

# 2010

## H-Diplo

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*H-Diplo has commissioned reviews of the Makers of the Modern World Series (Haus Publishing), which concerns the Peace Conferences of 1919-23 and their aftermath. The 32 volumes are structured as biographies in standard format or as specific national/organizational histories.*  
<http://www.hauspublishing.com/product/229>

#### H-Diplo Review Essay of:

**Michael Streeter. *Epitácio Pessoa: Brazil*.** London: Haus Publishing Limited, 2010, viii + 192pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, Further Reading, index. US \$19.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-905791-86-6.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Haus-Brazil.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **David McCreery, Georgia State University**

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**E**pitácio Pessoa is a short book about a Brazilian politician and lawyer, a participant in the 1919 peace negotiations, and eventually, and briefly, president of that country. The volume appears in Haus Publishing's "Makers of the Modern World" series, books intended for use as auxiliary reading for a history or political science course. It is not and does not purport to be a work of original scholarship.

In 1889 the military overthrew the arthritic Empire of Brazil, initiating the Old Republic (1890-1930). The first three chapters of *Epitácio Pessoa* interweave a brief history of this period, up through the early years of World War I, with Pessoa's early biography: a son of the elite of Paraíba, a marginal state in Brazil's Northeast, he had an upbringing typical of the time and place. Raised on a rural fazenda (hacienda), he was graduated near the top of his class from perhaps the most prestigious educational institution of the time, the law school at Recife, Pernambuco. Well-connected, he moved up quickly in politics though an intemperate attack from his seat in the House of Deputies on President Floriano forced a quick but temporary retreat to Paraíba in 1893. Over the next decade he became in many ways the archtypical oligarchic politician of the Old Republic, firmly in control of the political machine in Paraíba while holding various offices in the national capital, including Minister of Justice, Attorney General, and Justice on the supreme court, where he developed a local reputation as an expert on boundaries and international law. He

would almost certainly have grown old in the parochial power of Brazilian politics, a man noted, his contemporaries carped, chiefly for “vanity and self importance,” (43) had not world events intervened.

Except as it disrupted its European trade, a trade which had in any event already begun to shift more toward the U.S., World War I had little immediate impact on Brazil. The republic was instead preoccupied with a series of domestic disturbances, including a regional revolt in the south, the *Contestado*, and outbursts of violence in the interior provoked by the ambitions of *coroneis*, backcountry strongmen struggling for local preeminence. Although Brazil had participated in the 1907 Hague Peace Conference, an event remembered locally for the oratory of a brilliant if disturbingly independent thinker and politician, Rui Brabosa, generally the republic had had little interest and less weight in the international crises leading up to the war. With the outbreak of fighting, Brazil declared neutrality but like the U.S. eventually found itself drawn into the war by German attacks on her shipping. Brazilian participation in World War I had “no bearing on the outcome” (70) but she nevertheless ranked among the allies and rated an invitation to participate in the talks. Here Pessoa’s fate stepped in.

The evident person to lead to the delegation to the peace talks was Rui Barbosa, “the Eagle of The Hague,” but his nomination fell victim to local enemies; lacking an obvious alternative, the President appointed Pessoa, already a member of the delegation. Chapters 5 and 6 detail Epiácio Pessoa’s participation in the conference. Brazil’s immediate interests were quite narrow, compensation for coffee shipments caught in German harbors at the outbreak of the war and ownership of some 43 German ships impounded in Brazilian harbors, many of which the republic subsequently had leased to France. On the broader concerns of the conference Brazil had little appreciable impact, and author here admits that Pessoa was “not necessarily the prominent figure on the League of Nations Commissions his of his daughter’s words [in her biography of her father] might suggest” (95-96). But in the midst of the conference luck struck again, and Pessoa was called home to Brazil to be president.

Under the Old Republic, three states, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, and São Paulo, dominated national politics, rotating the four-year presidencies among themselves. For the upcoming election of 1918, however, they were unable to agree upon a candidate and instead compromised on one from the unthreatening state of Paraíba, Epiácio Pessoa. Rui Barbosa campaigned aggressively for the opposition but the election was a done deal and Pessoa returned late in 1919 from Paris to take up the office. Apart from the post-war economic woes common to all of Latin America and a confrontation with the military leading to an easily-repressed revolt of young officers, the *tenentes*, Pessoa had a relatively uneventful presidency. He gratefully retired in 1922, was appointed to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, and served until 1930. The revolution of that year in Brazil, ignited by the assassination of Pessoa’s nephew and protégé João Pessoa, and Getulio Vargas’s rise to national power effectively destroyed the old state political

machines. Pessoa died in 1942 but “his political age ... had already ended more than a decade earlier” (161).

Although the *Epitácio Pessoa* is well written it is hard to see what the market for it might be. Brazil’s and Pessoa’s roles in the peace conference were so slight as to interest only a specialist, and such a specialist would need to consult the daughter’s biography and Pessoa’s own writings, both available only in Portuguese. Perhaps it is of interest as an example of one of the many minor participants in the conference but that could be easily accomplished in an article or a pamphlet. Indeed, much of the text is taken up with a summary history of Brazil in these years based on a limited number of dated secondary sources. The author has done a good job of putting the material here together in a readable form, but one wonders why and for whom?

**David McCreery** was graduated from Tulane University with a Ph.D. in Latin American history and subsequently studied social anthropology at University College, London. He has published articles and books on Brazil, Guatemala, and on the history of work, and since 1977 has been on the faculty of Georgia State University. His current research is on the maritime history of Brazil.

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