

Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right

THE NAZI PARTY AND THE GERMAN COMMUNITIES ABROAD

THE LATIN AMERICAN CASE

João Fábio Bertonha and Rafael Athaides



The Nazi Party and the German Communities Abroad

The Nazi Party and the German Communities Abroad examines the German Nazi Party's actions around the world in the 1930s and 1940s.

The book particularly focuses on the formation and development of the *Auslandsorganisation der NSDAP* (AO) (Nazi Party/Foreign Organization), the party branch charged with the task of connecting with foreign fascist movements and, especially with Germans living abroad. The authors follow the creation of the AO and its development in Germany, along with its actions throughout the world, including Europe, Asia, Africa and North America, before finally focusing on Latin America. The Latin American case is then presented in both general and particular aspects, including countries such as Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Mexico and Colombia. The study draws on many primary sources and is extensively referenced; an index with 700 references related to the action of Nazism in the American continent is presented, including the American and Canadian cases.

This volume will be of interest to researchers of the history of Nazism and Latin America.

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Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right

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The Latin American Case

João Fábio Bertonha and Rafael Athaides

First published in English 2023
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an informa business*

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Published in Portuguese by Maringá: Edições Diálogos 2021 as “O nazismo e as comunidades alemãs no exterior: o caso da América Latina. História, historiografia e guia de referências bibliográficas (1932–2020)”

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bertonha, João Fábio, author. | Athaides, Rafael, author.

Title: The Nazi Party and the German communities abroad : the Latin

American case / João Fábio Bertonha and Rafael Athaides.

Other titles: O nazismo e as comunidades alemãs no exterior. English

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2023. |

Series: Routledge studies in fascism and the far right | Previously published: O nazismo e as comunidades alemãs no exterior: o caso da América Latina. História, historiografia e guia de referências bibliográficas (1932–2020). Maringá : Edições Diálogos, 2021. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022041209 (print) | LCCN 2022041210 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781032340500 (hardback) | ISBN 9781032344706 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781003322313 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Auslands-Organisation der NSDAP. | Germans–Latin

America–Politics and government. | Germans–Latin America–

History–20th century. | Germany–Foreign relations–Latin America. |

Latin America–Foreign relations–Germany. | Nazis–Foreign countries–

History–20th century. | Germany–Foreign relations–1933–1945.

Classification: LCC DD253.412 .B478 2023 (print) |

LCC DD253.412 (ebook) | DDC 327.4308–dc23/eng/20221117

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022041209>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022041210>

ISBN: 978-1-032-34050-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-34470-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-32231-3 (ebk)

DOI: [10.4324/9781003322313](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003322313)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

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Foreword to the Brazilian Edition

The publication of this book by João Fábio Bertonha and Rafael Athaides is a pleasant surprise. Although much has already been written about the presence of Nazi Party (NSDAP) groups outside Germany, the authors offer us a pioneering and important synthesis of varied historiography on groups and organizations integrated within the *Nazi Party Foreign Organization* (*Auslandsorganisation der Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* or simply AO).

This is an object that has been treated systematically by scholars since the early 1950s. Even so, the recent multiplication of studies on the subject makes a work like this one, carried out by Bertonha and Athaides, a more than welcome initiative both for those who want to explore this territory and for those who have been exploring it for some time.

The volume and variety of the production related to the topic would be, in itself, more than enough reason for the publication of a book that intends to map and identify this production. However, Bertonha and Athaides go further and, by going through the historiography on the subject, offer those who walk these rugged terrain elements that allow them to avoid and overcome some obstacles that have long been present in this field of study.

Of these, perhaps one of the most visible and durable for the work of research on the presence of the NSDAP abroad, especially in Latin America, is a type of image or social representation of the party, constructed in the 1930s, and which gained exemplary expression at the hands of the Argentine journalist Ernesto Giudici.

In 1938, Giudici published his *Hitler Conquista a América* (Hitler conquers America), a book whose title gives the tone of the alarm caused by the presence of the Nazi party in various countries outside Germany. In it, the presence of the Nazi Party in Latin America is explained through a singular theory of Nazi imperialism, in which the migratory experiences that have taken place since the first half of the 19th-century function as elaborate instruments of domination:

The colonies of these nationalities [Germany and Japan] were not founded by chance and not just anywhere, but in strategic places from

an economic and military point of view. [...] the richest regions of the world or the areas towards which the economic expansion of this imperialism is directed have been carefully studied, and to where their immigration is officially directed. [The 'colonies' serve: first, as ideological outposts of fascist imperialism, used for the dissemination of reactionary political ideas, for fascist propaganda abroad, etc.; second, as the support of the reactionary oligarchies of the respective countries, with whom it puts itself in contact in furtherance of its common dictatorial and anti-democratic plans; third, as centres of fascist espionage; fourth, as consumers of [the respective countries'] export products and as sellers of these products [. . .]; fifth, as a base of support for imperialism from a strategic, warlike, military point of view . . .

(Giudici, 1938, pp. 108, 110–111)

In a curious insight into the history and the relationship between past and present, for Giudici, everything is controlled “from above” and everything fits together: Nazism, once installed in Germany, gives meaning to the whole past of emigration and settlement of Germans around the world, all firmly amalgamated through the political project of Hitler’s imperialism.

Giudici’s view is, of course, a particularly cartoonish expression of a conspiracy myth very common in the Americas of the 1930s and 1940s. Even so, the presence of Nazism outside the borders of Germany has never ceased to be associated, in a more or less vibrant way, with the idea of the submission and control of Germans and their descendants by the party. And even if the specialized literature has subjected it to successive revisions, qualifying or rejecting it altogether, this “theory” has become so naturalized that it has proved durable in the historical studies on the Auslandsorganisation. Bertanha and Athaides’ book, going through decisive themes for the understanding of the presence of the Nazi Party abroad, offers us the elements that allow us to shed light on these reassessments.

The book, going from the general to the specific and from the centre to the periphery, skilfully connects data on the history of Nazism as a political system with the concrete experiences of the organization of NSDAP groups abroad.

Starting from a framework about the structure of the functioning of fascist regimes, it leads us to something that we could call a system of functioning of the Nazi Party and the Third Reich. In this way, the multiplicity of actors that, in different ways, act and dispute space both at home and abroad become evident. These diverse actors and agencies, many of which performed, in competition, the same function, were one of the hallmarks of the “Nazi system” that caught the attention of its first observers. As early as the 1940s, this “system” was described, contrary to the Nazis’ presentation of themselves, as “chaotic” by the political scientist Franz Neumann, in his prestigious and now classic *Behemoth: Structure and Practice of National*

Socialism, published in 1942. Today, this perception is firmly established in the historiography on the subject.

With this framework drawn, the authors allow us to go through both political projects and the institutional network that underpinned and guided the actions of party groups abroad, with emphasis on the thorough description of the agency that eventually took charge of individual militants and organized groups outside Germany: The Auslandsorganisation. The final picture of this competitive structure, the result of a work on the available historiography, stands out from the images produced in the so-called inter-war period and which pervade many of the histories written about NSDAP organizations abroad.

Armed with this set of references, the authors take us into the concrete cases of the construction of party groups in the various continents to offer us a panorama of the “worldwide expansion of the NSDAP.” The history of the groups brings us closer to a type of historiographical production that, even without neglecting the centre, allows us to see the building and capillary functioning of these groups, built, in general, without the interference or even the impulse of the leadership in Germany. There were the local, dispersed and largely personal initiatives that produced the ramification of the party on all continents, and, for the great majority of the cases, they were only later organized and structured by the leadership in Berlin. Bertonha and Athaides’ systematization leads us by continents and countries, culminating in a reconstruction of the organizational experiences of the NSDAP in the Americas, the focus of their interest.

Throughout the work, it is visible that the fundamental concern of the authors is not only to present theses and approaches but also, simultaneously, to reflect on them, not failing to show the criteria that guided them in the reading and systematization of this material. For this reason, the book gives space to perspectives hitherto little used in this field of studies, with emphasis on the problem of comparison, a concern that runs throughout the text. Although there are exceptions – such as the theses of Jürgen Müller (1997) and Olaf Gaudig and Peter Veit (1997) on the Nazi Party in Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico) – presented in the 1990s, the comparative approach has not yet become established in this field of study. And this, we may suppose, for a large set of reasons that range from the unequal availability of primary material in different languages to the differences in volume and depth in the investigation of concrete cases. However, we should not neglect a certain latent reserve in the professional field of historians regarding comparative exercises, which makes Bertonha and Athaides’ initiative even more significant.

Following the good practices of historical writing, the themes concerning the presence of the Nazi Party abroad are traversed with the declared intention of exercising comparison, supplanting supposedly impermeable frontiers between the so-called “national” cases. By bringing into consideration

references to other cases of fascist movements that expanded outside its national frontiers, with a clear emphasis on the Italian case, the authors place us before a powerful intellectual instrument that ends up producing two important effects: The first of them is what Jurgen Kocka (2014) has called the “deprovincialization” of the cases studied, shedding light on aspects that transcend them, and that allows us to see them as a family of phenomena that, without the comparison, would remain in the shadows or complete darkness.

On the other hand, it is precisely through careful confrontation and through the observation that refuses hasty generalizations that the specificities of each one of the cases gain vivid colours. It is the comparative look that allows the authors to verify similarities, differences and, observing from above the history of the Nazi Party abroad, to register silences and areas still little illuminated, presenting instigating starting points for exploration into specific cases and stimulating research still to be done.

Through the systematization of established knowledge, presenting a highly qualified synthesis of the state of the art in the field, and reflecting on the stories and memories created on AO and other Nazi Party groups abroad, what we have here is an important book because it has the power to open paths.

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Foreword to the English Edition

How I wish I had had this book 25 years ago! It took me years of bibliographical and historiographical research to familiarize myself with the state of the scattered and conflicted literature on the German presence in Latin America for a dissertation that became the book *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign against the Germans of Latin America in World War II* (2003). Bertonha and Athaides have now engaged in the judicious assessment of a much vaster secondary literature, enabling them to synthesize the state of knowledge about the Nazi project in Latin America in a volume that will be invaluable to scholars setting out in this field.

To do so, they needed not only to engage in exhaustive research into existing publications from several countries but to cut through the mass of faulty scholarship that emerged from the politically understandable, if to the truth-seeking scholar useless, accounts that adopted or mimicked contemporaneous propaganda aimed at inducing anti-Nazi action rather than providing reliable evidence. This is a heuristic, if not an ethical challenge. Bertonha and Athaides were equal to the task.

We now know that German emigrants to Latin America maintained a strong sense of cultural identity, but the willingness to participate directly in the Nazi project was attenuated by their circumstances. Direct contact with the homeland tended to wane over time, vitiating any truly aggressive nationalism on their part. They knew where their own interests lay: In maintaining friendly relations with their Latin American neighbours, governors and customers. Most German immigrants ultimately occupied an in-between space, loyal but apart, welcomed but unincorporated, in Latin America but not of it.¹

Small, isolated Nazi groups sprouted in several Latin American capitals after 1929. But most German emigrants tried to ignore these first coarse, noisy upstarts. It was not merely their grating style that kept the Nazis from making many early converts. The conservative German expatriates abhorred the disorder, the acid partisan rivalries that hobbled the Weimar government and regularly spilled onto the streets of Germany's cities. Shrill local Nazis now threatened to import the same conflicts to the staid overseas communities. Extolling the supremacy of German culture and calling

for defending the purity of German blood seemed to many emigrants to be in extremely poor taste where maintaining respectful relations with Latinos was crucial to their continued social and financial success – and in some cases, to peace within their own families. The Nazis explicitly rejected a large segment of the German population – those who married non-Aryans, those who did not speak German in daily life, or who adopted Latin American citizenship. For this reason, the early Nazis alienated many Germans and wound up becoming not the unifying force they aspired to be but a corrosive and divisive faction.

Hitler's rise to power in 1933 changed the equation, and the influence of the Nazi Party in Latin America began to grow. Germans living outside the Third Reich were included in the Nazi vision of a *Volksgemeinschaft*, a German ethno-national or, in the language of the era, “racial” community. The Nazi Party (NSDAP) undertook to enlist them in its ranks via its *Auslandsorganisation* (AO or Foreign Organization). Substantial open resistance in the first few years was rapidly stamped out as the Nazi Party moved to back up its transnational organizing efforts with the machinery of the state, as we learned from Olaf Gaudig, Peter Veit, Uwe Lübken, Jürgen Müller, and other rigorous scholars. In country after country, NSDAP officials marched into meetings with the boards of directors of German schools and German clubs to demand control as the true representatives of the Führer. These schools were central to the life of the German community, shaping the nature of what H. Glenn Penny has called “diaspora nationalism.”² Since Germanness was undefined, it could be contested, and the prime sites of the shaping of German identity in Latin America were the focal points of an increasingly desperate struggle.³

Bertonha and Athaides have sketched the outcome of that struggle: A poor showing by the organizers of the NSDAP in Latin America, for the most part, reflecting the region's low place on the priority list of Nazi Germany as well as the obstacles to Aryan supremacy in a region marked by racial diversity. To update a popular phrase, the Nazis did not persuade most Germans in Latin America to join the Party, and not only for lack of trying.

None of this excuses those who did join from the judgment of history. But historians now have, with the help of this fine book, a solid starting place from which to pursue their own investigations. They should return to it regularly as a model of good judgment and fair reporting.

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Notes

- 1 On the persistence of German identity in these communities, see H. Glenn Penny, “Reflections: German Polycentrism and the Writing of History,” *German History* 30:2 (June 2012): 265–282.

- 2 H. Glenn Penny, "Diversity, Inclusivity, and Germanness in Latin America during the Interwar Period," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 61 (Fall 2017): 85–108; Penny, "Material Connections: German Schools, Things, and Soft Power in Argentina and Chile from the 1880s through the Interwar Period," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59:3 (2017): 519–549.
- 3 Frederik Schulze, "Von verbrasilianisierten Deutschen und deutschen Brasilianern 'Deutschsein' in Rio Grande Do Sul, Brasilien, 1870–1945," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 41:2 (April–June 2015): 197–227.

Preface to the English Edition

It is with great satisfaction that we present this book to the English-speaking public. National Socialism and, more specifically, “exported Nazism,” is an object that attracts a great deal of interest, both from a specialized and a broader public, and the possibility of bringing new points for discussion to this public is one of the *raison d’être* of this book.

“Exported Nazism” is ultimately a theme related to international relations and the NSDAP reproduction abroad had a particular significance for the English-speaking countries. In all of them, there were substantial German immigrant communities, which the NSDAP tried to seduce and attract to its aims. This made the relationship between German immigration and the Nazi Party a matter of national security, requiring vigilance and control. At the same time, the presence of NSDAP militants settled in various European countries as well as in the Middle East and Africa was a strategically important issue for the United Kingdom, which identified them as a potential threat to its colonial empire and its allies in Europe.

For the United States, the concern was twofold. On the one hand, there was a huge German community settled in the country and there was the fear, which today we know to be unfounded, that at least some of these immigrants could be converted into Axis agents. The greatest concern of the American government, however, was in Latin America.

Latin America became, in the 1930s and 1940s, a battlefield between the Anglo-Saxon powers and the Axis agents, especially the Germans, but also Italians and Spaniards. There were economic, diplomatic and – in the future – military advantages in preventing the Axis advance towards Latin America. The vigorous efforts – cultural, economic and political – and the substantial resources employed by the United States government to nullify the German presence in Latin America are well known, but also the United Kingdom acted in this direction.

To mention just one example, which demonstrates how the Foreign Offices paid close attention to everything that happened south of Rio Grande, one can remember what happened in 1942 in the state of Paraná, south of Brazil. This state hosted, until 1938, the 5th largest Circle (*Kreiss*) of the Nazi Party in Brazil and a local journalist, Mário Martins, published, from 1938 on, a