



STATE COLLEGE CARLOS MARIGHELLA

Salvador, Brazil

-12.98502, -38.445



Executive Summary

A state college named after the authoritarian President Emílio Garrastuza Médici (1969-1974) has officially changed its name to Carlos Marighella, a guerrilla fighter against the Brazilian military regime (1964-1985). The current name was chosen after the college held an election in 2013, which was preceded by a series of talks about the historical characters that could be honoured in the renaming. In February 2014, the government officially changed the name of the college from Médici to Marighella after decades of interest in change and frustration over the name Médici. This move has also sparked interest in similarly named schools to also attempt to change their names.

Introduction

A college located in Salvador, the capital of the northeastern Brazilian state of Bahia, has undergone a name change in 2014: instead of paying homage to the dictatorship president General Emílio Garrastuza Médici, it now honours the memory of Carlos Marighella, a key figure in the resistance against this authoritarian regime. To be named after a dictator associated with a particularly repressive moment in the regime had been a point of contention for the school, which was engaged in a process of researching, suggesting, presenting and choosing (via a vote) an alternative name. The efforts of this long-standing contestation culminated in voting for the replacement of the original name that had been in place for 42 years. The case has been publicised and received a variety of responses, some positive (including from Marighella's family and historians) and some negative (mainly on social media). The negative responses were expressed most often as nostalgia for the memory of the dictatorship and its leaders, and presented an image of those who had been in opposition to the regime as 'terrorists'. This case study explores the complexities involved in the memory of the Brazilian dictatorship, both in relation to the specific characters of Médici and Marighella, and more broadly in connection to the country's current political climate of opposing stances on democracy and its history.

Background

The Brazilian Civil-Military Dictatorship (1964-1985)

The history of military involvement in Brazil's political life dates back to at least the time of the Republic, established in 1889.¹ In the 1960s, within the context of the Cold War, political polarisation grew more tense in Latin America, and US-influenced anticommunism was forceful in Brazil. On March 31 1964, after overthrowing the reformist centre-left government of João Goulart, the military took direct control of the state, installing an authoritarian regime that would control civil society and the political system according to its interests until 1985. The memory of this moment is a contested history in itself, as different perceptions of the dictatorship have historically coexisted within Brazilian society and historiography. While some see the roots of the regime in a moderate ideology focused on securing the rule of law, others see this as a myth and highlight episodes of severe repression and anticommunism.² The clearest example of this is the fact that some narratives describe this moment as a coup d'état, while others call it a 'revolution'.

General Emílio Médici presided over Brazil during the military dictatorship, from October 1969 to March 15 1974. The dictatorship period between 1964-1985 was characterised by a relatively rapid succession of presidents, meaning in 1969 Médici was already a successor to three governments – Ranieri Mazzilli (1964), Castelo Branco (1964-1967), Costa e Silva (1967-1969) and a Military Junta (1969.) Médici was chosen by generals to take over as a substitute for

¹ Marcos Napolitano, "The Brazilian Military Regime, 1964-1985", Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Latin American History. April 26, 2018.

² Carlos Fico, "Versões e controvérsias sobre 1964 e a ditadura militar," Revista Brasileira de História 24, no. 47(2003): 54

President Marshal Costa e Silva, who had ruled from 1967 to 1969.³ In 1968, Costa e Silva decreed the Ato Institucional Nº5 (5th Institutional Act), known as AI-5, which gave the President powers to 'close the National Congress, persecute politicians and institutionalise repression'. This measure was supported by Médici 'with excitement.'⁴

Médici's rule is known as the period of most intense repression during the dictatorship, referred to as Anos de Chumbo ('Years of Lead') due to widespread human rights abuses. This included the persecution, torture and murder of those opposing the regime, as well as censorship of the press, intellectuals, culture and political organisations. Repressive measures were particularly forceful against urban and rural guerrilla movements inspired by the Cuban experience, such as the Movimento Revolucionário 8 de Outubro (Revolutionary Movement 8th October, MR-8), the Araguaia Guerrilla, and the Ação Libertadora Nacional (National Liberating Action, ALN) - the latter founded by Carlos Marighella.

In addition to the notorious reputation of his administration, the figure Médici himself became well-known, especially due to political propaganda slogans 'Brasil: ame-o ou deixe-o' (Brazil: love it or leave it), which is connected to the large number of political exiles at this moment.

*Carlos Marighella and the Resistance*⁵

Born in Salvador (Bahia, Brazil), Marighella was one of the main names of the resistance to the military regime. His revolutionary stance guided his actions as a guerrilla fighter, and also informed his poetry and many authored books.

His political engagement had faced resistance and repression since 1934, when he was arrested for publishing a poem that was critical of the government that would, in 1937, become the dictatorial period known as the *Estado Novo* (New State), led by president Getúlio Vargas.⁶ He was arrested and tortured by this regime two more times: in 1936 for one year, and in 1939 for six years. In 1945, with the end of the *Estado Novo*, he was granted amnesty and released.⁷



Figure 1: Marighella's PCB identity card emitted during a period of legality of the party, from 1945 to 1947. © Arquivo Público do Estado do Rio de Janeiro [Aperj] CC0

³ Antonio Barros, "Os presidentes da ditadura militar", Agência Câmara. December 28, 2006.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See the Open Library on the Internet Archive for a list of Marghella's works including his famous *Minimanual of the Urban Guerilla* (1970).

⁶ Taís Ilhéu, "Afinal, quem foi Carlos Marighella?", Guia do Estudante. February 20, 2019.

⁷ Ibid.

In 1946, Marighella was elected as a federal representative of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) - see Figure 1 - in Bahia. By orders of President Eurico Gaspar Dutra (in power 1946-1951), and in the context of the Cold War, the party was made illegal and his position revoked. Dutra had run for president as part of the Social Democratic Party, a centrist movement founded by the elites of the *Estado Novo*, which represented mainly the expansive rural areas of Brazil.⁸ In light of a political climate hostile to leftist organising, Marighella then proceeded to act as a leader in many capacities within the clandestine PCB, a period which included travels to Communist China between 1953-54.⁹

This consistent commitment to the ideology and praxis of communism was central in leading Marighella to be considered the number one enemy of the government one year before Médici assumed the presidency in 1969.¹⁰ In 1964, he had been shot and captured by the Department of Social and Political Order (*Departamento de Ordem Política e Social*, known as DOPS) inside a movie theatre, and remained under arrest until 1965. That same year, he opted for a strategy of armed resistance, formalised in his book *The Brazilian Crisis*.

This position led to divergences with the PCB, which sharpened gradually and culminated in his renunciation of office and later expulsion from the party in 1967. PCB didn't share his views on the bourgeoisie, nor was he able to fight the state the way Marighella believed necessary. In his view, the need for armed war against the state was pressing. In 1968, he founded the Ação Libertadora Nacional (National Liberation Action) or ALN in accordance with this mission.

His views on the course of action for guerrilla fighting in Brazil were laid out in his 1969 *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*:

It is necessary for every urban guerrilla to always keep in mind that it can only maintain its existence if it is able to kill the police and those dedicated to repression, and if it is determined - truly determined - to expropriate the wealth of the rich businessmen, landowners and imperialists.¹¹

One of the most audacious actions of the ALN was the political kidnapping of U.S. ambassador Charles Burke Elbrick in 1969, a strategic move coordinated in tandem with the MR-8, [aimed at] the release of 15 political criminals, which was successful. This moment also included the dissemination of a revolutionary manifesto through the main means of communication of the country. The organisation became known for similar acts, considered acts of terrorism against the government. As with the divergent views on the significance of the events of 1964, the actions of Marighella and the ALN are similarly polarising. On the one hand, he is considered a hero of the

⁸ Agência DIAP, "Os 'três partidos brasileiros': dos ricos, dos pobres e do interior," Departamento Intersindical de Assessoria Parlamentar, February 1 2025.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ingrid Maria Machado, "Colégio faz eleição e tenta mudar nome de Médici para Marighella". G1 BA, December 12, 2013.

¹¹ Carlos Marighella, *Mini-Manual of The Urban Guerrilla* (Montreal: Abraham Guillen Press & Arm The Spirit, 2002), p.6.

resistance and an important strategist and executor of revolutionary acts that impacted the course of the fight for democracy in Brazil. According to this narrative, the severity of acts such as the kidnapping or summary executions was seen as proportionate to the violence of the repression imposed by the military regime. On the other hand, Marighella was, and to some continues to be, seen as a terrorist – certainly according to Brazil's highly-read conservative blogger, Reinaldo Azevedo. See especially his article entitled: 'The hero who saw terrorism as noble and honourable, who defended sabotage to passenger trains and who praised ambushes as a way to execute the enemy leaving it no chance of defence.'¹² Indeed, Marighella's legacy remains a divisive topic in Brazilian political discourse.

Memorialising the Dictatorship: 'Never Again'

As Joana Ferraz and Lucas Campos observe, disputes over the memory of the dictatorship include a series of institutions, monuments, statues, parks, public engineering works, buildings and streets that were created or named during the regime as public statements of the power of the state and its claim to the modernisation of the country.¹³ The practice of naming educational institutions after state leaders is widespread in Brazil, as it is worldwide, with 3135 public school units paying homage to past heads of government since the Republican period alone (from 1889).¹⁴ Within these, 976 are named after the five generals who ruled during the military regime.¹⁵

The memory of the military dictatorship in Brazil has been shaped by the reconciliation strategy that 'paved the way for re-democratisation in Brazil': the Amnesty Law was declared on the 28th August 1979, implemented during the rule of president João Batista Figueiredo.¹⁶ It established 'broad, general and unrestricted amnesty'; that is, to all of those who had committed political crimes, whether civilian or military.

The *Comissão Nacional da Verdade* (CNV, National Truth Commission) was created by Law 12528/2011 and instituted on May 16 2012 to 'investigate grave human rights violations that occurred from September 18 1946 to October 5 1988', during the government of President Dilma Rousseff (pres. 2011-2016) - who was herself a political prisoner and victim of torture.¹⁷ The

¹² Reinaldo Azevedo, "O herói que achava o terrorismo nobre e honrado, que defendia sabotagem a trens de passageiros e que pregava a emboscada para executar o inimigo sem chance de defesa," *Veja*, July 31, 2020.

¹³ Joana Darc Fernandes Ferraz and Lucas Pacheco Campos, "Os lugares de memória da ditadura: disputas entre o poder público e os movimentos sociais", *Cadernos de Sociomuseologia*, n°11-2018 (vol. 55), pp. 179-207.

¹⁴ Gustavo Uribe and Leonardo Vieira, "País tem quase mil escolas com nomes de presidentes da ditadura", *O Globo*, September 2, 2013.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Ricardo Westin, "Há 40 anos, Lei da Anistia preparou caminho para fim da ditadura", August 5, 2019.

¹⁷ Comissão Nacional da Verdade, "A CNV", n.d., <http://cnv.memoriasreveladas.gov.br/institucional-acesso-informacao/a-cnv.html>.

focus of the commission was on crimes perpetrated by ‘public agents, people at their service, with support of or in the interest of the Brazilian state’.¹⁸

History of the Contestation

State College Carlos Marighella (Colégio Estadual Carlos Marighella) is located in Salvador in the Northeastern state of Bahia, Brazil. It was built and inaugurated in 1972 under the name ‘State College Presidente Emílio Garrastazu Médici’ (*Colégio Estadual Emílio Garrastazu Médici*), in honour of Brazil’s president at the time, during the period of dictatorship. The name of the ex-president was written across the front of the building, but apparently no statuary, plaques or other forms of homage were present. This is one of several cases of schools and institutions that were built paying homage to Médici among other dictators.

The process of renaming the college had been discussed within the institution for years. Aldair Almeida Dantas, director of school at the time of its change, reports that the history of the name change precedes her administration and has been planned for decades. Having worked at the institution for 16 years, she states that the desire for the change in name had been alive in both the teaching and student communities.¹⁹ According to Dantas, the name Medici plastered across the front of the school’s building was a frustration, as the school’s well-renowned teaching was ‘stained’ by the name of ‘a character who represents one of the worst moments of our history’.²⁰ Dantas also states that the action responsible for the change was strengthened in 2013, when human sciences teachers promoted talks and discussions on the history of the country and of the state of Bahia. In November that year, the college initiated the name-change process and held an election on changing its name. Médici remained one of the options open to voters. A sociology professor was in charge of researching and presenting potential alternatives, candidates Carlos Marighella and geographer Milton Santos, for the vote – the selection of these candidates was ‘based on the preference of the entire school community’.²¹ It is significant that both Santos and Marighella were Bahians, thus connecting the name of the school to regional historical characters. Prior to the election, alumni, parents and students were invited to watch videos and attend lectures about the history of the candidates, Médici, Marighella and Santos, and about the history of the emergence of the institution.²²

Voting took place in November 2013, over the course of ten days. It was open to students, teachers, ex-students and parents.²³ A total of 658 votes were gathered - 406 for Marighella.²⁴

¹⁸ Comissão Nacional da Verdade, “Resolução 02”, August 20, 2012.

¹⁹ G1 BA, “Fachada de escola que mudou nome para Carlos Marighella é inaugurada”, April 11, 2014.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 5.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ingrid Maria Machado, “Colégio faz eleição e tenta mudar nome de Médici para Marighella”. G1 BA, December 12, 2013.

²⁴ Ibid.

The process was concluded in 2014 when the new name of the college was voted State College Carlos Marighella and the front sign was altered. The change was published in the Official State Diary on the 14th February 2014, implemented on the 17th of the same month and commemorated with a celebration at the school on the 11th April 2014, which included the then Governor of the state of Bahia, Jaques Wagner.²⁵ According to him, the change praises the memory of Marighella rather than generate sentiments of hate towards the military president: 'we are not planting hatred against anybody with this name change. We are planting love for Carlos Marighella, a man who fought for democracy, who fought for the freedom of the Brazilian people'.²⁶

Since the official change in name to State College Carlos Marighella, two other colleges in Bahia have expressed interest in changing their names, which also come from military presidents, and are pleading for a similar name change.²⁷ Were the story of State College Carlos Marighella to continue setting a precedent for change, this could have a transformative effect in Bahia – at least 16 institutions across the state have names of former military presidents related to the dictatorship, e.g. Castelo Branco and Arthur Costa e Silva.²⁸

Maria Marighella, Carlos Marighella's granddaughter, spoke to newspapers about this case, stating that while the family was not involved in this initiative, the name change was received as a happy achievement: 'this was a victory of democracy in Brazil, and of the construction and rescue of Marighella's memory'.²⁹ Historian Ricardo Sizilio also commented on this case: 'this change is highly important, because one stops valuing leaders of the dictators and starts valuing the leaders of the people, such as Marighella'. He argues this is especially relevant given that the names of the latter are rarely referenced in history books and taught in schools, and urges other education institutions to follow this example.³⁰

Social media comments and press coverage of this event reveal polarising views on the subject. Many have expressed disapproval of the name change, alleging an erasure of history and of the memory of 'those who kept our country from becoming communist' by removing references to the military. This evinces the endurance of the rhetoric employed by the dictatorship, which justified its authoritarian, unconstitutional and violent acts as a response to the 'threat of communism.' This narrative is consistent with the wider global context of the Cold War, as well as its intimate connection to the influence of the United States in Brazil and other military dictatorships in South America.³¹ In this sense, the controversy of this case lies in the divergent interpretations of the

²⁵ G1 BA, "Fachada de escola que mudou nome para Carlos Marighella é inaugurada", April 11, 2014.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Henrique Mendes and Ruan Melo, "Mais dois colégios querem trocar nomes de presidentes militares na BA", G1 BA, April 1, 2014.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ingrid Maria Machado, "Colégio faz eleição e tenta mudar nome de Médici para Marighella". G1 BA, December 12, 2013.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Daniel Neves Silva, "Ditaduras Latino-americanas". Brasil Escola, n.d.

events of the military dictatorship by different sectors of Brazilian society, and the subsequent impact of these interpretations on the modern political landscape of the country.

Decision-Making Processes

Ultimately, the decision made by the school representatives (including students, alumni, teachers, parents, guardians and administrators) in the process described above was approved by higher authorities, the State Government of Bahia. The request for changing the institution's name was sent to the State Education Secretariat (*Secretaria de Educação do Estado*). Education State Secretary, Osvaldo Barreto, seems to have approved the claim on the grounds that 'there is a general rule that the name of a school should be given by the *community*,³² whose request Barreto says is respected by the state.

The Education State Secretariat Office indicated that this was the first time that a state teaching institution named after a dictator has requested a name change.

Ramifications

Just over one month after the State College President Emílio Garrastazu Médici changed its name to honour Carlos Marighella, two other state teaching institutions submitted requests to have their names (also initially homages to military presidents) changed.³³

Colégio Humberto Alencar Castelo Branco suggested the name Nelson Mandela. The project was created by Human Sciences teachers. The change was put forward in the form of a referendum on 30th April 2014, and students, alumni, professors, workers and community residents voted. This process also included a general debate on the history of the military regime, the figure of Castelo Branco, and the significance of South-African leader Mandela. The change was effective.³⁴

Colégio Estadual Presidente Costa e Silva also intended to request a name change. The options for the substituting name included Santa Bernadette (the name of a local convent that used to occupy the school's location), Sister Dulce (a Franciscan Sister known for her charitable social actions) or educator, philosopher and pedagogue Paulo Freire. The school's director at the time, Jener Freire, mentioned that the name change had been under discussion for some time, but that the example of *Colégio Carlos Marighella* has shown that the complex process of addressing the memory of the military coup is possible.

³² ASCOM/SEC, "Comunidade escolar comemora mudança de nome do Colégio Estadual do Stiep Carlos Marighella", April 11, 2014. Emphasis added.

³³ Henrique Mendes and Ruan Melo, "Mais dois colégios querem trocar nomes de presidentes militares na BA", G1 BA, April 1, 2014.

³⁴ Bahia Notícias, "Colégio em Periperi muda de nome e passa a se chamar Nelson Mandela," June 6, 2014.

Summary and Conclusions

This case-study summarises the negotiation between clashing perspectives on the Brazilian Military dictatorship, as the characters of Medici and Marighella can be seen to symbolise the opposing sides of the political dispute of this period: the president, representing the regime, and the guerrilla fighter, representing anti-establishment action

The issue of the State College Carlos Marighella has been resolved by means of a consensus reached within the school, and its acceptance by the decision-makers. This contestation opened the way for new proposed name changes, which could become a large-scale process considering the large number of state schools titled after military dictatorship leaders.

The debate regarding the memory of the military dictatorship, however, is by no means reconciled. It is of strong contemporary relevance with the increasing popularity of a form of historical revisionism marked by a nostalgia for the dictatorship and a strong anti-communist and anti-revolutionary sentiment. Former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2023) is a known, declared and emphatic supporter of the military regime. He has expressed this verbally on several occasions, such as his public praise of Colonel Brilhante Ustra, the first member of the military regime to be charged with the crime of torture, as a “national hero”.³⁵ Bolsonaro’s admiration of and nostalgia for the dictatorship is also clearly expressed by his actions that mirror its policies, such as using the Lei de Segurança Nacional (National Security Law), created in 1983 for the persecution of those who opposed the regime, to persecute his critics.³⁶ The celebration of the dictatorship’s inauguration day and the proposed revision of school textbooks provided by the government that would portray it as a “forceful democratic regime” are some among many examples of this historical revisionism.³⁷

In short, the democratic processes through which the State College’s name change was achieved occurred in the context of a trend towards a sentiment of tolerance of the civil-military dictatorship among some sections of the population. The name change is thus an example of a contestation of a historically charged space which does not represent a universal consensus among the affected community, which in this case can be considered to embrace the entirety of Brazil.

³⁵ Veja, “Bolsonaro afirma torturador Brilhante Ustra é um ‘herói nacional’”, August 8, 2019.

³⁶ Catarina Barbosa, “Relembre 7 vezes em que o governo Bolsonaro se espalhou no Brasil da ditadura militar”, Brasil de Fato, March 31, 2021.

³⁷ Folhapress, “Livros didáticos vão mudar para dar a ‘ideia real’ da ditadura no Brasil, diz ministro da Educação”, NSC Total, April 4, 2019.

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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