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*Protest and Protect*, 2020. Mixed media on paper. 28 x 20 in. © 2020 Tali Margolin. Courtesy of the artist.

## This Is Brazil: Jewish Protests under Democracy and Dictatorship

Michael Rom

When a German immigrant verbally harassed a Jewish peddler in a bar in São Paulo, a Brazilian man came to the peddler's defense. "This is Brazil!" the Brazilian cried, landing a punch between the German's eyes. "The Brazilian does not differentiate between men, on the basis of religion, race, or color." This incident, the climactic moment of a short story by Bernardo Schulman that appeared in the Brazilian Jewish newsweekly *Aonde Vamos?* in September 1944, evoked the emergent national myth of racial democracy, which claimed that Brazil was a land of uniquely harmonious race relations,

and that this racial harmony was a defining national characteristic. By using the myth to simultaneously assert Jewish belonging in Brazil and challenge the belonging of their foreign adversaries, Schulman's story provided a template for subsequent Brazilian Jewish protest movements to emulate.

This article examines two Brazilian Jewish protest movements, a leftist-led protest in 1950 against the presence of a fascist war criminal named Herberts Cukurs in Rio de Janeiro, and a Zionist demonstration in 1979 in São Paulo



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against the prospect of a Palestine Liberation Organization diplomatic office in Brazil. While the first protest occurred during Brazil's postwar democracy, which lasted from 1945 to 1964, the second took place during the military regime that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985. Surprisingly, the first protest was unsuccessful, and led to the arrests of three participants, while the second achieved its goal, and resulted in no arrests. These diverging outcomes were the result of three important factors: Cold War geopolitics, generational differences between the protesters, and most crucially, the distinct ways in which each protest engaged with the myth of racial democracy.

The first protest demonstration involved a five-mile march from downtown Rio de Janeiro to the home of Herberts Cukurs on the Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon in August 1950. Cukurs, a Latvian war criminal responsible for the murders of hundreds of Latvian and Lithuanian Jews during World War II, fled to Brazil in 1946, where he lived openly under his own name and ran a paddle-boat rental business on the lagoon. In June 1950, the Rio de Janeiro Jewish Federation held a press conference to denounce his presence in the city. Although the Federation attempted to discreetly lobby the Brazilian government to expel Cukurs, a coalition of Brazilian Jewish leftists decided to take a bolder approach. Carrying banners calling for Cukurs's immediate expulsion, Jewish protesters arrived at his home, where they began attacking his paddle boats, until police arrived and arrested three of the protesters.

This protest infuriated the influential newspaper, which gave it front-page coverage, invoking the myth of racial democracy to discredit the protesters. "In Brazil there is no climate for antisemitism," the newspaper claimed. "Just as there isn't any climate for antisemitism, there isn't any for Semitic demonstrations, organized as such above and beyond the laws of the country." The depiction of the protest as being on behalf of Jewish rather than Brazilian interests was one reason for the failure of the anti-Cukurs movement. This impression was only enhanced by the fact that many of the protesters were recently arrived immigrants. Another cause can be attributed to Cold War geopolitics: with Brazil and the USSR having broken diplomatic ties in 1947, Brazil was unable to extradite

Cukurs to Soviet Latvia, and the Brazilian government decided not to initiate expulsion proceedings against him.

Conversely, the second protest was more successful precisely because of how it adroitly employed the discourse of racial democracy. Eager to secure access to oil in the wake of the 1973 Arab oil boycott, the Brazilian military dictatorship pursued closer relations with the PLO, officially recognizing the organization as the representative of the Palestinian people in 1979. When newspapers reported that the military regime was considering authorizing a PLO diplomatic office in the country, the Zionist Youth Council decided to take action. In December 1979, young Zionist activists organized an anti-PLO demonstration in the São Paulo Jewish neighborhood of Bom Retiro. Carrying signs that warned of the danger that the PLO office posed to Brazilian Arab-Jewish harmony, the demonstrators appealed to the idea of racial democracy, and were careful to couch their concerns in terms of Brazilian national interests.

Surprisingly for a protest taking place during the dictatorship, this demonstration resulted in no arrests, and even more remarkably, the protesters achieved their aim. In July 1981, the Brazilian foreign minister Ramiro Saraiva Guerreiro held a press conference to announce that Brazil would approve the PLO office on condition that it did not lead to conflict between Brazilian Arabs and Jews. When these two communities faced off in rival demonstrations throughout Brazilian cities following Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the Brazilian foreign ministry decided to veto the office altogether. Anti-PLO protesters succeeded where the anti-Cukurs protesters had failed, since they were Brazilian-born, and hence more attuned to the nuances of racial democracy. Cold War politics also played a role, as the military regime, which distrusted the PLO as a leftist liberation movement, was happy to find an excuse to avoid granting it an office, while still appearing to support it.

While racial democracy was far from an accurate depiction of Brazilian race relations, the myth retained its power as a national discourse throughout the Cold War. This discourse, however, was a double-edged sword: ostensibly embracing of ethnic and racial diversity, while intolerant toward ethnic or race-based forms of political

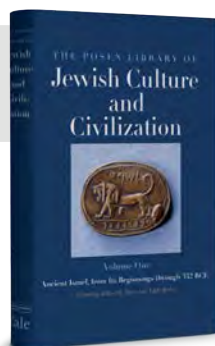
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mobilization. Portrayed in the press as a specifically Jewish demonstration, anti-Cukurs' protesters were unable to generate the necessary support for Cukurs' expulsion, and he would remain in Brazil until his assassination by the Mossad in 1965. Better versed in Brazilian idioms, anti-PLO protesters succeeded in portraying the PLO office as a threat to Brazilian national interests. Consequently, they were successful in their attempt to prevent the establishment of the office, and the PLO would not open a diplomatic office in Brazil until 1993, during the Oslo Accords.

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