeiro, due to violent police repression during a student protest. It had repercussions in the entire country, making outraged students go to the streets. This way, in Goiânia, on April 1st, 1968, a protest was held by mainly high school students and student leaders calling for justice for Edson Luiz. In the middle of the movement, the student Ornalino Cândido da Silva was shot in the head. He was 19 years old and also worked as a car washer to financially help his family. The military mistook him as being the student leader Euler Ivo during a chase against the protesting students. Here, it is possible to perceive that the military forces were willing to do anything to eliminate any form of freedom of expression different from their ideology, even if that means killing young students.

For that day and the following day, troops chased the students, culminating in the "Invasion of the Cathedral," when soldiers entered Goiânia's main church to arrest young people who had taken refuge there. The Archbishop of Goiânia, Dom Fernando Gomes, who was present on the day, could not prevent this violence - two students from being wounded by bullets inside the church.

All in all, teenagers and young adults, mainly students just like those participating in the protest of April 1st, were violently repressed simply for opposing the military government. Such resistance was the inspiration for student revolts in states like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

Nowadays, the memories of the student resistance movements against the violence of the military forces at that time stand both as a symbol and an alert for possible future anti-democratic regimes. For this, there is also a monument in Goiânia called "Monumento aos Mortos e Desaparecidos

na Luta Contra a Ditadura Militar” (i.e., Monument to the Killed and Disappeared in the Fight Against the Military Dictatorship) that has the intention of passing these memories of resistance on to the next generations.

1.2.4. Guerrilla of Araguaia (1967-1974)

Another notorious resistance movement was the Guerilla of Araguaia. In 1967, militants linked to the PC do B wanted to imitate resistance inspired by the Cuban Revolution. Moving into remote areas, they tried to set up a rural guerrilla movement in the Bico do Papagaio, a region that then belonged to Goiás, on the border with the state of Pará. This region contains a part of the great river Araguaia, hence the name of this guerrilla movement.

The militants carried out training, hid fugitives, and planned armed operations there. After the General Médici government (1969-1974) launched intense repression against the insurgents, the guerrilla movement became violent. With operations Sucuri, Papagaio, and Marajoara, the fighting intensified from 1972 onwards. The Commission on Political Deaths and Disappearances (CSMDP) calculated that seventy-nine guerrillas were involved in the guerrilla war. Local peasants also supported the movement. Almost half of the disappearances of opponents in Goiás during the military regime occurred in the Araguaia region. A total of seventy people went missing, sixty-four of them militants and six peasants. Thus, this was the most significant rural guerrilla war against the Brazilian military regime, which had a national repercussion.

2. Memories of Repression and Resistance

This section is primarily based on oral history, complemented by documents provided by prominent participant Neso Natal.

Neso Natal, on August 27th, 2021, during his interview with João Victor A. Marques.

To deeply understand the military coup of 1964 and its impacts on a victim's life, I interviewed Neso Natal. Natal is one of the figures that marked the resistance during the military dictatorship. He was one of those responsible for the Assault on the “War Shot”

Barracks, a militant student leader and once part of communist parties, namely the PCB and PCdoB. He was arrested and brutally tortured — physically and mentally.

In this section, I aim to present the statement that Neso Natal provided me during our interview, describing moments that are reflected in his physical scars and precise memories. Natal's history is presented in six sections: Background, Militancy, Arrest, Exile, Torture, and Amnesty.

2.1. Background

Neso Natal was born on November 4, 1942, in Goiandira, a city in the interior of Goiás, where he was raised. “Since I was six years old, in Goiandira, I was heavily influenced by Juca Ferreira, who was from the Communist Party of Brazil (PCB) and worked in the pharmacy with my father,” Neso Natal said. Natal told me that the pharmacy where his father worked was a center where people would meet to talk about left-wing ideologies, such as during World War II, when people would comment on Nazism and Fascism.

“Something interesting is that very few people had radios at that time, and in this pharmacy, there was a radio that people listened to, and there was also a map. So Russia's victory in World War II was much discussed. Russia lost more than 20 million people in the fighting, between soldiers and civilians. Some historians claim that this number was even higher. It was people who suffered a lot in that period.”

He told me that from a very young age, he could tell that everything revolved around that conversation, praising the ideology of socialism: “I remember that soon after, at that time, they built a huge tower for the ‘Oil is Ours’ campaign. That was a fight for the people, and the next day the mayor had it torn down, but the persistence of the communists was great and they raised the tower again.”

In addition to the towers being torn down, Neso notes that in Goiandira, where he lived, the severity of persecutions was already very high.” As Goiandira was the gateway to the communist party in Goiás, from the railroad that passes through Goiandira, Catalão, Ipameri and ends in Anápolis, my city was also the focus for persecution and torture.”

He specified that they shaved the communists' heads, rubbed tar on them, and pulled their fingernails with pliers. Then, Neso relates that the presence of the communist party in Goiandira was an essential influence on him. "I lived in an environment where there was always talk about misery, poverty, inequality; I always heard about the struggle related to Socialism, the development of this political-economic system, the growth of the Socialist Block (USSR), about Stalin. Stalin was regarded as a god; he was called Papa Stalin, Grandpa Stalin."

Moreover, his father participated in the movement that took Riberão Preto, in 1932, in the Constitutionalist Revolution that was São Paulo's fight against the authoritarian president Getúlio Vargas. Many people in Goiás also participated in this movement against the Paulistas. "Further than being an activist, my father ran for mayor of Goiandira through the communist party. There was even a shootout at one of the political rallies since the other candidate was the extremely conservative Colonel Sinfrônio." As Natal grew up under the influence of political activism inspired by his father and the socio-political context, even when he was still in school, he had already become involved with militancy and left-wing organizations.

Map showing where Goiandira is located in Goiás. (Raphael Lorenzeto de Abreu - [Image:Goiás MesoMicroMunicip.svg](#), own work)

2.2. Militancy

Within the student body in high school, Neso says he was involved with organizations such as UGES (União Goiana dos Estudantes Secundaristas), which prompted his involvement in future militancy resistance movements. This section provides an overview of Natal's track record as a militant.

"I had a lot of contact with the left-wing people inside UGES. I participated in congresses and, as I already had a tendency, I tried to participate in a revolutionary organization. Later, I entered this revolutionary organization, which was the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), eager to trigger a revolution, influenced heavily by the Cuban Revolution, the Vietnam War, and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, which are historical events that influenced many democracies and countries in the world."

Neso told me that the knowledge he already had in left-wing ideologies, even though only a theoretical one, helped him to engage relatively early on with PCB. In the 1960s, being part of the Brazilian communist party, he told me he had a sort of "petty-bourgeois tendency" to generate a revolution similar to what the Cubans did. "I thought that by taking the gun, the rifle would make the revolution. I joined the party half dissatisfied with the political position and the fight that should be done through the vote, not through an armed revolution. I was unhappy, but I participated. I even participated in the campaign for the legalization of the Communist Party."

During this time, he studied in the highly reactionary Don Bosco School. The revolutionaries, the people from the left-wing, studied in a public school, in the Lyceu school located in Goiânia. Thus, he transferred to the Lyceu school, and there was a place that supported his involvement in activist movements. "I participated in various student movements in the capital. We had intense activities, like campaigns against bus fare increases and participating in several strikes that UGES promoted."

As if the strikes and student movements were not enough, Neso told me he wanted to do something bigger. "I thought that it was very easy to make a revolution, all you had to do was take the rifle, go up and take the power. I thought that, sometimes for lack of knowledge, even though I had already read some Marxist books, books by Lenin, and Hegel. Soon after that, a workers' congress happened here in Goiânia. It was in this congress that I started to have doubts. I began to realize that the fight for socialism was very peaceful, everything by voting, and I began to think that it wouldn't work that way. However, in this same period, João Amazonas, one of the leaders of the other communist party in Goiás (PCdoB), was here in Goiânia. When he came I began to think that the PCdoB's position was a more revolutionary one. Then, I left PCB and joined the PCdoB."

This change of parties was crucial to Neso's life; the PCdoB adopted the more radical approach Neso was looking for and was the party that led Neso to organize the Assault on the War Shot Barracks. "Inside PCdoB, I met Tarzan de Castro, Elio, Divino, people that were already active as militants. We organized several and constant meetings in Goiânia to put our plans of resistance in action. Then, it was prior

to the coup of 64 that we started planning our first armed resistance movement seeing that a military coup was about to happen. We organized the Assault on the ‘War Shot’ Barracks.”

2.3. First Arrest

After the Assault on the “War Shot” Barracks, the majority of the operations group was imprisoned for around four months. Eventually, they were granted habeas corpus to be released, as was the case of Neso Natal. “We were imprisoned in the 10° BC (a state prison in Goiânia). The police officer took our statement with everyone around, in a swivel chair, each one asking a question wanting to know what was happening and what had happened. After this robbery, we were practically left in the lurch. We were arrested immediately for lack of support because if we had had support these weapons could have gone somewhere else. We would do a sequence; other people would do the distribution.”

He also commented that he was not tortured in this first arrest but saw the dictatorship’s atrocities directly for the first time there.

“I can honestly say that I was not tortured in this first arrest. It is enough to be arrested for your rights to be curtailed, the methods for taking statements did not let us sleep, but I was not in fact tortured, and I cannot say anything about it in this first arrest. However, I met with people who were already being victims of the experimental and sadist military torture. Leaving Goiânia, we were transferred to the PE - Army Police in Brasília, and there were people with very serious problems, like Pawel Gutko. He was not a member of the party, but he was Polish, his father was Russian, who happens to have been my teacher, and his mother was Polish. They arrested him in Goiânia and started severely torturing him. By the time I was there, you could notice the mental damage the torture caused to him. As a result, he used to burn his whole body with cigarettes himself, drink water from the toilet, and rub his face with his own feces when he defecated. From what I know from the newspapers, he could not stand the torture and did not last much after that. Thus, after being in jail for four months or so, I came out with the habeas corpus that I wrote and knew that if I did not want to end up just like Pawel Gutko, I needed to run away from Goiás.”

Neso told me that he and his colleagues started planning to flee to another state or country to avoid being persecuted again because they were already considered a threat and state enemies by the military regime.

2.4. Exile

When the military forces started persecuting the militants again, many of Neso’s colleagues went to Rio de Janeiro, but he went to Uruguay. As the political situation in Uruguay was not favorable to foreigners, however, he returned to Rio de Janeiro, hoping to find another way to flee the country. He struggled to find a solution, even entering the Mexican embassy seeking exile, without success and almost being caught. Nevertheless, the PC do B supported him with a ticket and visa to France.

From there, he went to the Soviet Union. Thus, Neso Natal was exiled in Russia for almost a decade and started to build a life there. He studied geology there and met his wife, Maria. In 1975, Neso decided to come back to Brazil. However, the regime had condemned him for political crimes while he was outside of the country, which resulted in Natal being brutally tortured after getting caught by the government upon his return.

“I went to Paris, stayed there for a while. From there I went to Moscow, where I took my higher education course. I was very well received in the Soviet Union. But despite everything you are left with that desire to return to your homeland. But I am sure that if I had stayed here during the Medici Government, which was the most violent government at the time, I would not be here alive and speaking. When I arrived in Moscow, I went to the Party Staff School. I stayed there for a year, studying Marxism. After I finished school, I got an opportunity to transfer to Kyiv to study geology. So I went to become a geology technician, studying in Kyiv where I stayed for almost a year. In this period of one year, I had already met Maria who lived in Moscow and was studying medicine; then, I asked for a transfer to Moscow. In Moscow, I entered the Institute of Geology, now as an undergraduate student. I was studying, and I had a lot of difficulty with mathematics and other subjects. Therefore, Maria got a private tutor, and with a lot of effort, I overcame the difficulties and finished the Geology course. The course lasted

five years. I finished the course that was Geology and Engineering. It was engineering for the construction of mines, dams, and mining galleries. After finishing this course, I returned to Brazil, in 1975, in the Geiser government. Also, during this period in exile, I kept in touch with Gregório Bezerra and with Prestes' family. I arrived in the Soviet Union before Prestes, but he left soon after, and so did I. You may ask me why I made this decision, but the only thing that I had in mind is that Brazil was getting better than it was at that age. I believed I had to come back, I had to continue to fight for my country."

Going through his return to Brazil, Neso told me about what he expected from living in Brazil again and how things went after landing in Brazil.

"When Maria and I came to Brazil, we had a collection of books, paintings, a large number of records of classical music, and we shipped them. I still have some of these books here, but the military took most of them. We arrived in September 1975, and my great joy was to have graduated together with Maria, come back to Brazil, and start working— especially because she graduated in medicine, tropical diseases, and Brazil is a low country. We had a dream of doing something for the country, but when we arrived, still under the military regime, under a rule of persecution, we wanted to go back. Eager to work, I went to São Paulo and published ads in the newspaper O Estado de São Paulo for those looking for a geologist to find me. While not receiving any job proposals, I stayed with Maria and my family.

On November 1st, I received a letter saying that the move from Moscow had arrived and I went to São Paulo. On November 15, 1975; I stayed in São Paulo for three days and went to Santos' harbor. What I did not know is that, during this period, it seemed that the military people were already waiting for me there. They identified the Russian ship and found me. I was kidnapped, arrested, and taken to the former Maritime Police. At the Maritime Police, the torture began. Still, it was lighter than at the DOI-ODI (i.e., one of the most infamous prisons regarding the military hell, located in the state of São Paulo) afterward. They started punching me, asking questions without much interest in my answers, because they wanted to torture me and not get answers. Soon afterward, I was transferred to the DOI-CODI, they took me away handcuffed, hooded, and the torture began."

2.5. Torture

From this point on, Neso related in detail the cruelty he experienced after being kidnapped and tortured. It is essential to mention that while all of this was happening, Maria, Neso's wife, did not know where he was and did not speak Portuguese at all, being pregnant at that time.

Neso told me that it was as if he was entering hell at the DOI-CODI prison, a hell of torture. They took him to a room, stripped him of his clothes, threw water and salt on him, and tied him to a heavy zinc chair. They tied wires to his genitals and fingers. They tortured him with electric shocks; the chair was so heavy that it shook, and his teeth contracted.

"They applied violent shocks, a terrible feeling. Even worse was when they put the wires inside my ear. It was as if you were being hit with an anvil, a noise that made you faint. You would faint and they would come and punch you in the diaphragm so that you would start coming to your senses to continue on and on. In the first room that I was in, which they called the visiting room, they did not want to know any information; not even your name, because they asked and when you were going to answer they came with a shock and you could not even answer because your body was shaking. That was in the beginning. Then they put you in a very dark 1.20-meter cell, with a mattress and a toilet. They put you there and from that point on they would not let you sleep. You spent the whole night taking statements. I realized that there were three teams: teams A, B, and C, that took the statements. You were hooded, but when you came out you could see a little bit of the room, it was a padded room, acoustically protected. The first team would take the statements, these statements would be passed to the other team that would analyze them and ask other questions, and the third team would sometimes have us write up and tell things about the story."

They asked Neso a lot about his participation in the assault on the 'War Shot' Barracks. Also, because he was still speaking a lot of Russian, they usually called him a KGB agent. Because of that, sometimes the torture would go even more intensely. Neso remained arrested there in DOI from the middle of November until January 1976, when he was transferred, and psychological torture began.

"In the hell, at the DOI I was still conscious during the tortures, I still kept my conscience, although I was suffering. I stayed more or less from November until the beginning of January suffering from the physical torture. Then, I was transferred to the DOI in Brasilia, when the psychological violence and mental confusion became part of the torture. There I went crazy, completely out of my mind. They used the closed prison method with heat, cold, lights on, water dripping, hearing things. They divided the day into four. How did they do this? They mess with your psychology: the light would get colder, hotter; they would bring you coffee, food, even if you did not eat. They did this until you had no idea. When we are imprisoned, we look at our fingernails and hair to have an idea of how long we have been there, but after a certain period of time, we lose track. Life no longer has any value, you only think about something else. You think that it does not have any value anymore, you become a lab rat. That's why, when they do the tests, they immediately kill the rats. We were like that. The physical torture, you are conscious and you endure it. Sometimes it gets to a stage where you cannot stand it anymore. In fact, the first time I attempted suicide was in São Paulo during the physical torture. But even so, the psychological torture is absolutely worse."

Neso said it was martyrdom. Sometimes he did not even know his family anymore. He told me he was mute; he was not able to speak.

"I was delirious. They made me become a person without conscience as if I were some kind of animal. A person who does not think nor do anything. It's hard to explain the situation I was in, I became inconsequential in a certain way. When I was transferred from Brasilia to CEPAIGO in Goiânia, if they had placed me with the common prisoners, I think they would not have accepted me. It was the comrades who treated me and took care of me. There, they kept a 24-hour watch on me so that I would not do anything reckless. In CEPAIGO I also tried to commit suicide with a thread, but fortunately, it did not work. Meanwhile, my wife was in Goiânia. She did not speak Portuguese, only Russian. Dr. Rômulo's advice, a lawyer, was that she was not allowed to go out. She always stayed inside the house, and she was pregnant. She could not go out, because they were threatening to deport her. They found out about her somehow. She was so desperate that she went to the Soviet Union embassy, but the ambassador could not interfere in

internal Brazilian affairs, the only thing he could offer was a return ticket. She preferred to stay here and wait for the consequences. She did not know what to do, even though she knew about my case in Brazil, about the danger I was in."

Neso said he felt naive about returning to Brazil and not listening to the comrades who said it was better to wait for amnesty. It was a great difficulty with Maria's situation, and she was left on the loose, even though Neso's family gave her excellent assistance.

"My brothers Zequinha and Jehovah, and my mother gave her assistance. She stayed in Brazil and had a very hard time because of the assistance that I could not give her due to my imprisonment. I was imprisoned for almost two years, from November 1975 to June 17, 1977. From the moment my wife visited me in the prison, and I was able to receive visits, I did not recognize the baby in her womb, deliriously thinking it was a pillow. Sometimes I spoke, sometimes not; I was mute, I saw things, I did not recognize people. I thought everyone was a spy, I was upset. It was indeed a very difficult period. It took a long time for improvement to begin. Abrão, a comrade of mine, helped me a lot. He and other colleagues managed to get me out of CEPAIGO and took me to a psychiatric clinic so that they could prescribe me medication. Little by little I got better; but even after I left prison I spent a long time rehabilitating myself. I am not ashamed to tell you this because the reactions that I had were real."

Neso also commented on the consequences of the torture that followed him until nowadays:

"The impressive thing is that even after a long time, you can notice in my house, there are no keys in the doors, I do not lock the doors. I have the greatest dread and fear of closed places. This is because of the prisons. I always have nightmares about the police running after me. When I got out of prison, I could not see any police, even the traffic police I thought were a danger to me. The torture had a very big influence on my irritability. I have marks from the torture; I still have the marks from the dragon chair. They would throw salt and you would move around, even though you were tied up. They threw salt to conduct energy. The seat was made of zinc and when you moved, the salt made wounds, and the wounds with the salt were

an unbearable pain. I have marks on my legs and my teeth are all false because the molar and premolar teeth were crushed because of the strong contractions, with so much force the teeth would break. I have hearing problems, diabetes, I have a lot of irritability, all of this is a consequence of these events."

He was one of the last victims to be released from prison: "I got out, but I was persecuted, I believe not only me but also the other comrades, until 1985."

2.6. Amnesty

Amnesty was granted in 1979. During the Geisel Government, it was already possible to understand that they were heading towards an amnesty. Neso saw that coming: "At the time I was arrested, the DOI was full of people who had already been arrested and were there again. When there was Geisel's immediate reaction, it benefited everyone that was there, even though there was resistance inside from the military forces."

Neso described what it was like receiving amnesty after all the events he suffered:

"Receiving Amnesty was very exciting. Sometimes I was incredulous, wondering if this recognition would really happen. At the Amnesty trial, the Human Rights trial, the Peace Commission trial, I was very distressed. The first trial was a trial that I did not participate in, it was a more ordinary event, and I lost. I became tense and by the second trial, I was already without hope of winning the amnesty, of winning this recognition. There was the trial, they wanted to judge me and I was recognized as a professor because I had been a professor of the Russian language at the Brazil-Soviet Union Cultural Institute - it was listed in ABIN that I was a professor and they wanted to judge me as such. I had a degree in Geology, my profession was not that of a teacher. The reporter had asked that they judge me as a teacher, but Lavonier, who was the president of the Amnesty Commission, did not accept and said that I was a geologist, that I had arrived with a diploma, and that I had been arrested as a geologist. The documents mentioned the arrest of a geologist who studied in the Soviet Union. This thesis was defended and won. I was accepted as a geologist and received a pension as such. It was very emotional. There were several people in the plenary that applauded me and

the Commission. Comrades like Marcantônio and João Silva were there. My daughter Maya was there. I was very satisfied and happy with the judgment. This judgment took place at the end of 2004. The important thing is not the pension, not the salary, but the recognition that the State was wrong. That is the most important thing and the main thing."

Neso still thinks that there should have been trials of the dictatorship's oppressive leaders to repair a lack of justice left by the military government.

"I am in favor of the trial of the torturers. For me, torturers should not be given amnesty. There is no amnesty for torturers anywhere in the world. There should be a trial for these people, they killed many, not only Brazilians but also Italians, Argentines, Spaniards who were fighting here and who died. In Argentina and Chile, they were prosecuted and convicted. In Brazil, there is resistance, not only from the Armed Forces but also within the Congress, within the Senate, because there are many people there who have no interest. In my time we had Commander Ustra, who has now been condemned; he was a torturer and has nothing to do with Amnesty. Congress and many people think that both sides should have amnesty, and that is just hard to swallow." "I believe that their domination will not be eternal. It will come to an end like the Roman and Byzantine Empire; like Nazism and Fascism will also come to an end, but I believe it still exists today. The Congress and the Senate are full of people from that time, from the Arena. That is why it is difficult to do something. Why hasn't land reform been done in Brazil yet? Because it is very difficult to do it in this situation, in this capitalist regime; and it is even more difficult because of the people that are in the Congress and in the Senate. There are many democrats, but there is a big resistance. There are people who are against amnesty."

All in all, Neso's legacy of resistance and memories of a violent period should never be forgotten, as a lasting reminder of how harmful anti-democratic governments can be, not only in Brazil but across the globe.

Neso Natal and his wife Maria, in 2018, fifty-five years after the military coup

Final Remarks

I have demonstrated in this paper that Goiás was a region that abundantly experienced the Brazilian military dictatorship, passing through severe repression, facing it with considerable resistance, and leaving many disturbing memories and scars in those who survived the atrocities.

Although the documented materials about the military dictatorship in Goiás helped reconstruct the key events of this period, interviewing Neso Natal provided a more transparent and human approach to the research. It contributed with crucial information about the atrocities committed at that time and left explicit the harm that anti-democratic systems can do to human rights. Essentially, Neso Natal is living proof of how precisely the coup affected Goiás and injured the human rights of many Goianos, victims of military authoritarianism.

I should point out that the experience of Neso Natal, unique and important as it is, is one among the thousands affected by the Brazilian military dictatorship. It is essential to recognize the victims' fight against the repression of that government's ideologies and recall their constant fight. This legacy might be a warning for current Goianos and future generations of Brazilians and people all over the world. A warning to take a stand against any kind of governance which leans toward authoritarianism.

Author's Future Steps

I am aware that the research paper does not cover one hundred percent of the events in Goiás, nor is it a complete piece about the Brazilian military dictatorship, which leaves space to continue to engage in the learning of this period. I aim to continue pursuing this path. Specifically, developing further understanding about the Brazilian military dictatorship and studying other mass violence episodes shall be part of my future as a researcher. Being a researcher is indeed a contribution to my intellectual curiosity, but also holds a cultural responsibility to represent the history of my state, and it is an encouragement to anyone who seeks to study human rights abuses in their surroundings. I hope that I demonstrated that the history of the military regime in Goiás matters,

regardless of how the years and decades have passed since the events occurred. Such a record should be kept alive, and mass violence should be continuously explored, as a lasting warning against the abuse of power, in Goiás and worldwide.

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