



## MAIDEN'S TOWER (TORRE DAS DONZELAS)



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## **Synopsis**

Forty-five years after the Brazilian dictatorship of the 80s, a group of women reunite to discuss their lives during their imprisonment in Tiradentes Prison. They reveal how they lived together in prison under the military dictatorship, tackling not only political issues such as the history of democracy in Brazil but also the role of women as militants.

## **About Brazil**

Brazil—officially the Federative Republic of Brazil—is located in South America. The largest country on that continent, it shares a border with every other country there except Chile and Ecuador. It is the fifth largest country in the world and the fifth most populous, with a total population of about 211,000,000.<sup>1</sup> Brazil's official language is Portuguese, and its capital city is Brasilia. The largest city in Brazil is São Paulo, located in the southeast. Brazil is governed as a democratic federal republic.

## **Military Dictatorship**

During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of countries in Latin America were taken over by military dictatorships, including Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Panama, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil. One thing that most of these dictatorships had in common was that they suppressed freedom of speech and even arrested people who spoke out in opposition to them. Latin America's many dictatorships occurred at the same time as the Cold War, when anti-communist sentiment was high in the United States. As a result of its fears of communism, the United States government encouraged and even supported some of these dictatorships because they were believed to be a way to prevent communism from spreading.

Brazil's military dictatorship began in 1964. After left-leaning president João Goulart tried to institute various socialist reforms, he was pushed out of power in a military coup that took place in 1964. The United States officially recognized Brazil's new government, and Goulart fled to Uruguay. A succession of military generals ruled Brazil until 1985, starting with Humberto Castello Branco. Branco was followed by Artur Costa e Silva, Emílio Médici, Ernesto Geisel, and João Figueiredo.

## **Restriction of Civil Liberties**

The new military government issued a number of decrees, known as Institutional Acts, that legally allowed it to take more and more control over life in Brazil. There were seventeen acts in total. One of the most notorious was the fifth, which suspended the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/br.html>

democratic rights of citizens and allowed the government to change laws, regardless of the existing constitution.

Overall, during the years that Brazil was governed by the dictatorship, civil liberties and freedom of speech were severely restricted. Many of those people who opposed the new regime were arrested by intelligence agencies such as the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS) and the Department of Information Operations—Center for Internal Defense Operations (DOI-CODI). These activists were imprisoned and often tortured in prisons such Tiradentes Prison in São Paulo. In total, it is estimated that thousands of people were jailed and tortured in Brazil during the years of the dictatorship, and around 400 were killed.

### **Dilma Rouseff**

Dilma Rouseff was one of the women who was imprisoned in Tiradentes Prison. She was born in 1947 to a Brazilian mother and a Bulgarian father. Rouseff became involved with political activism starting with her high school years, and later played a leadership role in organizations that were opposed to the military dictatorship. In 1970, she was arrested and incarcerated in Tiradentes Prison, where she was held for three years. During that time, she was tortured. She was released in 1973. In 2011, Rouseff became the first female president of Brazil. In 2014, she was reelected, but in 2016 she was impeached and was removed from office.

### **End of the Dictatorship**

Throughout the years of Brazil's military dictatorship, opponents continued to fight for democratic rights, and by the 1980s the military began to give up some of its power. Eventually, it allowed presidential elections. The dictatorship ended in 1985, when the people of Brazil elected Tancredo de Almeida Neves as president and José Sarney as vice president, instead of the candidates from the military party. Neves died before he was able to take office, so Sarney became Brazil's first civilian president since 1964.

### **Accountability and Acknowledgement of Abuses**

While the dictatorship ended in 1985, the people of Brazil did not forget all the human rights violations that had occurred. even today, many Brazilians continue to be unhappy with the fact that very few of the crimes committed under the dictatorship were ever punished. One thing that contributed to this lack of accountability was the Amnesty Law, passed in 1979, which forgave both civilians and members of the military for crimes that had been committed under the dictatorship. The law allowed activists who were in exile to return to Brazil, however it also protected members of the former government from being prosecuted for torture and other human rights violations.

Many other Latin American countries were governed by military dictatorships over a similar time period as Brazil, and citizens in those countries also experienced significant human rights abuses. However, unlike Brazil, a number of those other countries later took action to acknowledge and sometimes even punish those abuses. For example, Chile created a truth commission to investigate the human rights abuses that occurred there under the regime of General Augusto Pinochet, and even provided compensation to victims of torture. In contrast, most of the people who tortured prisoners in Brazil were never held accountable for their actions.

In 2012, Brazil did finally create the National Truth Commission to document the human rights abuses that occurred during the years of military rule. In 2014, the commission published a report, where it concluded that there had been 434 deaths and disappearances. It also identified 377 people as carrying out human rights violations as sanctioned by the state. However, it is widely argued that the commission was not enough because it lacked the power to achieve anything of significance.

Critics argue that overall, rather than acknowledge the abuses that have occurred, Brazil has instead tried to simply forget that they happened. As a result of such forgetting, some people worry that similar abuses could occur in the future. They point out that Brazil's current president, Jair Bolsonaro—a retired military officer—has spoken about the years of the dictatorship with nostalgia, and has reinstated celebrations commemorating the 1964 coup.<sup>2</sup> Despite these actions, Bolsonaro remains popular with much of Brazil's population.



## Glossary

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/27/brazil-bolsonaro-celebrates-brutal-dictatorship>

- **Bandeirantes Operation (OBAN):** A detention and torture center in São Paulo, Brazil.
- **Carandiru:** Carandiru is a prison in São Paulo, Brazil, notorious for its horrific conditions and human rights violations. It was shut down in 2002.
- **Department of Information Operations—Center for Internal Defense Operations (DOI-CODI):** This Brazilian intelligence agency was responsible for arresting and torturing hundreds of people during the period of military rule, from 1964 to 1985.
- **Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS):** Brazilian intelligence agency that arrested and tortured opposition groups.
- **Carlos Marighella (1911-1969):** Carlos Marighella was a Brazilian politician and political activist who opposed the military dictatorship. He founded the National Liberation Action group.
- **Karl Marx (1818-1883):** Marx was a philosopher and revolutionary. His works helped inspire numerous twentieth-century communist regimes.
- **Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930):** Vladimir Mayakovsky was a revolutionary Soviet poet.
- **National Liberation Action (ALN):** A communist guerilla group in Brazil, that was founded by Carlos Marighella.
- **Palmares Armed Revolutionary Vanguard:** The Palmares Armed Revolutionary Vanguard was a guerilla organization that fought against Brazil's military dictatorship.
- **São Paulo:** São Paulo is the capital of the Brazilian state by the same name. It is the largest city in Brazil, and one of the largest in the world.
- **Virgílio Gomes da Silva (1933-1969):** Virgílio Gomes da Silva was a political activist and member of the National Liberation Action group.
- **Mao Tse-tung (1893-1976):** Mao Tse-tung, or Mao Zedong, was a communist revolutionary who founded the People's Republic of China.
- **Tupamaros:** An urban guerrilla organization in Uruguay.
- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights:** This document was adopted in 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations. It sets out a standard of fundamental human rights to be protected by all nations.
- **World Cup:** The World Cup is a soccer tournament held every four years, that determines the world's soccer champion. Brazil has won numerous times, including in 1970.

## Additional Resources

### Books

- Amnesty International (1999). *Brazil: No One Here Sleeps Safely*. New York: Amnesty International.
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