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# The Great Depression in the Americas (circa 1920–1939)

Peter Clements

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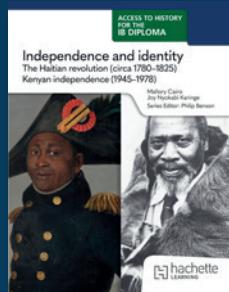


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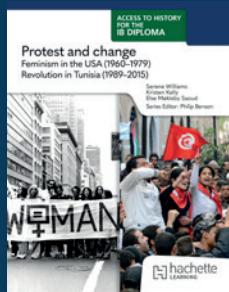
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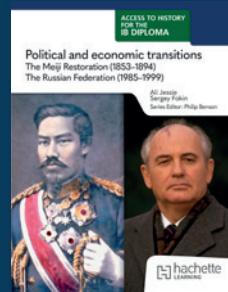
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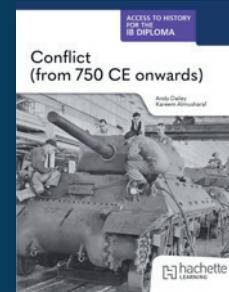


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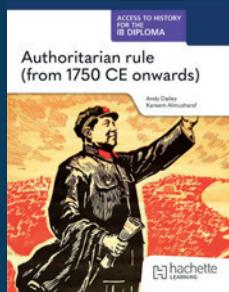


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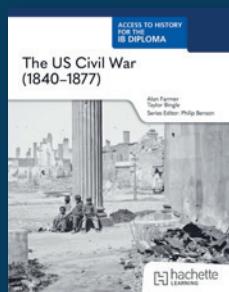


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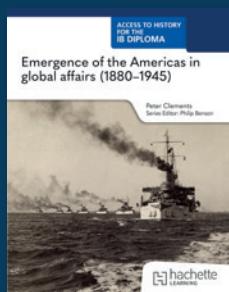


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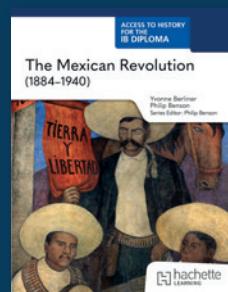
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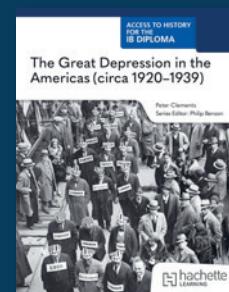
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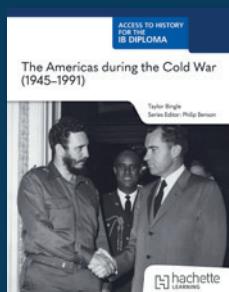
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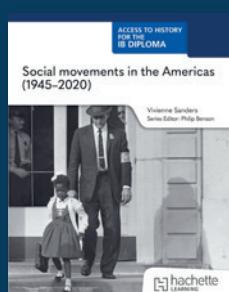
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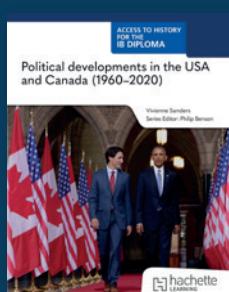
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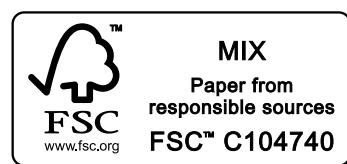
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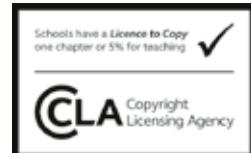
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# Political impact of the Great Depression in Brazil

This chapter considers how Getúlio Vargas governed Brazil in the 1930s and how his regime moved towards a dictatorship, resulting in the creation of the *Estado Novo* in 1937. He set up a system of repression over time and used propaganda to win the support of the people. Labour and social programmes were introduced to gain the support of specific groups, notably urban workers and the middle classes. Vargas sought to modernize and industrialize Brazil in the wake of the Great Depression. The chapter ends with the opposition to Vargas and how he dealt with it.

You need to consider the following questions throughout this chapter:

- ★ How far did Vargas achieve political stability?
- ★ How did Vargas establish a dictatorship?
- ★ How did Vargas balance repression and reform in addressing the issues of labour rights and social policies?
- ★ Who challenged Vargas and why?

## KEY DATES

<b>1930</b> Vargas became head of government	<b>1936</b> National Commission for Stopping Communism set up
<b>1931</b> Creation of Ministry of Labor <i>Clube 3 de Outubro</i> formed	National Security Tribunal created
<b>1932</b> Bureau of Reconciliation and Arbitration set up New electoral law Paulista Rebellion	<b>1937</b> Creation of <i>Estado Novo</i> Strikes banned Legislature shut down and political parties outlawed
<b>1934</b> Period of constitutional government began	<b>1938</b> Integralist Revolt
<b>1935</b> ANL Rebellion National Security Law	<b>1939</b> Creation of Press and Propaganda Department (DIP) Labor Courts set up

# 1 Impact on political stability

► **Key question:** How far did Vargas achieve political stability?

## Vargas' regimes

Vargas became head of the Brazilian government in 1930 following a military coup. We have seen how the 1930 Revolution was in part a response to the depression and a desire for modernization, industrialization and a stronger central government within Brazil. The governments of the 1920s were simply not strong enough to address these issues, nor the instability which had defined the decade (see page 00).

Vargas was to form three types of government before his downfall in 1945; he also returned to power in the period 1951–54. He started out in a 'democratic' government but ended with a dictatorship, with the creation of the *Estado Novo*. Across the regimes, Vargas himself was the main factor of stability. During the *Estado Novo*, he was effectively marketed as an all-powerful, all-knowing leader. Historians have questioned whether he had a long-term strategy to place himself in this position or was simply responding to different circumstances.

### Head of the Provisional Government, 1930–34

Vargas' first government was termed 'provisional' because it took place while a new constitution was being drawn up. Meanwhile, Vargas **ruled by decree**.

In February 1932, a new electoral code was passed, which:

- gave the vote to all literate males over the age of 18 and to working women and widows
- introduced the secret ballot
- created the organization Election Justice to organize and supervise elections.

The intention was to stabilize elections and reduce fraud. A Constituent Assembly was elected by this new procedure in March 1933 to draw up a new constitution. As the Assembly set about its work, it became clear that many of the new deputies supported democratic ideas. Having accepted the new constitution on 16 July, the next day the Assembly invited Vargas to become president.

### The 1934 Constitution

Vargas became president of a new regime that was supposedly a democracy. It maintained the federal system, accepted the 1932 electoral code and outlined specific powers and limitations of the presidency:

How did Vargas' first two regimes lead to the *Estado Novo*?

#### KEY TERM

**Rule by decree** Where a leader can pass laws without having to consult anyone.

## KEY FIGURE

**Benito Mussolini (1883–1945)** The fascist dictator of Italy whose governance served as a model for other fascist or authoritarian regimes in the 1930s. He made parliament relatively powerless, created a strong and feared state security system, and promoted himself as a godlike leader through powerful propaganda. He also set up a system of corporations of employers and workers to set out working conditions for their sectors under state direction. This idea gained wide support in the 1930s.

- The president was elected by both houses of the Congress for a period of four years and could not serve more than one term.
- The legislature or parliament was divided into the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies.
- The Chamber of Deputies was made up of representatives of 50 corporations, based on Mussolini's fascist economic model in Italy, plus 250 deputies representing areas and the population as a whole.
- The Senate (or Upper House) had the task of watching over the Constitution to ensure all laws passed followed its principles. It was empowered to suspend any laws deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, the highest court of law in Brazil.

Clearly, the intention was to reduce the power of the old elites. In practice, however, this didn't happen and Vargas was always prepared to work with them because, however grudgingly, he knew he needed their support.

### *Powers of the presidency*

As president, Vargas could declare a state of siege during emergencies and could order the censorship of publications. However, Vargas was concerned about certain aspects of the Constitution:

- The president could not bypass the Constitution and govern without consulting the other political institutions.
- The Federal Court of Auditors was given the power to check government accounts.
- Vargas opposed the idea of a one-term presidency.
- He disliked the powers of the Senate and Supreme Court to test laws to ensure they were constitutional.

### **Constitutional Government, 1934–37**

For Vargas, his presidential power was not enough. He may have begun planning for a dictatorship after the 1935 Alliance for National Liberation Rebellion (ANL, see page 000) or even before. He was certainly opposed to the planned 1937 presidential elections that would have brought his presidency to an end. However, it is impossible to say whether he accepted democracy only in the short term while planning long-term for his dictatorship.

Vargas knew full well that the old elites wanted their powers back; he also knew many of his former allies wanted to replace him. Therefore, he built his own power base, offering rewards and favours, making secret alliances and postponing decisions. He wanted to settle disputes between political rivals; in this way he appeared to be above political squabbles, as the obvious leader.

The Constituent Assembly lasted eight months before being suspended in 1935 by the National Security Law (see page 000) in the wake of the ANL Rebellion. Vargas avoided calling a new government and setting a precise date for the presidential elections due in 1937. Many historians argue that Vargas' overarching aim throughout his rule was to stay there; he had not become provisional president in 1930 in order to hand over power to someone else a few years later. Many of those in the Liberal Alliance, like himself, were not natural democrats. They believed the Old Republic had failed because central government was weak. The solution was to make it strong and authoritarian.

After the uprisings that threatened his position, the Paulista Rebellion in 1932 and the ANL Rebellion in 1935, Vargas suspended the Constitution and moved to a dictatorship in 1937.

### The *Estado Novo*, 1937–45

The *Estado Novo* ('new state') was the name given to the period of Vargas' personal rule. The 1937 Constitution, which replaced that of 1934, dissolved all political parties and suspended the 1937 elections. Both houses of Congress – the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate – were closed. The **plebiscite** required to verify the Constitution was never carried out.

Vargas ruled by decree, deployed a special police force that predated the *Estado Novo* (having been set up after the failed 1935 rebellion) and which used torture and other means of **repression**, abolished personal freedoms, introduced strict press censorship and deployed a propaganda machine to promote his own image as an all-powerful leader. To all intents and purposes, he introduced a fascist-style dictatorship.

The reality was far more complex, however.

### Reactions

Those supporting democracy were outraged but impotent in the face of government forces. However, many Brazilians supported Vargas. Many of the working classes saw him as the best hope to improve their lives (see page 00). Others appeared indifferent to whoever was in power. Much depended on how far they personally benefited from Vargas' reforms. Most nationalists supported Vargas.

Most importantly, perhaps, he had the support of the military. In 1932, Vargas had purged the army of politically unreliable senior officers. By 1933, 36 out of the 40 serving generals had been promoted by, and owed their allegiance to, the new government. Many of his policies were to their advantage. He increased military salaries and the armed forces almost doubled in size from 38,000 in 1927 to 75,000 in 1937. Regional commands absorbed state militias, which strengthened central authority and weakened the states further. The two senior officers, Pedro de Góis Monteiro, who served as chief of staff from 1937–43, and Eurico Gaspar Dutra, Minister of War from 1937–45, remained fiercely loyal.

### KEY TERMS

**Plebiscite** A popular vote.

**Repression** To subdue using force.

There was little or no opposition to the creation of the *Estado Nono*.

- Vargas had built up powerful alliances, particularly with the army, whose main interest was generous budgets and little interference from government.
- On 31 December 1935, Vargas had given a radio address warning of communist threats. These were mainly false, but had a powerful impact in scaring the wealthier classes and the Catholic Church, which supported the government with sermons against 'godless' communism.
- The government launched a tireless campaign against the 'evils' of communism. In particular, it demonized the 1935 rebels, calling them 'mad' in relentless propaganda.
- Much was made of the forged 'Cohen Plan' of September 1937 (see page 000), which claimed to promote a Russian-planned communist uprising in Brazil.

Vargas waited two months to ramp up the rhetoric and propaganda. Then, on 10 November 1937, the military surrounded the Congress building and sent the deputies home. Vargas announced the new regime in a radio address:

#### **SOURCE A**

##### **Vargas' radio address of 10 November 1937**

In periods of crisis such as the one through which we are now passing, the democratization of parties, instead of offering a certain opportunity for growth and progress within the framework necessary for human life and development, subverts [undermines] the hierarchy, menaces the fatherland and puts in danger the existence of the nation by exaggerating competition and igniting the fires of discord. It is necessary to note that, alarmed by the cries of professional agitators [troublemakers] and confronted by the complexity of political struggles, the men who do not live from such struggles, but rather from the fruits of their labor, abandon the parties to those professionals who live from them, and they abstain from participating in public life which would benefit from the participation of those elements of order and constructive action. Universal suffrage [all adults having the vote] thus has become the instrument of the astute, the mask which thinly disguises the conniving [plotting] of personal ambition and greed.



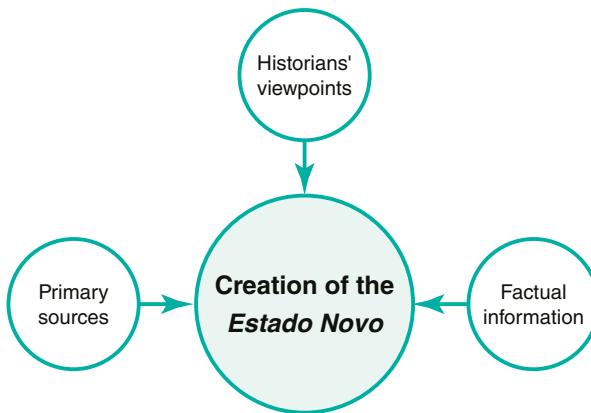
How useful is this source in explaining the reasons for the creation of the *Estado Nono*?

**ACTIVITY****Cause and consequence**

1 Conduct your own research into the creation of the *Estado Nôvo* in 1937. Consider:

- economic reasons, such as the desire to develop industrialization in Brazil (see also Chapter 6, page 00)
- cultural reasons, such as the creation of a national Brazilian identity (see also Chapter 4, page 00)
- any other reasons you can find.

2 Group together the types of evidence you have found; for example, primary sources, historians' viewpoints, factual information. Draw these in your own summary diagram, for example:



3 Discuss with your partner which reasons you consider the most important in the creation of the *Estado Nôvo*. How far are they similar? Draw up an agreed list.

4 Compare your final list with that of another pair of students. Discuss any differences. Draw up a final agreed list.

5 Together, rank the agreed causes in terms of importance. What do you think was the main reason Vargas set up the *Estado Nôvo*? Explain your answer and reasoning to the group as a whole.

6 You could return to this issue when you have studied Chapters 4 and 6 more thoroughly. Discuss whether you have changed your mind at all.

**A  
T  
L**

As learning partners, how far did this activity help you to learn from each other?

**T  
O  
K**

Consider the reasons why historians might change their minds about the causation of events. (Perspectives.)

## The political stability of Brazil

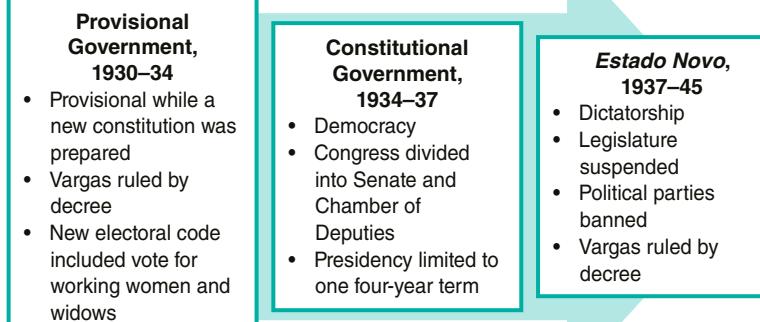
The 'Old Republic' that the 1930 revolt replaced had not had a history of political stability and had undergone many rebellions of varied seriousness. The 1930 rebellion was intended to create a stable political system based on democracy. However, the elites remained and there were also new movements based on radical ideas such as communism (see page 000). These came to the fore in two significant rebellions, in 1932 and 1935, which will be discussed in section 4 of this chapter. The Constitutional Government therefore lacked the stability it was designed to create.

Vargas distrusted democracy. He felt Brazil could best be governed by a strong executive. Therefore, he was never comfortable with the 1934 Constitution. This may have been caused by the rebellions or it may always have been his intention to abort democracy and create the *Estado Novo*.

Vargas carried much of the population with him as he moved to dictatorship. With the *Estado Novo* he established a stable regime, although it was based largely on repression and propaganda. The Constitution of 1934 was not given time to embed itself because the forces that opposed it were too powerful, and it faced significant unrest. Nevertheless, during the 1930s, Vargas was the one constant; he was leader of Brazil from 1930 to 1945 (and again in the early 1950s). How he achieved this dominance will be addressed in the next section.

### SUMMARY DIAGRAM

The impact of regime change on political stability



## 2 Changes to political power

► **Key question:** How did Vargas establish a dictatorship?

### Creation of repression

Vargas planned the *Estado Novo* to be a dictatorship and undermined all the institutions he felt might be a threat to this. He burnt all the individual state flags, for example. This was meant as a strong message that he would increase the power of the federal state and reduce that of the individual states. Vargas went on to cancel the planned elections, dismiss Congress and effectively assume all political power himself. He was backed by the military, whose numbers would continue growing in the ensuing years to 93,000 by 1940. He had already introduced most of the instruments of repression, but it is worth listing them in full:

- 1933: A special political police force was created in Rio de Janeiro.
- 1935: National Security Law listed crimes against the political and social order.
- 1936: With communism outlawed, a National Commission for Stopping Communism was set up specifically to investigate any civil servants and others suspected of participating in activities against the state.
- 1936: A National Security Tribunal was set up by which judges could summarily, and without evidence, order the imprisonment of suspected opponents. Conditions in prisons could be brutal.

In addition, a political police force was set up to hear accusations of disloyalty to the regime, arrest suspects, imprison them, use methods of torture to extract confessions, and murder when necessary. This police force developed strong ties with the Nazi Gestapo and shared information about interrogation techniques and how best to stifle dissent. Torture was used as a matter of course. People learnt that falling out with the regime was extremely dangerous. Suspicion was enough to ruin one's life. As in other dictatorships, people learnt to be wary and speak guardedly.

Vargas built an infrastructure of repression, but he still needed the support of most of the population. People had to believe (or at least go along with) the idea that the loss of personal liberty was worth it. This was to be achieved through social reforms and sophisticated propaganda (see below).

### Propaganda

Vargas understood the power of media and propaganda. While repression was widespread, there also needed to be an impression of overwhelming support for the regime. This was largely the task of the Press and Propaganda Department (DIP).

What organizations were created to repress the population?

What was the purpose of the Press and Propaganda Department (DIP)?

## Press and Propaganda Department (DIP)

The DIP was set up in 1939 and embraced most forms of media including radio broadcasts, theatre, the cinema and the press – in other words, the means by which most Brazilians could access the government message. The Department appointed its own composers, writers and artists to produce its own art forms. It published two periodicals. It has been estimated that, soon after its creation, 60% of newspaper and magazine articles were written by DIP personnel.

The DIP controlled popular music because it knew this was the most efficient way of spreading ideas among the working classes, who might be illiterate or not possess a radio but did listen to popular music in bars or dance halls. It even began a Brazilian Music Day on 3 January each year. There were choirs to sing at mass events to add to the sense of theatre and entertainment.

Beyond music, the DIP appreciated the power of radio. More and more people owned radios, so the large audiences stimulated advertising, which in turn brought in revenues for the government. In 1939, the DIP began 'Brazilian Hour', transmitting government propaganda via a national radio network. One of the most common guests was Vargas himself, so his voice was recognized throughout Brazil. He was a born communicator, speaking in everyday language so the listeners could all understand his message, with a reassuring tone that invited confidence. Interestingly, he frequently adopted the motto 'Fatherland, family and religion' from the **Integralists**, or Brazilian fascist group (see page 000), in speeches to emphasize the values of the *Estado Novo*.



### KEY TERM

**Integralists** Members of the fascist group, Brazilian Integralist Action (AIB).

## Promotion of Vargas

Vargas was widely photographed with children, families, the army and workers. He became the most famous man in Brazil, as was his intent. The message was simple: Vargas is Brazil, not just the father of those in need, but the father of all Brazilians. Without Vargas, Brazil is nothing.

Vargas did not simply want to be an adored leader. He wanted to create a new Brazilian identity in which all Brazilians could share and take pride. He wanted to create no less than a new Brazilian culture.

**SOURCE B**

Vargas in his role as the father of the nation. The text reads: 'Children! Learning, at home and in school, the cult of the Fatherland, you will bring all chances of success to life. Only love builds and, strongly loving Brazil, you will lead it to the greatest of destinies among Nations, fulfilling the desires of exaltation nestled in every Brazilian's heart.'





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