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Special issue: *Life history and cultures of militancy in Latin America's Cold War*

Research article

# Martians in the favela: religion and revolution in Rio de Janeiro

Michael Rom<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Department of History, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

\* Correspondence: michael.rom@ubc.ca

Submission date: 19 September 2022; Acceptance date: 13 February 2023; Publication date: 22 March 2023

## How to cite

Rom, M. 'Martians in the favela: religion and revolution in Rio de Janeiro'. *Radical Americas* 8, 1 (2023): 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ra.2023.v8.1.001>.

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This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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## Abstract

Research on Marxism as a religious movement has primarily focused on its theological implications. Building on this work, this article instead examines the practical aspects of revolutionary Marxism as a religious experience during the Latin American Cold War, and compares it to two other non-Christian religious traditions, Judaism and Umbanda. Drawing on secret police records, memoirs and oral history interviews, this article explores the influence of Judaism, Marxism and Umbanda on the anti-dictatorship activism of Alfredo Syrkis. Through an analysis of Syrkis's life history, it assesses his conversion from liberal anticommunism to revolutionary Marxism, his participation in Marxist proselytising as a high school activist and his political activity in the clandestine Marxist organisation Revolutionary Popular Vanguard (VPR), highlighting group dynamics that were comparable to millenarian movements. It also considers the importance of other religious traditions in Syrkis's life, including Judaism, the religion of his parents that equipped him with valuable social ties, and Umbanda, a syncretic Afro-Brazilian religion that Syrkis turned to during times of extreme anxiety in the armed struggle. This article

argues that the religious traditions of Judaism, revolutionary Marxism and Umbanda influenced Syrkis's political activism in both complementary and competing ways. While none of these traditions were able to command Syrkis's undivided loyalty, collectively they informed the terms of his engagement with and disengagement from the Brazilian armed struggle against military rule. By analysing Syrkis's life history through the lens of religion, this article broadens the study of cultures of militancy during Latin America's Cold War.

**Keywords** Brazil; Cold War; student movement; armed struggle; military dictatorship; Judaism; Marxism; Umbanda

## Introduction

In his best-selling memoir *Os carbonários* (The Carbonari), which he wrote while in exile in Portugal in the late 1970s, Alfredo Syrkis described a visit that he paid to the Rio de Janeiro favela of Jacarezinho ('Little Crocodile') one decade earlier. The purpose of this visit, which took place in 1968, was to spread the gospel of revolutionary Marxism among residents of the northside favela. Syrkis was then 16 years old, and took part in this mission alongside other members of his high school student committee (COSEC) – a Marxist organisation made up of students from the more affluent southside. During the mission, Syrkis climbed onto the back of a pickup truck, and preached to the assembled workers. 'Comrades, alone we are nothing,' he told them. 'Organised, we are the force that will end the dictatorship of the bosses and establish a new Brazil, in which the workers will be the owners of the factories!' This revolutionary message failed, however, to move his listeners, who stared at him and the other students as if they were 'Martians who had landed their spaceship in the middle of Jacarezinho'.<sup>1</sup>

Syrkis's message promised his listeners salvation through a revolutionary transformation that would overturn the old social and political order and implement a classless society. American anthropologist Ward Goodenough has defined salvation as 'the achievement of an ideal state of being, whether in life or after death, a transformation of the self whether through individual endeavor or through collective effort to transform society.'<sup>2</sup> Other thinkers, such as German philosopher Walter Benjamin, have explicitly viewed Marxism as a form of secularised Judaeo-Christian messianism. 'Marx', Benjamin wrote, 'has secularized the messianic time in the conception of the classless society.'<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, Israeli historian Igal Halfin has coined the term 'Marxist eschatology', which he calls 'a linear concept of time outlining a precise temporal motion of the proletariat from the "darkness" of capitalism toward salvation in a classless society.' In this eschatological vision, the proletariat serves as the collective messiah, which the intelligentsia awakens to its redemptive role.<sup>4</sup>

Scholarship on Marxism as a religious movement has thus primarily focused on its theological implications. Building on this work, this article instead examines the practical aspects of revolutionary Marxism as a religious experience. Through an analysis of Alfredo Syrkis's life history, it explores his conversion from liberal anti-communism to revolutionary Marxism, his participation in Marxist proselytising missions as a high school activist and his political activity in the clandestine Marxist organisation Revolutionary Popular Vanguard (VPR), highlighting group dynamics that were comparable to millenarian movements. It also considers the role of other religious traditions in Syrkis's life, including Judaism, the religion of his parents that provided him with valuable social ties, and Umbanda, a syncretic Afro-Brazilian religion that Syrkis turned to during times of extreme anxiety in the armed struggle.

Like any life history, Syrkis's experiences were to some extent unique and singular. But as a Jewish activist who embraced revolutionary Marxism, and also dabbled in Afro-Brazilian spirituality, Syrkis's activism offers an important window into the study of non-Christian religions during the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964–85). Scholarship on religion during the military regime has primarily focused on the dictatorship's ties with the Catholic Church and Protestant evangelicals, while research on religious movements in the armed struggle against military rule have primarily addressed activists with Catholic roots, such as Popular Action (AP), which emerged out of leftist Catholic organisations such as the Catholic University Student Youth (JUC).<sup>5</sup> This article instead explores the influences of non-Christian religious traditions and cultures, including Judaism and Umbanda, on Brazilian armed struggle activists.

In addition, it follows new directions in the study of revolutionary Marxism elsewhere in Latin America, which conceptualise these forms of activism as religious movements in their own right.<sup>6</sup>

Drawing on secret police records, school files and oral history interviews, this article examines the influence of three non-Christian religious traditions on Alfredo Syrkis's activism. Its main source, however, is Syrkis's memoir, written roughly one decade after the events that it narrates, close enough in time to enable him to remember the events in vivid detail, but far enough away to allow him to reflect on his activism with emotional distance, irony and self-criticism – and written in new contexts (Portuguese exile and Brazil during the democratic opening) that also helped shape the content and manner of his recollections. Part of a wave of memoirs written by former armed struggle activists in the VPR and other organisations and published during the final years of military rule, Syrkis's memoir was highly acclaimed, becoming the basis for a prime-time television series and launching his subsequent career as a Green Party politician.<sup>7</sup> By critically engaging with Syrkis's memoir in conjunction with other sources, this article compares Syrkis's depiction of his activism with recent secondary studies on the VPR, and with theoretical work on clandestine revolutionary movements in Italy and West Germany occurring during the same time period, albeit under different political contexts, that provide important insights into the dynamics of armed struggle activism in Brazil.<sup>8</sup>

This article argues that the religious traditions of Judaism, revolutionary Marxism and Umbanda influenced Alfredo Syrkis's political activism in both complementary and competing ways. Judaism shaped his parents' experiences as Holocaust survivors, presented a foil for his Brazilian nationalism and served as a common background that facilitated friendships with Jewish leftist students at the Colégio de Aplicação (CAp) that proved central to both his political radicalisation and decision to leave the armed struggle. Marxism provided him with eschatological beliefs and religious rituals, while challenging his commitment through millenarian elements that demanded the renunciation of external ties, the sharing of possessions and self-abnegation. Finally, Umbanda offered a focus on individualised problem solving that complemented and ultimately conflicted with the collective focus of Marxism. While none of these traditions were able to command Syrkis's undivided loyalty, collectively they informed the terms of his engagement with and disengagement from the Brazilian armed struggle.

## Judaism

Alfredo Syrkis was one of dozens of young Brazilian Jews who participated in the student movement and armed struggle against the military dictatorship.<sup>9</sup> Unlike most of these other activists, whose families arrived during the period of mass Jewish immigration to Brazil between the two World Wars, however, his parents were Holocaust survivors who immigrated to Brazil after the end of the Second World War.<sup>10</sup> Syrkis's parents, Eugeniusz Syrkis and Lila Binensztok, were both Polish Jews who grew up in secular, Polish- rather than Yiddish-speaking homes. Eugeniusz was born in the industrial city of Lodz in 1916, while Lila was born in the eastern town of Pinsk (in present-day Belarus) in 1923. When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, Eugeniusz fled eastward to the USSR, where he joined a labour battalion and then a Polish infantry division of the Red Army, with which he took part in the Battle of Berlin in May 1945. Meanwhile, Lila's father, Alfred Binensztok, was an officer in the Polish Army, and the Soviets killed him along with more than 14,000 Polish military personnel in the Katyn massacre of April 1940, during the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland. As a politically suspect family, Lila, her sister and her mother were deported by the Soviet authorities to Siberia, inadvertently saving their lives, since very few Jews from Pinsk survived the subsequent Nazi occupation of their hometown.<sup>11</sup>

After the end of the Second World War, Eugeniusz immigrated to Rio de Janeiro to join his mother Rosa Poznanska, who had been in Paris when the war broke out and decided to join relatives in Brazil.<sup>12</sup> The Binensztoks returned to Poland, living first in Wroclaw and then in Warsaw, but after Polish soldiers, police officers and civilians murdered 42 Jews in Kielce in July 1946, they too decided to emigrate.<sup>13</sup> Anti-Semitic immigration restrictions thwarted their efforts to move to Brazil, where Lila's father's aunt was living, so instead they moved to Sweden.<sup>14</sup> After a year in Sweden, a sympathetic priest gave them papers attesting that they were Roman Catholics, which enabled them to obtain Brazilian visas. Thanks to her great-aunt, Lila found a job at Rosa's hat shop, and she met Eugeniusz in 1948. They married the following year, and Alfredo Hélio Syrkis, their only child, was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1950. Eugeniusz and Lila, who were now calling themselves Eugênio and Liliana, named their son after his two grandfathers, the aforementioned late Alfred Binensztok and Eli Syrkis, who had died in the First World War.<sup>15</sup>

In Rio de Janeiro, Eugênio and Liliana frequented the Polish rather than Jewish community, since they spoke Polish rather than Yiddish, but some of their closest friends, for example Tadeusz and Wanda Ponczek, were also Polish-speaking Jewish Holocaust survivors. 'Fred's [Alfredo's] parents, just like mine, were Holocaust survivors and arrived in Brazil at more or less the same time', Tadeusz and Wanda's son Roberto Ponczek recalled in a social media tribute to Syrkis after his untimely death in a car accident in 2020. 'They were very close friends, and their condition of being Jewish immigrants and survivors, recently arrived in a new and exotic land, united them in a fraternal friendship.'<sup>16</sup> However, friendships with other Holocaust survivors notwithstanding, the Syrkis family's only regular contact with the Rio de Janeiro Jewish community came through their annual attendance of High Holiday services at the Associação Religiosa Israelita (ARI) reform synagogue, and they did not circumcise Alfredo as a child, out of an aversion to physically marking him as Jewish due to an ingrained fear of anti-Semitism.<sup>17</sup>

Another way that Judaism played a role in their lives was through their support for Zionism, even though they chose not to move to Israel. In an attempt to enable Alfredo to socialise with other Jewish children, his parents sent him to a summer camp affiliated with ARI, which Alfredo viewed as 'a form of proselytism designed to bring these youths to Israel'. The Zionist curriculum of the summer camp challenged Syrkis's early attempts to define his national belonging as a Brazilian. 'I felt that Judaism was a religion, and that it was not to be confused with a nationality,' Syrkis remembered. 'My nationality was strongly Brazilian.' In a similar vein, Syrkis attempted to minimise his Polishness, and was ashamed when his parents spoke to him in Polish in common spaces in their apartment building. But like his parents, he sympathised with Israel, and rooted for it in the June 1967 war with its Arab neighbours.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to his fluency in Polish and Portuguese, Eugênio and Liliana sought to provide Alfredo with proficiency in English and French. They enrolled him in a series of private anglophone elementary and middle schools, including the British School, Colégio Anglo-Americano and Colégio Andrews, along with extracurricular French lessons at the Alliance Française.<sup>19</sup> Colégio Andrews, which he attended from the ages of 9 to 15, was home to a large number of Jewish students who sought social integration and upward mobility through a superior education. But while he credited Andrews with providing him with a solid educational base, Syrkis found its rigid atmosphere stifling. 'The school's structure was authoritarian', he recalled, 'and I was an extremely rebellious student.' Syrkis expressed his defiance by setting off firecrackers in the boys' toilets, and only avoided expulsion thanks to his good grades.<sup>20</sup>

Yet in spite of his expensive education and rebellious antics, Syrkis experienced difficulties in finding his place within his upper-middle-class southside neighbourhood of Flamengo. He felt that his peers in the apartment building where he lived did not share his restlessness. 'The quotidian life was sterile, with its cheap consumerism, its values of idle trickery, the fights of the southside playboys, and the sexual coercion of young female domestic workers,' he wrote in his memoir. 'I didn't have a critical vision of these values, but [even so] I wasn't able to integrate myself directly into this parasitism.' It appeared to him that his neighbours were not really his friends, and that their aspirations were in any case limited to dressing well and earning easy money at the expense of others. Something was wrong with this scenario, Syrkis reflected, but he could not figure out exactly what it was.<sup>21</sup>

It was only in 1967, when Syrkis transferred to the CAp, an elite public school affiliated with the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, that he found a group of peers who shared his intellectual and cultural interests. Located in the southside neighbourhood of Lagoa, CAp required prospective students to pass a rigorous entrance exam, and offered an experimental, progressive pedagogy and a highly politicised environment.<sup>22</sup> By transferring to CAp, Syrkis was able to save his parents the expensive tuition that they had been paying at Andrews, while maintaining a similar, or even superior, quality of education. Like Andrews, CAp had a large percentage of Jewish students. In his class of 31 students, 12 were Jewish, a ratio of nearly 40 per cent.<sup>23</sup> Racially, however, CAp was much like other southside schools, with only one student in his class of African descent.<sup>24</sup>

Most importantly, CAp introduced Syrkis to forms of Jewishness that differed from the synagogue services and Zionism to which he had previously been exposed. Many of his new classmates' parents were Jewish communists, part of a global Yiddish-speaking communist movement that was prevalent throughout Europe and the Americas well into the 1950s. 'Jewish communists sought not to supplant "Jewishness" with socialism and support for the USSR,' historians Matthew Hoffman and Henry Srebnik have written, 'but rather to augment their Jewish identity via communism.'<sup>25</sup> In post-war Brazil, Jewish communists and socialists created a wide range of cultural, educational and recreational institutions, including the Yiddish communist weekly *Unzer Shtime* (Our Voice), the Associação Feminina Israelita Brasileira (AFIB) women's association, Escola Eliezer Steinberg, a leftist Jewish elementary school in

Rio de Janeiro and Colônia de Férias Kinderland, a summer camp in the interior of the state of Rio de Janeiro that AFIB activists founded in the early 1950s. Brazilian Jewish communists affirmed their political affinities by naming their children after Karl Marx and Luís Carlos Prestes, secretary-general of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), and by enrolling them in Escola Eliezer Steinberg and Kinderland, where they formed lifelong social ties.<sup>26</sup>

In his memoir, Syrkis wrote that he gravitated to leftist students like Carlos Minc Baumfeld and Luiz Carlos Rotberg due to a shared interest in books, films and plays, and a desire for social belonging. At the same time, however, he did not quite fit in with them politically. Under the influence of his father, whose difficult experience of the USSR had imbued him with a virulent anti-communism, Alfredo had supported the 1964 military coup that overthrew the left-leaning government of João Goulart. But while Syrkis and other urban middle-class liberals welcomed the coup as a means of defusing the alleged threat of a communist takeover, and assumed that the military would return to the barracks as it had after previous interventions to guarantee the constitutional order in 1945 and 1955, the generals evidently had other ideas. 'By 1965, it had become clear to me that the military, which had taken power under the pretext of defending democracy, was disposed to continue to exercise it, without consulting the people,' Syrkis wrote. 'I thought, if communism was synonymous with lack of freedom, it didn't make any sense to get rid of freedom and elections in the name of anticommunism.' This growing disillusionment with military rule marked Syrkis's first divergence from the ideas of his father, who felt that the more authoritarian the regime was, the better it would be for Brazil.<sup>27</sup>

Even as Syrkis struggled to adapt his liberal outlook to the emerging political reality, he supported leftist students like Baumfeld and Rotberg in their struggle for freedom of expression. This struggle began after the CAP administration censored articles in the June 1967 edition of the student newspaper *A Forja* (The Forge) on the subjects of underdevelopment, hunger and LSD. The editorial team, led by a Jewish student named José Maurício Gradel, published empty spaces where the articles were meant to have been, prompting students to demonstrate, and the administration to establish a disciplinary committee to investigate the editors.<sup>28</sup> As the conflict between leftist students and the administration escalated, students threatened to go on strike, causing the administration to shut down the student council, and to preemptively suspend classes in October, compelling any student who wanted to return to class to sign a document committing them to comply with the administration's disciplinary rules. As a leader of the liberal students, Syrkis managed to convince a majority of them not to sign the document, forcing the administration to reopen the school for all students after two weeks. During the time that the school was closed, CAP students met daily to discuss the student movement, and Syrkis began to understand that the fight of CAP students was part of a broader political struggle.<sup>29</sup>

This growing political awareness prompted Syrkis to attend his first protest demonstration in late October, which he described as his 'baptism of tear gas' in front of the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) building in downtown Rio de Janeiro. Jointly organised by the Metropolitan Student Union (UME) and the Metropolitan Association of High School Students (AMES), the demonstration protested the unsanitary conditions at a student cafeteria, the agreement between MEC and the US Agency for International Development to restructure Brazilian universities and annual tuition fees.<sup>30</sup> Although the protest was not itself of great historical significance, it marked a turning point in Syrkis's personal political trajectory, evident in his decision to begin his memoir with the protest, and was the moment when he first felt himself to be part of the struggle against the dictatorship. But he remained unwilling to join the crowd in chanting the name of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, an Argentine Marxist who had been killed in Bolivia a few weeks earlier, since Syrkis did not yet identify as a Marxist.<sup>31</sup>

Syrkis's participation in the protest prompted his classmate Carlos Minc Baumfeld to invite him to participate in a *pichação*, a nocturnal session of spray-painting anti-dictatorship slogans on the walls of CAP. Of the five participants in this political action, all but Álvaro Lemos, president of the now underground student council, were Jewish, an indication of both the high percentage of Jewish students among the CAP left, and the specific influence of Jewish peers on Syrkis's political trajectory.<sup>32</sup> But in spite of their common ethnocultural background, and their shared opposition to the dictatorship, these students were a heterogeneous group. Baumfeld's family was communist, Syrkis's was liberal, another classmate named Nathan Kamliot was a Zionist and José Gradel had a more traditional upbringing, evident in his daily attendance of synagogue services when he was 14, at his mother's behest, in order to say the Mourner's Kaddish for his father.<sup>33</sup> While Judaism as a religion did not influence their political activism in any discernible way, their common ethnic background likely enabled the trust necessary to

embark together on a risky activity, one which could result in arrest or expulsion.<sup>34</sup> As Syrkis increasingly radicalised, and as he took on even riskier political tasks, he would consistently draw on his Jewish friendships throughout his time in the armed struggle.

## Marxism

The pichação marked Syrkis's informal initiation into the leftist group at CAP, but it also engendered a personal political crisis, as his increasingly radical activism conflicted with his liberal worldview. In order to resolve his ideological crisis, Syrkis borrowed Marxist texts from his classmates, including Karl Marx's *Selected Works*, the US Marxist Leo Huberman's *Man's Worldly Goods* and Mao Zedong's essays 'On Practice' and 'On Contradiction'. He avidly read these works during his summer vacation at the end of the 1967 school year, at his parents' vacation home in the interior of the state of Rio de Janeiro. These readings prompted Syrkis to reflect on Brazil's rampant inequality, which included high rates of infant mortality, malnutrition and illiteracy. This inequality had bothered him for some time, according to his memoir, but during his liberal phase he had understood it as a consequence of underdevelopment. However, the military dictatorship had developed the Brazilian economy, even as the real value of workers' salaries dropped steadily since the coup. Consequently, Syrkis found himself drawn to his new friends' Marxism, which seemed to offer a totalising solution to the country's woes. 'It was a religion without being one,' he reflected.<sup>35</sup>

Syrkis next moved on to Isaac Deutscher's biography of Leon Trotsky, which argued that even though the Russian Revolution had resulted in a repressive regime, other models of socialism offered more promise. Following his classmates' lead, Syrkis became particularly interested in Che Guevara, the hero of the Cuban Revolution, especially after reading a profile of his life and death in the Brazilian magazine *Realidade* (Reality). The article had a full-page photograph of Guevara, which Syrkis carefully removed from the magazine and put in the frame where he had previously hung a photo of John F. Kennedy, symbolically exchanging one martyred Cold War icon for another. Since Guevara's works were not available in bookstores, Syrkis borrowed an underground edition of Che's *Guerilla Warfare* from Carlos Minc Baumfeld. He also became, in his own words, 'converted' to the cause of the Viet Cong, and closely followed news about the Tet Offensive on the radio, which he listened to with his father on the porch of their vacation home, with Eugênio cheering for the US Marines and Alfredo for the North Vietnamese as if they were two rival teams in the soccer World Cup.<sup>36</sup>

Following his conversion to Marxism, Syrkis plunged into student politics upon his return to CAP in early 1968. The CAP administration refused to allow student council president Álvaro Lemos to register for the new academic year, and other experienced student activists such as Baumfeld left student politics in preparation to joining the armed struggle.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, the leadership of the underground student council passed on to a troika of less-experienced activists, including Syrkis.<sup>38</sup> His de facto expulsion notwithstanding, however, Lemos continued to exert influence over the politicisation of CAP students. At the time, the two largest clandestine Marxist organisations in Rio de Janeiro were the Communist Dissidence of Guanabara (DI-GB), a group of university students who broke away from the PCB over its failure to endorse armed struggle to overthrow the dictatorship, and AP, which had its roots in JUC.<sup>39</sup> Lemos joined another splinter group, the Dissidence of the Dissidence (DDD), which had broken away from the DI-GB, and which was allied with the University Student Dissidence of São Paulo (DI-SP). In order to attract followers from the DDD at CAP, Lemos created two Marxist study groups, which included Syrkis and other leaders of the underground student council.<sup>40</sup>

Inspired by their Marxist study, CAP students decided to create their own organisation in August 1968, the High School Student Committee, known by its Portuguese acronym COSEC. Syrkis was one of the founders of the new organisation, which aimed to coordinate the high school student movement across the southside of Rio de Janeiro, while also recruiting students for the armed struggle. Ostensibly independent, it maintained ties through Lemos and Baumfeld with the DDD and another splinter organisation, the Marxist-Leninist Group (NML), which had broken away from AP. The new organisation's inner core included 15 activists, while a further 60 participated in Marxist study groups and an additional 200 were loosely connected to COSEC through student councils and extracurricular activities.<sup>41</sup> Activists took part in clandestine weapons training at their parents' holiday homes in the interior of the state, where they practised shooting revolvers and handguns, and learned how to fashion Molotov cocktails.<sup>42</sup> Syrkis, who had been part of a shooting club, took charge of COSEC's paramilitary sector.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to their weapons training, COSEC activists sought to spread the gospel of revolution to non-believers. On 7 September, the Brazilian national day, 25 COSEC activists from CAP, Pedro II, Colégio Andrews and Colégio André Maurois participated in a *comício-relâmpago* (lightning rally) in the middle-class southside neighbourhood of Copacabana.<sup>44</sup> They also proselytised in northside favelas, in order to fulfil their Marxist eschatological mission of politicising the proletariat. During an agit-prop action in Jacarezinho, Syrkis gave an impromptu sermon, in which he used biblical language to preach armed struggle. 'Violence must be met with violence, arrogance with courage,' he proclaimed grandiosely. 'It's an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!' While his listeners stared at him and his fellow activists as if they were extra-terrestrials, at a subsequent mission a few weeks later, in the neighbouring favela of Nova Brasília, Syrkis found a more receptive audience. One of his listeners even applauded, which Syrkis optimistically understood to mean that his message was reaching the masses.<sup>45</sup>

Another frequent practice with strong religious overtones consisted of sessions of criticism and self-criticism, inspired by Maoist dogma and Catholic traditions of confession and self-flagellation.<sup>46</sup> Through these sessions, COSEC activists sought to ritually disavow their middle-class origins and exorcise their petit-bourgeois aversions by imbuing themselves with what they understood as the revolutionary ideology of the proletariat. 'In these psychodramas', Syrkis wrote, 'the most legitimate yearnings for liberation in the fullest sense, to make the revolution also inside [oneself], the search for the New Man, became entangled with these semi-religious rites, tending strongly toward sadomasochism.'<sup>47</sup> According to Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, true socialism required not only economic redistribution, but also a new form of human consciousness attained through self-sacrifice. 'Each and every one of us readily pays his or her quota of sacrifice, conscious of being rewarded with the satisfaction of fulfilling a duty, conscious of advancing with everyone toward the new man and woman glimpsed on the horizon,' Guevara wrote in his article 'Socialism and Man in Cuba'.<sup>48</sup> As Lukas Böckmann has argued, Guevara's concept of the 'New Man' probably drew on his Catholic upbringing, echoing Paul's ideas about Christians becoming new men in his letter to the Ephesians.<sup>49</sup>

For Syrkis, self-sacrifice entailed giving up on a year-end trip to Paris to attend a course at the Sorbonne. He wanted to go, and was convinced that he had earned a break after working diligently on behalf of the student movement throughout 1968. His comrades, however, had other ideas. The leader of the criticism and self-criticism sessions, a student named Rômulo de Almeida Portela, whose codename was, fittingly, 'Ernesto', presented Syrkis with a Manichean choice between good and evil: political struggle or bourgeois life. He could allow himself to surrender to his class imperatives and go to Paris, or choose the revolution, in an unequivocal manner and without hesitation. Portela spoke of the importance of the historical moment, the suffering of the working class and his faith that Syrkis would not disappoint the revolutionary cause. Framed in these stark terms, Syrkis had little choice but to accede, and he did so enthusiastically, thanking Portela for his firmness and avowing that the true revolutionary did not take vacations. He later wrote that he considered this moment decisive to his choice to identify with the proletariat. With his mother, however, Syrkis was far less gracious, and he refused to yield to her pleas for him to reconsider his decision to cancel his trip to Paris even when she informed him that she had already partially paid for his course.<sup>50</sup>

Liliana was in for an even greater shock, however, when Alfredo announced a far more onerous sacrifice: to leave the CAP, give up on his preparatory course for the university entrance exam and enrol in Colégio França Júnior, a working-class high school in the northside neighbourhood of Penha. Self-criticism and minor sacrifices were not enough, and COSEC activists needed to embrace their revolutionary mission by leaving behind their privileged southside educational institutions in order to gain more disciples for the anti-dictatorship underground among the children of the proletariat. This proved to be a difficult task. Syrkis found his new classmates to be completely depoliticised, and to make matters worse, there was already another underground activist, a young woman whom Syrkis recognised from AMES meetings, and who viewed his arrival as an unwarranted invasion of her territory. Over time, however, he managed to assemble a small Marxist study group with three other students, and embarked with them on an ill-fated *pichação* that resulted in one student's arrest.<sup>51</sup>

Yet even as Syrkis and his former classmates sought to expand the student movement on the northside of Rio de Janeiro, the movement as a whole was in the midst of serious decline as a result of increasingly repressive legislation. In December 1968, the military dictatorship implemented Institutional Act no. 5 (AI-5), which allowed the president to close Congress and rule by executive decree, instituted artistic and press censorship and suspended habeas corpus for political crimes, enabling the detention of suspects without an arrest warrant, the use of torture as a widespread method of interrogation and

the disappearance of political prisoners.<sup>52</sup> One of the ensuing decrees was Legal Decree no. 477, which prohibited high school and university students, teachers and professors from engaging in political activities such as strikes, protests and the use of school property for loosely defined subversive purposes. Students who contravened this decree faced expulsion, a three-year ban on re-enrolment, and a five-year period in which they were ineligible for publicly funded scholarships.<sup>53</sup>

As the student movement became increasingly unviable, more radical high school students gravitated towards the armed struggle. The DDD and NML completed their merger with the Commandos of National Liberation (COLINA), which had broken away from a communist organisation called the Marxist Revolutionary Organization – Worker Politics (POLOP).<sup>54</sup> COLINA in turn sought to merge with the VPR, an armed organisation from São Paulo with roots in the DI-SP, POLOP and the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR), an organisation of leftist army officers purged following the 1964 coup.<sup>55</sup> In July 1969, COLINA and the VPR formalised their union, taking on a new name, Revolutionary Armed Vanguard – Palmares (VAR-Palmares), in homage to an African maroon community in north-eastern Brazil that resisted Portuguese colonial rule.<sup>56</sup> Like the Uruguayan Tupamaros, named after the Andean anti-colonial fighter Túpac Amaru, the new organisation sought to assert its revolutionary legitimacy by naming itself after an example of historical resistance.<sup>57</sup>

In one of its first actions, VAR-Palmares robbed a safe belonging to the former mistress of a corrupt governor of São Paulo, netting the organisation US\$2.5 million.<sup>58</sup> But while the purloined safe enabled VAR-Palmares to abstain from risky bank heists to finance its activists, this increased financial security raised the stakes for the organisation, prompting fierce ideological debates that ended up sundering its unity. At an organisational congress in September 1969, delegates debated whether VAR-Palmares should renounce political organising among workers, students and peasants in favour of an exclusive focus on guerrilla warfare. While the majority of the organisation was opposed to this idea, those in favour, including a former army captain named Carlos Lamarca, decided to break from the organisation and reconstitute the VPR.<sup>59</sup> Following the schism, members of both VAR-Palmares and VPR sought to recruit COSEC activists.<sup>60</sup> Syrkis opposed the exclusive focus on guerrilla warfare, but his friendship with Baumfeld and admiration for Lamarca prompted him to side with the VPR.<sup>61</sup> As Victoria Langland has argued, personal and emotional affinities played important roles in young activists' decisions to choose between rival factions.<sup>62</sup> Most COSEC activists also chose the VPR, even though the organisation's opposition to mass organising undermined COSEC's *raison d'être*.<sup>63</sup>

Although Baumfeld managed to convince most of COSEC to side with the VPR, his own participation in the armed struggle came to an involuntary end, following his arrests in his northside safehouse.<sup>64</sup> Baumfeld's arrest underscored the danger of revolutionary activism, prompting many COSEC members to drop out of the armed struggle.<sup>65</sup> Ironically, one of the first to leave was Rômulo de Almeida Portela, who abandoned the path of his revolutionary namesake and opted instead to join Rio de Janeiro's burgeoning counter-culture.<sup>66</sup> Luiz Carlos Rotberg made the same decision, although he promised to remain as a sympathiser. Syrkis pretended to empathise with those who left the armed struggle, but internally he scorned what he regarded as a betrayal of the revolution. He resolved to continue the armed struggle, and joined a VPR combat unit. 'In the beginning of January 1970, the start of the decade,' he wrote, 'I was all enthusiasm and faith in the glorious VPR.'<sup>67</sup> This faith, rooted in the student movement's experiences of proselytism among the masses, overcoming the 'original sin' of one's bourgeois origins through confession and self-flagellation, and Guevarist-cum-Catholic ideas about revolutionary self-sacrifice and the New Man, would be soon put to the test both by evolving conditions in the Brazilian armed struggle, and the VPR's totalising demands on its adherents.

## Umbanda

Syrkis's faith in the VPR and the armed struggle, however, did not preclude serious fears about his own survival. In November 1969, the Brazilian military dictatorship assassinated Carlos Marighella, leader of the armed struggle organisation National Liberating Action (ALN), while a leaked document from a prison in Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais, known as the 'Document of Linhares' revealed the extensive use of torture against political prisoners.<sup>68</sup> With the possibility of being killed or arrested and tortured on his mind, Syrkis wondered whether he would live until the following New Year's Eve. 'How to survive the 365 days with their thousands of hidden minutes, in the inexorable uncertainty of time?' he asked himself.



'How many of us were destined to become a news item in the newspaper, a macabre photo?' With these paralysing doubts in mind, faith in the Revolution seemed to be a daunting task.<sup>69</sup>

In order to assuage his fears, Syrkis turned to a New Year's Day Umbanda ceremony dedicated to Iemanjá, patron saint of water and queen of the West African Yoruban pantheon. Umbanda, an Afro-Brazilian religion with approximately 20 million adherents in Brazil, centres around *orixás*, Yoruban deities who are viewed as intervening in the lives of humans to help or harm them. 'Through Umbanda rituals, followers pay homage to these entities, seek their protection, and solicit their help in resolving individual illnesses and personal problems,' writes anthropologist Diana DeGroat Brown. 'Umbanda is understood as a pragmatic and instrumental problem-solving religion.' Unlike another Afro-Brazilian religion of Yoruban origin, Candomblé, Umbanda is a syncretic religion, with elements taken from Catholicism, Spiritism and Indigenous Brazilian culture, and its followers come from a wide variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>70</sup> During the military dictatorship, Umbanda enjoyed greater public acceptance and official legitimacy, as the political conservatism inherent in its emphasis on individual destiny suited the needs of the military regime, while offering an alternative, along with evangelical Protestantism, to a Catholic Church that was becoming increasingly associated with opponents of the military dictatorship.<sup>71</sup>

By participating in an Umbanda ritual on Ipanema Beach, Syrkis was able to temporarily leave behind both his urban surroundings and his fears. 'The cacophonous sound of the sidewalks and avenues remained behind, and one could only hear the rhythmic roar of the surf and the songs of the people in white for Iemanjá, queen of the ocean, mother of the waters and of all life,' he wrote in his memoir. 'The anguish remained on the asphalt of Vieira Souto [Avenue].' In the water, hundreds of people waded up to their hips, throwing flowers in the traditional offering for the goddess. Eager to join in the ritual, Syrkis obtained a flower from an elderly Black woman, which he ritually threw into the water after rolling up his trouser legs and entering the ocean. This immersive experience was a transformative one, and it endowed him with a sense of bliss and oneness with his fellow practitioners. 'I left the ocean as one leaves an orgasm, panting and satisfied,' he wrote. 'I loved the people in white and smiled at each of them.'<sup>72</sup> Syrkis's striking use of erotic language may have reflected the transgressive aesthetic of the alternative press that he worked for while finishing his memoir.<sup>73</sup> But it also underscored the embodied nature of his conversary experience, in contrast to his prior embrace of Marxism, which was intellectual and textual in nature.

Syrkis's encounter with Umbanda was necessarily ephemeral, as the clandestine existence on which he had embarked did not allow for a more sustained initiation into the religion. Having served the purpose of enabling him to transcend his fears in order to join the armed struggle, Syrkis would once again turn to Umbanda a year later, in a very different urban environment: the inside of a safehouse in the northside of Rio de Janeiro, where he was guarding the Swiss ambassador to Brazil, Giovanni Enrico Bucher. Thanks to his fluency in English and French, Syrkis had been asked to serve as the interpreter during the VPR's kidnapping of Bucher, whom the organisation intended to exchange for imprisoned political activists. It was Syrkis's second spell as interpreter during a kidnapping, after a prior operation in June 1970 when the VPR kidnapped the West German ambassador Ehrenfried von Holleben. Ironically, his parents' insistence on providing him with foreign-language proficiency had equipped him to play a central, and very dangerous, role in the Brazilian armed struggle.<sup>74</sup>

While the Holleben kidnapping ended after only five days and resulted in the release of 40 political prisoners who were exiled to Algeria, the next kidnapping would not be as simple. Upping its requirements, the VPR demanded the release of 70 political prisoners in exchange for Bucher, in addition to the publication of its manifesto and the suspension of fares on two commuter trains.<sup>75</sup> But it appeared that in kidnapping the Swiss ambassador, the VPR had miscalculated. As a small country, Switzerland did not have the same diplomatic weight as West Germany or the United States, whose ambassador the ALN and another organisation known as the 8th October Revolutionary Movement (MR-8) had kidnapped in September 1969.<sup>76</sup> To make matters worse, Bucher had alienated the military regime by appealing for the release of Jean Marc von der Weid, a Swiss-Brazilian student leader who had been imprisoned since 1969. Most importantly, however, the military regime was determined to undermine the efficacy of kidnapping as a means of obtaining the release of political prisoners and other concessions.<sup>77</sup>

In order to buy time while it searched for the safehouse, the dictatorship initially claimed not to have received the VPR's demands, and then waited nine days before admitting to having received the organisation's communiqué. Next, it refused to release 19 of the requested political prisoners, insisted that the VPR send a new list of 70 names, and rejected the organisation's two other demands. The military

regime's intransigence prompted a fierce debate within the safehouse and the organisation as a whole as to whether the VPR should send a new list of names, or execute Bucher if the dictatorship did not accept the first list. Eager to display their revolutionary firmness, 15 members of the organisation supported the latter position, with only three favouring further negotiations, according to Syrkis. This was a sign both of the VPR's steep numerical decline as a result of arrests and defections to other organisations, and that its social isolation and increasingly precarious prospects had disposed it towards adopting extreme positions that emphasised organisational solidarity over political effectiveness, as Donatella della Porta has argued in her study of clandestine leftist organisations in the 1970s.<sup>78</sup> Within the safehouse, the vote was three to two in favour of executing Bucher, with Syrkis and the operational leader Carlos Lamarca in the minority.<sup>79</sup>

Fortunately for the ambassador, Lamarca decided to veto the execution, and the VPR resumed negotiations with the military dictatorship. With the operation already in its fourth week, Syrkis spent New Year's Eve in the safehouse, guarding the ambassador while the four other members of the operation audaciously held a New Year's Eve party for their neighbours. As the only member of the operation who had not been introduced, under an alias, to the neighbours of their safehouse, Syrkis was also the only resident of the safehouse other than Bucher who had not left it since the operation had begun on 7 December. The ensuing claustrophobia, and the approach of the new year, led Syrkis to once again question whether he would survive until the following New Year's Eve. As he had one year before, Syrkis sought to transcend these fears by participating in the New Year's Day offering to Iemanjá. 'I had to see the ocean', he wrote in his memoir. 'To lose my view on the horizon, walk on the soft sand, and give my flowers to the mother of waters Iemanjá, who that night waited in vain, on the other side of the city.'<sup>80</sup>

The next day, on 1 January, Syrkis asked permission from the other residents of the safehouse for a one-day leave, in order to pay the rent on his own room and to clear his head by seeing the ocean. In the meeting, he did not mention his desire to pay his respects to Iemanjá, and curiously, once he was granted the leave for the following day, he did not appear to give an offering to the Afro-Brazilian goddess, prompting the question of the sincerity of his commitment to Umbanda. Did Syrkis not comply with his desire to give an offering since he had already missed the time-sensitive New Year's Day ceremony the day before, or was he simply unable to fit it into all the tasks that he had to complete within the limited time at his disposal before needing to return to the safehouse? Conversely, was his interest in Umbanda merely a literary artifice, one designed to give a folkloric element to his narrative at a time of increased interest in Afro-Brazilian popular culture in Rio de Janeiro?<sup>81</sup> Following Syrkis's untimely death in 2020, this question cannot be definitely answered.<sup>82</sup> One possible interpretation is that Umbanda, with its emphasis on individual problem solving, enabled Syrkis to express his individuality at a time when he had to subsume this individuality to the needs of the collective, allowing him to grapple with his fears about survival and gain some space for himself.

Syrkis's personal struggle between his individual needs and commitment to the collective also manifested itself in a conversation that he had with his close friend and confidant Luiz Carlos Rotberg during his one-day leave. Rotberg believed that the armed struggle was a lost cause, and during their meeting he attempted to convince Syrkis of this belief. 'They are winning. Everyone is terrified, and many people are buying into the [dictatorship's narrative of the so-called economic] miracle,' Rotberg argued. 'I don't think you have any chance. It's a matter of time.' Syrkis did not dispute this analysis, but argued that he had a strong commitment to the armed struggle. 'Someone has to resist,' he insisted.<sup>83</sup> While in the safehouse with the Swiss ambassador, Syrkis attempted to transform the VPR by writing a political pamphlet entitled 'The Armed Propaganda Path', which called for the organisation to embark on mass actions such as food distribution to the poor, which he proposed combining with student movement tactics like lightning rallies, pamphleteering and political graffiti.<sup>84</sup> Following the release of the ambassador on 15 January, the VPR adopted Syrkis's approach. On 26 January, Syrkis and his fellow activists held up a supermarket depot on the northside of Rio de Janeiro, expropriating two food trucks which they distributed in the Rato Molhado (Wet Rat) favela.<sup>85</sup>

However, the growing hostility between Syrkis and the other members of his commando unit undermined his efforts to take the VPR in a new direction. The product of the militants' growing frustration over their increasingly precarious position, and personal conflicts exacerbated by spending 40 days together in the safehouse after kidnapping the Swiss ambassador, this tension erupted during a street meeting between Syrkis and an Afro-Brazilian activist named Gerson Theodoro de Oliveira. In the meeting, Oliveira accused Syrkis of putting his personal needs ahead of those of the group, claiming that he received money from his parents that he did not share with the organisation, socialised with

dropouts from the armed struggle who were known to smoke marijuana and preferred to schedule his street meetings in the affluent southside.<sup>86</sup> These accusations map closely onto Donatella della Porta's argument that clandestine Marxist organisations were like millenarian movements, insofar as they demanded that their members renounce all external ties, share all possessions and sublimate their private needs to those of the organisation.<sup>87</sup> By refusing to submit to these expectations, Syrkis defied the VPR's ultimate authority over him, provoking conflicts with other activists that in time would lead Syrkis to re-evaluate his own commitment to the organisation.

Della Porta has also observed that 'militants' isolation from external channels of information was a main factor that strengthened their total commitment to the underground'.<sup>88</sup> Since he had disregarded the organisation's ban on maintaining external ties, Syrkis had access to external channels of information such as Rotberg, and he therefore understood that the VPR was fighting a losing battle that would either end in his arrest and torture, or death. Nevertheless, like other activists, he felt a strong sense of responsibility to his comrades, both living and dead. While watching a screening of *The Conspirators*, an Italian film about the Carbonari, a revolutionary secret society in nineteenth-century Rome, Syrkis decided that it would be better to die than betray his comrades by revealing critical information under torture.<sup>89</sup> As he related in his memoir, however, another screening that he attended the next day, of an unnamed comedy set in Europe, persuaded him that he would rather live than lose his life for a doomed cause. Fittingly, the sight of Paris, which he had earlier given up on to affirm his commitment to the Revolution, now convinced him to leave the armed struggle. While it is likely that Syrkis's decision to leave the armed struggle took place over a longer period of time than two film screenings, there is no reason to doubt that these experiences contributed to his decision.<sup>90</sup>

In a meeting with his close friend and fellow VPR member Alex Polari, Syrkis tried to justify his decision to leave the VPR in rational terms.<sup>91</sup> 'The VPR cannot be transformed,' he told Polari. 'The deformations are too deeply ingrained.' He argued that the organisation's disavowal of mass organising in favour of an exclusive focus on guerrilla warfare, the main reason for its schism with VAR-Palmares, had left it socially isolated, 'an organization of thirty guys at war with the regime'.<sup>92</sup> Yet even though he was convinced of the correctness of his decision to leave the VPR and go into exile, Syrkis recognised that this decision contravened Carlos Lamarca's maxim of 'having faith in the Revolution and never letting yourself be reduced to your own individuality'.<sup>93</sup> Leaving the armed struggle was tantamount to an admission of loss of faith in the Revolution, and a confession that he was putting his own individual needs over those of the collective. Syrkis's affirmation of his own individuality through the practice of Umbanda had initially coexisted with his revolutionary Marxism, enabling his participation in the armed struggle by allowing him to transcend his fears. As conditions changed, however, and defeat appeared imminent, Umbanda gave him space away from the collective at a critical moment, facilitating his ultimate break from Marxism and the Brazilian armed struggle.

## Conclusions

Alfredo Syrkis was the son of Polish Jewish Holocaust survivors who had immigrated to Brazil after the Second World War. Since they spoke Polish rather than Yiddish, and since they had arrived in Rio de Janeiro after the wave of Jewish mass immigration during the inter-war years, his parents maintained closer ties with other Poles rather than other Jews, and attended synagogue only on the High Holidays. The Syrkis family expressed its Judaism primarily through support for Israel, and sent Syrkis to a Jewish summer camp that challenged his Brazilianness by attempting to convince him to move to Israel. After he transferred to CAP, Syrkis came into contact with another form of Jewishness, based on a Jewish leftist network of schools and summer camps. Although he did not yet consider himself a leftist, Syrkis gravitated to Jewish leftist students such as Carlos Minc Baumfeld and Luiz Carlos Rotberg, due to a shared love of books, plays and films, a desire for social belonging and an implicit sense of trust based on a common ethnic background that enabled him to participate in risky political activities.

Syrkis's participation in radical political activities such as protests and pichações caused him to question his liberal ideology, leading him to embark on Marxist textual study that prompted his conversion to revolutionary Marxism. The religious nature of this political doctrine consistently primarily of proselytising missions in the middle-class southside and northside favelas alike, even though the class and racial differences between favela residents and Marxist students led Syrkis to compare himself and his comrades to 'Martians' in the eyes of the residents. Another revolutionary practice that closely

resembled religious rites consisted of sessions of criticism and self-criticism, which served as venues for Marxist students to ritually disavow their bourgeois origins and self-actualise as New Men and Women. Finally, the process of becoming New Men and Women included onerous personal sacrifices, which for Syrkis included giving up a year-end course in Paris, and leaving CAp to transfer to a working-class northside school in an attempt to acquire further disciples for the student movement.

The apotheosis of Syrkis's revolutionary faith was his decision to join the VPR, an underground armed struggle organisation at war with the Brazilian military dictatorship. In order to join this organisation, however, Syrkis needed to overcome his fears of losing his life in the armed struggle, which he did by participating in an Umbanda ceremony dedicated to the Afro-Brazilian goddess Iemanjá. This religious experience was necessarily ephemeral, as his clandestine existence did not allow Syrkis to embark on more sustained initiation into the religion. However, one year later Syrkis would once again feel the urge to give an offering to Iemanjá, as the approach of New Year's Day, coupled with his highly precarious position in a safehouse harbouring the kidnapped Swiss ambassador, led him to once again fear for his life. This urge prompted Syrkis to request a one-day leave to visit the ocean, although his subsequent failure to give an offering to Iemanjá prompts the inevitable question as to the depth of his commitment to Umbanda.

What, then, does Syrkis's life history teach us about religion in the armed struggle, and how representative was it of other armed struggle activists? The combination of Judaism, revolutionary Marxism and Umbanda that Syrkis embodied was clearly unique, and indicative, above all, of the diversity of religious experiences during the Brazilian armed struggle in particular, and 1960s Latin America in general. But his embrace of Marxism as a religious faith was a path embarked upon by many young activists of his generation in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America, and suggests the need for further scholarship on the practical, in addition to the eschatological, aspects of revolutionary Marxism as a religious tradition. Moreover, Syrkis's experiences in the armed struggle support theoretical work comparing clandestine revolutionary organisations to millenarian movements, with totalising demands that members renounce all external ties, share all their possessions and sublimate their own individuality to the needs of the revolutionary collective.

Equally instructive is the way that these three religious traditions complemented and conflicted with each other in Syrkis's life history. His ethnocultural ties with other Jewish activists such as Carlos Minc Baumfeld and Luiz Carlos Rotberg facilitated his embrace of revolutionary Marxism, even as his ongoing connection with Rotberg gave him access to external channels of information that allowed him to understand that the armed struggle was ultimately a losing cause. Meanwhile, Syrkis's adoption of Umbanda enabled him to join the armed struggle by transcending his fears of his own demise, even as the individuality that it promoted ultimately prompted Syrkis to leave the armed struggle and go into exile. By understanding the dynamic interactions of these three traditions in Syrkis's life history, while contextualising them within the broader arc of Syrkis's revolutionary activism, we can better understand the trajectories of armed-struggle activists like Syrkis, and the shifting roles that religious traditions played in the opposition to the Brazilian military dictatorship.

Religious faith is extremely challenging to parse, and to a certain extent one must take participants' experiences at their own word, even while analysing the competing influences and motivations that their narratives reveal. This article has relied to a significant extent on Syrkis's own memoir, which in its paperback edition numbers more than 400 pages, and which Syrkis wrote at a time when he had both fresh memories of the events that he described, and enough distance to narrate them critically. Where possible, I have compared his recounting with other sources, such as secret police records, high school documents and oral history interviews. But at times, such as his account of his engagement with Umbanda, no other sources exist to corroborate his account and, as Syrkis passed away in a tragic car accident in July 2020, neither can we verify it with him. Thus, this article is at best an initial attempt to assess Marxism as a religious movement in the Brazilian context, its interactions with other religious traditions such as Judaism and Umbanda, and the particularities of these three traditions in the life history of Alfredo Syrkis.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Syrkis, *Os carbonários*, 145. Originally published as Alfredo Syrkis, *Os carbonários: memórias da guerrilha perdida* (São Paulo: Global, 1980). Syrkis changed the spelling of his last name in the 1980s. I have retained the original spelling of his last name to describe events that occurred before then.

- <sup>2</sup>Goodenough, 'In pursuit of culture'.
- <sup>3</sup>Quoted in Goldstein, 'Messianism and Marxism', 246.
- <sup>4</sup>Halfin, *From Darkness to Light*.
- <sup>5</sup>Cowan, *Moral Majorities*; Serbin, *Secret Dialogues*. On the AP, see Lima and Arantes, *História da Ação Popular*.
- <sup>6</sup>Böckmann, 'Revolutionary eschatology'; Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba*.
- <sup>7</sup>For an analysis of these memoirs, including Syrkis's, see Atencio, *Memory's Turn*, 28–58.
- <sup>8</sup>These studies include Green, *Exile within Exiles*; Silva, *A revolução da VPR*; della Porta, *Social Movements*.
- <sup>9</sup>For a broader overview of Brazilian Jews in the armed struggle, see Rom, 'The Torah of Che Guevara'.
- <sup>10</sup>On interwar Jewish immigration to Brazil, see Lesser, *Welcoming the Undesirables*.
- <sup>11</sup>Alfredo Sirkis, interview with author, 29 February 2016, Rio de Janeiro; Sirkis, *Lila*; Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 54–5.
- <sup>12</sup>Brazilian foreign ministry to Consulate-General in Paris, 28 May 1947.
- <sup>13</sup>On the Kielce pogrom and anti-Semitism in post-war Poland, see Engel, 'Patterns of anti-Jewish violence'; Gross, *Fear*; Meducki, 'The Pogrom in Kielce'.
- <sup>14</sup>Milgram, 'O Brasil e os sobreviventes do Holocausto'; Senkman, 'La política inmigratoria del primer Peronismo'.
- <sup>15</sup>Liliana Syrkis, interview with Aleksandra Pluta, 6 May 2015, Rio de Janeiro.
- <sup>16</sup>Ponczek, 'Meu amigo Fred'. On the Ponczeks, see Melson, *False Papers*.
- <sup>17</sup>Sirkis, interview with author.
- <sup>18</sup>Sirkis, interview with author. Over the course of his armed struggle activism, Syrkis would adopt the Palestinian cause.
- <sup>19</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 44.
- <sup>20</sup>Abend, 'Revolução do Andrews faz 70 anos', 6.
- <sup>21</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 57.
- <sup>22</sup>On the Colégio de Aplicação, see Abreu, *Intelectuais e guerreiros*.
- <sup>23</sup>'Reunião de pais do 1º clássico- relação de presença', October 17, 1967, Programa de Estudos e Documentação Educação e Sociedade (hereafter cited as PROEDES), Colégio de Aplicação Collection, CAP 054/DISC 062.
- <sup>24</sup>Class photo, Colégio de Aplicação da F.N.F. 1º Classico 1967, PROEDES, Colégio de Aplicação Collection, CAP 052/DISC 017.
- <sup>25</sup>Hoffman and Srebrnik, *A Vanished Ideology*, 4.
- <sup>26</sup>On these institutions, see Goldfeld, *Senhoras progressistas*.
- <sup>27</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 57.
- <sup>28</sup>A Forja 12.
- <sup>29</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 58–62.
- <sup>30</sup>On the MEC-USAID agreement, see Langland, *Speaking of Flowers*, 99–100; Martins Filho, *Movimento estudantil*, 130–5.
- <sup>31</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 51. On Che Guevara, see Anderson, *Che Guevara*.
- <sup>32</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 62–6.
- <sup>33</sup>José Maurício Gradel, interview with author, 27 May 2015, Rio de Janeiro.
- <sup>34</sup>On the importance of Jewish social networks in the armed struggle, see Rom, 'The Torah of Che Guevara'.
- <sup>35</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 78–80.
- <sup>36</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 81–2.
- <sup>37</sup>Brasil: Nunca Mais (hereafter cited as BNM), 150/612.
- <sup>38</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 83–4.
- <sup>39</sup>On the DI-SP, see Silva, *Os Filhos Rebeldes de um Velho Camarada*.
- <sup>40</sup>Arquivo Público do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (hereafter cited as APERJ), Political Police Collection, Secret Sector, 159/568.
- <sup>41</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 144–5.
- <sup>42</sup>APERJ, Political Police Collection, Secret Sector, 159/A-581.
- <sup>43</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 150.
- <sup>44</sup>APERJ, Political Police Collection, Secret Sector, 159/582.
- <sup>45</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 145–6.

- <sup>46</sup>The Weather Underground, a US revolutionary Marxist organisation, also made frequent use of criticism/self-criticism sessions. See Varon, *Bringing the War Home*, 55.
- <sup>47</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 146–7.
- <sup>48</sup>Guevara, 'Socialism and man in Cuba', 212–18.
- <sup>49</sup>Böckmann, 'Revolutionary eschatology', 213.
- <sup>50</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 146–8.
- <sup>51</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 148–60.
- <sup>52</sup>Green, *We Cannot Remain Silent*, 91–92; Skidmore, *The Politics of Military Rule*, 81–2.
- <sup>53</sup>Langland, *Speaking of Flowers*, 173–4.
- <sup>54</sup>On COLINA, see Leite, 'Comandos de libertação nacional'.
- <sup>55</sup>Silva, *A revolução da VPR*, 35–45.
- <sup>56</sup>Gomes, *Palmares*.
- <sup>57</sup>Green, *Exile within Exiles*, 89. On the Tupamaros, see Marchesi, *Latin America's Radical Left*, 23–68.
- <sup>58</sup>Cardoso, *O cofre do Dr. Rui*; Skidmore, *The Politics of Military Rule*, 88.
- <sup>59</sup>Green, *Exile within Exiles*, 93–5.
- <sup>60</sup>APERJ, Political Police Collection, Secret Sector, 88/261. Many COSEC activists, like Sirkis, were part of what was known as an *organização para-partidária* (OPP), an affiliate that prepared them to join the organisation itself.
- <sup>61</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 177.
- <sup>62</sup>Langland, *Speaking of Flowers*, 139.
- <sup>63</sup>APERJ, Political Police Collection, Secret Sector, 159/566.
- <sup>64</sup>BNM, 030/151.
- <sup>65</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 191–2.
- <sup>66</sup>On the Rio de Janeiro counterculture, see Dunn, *Contracultura*.
- <sup>67</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 192–3.
- <sup>68</sup>On Marighella and the ALN, see Magalhães, *Marighella*; Sales, 'A Ação Libertadora Nacional'.
- <sup>69</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 186–7.
- <sup>70</sup>Diana DeGroat Brown, 'Umbanda'.
- <sup>71</sup>Catoggio, 'Religious beliefs'; Serbin, *Secret Dialogues*, 43; DeGroat Brown and Bick, 'Religion, class', 83.
- <sup>72</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 188–9.
- <sup>73</sup>On the Rio de Janeiro alternative press, see Dunn, *Contracultura*, 55–65.
- <sup>74</sup>On the kidnapping of the West German ambassador, see Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 239–81.
- <sup>75</sup>Skidmore, *The Politics of Military Rule*, 119.
- <sup>76</sup>For a first-person account of the kidnapping, see Gabeira, *O que é isso, companheiro?* The MR-8 took its name from another organisation based in the neighbouring city of Niterói, which the dictatorship had all but completely dismantled, in order to embarrass the military regime by making it seem as if this organisation was still in operation.
- <sup>77</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 335–40.
- <sup>78</sup>della Porta, *Social Movements*, 119.
- <sup>79</sup>Green, *Exile within Exiles*, 125.
- <sup>80</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 375–9.
- <sup>81</sup>On increased interest in Afro-Brazilian culture in late 1970s Rio de Janeiro, see Dunn, *Contracultura*, 146–74.
- <sup>82</sup>Moreira and Caetano, 'Alfredo Sirkis'.
- <sup>83</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 381–2.
- <sup>84</sup>Green, *Exile within Exiles*, 129.
- <sup>85</sup>APERJ, Political Police Collection, Secret Sector, 88/203.
- <sup>86</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 414–17.
- <sup>87</sup>della Porta, *Social Movements*, 179. On Brazilian millenarian movements, see Pessar, *From Fanatics to Folk*.
- <sup>88</sup>della Porta, *Social Movements*, 180.
- <sup>89</sup>Magni, *Nell'anno del Signore*.
- <sup>90</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 417–24.
- <sup>91</sup>On Polari's time in the VPR, see Polari, *Em busca do tesouro*.
- <sup>92</sup>Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 427.

<sup>93</sup>Quoted in Sirkis, *Os carbonários*, 423–4.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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