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Bolsonaro and History: The Controlling Cycle

Iuri Macedo Piovezan¹

Jair Messias Bolsonaro and his far-right movement are an embarrassment to ethical Brazilians. On 28 October 2018, to the surprise of many, Bolsonaro was elected the thirty-eighth President of Brazil with over 55.13% of the votes.² In the years that followed, the right wing's influence, of which the president himself partakes, became increasingly popular. History, both as a subject and a natural phenomenon, is cyclical, and I believe that many events could have been avoided if people had taken a more careful look at the past. Due to history having such a nature, and taking into consideration other far-right movements that came before Bolsonaro – such as Adolf Hitler's and Benito Mussolini's – and their personalities, I believe that Bolsonaro's fate will match his right-wing antecessors.

First, some definitions need to be made. This essay will compare these three populist leaders and conclude that Bolsonaro's regime is doomed to fail. By failure, however, I mean that his goals in politics will not be achieved. At the end of World War II, Hitler committed suicide in a bunker, and Mussolini was assassinated. Therefore, their political scheme failed, but not in the same way that I believe Bolsonaro's will. I am not insinuating that Bolsonaro will either kill himself or die at the hands of another, but rather due to the way he is conducting his business as a right-wing populist president, he is doomed to failure. Since history repeats itself, and he fits “in the same box” as Hitler and Mussolini, his political goals as the thirty-eighth Brazilian president are doomed to fail.

Germany was in shambles after World War I, a perfect scenario for Hitler to emerge. The Great War met its end when the Germans signed the ceasefire of November 1918, following the disastrous Spring Offense.³ In order to decide their fate (including other losing nations'), the Paris Peace Conference was established. According to the historians Michael D. Richards and Paul R. Waibel, the meeting resulted in – among other things – five treaties.⁴ The most well-known, however, is the Treaty of Versailles. This treaty, named after the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles where it was signed,⁵ laid out a set of punishments for the Germanic nation, such as “forcing the nation to surrender around 10 percent of its territory and all of its overseas possessions” and demilitarization. The most important, though, which caused the most revolt, was the “war guilt clause,” which demanded Germany accept full responsibility for World War I and pay an exorbitant amount in

¹ Iuri is a soon to be graduate of Temple University majoring in Global Studies and minoring in History and Spanish.

² “Eleições 2018: Jair Bolsonaro é eleito presidente do Brasil,” *Veja*, 28 October 2018, <https://veja.abril.com.br/politica/eleicoes-2018-segundo-turno-apuracao-resultado-presidente-ao-vivo/>.

³ Jennifer Llewellyn and Steve Thompson, “The German Surrender,” AlphaHistory, accessed May 29, 2021, <https://alphahistory.com/worldwar1/german-surrender/>.

⁴ Michael Richards and Paul Waibel, *Twentieth Century Europe: A Brief History* (Wiley and Sons, 2014), 80.

⁵ Richards and Weibel, *Twentieth Century Europe*, p. 81.

reparations.⁶ In response, Germans felt distressed and, due to its demands, hated the Treaty of Versailles. In a situation like this, where people need a savior, is where figures like Hitler appear.



Figure 1: Hitler with Joseph Goebbels' daughter, 1932. Source: <https://www.livescience.com/54441-how-hitler-rose-to-power.html>

Many characteristics made Adolf Hitler a popular figure. The first was his ability as a public speaker. Karl Schleunes, in the book *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz*, claims that the Fuhrer became known in the German Workers' Party due to his power as a speaker.⁷ Even though defining him as “not an interesting conversationalist,” Schleunes says that Hitler “could milk an audience and shape it and get it to feel.”⁸ For instance, in a speech before the Reichstag on 30 January 1937, Hitler mentioned that it had been four years “since the beginning of the great internal revolution” that gave a “new aspect to German life.” So, he prepared a speech to summarize “all the successes that have been achieved and the progress that has been made during these four years, for the welfare of the German people.”⁹ The next was Hitler’s portrayal as an honorable, patriotic man. Historian Despina

⁶“Treaty of Versailles,” History, accessed 29 May 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/treaty-of-versailles-1>.

⁷Stephanie Pappas, “Hitler’s Rise: How a Homeless Artist became a Murderous Tyrant,” *LiveScience*, 2016, <https://www.livescience.com/54441-how-hitler-rose-to-power.html>.

⁸Pappas, “Hitler’s Rise.”

⁹ Adolf Hitler, “Speech before the Reichstag,” transcript of speech delivered at the Reichstag, 30 January 1937,

Stratigakos claims that one strategy that Hitler used to “rehabilitate his personal image” was to focus propaganda on his personal life. This propaganda portrayed Hitler “as a good man, a moral man.” Even though the image was fabricated, this historian concludes that it was an effective strategy.¹⁰ This photograph, taken in 1932, shows Hitler with Joseph Goebbels’ daughter, spreading the notion of him as a lover of kids (Figure 1). Hitler’s relationship with Rosa Bernile Nienau is another example. Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler’s official photographer, made a picture book titled *Youth Around Hitler* that, as the title suggests, contained pictures of Hitler and young children. One of them, specifically, would impact the Fuhrer like no other. Due to a shared birthday, Hitler would meet and adore Rosa Nienau, a child whom — even after discovering they had Jewish roots — Hitler would continue a friendship with (Figure 2).¹¹ Lastly, Hitler used the growing tensions between Germans and Jews in his favor. The Jewish population was then his chosen scapegoat.



Figure 2: Hitler and Rosa. Source: <https://allthatsinteresting.com/hitlers-children>

Italy, too, required a hero after World War I. After the Battle of Caporetto, on 24 October 1917, the nation saw itself with a significant number of casualties. Around 700,000 people were

<http://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/reading/hitler%20speeches/Hitler%20Speech%201937.01.30.html>

¹⁰ Pappas, “Hitler’s Rise.”

¹¹ “Remarkable tale of Hitler’s young Jewish friend,” *BBC*, 13 November 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46192941>.

impacted (40,000 killed, 280,000 captured, and 350,000 deserted).¹² For the Italians, desertion was a serious offense, with many officers advised to shoot their men if they chose to leave the battlefield. Italy emerged victorious but deeply divided, with many men feeling that they left the war without what they were expecting out of the peace negotiations in Paris. As Richards and Weibel discuss, “the peace conference awarded Italy much less than it felt entitled to by the Treaty of London between the Triple Entente and Italy (1915).” National pride was therefore hurt. In addition, “massive national debt, rapid inflation, and increasing unemployment struck the nation,” leaving many with the sense that a Bolshevik revolution was imminent in Italy. When it comes to politics, both the Catholic and Socialist parties were deeply divided, not giving the population the certainty they needed. Benito Mussolini emerged in this confused state of animosity, “a former schoolteacher and editor of the Socialist Party newspaper, *Avanti*.” When Mussolini claimed that Italy should enter the war with the Allies, he was expelled from the Socialist Party in 1914.¹³

Mussolini’s regime was rooted in nationalism as he was made Italy’s Prime Minister in 1922, with the Duce’s popularity rising each day. Fascism, as an ideology, called for action, preaching for an unequal society, divided between the strong and the weak, where the state has full autonomy. The term comes from the Roman ax *Fascio*, a weapon that was only possible by the union of wooden pieces (the people) with red chains (the state) and the iron ax. Like the Romans, they also revered past societies and abominated new ones. Like the Nazis, they denied the importance of knowledge and acted almost by instinct. When discussing Mussolini and his success, some of his characteristics come into play. The first was, like Hitler’s, his way with his words. In a speech in Napoli, in 1931, and 1936 in Rome, we see a man with an incredible ability to make an engaging speech.^{14,15} The way he forms his sentences, enunciating Italian patriotism, and his physiognomy and body language were engaging and called everyone’s attention to every word that left his mouth. In both of these videos, the Italian dictator is seen with both hands alternating between his hips and performing brute movements as he speaks. Undeniably, this stance greatly helps him assert his power over his people. The second characteristic was his image to the general population. Many believed him to be a man sent from God, a man of “divine providence.”¹⁶ Lastly, like Hitler, Mussolini had a scapegoat. Instead of blaming

¹² “Battle of Caporetto,” History, accessed 29 May 2021, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/battle-of-caporetto>.

¹³ Richards and Weibel, *Twentieth Century Europe*, p. 131.

¹⁴ “Mussolini Speech – Napoli,” YouTube, 9 May 2013,

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=mussolini+speeches+strategies&ru=%2fvideos%2fsearch%3fq%3dmussolini%2bspeeches%2bstrategies%26FORM%3dHDRSC3&view=detail&mid=DA3F8644A1843901B106DA3F8644A1843901B106&&FORM=VDRVRV>.

¹⁵ “1936 Rome Mussolini Gives Speech From Balcony,” YouTube, 9 April 2012,

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=mussolini+speeches+strategies&&view=detail&mid=3E311B63626FF44D2C873E311B63626FF44D2C87&&FORM=VRDGAR&ru=%2fvideos%2fsearch%3fq%3dmussolini%2bspeeches%2bstrategies%26FORM%3dHDRSC3>.

¹⁶ Harry Schnitker, “From Stand-Off to Confrontation” Pope Pius XII and Mussolini, 1938, 1943,”

Catholic News Agency, 5 September 2011,

<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column/51652/from-stand-off-to-confrontation-pope-pius-xii-and-mussolini-1938-1943>.

specifically the Jewish population, Mussolini chose “socialists, trade unionists, homosexuals, and racial and religious minorities.”¹⁷ Therefore, like the Fuhrer, Mussolini had a favorable image to his people.

Brazil’s depression did not come through war but political exhaustion. One of the significant themes that immensely helped Bolsonaro’s election was that he was a breath of fresh air to people tired of the previous party’s dominance. According to *Folha de São Paulo*, a chief news source in Sao Paulo, the *Partido Trabalhista* (Workers’ Party) was in power from 2003 to 2016.¹⁸ This party, however, was rooted in corruption, with many of its members being incarcerated due to the *Lava Jato* operation (Operation Car Wash). So many years in power resulted in significant opposition, which made the majority of the population wish for change. Brazilian politician Nikolas Ferreira, after Bolsonaro got elected, claimed that “people were tired of the life from the Left.”¹⁹ With increasing tensions happening in the nation, Bolsonaro appeared to be the nation’s last hope. In 2018, I had the privilege of interviewing some people in Brazil for a project related to politics at my university. I must say that all names listed are not the real names of the subjects since all requested to remain anonymous. John, my first interviewee, claimed that he only voted for Bolsonaro because “in between voting for Bolsonaro, or PT, I’d rather vote for Bolsonaro.” Maria, a mother of two, said that “I cannot swallow the lies of PT anymore; I firmly believe that Brazil needs change, and maybe it will be with Bolsonaro.” Many Brazilians, unfortunately, had the same mentality on 28 October 2018.

Bolsonaro’s image to his people, like Mussolini’s and Hitler’s, is favorable in similar ways. Marco Rodrigo Almeida, a *Folha de São Paulo* journalist, reported that “Brazilians have never seen a President in such a simple surrounding.”²⁰ Pictures (Figure 3) surfaced on social media, portraying Bolsonaro as a “common Brazilian, not raised in a rich environment.”²¹ Here, to the right, one can see the president wearing a soccer jersey while eating food directly from a tray. In addition, Bolsonaro is portrayed as the utmost patriotic leader Brazil has ever had. While being interviewed by JovemPan, a significant radio in Brazil, Bolsonaro claimed that his “party is Brazil,”²² which became one of his

¹⁷ Teresa Albano. “Bamboozled by Hate: Fascism Blamed ‘the Other’ for Capitalism’s Problems” Peoples’ World, 18 April 2017, <https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/bamboozled-by-hate-fascism-blamed-the-other-for-capitalisms-problems/>

¹⁸ “Confira Quem Foram os Presidentes do Brasil Desde a Proclamacao da Republic,” *Folha de Sao Paulo*, 25 January 2017, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2014/10/1537268-confira-quem-foram-os-presidentes-do-brasil-desde-a-proclamacao-da-republica.shtml>.

¹⁹ Pierre Borges, “As Pessoas Estavam Cansadas das Mentiras da esquerda,” *PlenoNews*, 5 February 2021, <https://pleno.news/pleno-entrevista/as-people-estavam-cansadas-das-mentiras-da-esquerda.html>.

²⁰ Marcos Rodrigo Almeida, “Para Especialistas, Bolsonaro Adota Visual Simples como Tatica,” *Folha de Sao Paulo*, 12 November 2018, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2018/11/para-especialistas-bolsonaro-adota-visual-simples-como-tatica.shtml>.

²¹ Guillermo Federico Piacesi Ramos, “Bolsonaro Nao Fala Infles, e Feio,” *Jornal da Cidade*, 8 March 2020, <https://www.jornaldacidadeonline.com.br/noticias/19201/bolsonaro-nao-fala-ingles-e-feio-mas-ja-tivemos-coisa-muito-pior>.

²² “Bolsonaro: ‘Meu Partido e o Brasil,’” JovemPan, accessed 29 May 2021, <https://jovempan.com.br/programas/jornal-da-manha/bolsonaro-meu-partido-e-o-brasil.html>.

slogans. Bolsonaro also claims that only God can remove him from the president's chair.²³ In this vein, far-right Brazilian activists tend to bind Bolsonaro and his actions with religious figures. Bolsonaro shared a video of Steve Kunda, a Congolese pastor, who affirmed that Bolsonaro was "chosen by God" to guide the nation on his personal Facebook account.²⁴ Moreover, when trying to defend the use of hydroxychloroquine to cure COVID-19, a medicine with no scientific backing, the President claimed that God was the one that provided the nation with such a remedy.²⁵

The language the President uses in his speeches is also praised by his followers. Even though he lacks an eloquent language, Bolsonaro appeals to and motivates those listening. Andre Singer, Professor of Political Science at the University of Sao Paulo, one of the most praised institutions in Latin America, claims that the President has a more "direct and popular" method of speaking when compared to his antecessors.²⁶ For Singer, however, this is only a strategy to secure the 2022 elections. Reginaldo Ferreira da Silva, known as Ferrez — a Brazilian writer — claimed that "Bolsonaro speaks a language that the people understand."²⁷ Notice here that many people compliment the simplicity of Bolsonaro, which seems to be his central selling point. When it comes to his scapegoat of choice, Bolsonaro chose the Workers' Party, a left-leaning party that had ruled Brazil for twenty-one years. Bolsonaro was seen as Brazil's last hope among a tired population.

²³ Ricardo Brito, "So Deus me Tira Daqui", diz Bolsonaro em Discurso," *Terra*, 12 May 2021, <https://www.terra.com.br/noticias/brasil/so-deus-me-tira-daqui-diz-bolsonaro-em-discurso,7324dae741c3a324a26292fdf0261bdd91x4eqli.html>.

²⁴ "Bolsonaro divulga video onde diz que ele e 'escolhido por Deus'," *Correio da Amazonia*, 20 May 2019, <https://correiodaamazonia.com/bolsonaro-divulga-video-onde-diz-que-ele-e-escolhido-por-deus/>.

²⁵ "Bolsonaro pede normalidade e diz que Deus deu a hidroxycloquina," *Noticias sao o Mundo*, 1 October 2020, <https://www.noticiasaoiminuto.com/mundo/1596185/bolsonaro-pede-normalidade-e-diz-que-deus-deu-a-hidroxycloquina>.

²⁶ Andre Singer, "Bolsonaro Muda Linguagem, Já Pensando nas Eleições de 2022," *Jornal da US*, 17 September, 2021, <https://jornal.usp.br/radio-usp/bolsonaro-muda-linguagem-ja-pensando-nas-eleicoes-de-2022/>.

²⁷ Marina Consiglio, "Bolsonaro fala a lingua que o povo entende'," *Folha de Sao Paulo*, 17 October 2019, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2019/10/bolsonaro-fala-a-lingua-que-o-povo-entende-diz-escritor-ferrez.shtml>.



Figure 3: Bolsonaro eating. Source: <https://www.brasil247.com/brasil/para-especialistas-bolsonaro-adota-visual-simples-como-tatica>

History is cyclical. The debate of whether history follows a cycle is not contemporary. Many scholars like Arthur Schlesinger, in *Paths to the Present*, Arthur Schlesinger Jr, in *The Cycles of American History*, and Ibn Khaldun, a fourteenth to fifteenth century Arab philosopher, discuss whether historical events are deemed to repeat themselves or if this is some sick joke of fate.²⁸ I, however, accept the proposition that history is cyclical. I believe that history exists to teach us a lesson, and we, as a society, can only succeed if we learn from the mistakes of the past. If maybe Hitler had paid more attention to Napoleon, he might have succeeded in Russia. Maybe, if we had learned something from the 1918-19 Influenza pandemic, we might have had an easier time with COVID-19.

Bolsonaro shares key similarities with Hitler and Mussolini. Throughout this paper, I have written about the key elements that made each leader popular in their country, mainly focusing on their image and word choice. When it comes to their ability to discourse, all three leaders were very popular in their speeches. Hitler was said to be charismatic, Mussolini made engaging speeches, and Bolsonaro chose to appear as a simple man in his words. All of them had appeared as the ideal man in their society. Hitler was seen as a lover of kids, Mussolini as a religious figure, and Bolsonaro as the leader God chose. Moreover, all of them were incredibly patriotic. I must say that this goes not to claim that Bolsonaro is capable of the atrocities that Hitler and Mussolini committed but to show the similarities in how these right-wing populist leaders engage with their population and the propaganda they use, which, as seen, idealizes their images. I must acknowledge that Hitler and Mussolini's situations differed from Bolsonaro's. First, Brazil is not in a major war at the risk of being invaded by a neighboring nation. Second, Bolsonaro — even though being from the far-right — is not a dictator and therefore cannot remain in power indefinitely. However, the point of this essay is to portray the similarities between these three right-wing populist leaders and illustrate that accepting the claim that history is cyclical, Bolsonaro's regime is due to fail.

Considering the cyclicity of history, Bolsonaro's regime is doomed to fail. Both Hitler and Mussolini's governments met their end at the closing of World War II. This was factual proof of the

²⁸ "Cyclical Theory of History," *The Free Dictionary*, accessed 29 May 2021, <https://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/History%2c+Cyclical+Theory+of>.

failure of Nazism and Fascism and, for me, of any extreme right-wing movement. Bolsonaro, being a representative of such a group, is even accused of having Nazi or Fascist tendencies. Historian Federico Finchelstein, an authority in studying fascism, claims in *A Brief History of Fascist Lies* that “there is no doubt that Bolsonaro acts as a fascist.”²⁹ Moreover, according to Finchelstein, there are four elements that populism abandons from fascism, but the most important — and the one that Bolsonaro relies on the most — is the “lying” aspect. According to Finchelstein, this element is the most important since, even though every politician lies, fascist ones do it in a greater quantity.³⁰ The scholar then concludes that Bolsonaro is a fascist “wannabe,” one that definitely lies like a fascist.³¹ In addition, 234 Brazilian Jewish intellectuals published a letter claiming that Bolsonaro’s regime had fascist, anti-democratic, and Nazi tendencies.³² This letter, in a free translation, says

It is necessary to call things by their name. It is time for us, intellectuals, freethinkers, Jews, and progressive Jews, descendants of the greatest victims of the Nazi regime, to position ourselves as social actors in the public debate about the current national moment. It is noticeable that the government headed by Jair Bolsonaro has strong Nazi and fascist leanings. It is necessary to call things by their name. Conspiratorial and anti-democratic perspectives produce, just like fascism and Nazism, imaginary enemies and allies. If not Jewish, as the case may be of the Third Reich, leftists; if not gypsies, scientists; if not communists, as in Fascist Italy, feminists. The idea of a constant struggle against ghostly threats continues. But there is more. The repeated racist and Nazi reports of the Bolsonaro government, the use of fascist symbols, and reference to the extreme right cannot leave any doubts. The project of power advances. Genocide, destruction of the democratic structures of the eugenic state, and practices are wide open. It is up to us Brazilians and Brazilians to prevent us from reaching a greater tragedy. Removing Bolsonaro must be the so-called unison of the hour. It is the call against genocide.

Therefore, I firmly believe that, when taking such similarities and putting them into perspective, Bolsonaro’s far-right regime simply cannot be successful. Hitler, even though he was a popular leader, is seen by most as an example of a failed man. Even though he had a strong persona and was seen as honorable, Mussolini failed. Bolsonaro, as history repeats itself, is destined to do the same.

²⁹ Rosana Pinheiro-Machado, “Bolsonaro é o líder mais próximo do fascismo,” *The Intercept Brasil*, 7 July 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/07/07/bolsonaro-populista-fascismo-entrevista-federico-finchelstein/>.

³⁰ Pinheiro-Machado, “Bolsonaro.”

³¹ Pinheiro-Machado, “Bolsonaro.”

³² Reinaldo Azevedo, “Bolsonaro tem inclinacoes nazistas e fascista, dizem intelectuais judeus,” *UOL*, 31 May 2021, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/colunas/reinaldo-azevedo/2021/05/31/bolsonaro-tem-inclinacoes-nazistas-e-fascistas-dizem-intelectuais-judeus.htm>.