

# Lessons from Victory Day

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In 2025, we celebrate the 80th anniversary of the Allied victory in World War II—a massive global effort that defeated the Nazi-fascist regimes that had plagued Europe for over a decade, and in which Brazil took part.

This year's celebration, however, carries a different and worrying tone. Global instability and the fragmentation of strategic alliances that have maintained a degree of world order since the end of the war now make this anniversary feel less like a celebration of peace and victory and more like a prelude to renewed conflict.

In historiographical terms, World War II is considered to have begun in 1939 with the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany. However, their drums of war had already been sounding across many European countries since the early 1930s. Between the outbreak of the war in 1939 and Brazil's formal declaration of war against the Axis powers in 1942, the country's actions internationally were marked by hesitation and ambiguous diplomatic and military signals. It was only after several Brazilian merchant ships were attacked by German and Italian submarines—resulting in the death of many civilians and significant economic losses—that Brazil then decided to abandon its neutrality and join the Allies in the broader war effort. Only then did the country begin to mobilize and defend its sovereignty, its territory, and its population, while contributing to the collective effort of its partners and allies to defeat the regimes that led the world to experience total war.

The decision to send troops to war was met with enormous challenges in recruitment, training, and equipment. The Brazilian Army was clearly outdated in terms of doctrine, personnel, and material. Its last major modernization had occurred during the French Military Mission, which had reshaped the Army according to standards of the victorious forces of World War I. Many of the efforts to re-equip the force in the years prior to the declaration of war involved negotiations with the German arms industry. Uniforms, as well as individual and collective weapons, were far from being state-of-the-art at the time. With herculean recruitment efforts, relying on both volunteers and conscription, only one of the three planned divisions could be assembled, consisting of approximately 25,000 men. Training this group was yet another major challenge. Only in August 1944 did Brazil manage to send a Division—the Brazilian Expeditionary Force (FEB – *Força Expedicionária Brasileira*)—to the Italian theater of operations. Upon arrival, the troops first came into contact with the weapons they would use, undergoing much of their training already in combat.

Meanwhile, the Brazilian Navy had to urgently re-equip and modernize itself to ensure the country's ocean and coast defense. This included acquiring means to conduct effective anti-submarine

warfare—the greatest threat in the South Atlantic at the time—and ocean patrols. Once again, the urgency to update both material and doctrine required extraordinary human efforts. The same urgency applied to the newly established Brazilian Air Force (FAB – *Força Aérea Brasileira*), which had to equip itself, develop operational doctrine, and deploy both across national territory and to the Italian theater, where it operated the First Fighter Aviation Squadron—a capability the FAB had not yet possessed.

From a civilian perspective, the country also faced significant dilemmas. With large populations of Italians, Germans, and their descendants, dealing with these now-designated “enemies” was far from easy. Redirecting economic and production efforts toward war efforts modified markets and industrial processes.

Nor was the decision to declare war on the Axis powers politically or diplomatically unanimous.

In other words, the country was not prepared for war. The reasons behind this lack of preparation are many, and a brief text such as this does not allow for a detailed discussion. However, much of it stemmed from a reluctance, in the preceding years, to recognize that the unfolding conflict would eventually affect Brazil and require both an international stance and an efficient military capacity for its own defense.

Moreover, the country was not prepared for the post-war period. In the concert of nations at the end of the conflict, Brazil’s actions can be described as timid compared to other victorious Allied countries. Even in its treatment of returning veterans, much more could have been done for those brave Brazilians.

Today, we celebrate the bravery of those who fought on land, at sea, and in the air, and we preserve the memory of those who gave their lives for the country. Yet we must ask: what has Brazil learned from that experience, both militarily and diplomatically?

The possibility that the ongoing conflicts in 2025 may escalate into a single global war is not entirely unrealistic. Even within alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which for many years helped maintain a degree of stability, there is now an atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty. The European Union is making massive investments in defense, and many countries have resumed conscription and began preparing their populations for the possibility of war.

In a recent interview with the German weekly, *Die Zeit*, the President of the European Union, Ursula von der Leyen, stated: “The West as we knew it no longer exists. The world has become a globe, also geopolitically [...]”

The consequence is that countries as big as Brazil—geographically, economically, politically, and militarily—can no longer remain detached from the current global context of uncertainty and rising belligerence.

Although all this may seem geographically distant from Brazil, it is not, as history clearly shows us when we look back at World War II. Therefore, failing to prepare would be irresponsible; believing one can “be friends” with everyone would be naïve. If the country wishes to offer an alternative or assume any degree of leadership, it must do so with coherence between words and actions, firmly grounded in democratic values and ethical principles, respecting national sovereignty and human rights. These were the values that led to victory in 1945 and that makes it possible for us to honor that historical memory today.