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REBELLION AND THE BACKLANDS

A primitive animality, slowly expunged by civilization, was here being resurrected intact. The knot was being undone at last. In place of the stone hatchet and the harpoon made of bone were the sword and the rifle; but the knife was still there to recall the cutting edge of the ancient flint, and man might flourish it with nothing to fear–not even the judgment of the remote future.
—EUCLIDES DA CUNHA, *Os Sertões* (*Rebellion in the Backlands*)

The above were some of the closing lines of what became one of the most influential books ever written in Brazil: Euclides da Cunha's 1902 *Os Sertões*.[1] Originally trained as a military engineer, Cunha had been dispatched to the interior of Bahia as a war correspondent for *O Estado de São Paulo*, tasked with writing about a standoff in the late 1890s between the Brazilian army and a millenarian movement of some thirty thousand residents at a rural settlement known as Canudos. By the time Cunha arrived in 1897, three government expeditions had failed to defeat the backland defenders under Canudos's leader, the itinerant preacher Antonio Conselheiro. Cunha witnessed the fourth and final assault, through which the army finally occupied

Canudos and destroyed the village, ending with the army beheading many of the locals who had been taken prisoner. Only a handful of Canudos's nearly twenty thousand residents—including women and children—survived. Mediated largely through Cunha's wartime reports and book, the violence at Canudos profoundly impacted how Brazilians viewed their national character. As Robert Levine has written, "Readers of *Os Sertões* were shown that the new symbols of Brazilian progress—the burgeoning cities of the coast with their artifacts of material culture imported from abroad—masked the primitive and antisocial impulses still resident in the rural interior."[2] Over the course of the book, as Cunha grapples with his newfound respect for the locals as well as his disdain for the ferocious violence of government forces in their destruction of Canudos, readers are confronted with a troubling dilemma: Is the coast really more civilized than the interior?

Os Sertões offers a useful opening to a book on the Prestes Column and an interior history of modern Brazil. In many ways, the column was an inheritor of the discourses made famous by Euclides da Cunha. As we will see, the leaders of the column invoked Cunha's writing about the landscapes of the backlands, mimicked his way of describing local people, and saw themselves as continuing his legacy of bringing mainstream attention to the realities of life there. Cunha helped to popularize the twinned narratives of interior spaces and their communities. Prior to describing the battles at Canudos, for example, *Os Sertões* opens with a first chapter titled "The Land," followed by the second chapter, "The Man." This duality would become a key theme in the legend of the Prestes Column in which the rebels heroically traversed the vast spaces of the Brazilian heartland while shining a light on the true nature—and fearsome potential—of its inhabitants. As it was in Cunha's depictions of Canudos, the prevailing symbolism of the Prestes Column relied on questions of civilization, backwardness, and the spatial contours of Brazil's future.

As a nod to Euclides da Cunha, this chapter is titled "Rebellion and the Backlands," a slight refraction of *Os Sertões*'s translated English title, *Rebellion in the Backlands*. Here, my choice of *and* rather than *in* is meant to signpost an important and often overlooked element in the history of the Prestes Column: the rebels in the 1920s had never intended to take their fight into the backlands. Rather, the tenentista movement was initially organized by, and for, sectors along the coast. This chapter comprises two sections that place the links between Canudos and the Prestes Column in the broader political changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, it discusses *Os Sertões* and how its depiction of the Canudos War set in motion the

types of spatialized discourses that would predominate in the legend of the Prestes Column. Second, it focuses on Brazil's army—the institution from which the column would emerge—and the political movement that erupted in the 1920s from disenchanted army officers: what became known as *tenentismo*. A discussion of the army is especially important because, prior to 1930, when Getúlio Vargas initiated Brazil's first centralized political system, the army was essentially the only national institution, meaning that when Prestes led the rebels on their fifteen-thousand-mile march, it injected a sort of spatial legitimacy into the army's self-image as the country's most representative body.

Coastal Gaze at Canudos

A veritable subfield of scholarship exists on Euclides da Cunha and the impact of *Os Sertões*.[3] Thus, my objective here is neither to summarize the book nor to analyze the myriad of ways in which it shaped Brazilian social thought on questions of race, region, and modernity. Instead, I discuss a set of themes about *Os Sertões* as a way to situate the formation, some two decades later, of the Prestes Column.

To begin, Cunha and his reports attained wide notoriety within mainstream coastal society because of the advent of the same platform that would soon cultivate the legend of the tenente march across the interior: newspapers. Although smaller than the media boom of the 1920s, Brazil's newspaper sector at the turn of the twentieth century benefited from the recent expansion of telegraph lines into the country's interior—a bridging of coast and interior also enabled around this time by the construction of railroads and the advent of steamships. Cunha's dispatches from the front lines in Canudos, along with those of journalists from eight other newspapers sent to cover the final and most dramatic phase of fighting, represented some of Brazil's earliest war reporting. As Levine notes, "Highlighted by the universal fascination with stories about crazed religious fanatics, the Canudos conflict flooded the press, invading not only editorials, columns, and news dispatches, but even feature stories and humor. For the first time in Brazil, newspapers were used to create a sense of public panic."[4] This panic had been building over the course of Brazil's nearly century-long transition out of colonial rule. Although both the 1822 establishment of the Brazilian Empire (which replaced Portuguese rule) and the 1889 creation of the Brazilian Republic (a replacement for the empire) occurred bloodlessly—unlike most of Latin America, Brazil never fought a war of independence—a series of revolts from enslaved

people and other oppressed groups kept Brazilian elites on edge. Not only did these rebellions make elites fearful of a Brazilian version of the Haitian Revolution but their seemingly constant occurrence across the nineteenth century also undercut the elite narrative of Brazil as a peaceful and civilized nation. After decades of smaller-scale revolts, most of which received little media or public attention, the Canudos War erupted across headlines and into the psyche of the nation. In the first decade of republican rule, newspaper coverage of the war dented mainstream society's sense of exceptionalism.

One of the aspects of Cunha's reporting that set him apart was his attention to the social backdrop of Canudos. While most of the other journalists sent to Canudos stayed embedded with the military, Cunha ventured out to conduct his own research, talking with locals and exploring the area. More than merely reporting on the gory details of the war, Cunha sought to understand why it was happening in this particular space of the Brazilian nation. As Edvaldo Pereira Lima has observed, "Bringing to the field his cultural background in positivism and social Darwinism, on the one hand, and naturalism—as applied to both science and literature—on the other, [Cunha] composed war dispatches that avoided the shallow, fact-oriented approach of his competitors and instead put the dramatic situation into a personal perspective."[5] Positivism, it should be noted, was an ideology popularized by the nineteenth-century French philosopher August Comte, who argued that society should be governed by a mathematically oriented vision of rational thought. Brazil's military academies relied heavily on positivist teachings, instructing cadets like Euclides da Cunha to see society as moving through stages of progress and civilization. With these ideas in mind, Cunha reported on the inhabitants of Canudos with an eye toward their place in a broader logic of Brazilian society.[6]

Cunha's attention to personal stories in the backlands came to represent Brazil's first example of journalistic nonfiction, which would position him as the grandfather of Brazilian literary journalism.[7] Part of what made Cunha's writing so impactful was his focus on the people who inhabited the Bahian interior—the sertanejos. His descriptions of sertanejos elevated these rural people into a nationally known archetype; he wrote about them in a manner that was simultaneously condescending and awestruck. For example, he gave the following description of a sertanejo:

> He is ugly, awkward, stooped. Hercules-Quasimodo reflects in his bearing the typical unprepossessing attributes of the weak. His unsteady, slightly swaying, sinuous gait conveys the impression of loose-jointedness. His

> normally downtrodden mien is aggravated by a dour look which gives him an air of depressing humility. . . . Yet all this apparent weariness is an illusion. Nothing is more surprising than to see the sertanejo's listlessness disappear all of a sudden. In this weakened organism complete transformations are effected in a few seconds. All that is needed is some incident that demands the release of slumbering energies. The fellow is transfigured. He straightens up, becomes a new man, with new lines in his posture and bearing; his head held high now, above his massive shoulders; his gaze straightforward and unflinching. Through an instantaneous discharge of nervous energy, he at once corrects all the faults that come from the habitual relaxation of his organs; and the awkward rustic unexpectedly assumes the dominating aspect of a powerful, copper-hued Titan.[8]

In his typography of sertanejos, Cunha's social Darwinism mixes with his newfound respect for their innate potential. As popularized by Cunha's writing, and later evident in subsequent interior expeditions like the Prestes Column, this duality would reverberate across commentary on the interior more broadly.

The Army at a National Crossroads

Cunha's respect for the sertanejos, prejudiced as it was, also reflected the failure of Brazil's modernizing project. What made the sertanejos so surprising, in part, was that they stood out so starkly against the projected vision of the Brazilian nation, still in its buoyant infancy after the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the establishment of the First Republic in 1889. At a moment when coastal elites imagined that their new republic could parallel the development of the "civilized" nations of Europe, Cunha's dispatches from Canudos and his eventual book shocked readers and made clear that Brazil's search for modernity would have to take seriously the realities of life across its vast territorial expanses.

Part of these debates related to Brazil's army, and how the new republic would deal with internal dissent. Prior to the start of the Canudos War in 1896, the government had to contend with a series of regionalist revolts earlier in the decade, most notably the Federalist Revolution of 1893 in Rio Grande do Sul, in which *gaúchos* sought greater state autonomy in the face of the republic's centralizing project. After nearly two years of fighting, the army was able to put down the revolt in Rio Grande do Sul—though the

gaúchos did march to the borders of São Paulo before being driven back to southern Brazil. And, when the war at Canudos began, Brazil's first civilian president, Prudente de Morais, dispatched the army with hopes of a quick and decisive victory. Yet it took *four* campaigns to finally defeat Conselheiro and his relatively impoverished followers. More than simply a testament to the sertanejos' resilience, the drawn-out fighting at Canudos was also a result of the army's shortcomings. Journalists on the front lines sent tales of military incompetence back to readers on the coast, making the campaign into something of an embarrassment for the government. It was bad enough that the army could not easily defeat a group of supposed backland fanatics, but the behavior of government troops challenged the view of a civilized Brazilian nation.

In one of the most infamous scenes from *Os Sertões*, Euclides da Cunha tells a story of soldiers who descend ravenously on a herd of goats. Reading this text, one begins to question whether the actual barbarians were the soldiers rather than the sertanejos. The scene takes place toward the end of the war, at a moment of supposed victory for the nation, when its self-projected image of modernity gets called into question. As recounted by Cunha:

> This was the last of the skirmishes, and it ended in a providential incident. Alarmed, it may be, by the bullets, a herd of wild goats invaded the camp, almost at the moment that the defeated sertanejos retreated. This was a fortunate diversion. The [soldiers], absolutely exhausted, now gave wild chase to the swift-footed animals, delirious with joy at the prospect of a banquet after two days of enforced fasting. And an hour later these unhappy heroes, ragged, filthy, repulsive-looking, could be seen squatting about their bonfires, tearing the half-cooked flesh as the flickering light from the coals glowed on their faces, like a band of famished cannibals at a barbarous repast.[9]

In the years and decades after the war at Canudos, this type of story lingered as a reminder of the army's role in the nation's political project—and of what could go wrong when the army failed to uphold an image of virtuous defenders of the patria.[10] Even more troubling for leaders of the First Republic was the fact that, in the early years of the twentieth century, the military became an increasing source not of order, but of unrest and calls for political change. In 1904, cadets from Rio de Janeiro's military academy joined local civilians in staging riots against compulsory vaccinations, and, six years later, navy sailors mutinied by taking over two battleships in the Guanabara Bay.[11] The latter event was particularly telling of the challenges within the military

and of society more broadly as Brazil navigated the afterlives of slavery. The naval mutiny was staged by Afro-Brazilian and mixed-race sailors as a way to denounce the corporal punishment used by white officers. The so-called Revolt of the Whip revealed the discrepancy between the high-minded positivist goals of military officers and the social realities of a stratified society.

Industrialization in the cities and foreign immigration to urban and rural areas alike resulted in a massive population boom. Between 1890 and 1920, Brazil's population more than doubled from fourteen million to nearly thirty-one million.[12] Much of the wealth generated by this expansion benefited elites tied to the coffee industry and their political supporters, which formed the core of the era's *café-com-leite* power-sharing system between São Paulo and Minas Gerais. Named for the states' respective commercial prowess in coffee and dairy, this system had informally governed Brazil for most of the First Republic, alternating the presidency between candidates from São Paulo (the country's most powerful financial state) and Minas Gerais (the state with the nation's largest population). The dominance of these two states led to a power imbalance that was both regionally and class-based. Brazil's growing inequality was also pervasive within the armed forces. As seen in the 1910 Revolt of the Whip, the officer corps remained almost entirely white, while the lower ranks tended to be filled by poor Brazilians who, unlike the middle and upper classes, could not escape military service. In his study of the Brazilian army, Frank McCann explains that "because most recruits came from the lower end of the social and economic scale, they were darker and less educated than those who obtained exemptions. Mulattos and mestiços predominated in the ranks, except in the immigrant south."[13]

This assessment of the military, however brief, is important for several reasons. First, given that the Prestes Column emerged from the army, we must situate its history within that of the military, particularly the legacies of positivism and its impact on the generation of military cadets who came of age in the early decades of the twentieth century. Because the tenentista movement of the 1920s was led by the military, it could claim to be a positivist intervention in society rather than an irrational uprising such as that staged by civilian "fanatics" at Canudos in the 1890s or in the Contestado War (1912–16), a millenarian revolt in the southern borderlands of Paraná and Santa Catarina. The Prestes Column resulted from this sense of the military as a civilizing force for modernity and progress. If the army's role in the interior had previously been to suppress regional revolts, the Prestes Column would allow its supporters to further elevate the military's image as heroic agents of national progress.

And, given the contours of how the column would get mythologized—white rebels venturing into the dark heart of the country—a discussion of the army is important for understanding the circulation of racialized discourses. As seen above, most of the lower-ranking soldiers in the army were of Afro-Brazilian and mixed origins. The one exception, as noted, tended to be those from southern states like Rio Grande do Sul, a demographically more European-descendent part of the country. In many ways, the depiction of the column as being led by white Brazilians holds true, especially because its leadership was almost entirely Euro-descendent, including the commanding officers who came from the northeastern states of Ceará and Pernambuco.

The archival record offers few traces of the foot soldiers and lower-ranking rebels who composed the majority of the Prestes Column, though some photographs from the early phase of the rebellion in 1924—after the initial São Paulo revolt, but before it had incorporated Prestes's gaúcho troops—show a mixed ethnic composition among the rebel ranks (fig. 1.1). Over the following months, many of the paulista rebels would cross into exile, leaving some seven hundred soldiers from the original São Paulo uprising to join

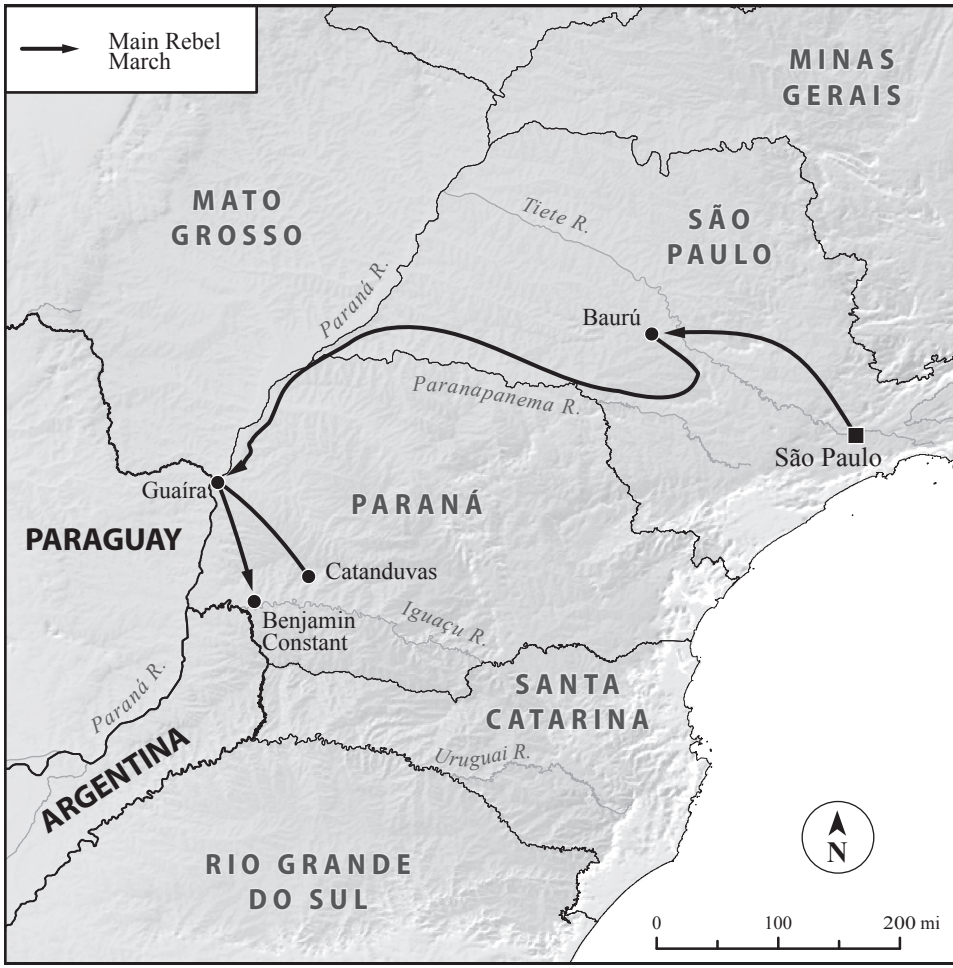
FIGURE 1.1. Photo of rebels near Guairá, Paraná, November 1924. Only one name is given, a 4th Lieutenant "Abilio" (*seated, front*). Source: Acervo da Fundação Biblioteca Nacional, Brasil.

forces with roughly eight hundred gaúcho soldiers under Prestes. We do not know how many of the resulting rebel forces were of which ethnic background. What we do know is that, on the whole, the column was portrayed as white. This portrayal of the Prestes Column reflected the larger construction of race in Brazil. In her study of São Paulo and whiteness, Barbara Weinstein shows that the actual demographics were almost immaterial—regardless of whether or not paulistas were "white" mattered less than the fact that, against the foil of nonwhite backlands, they *became* white.[14]

Tenentismo

As noted by the historian Vavy Pacheco Borges, although the term *tenentismo* is used to describe the rebellious army movements of the 1920s, it was not coined until later.[15] At the time, it was known as different combinations of military rebel or revolutionary—*militares revolucionários*, *revoltosos*, *rebeldes*, or *revoltados*. Tenentismo as a distinct—if vaguely defined—political movement only took shape retroactively, after Vargas seized power in 1930, as politicians and subsequent generations of scholars sought to discuss the armed movement that toppled the First Republic. There have been two main schools of thought as to what exactly tenentismo was and how it came about. Maria Cecília Spina Forjaz argues that tenentismo was a product of a new urban middle class that became frustrated when its aspirations of social ascent confronted the entrenched systems of the First Republic.[16] Boris Fausto, on the other hand, suggests that tenentismo emerged because the military saw itself as the guardians of Brazil's institutions, a belief that originated in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this latter view, the elites of the First Republic, who were handed power because of the military's intervention in the late 1890s, had abdicated their responsibility to the nation and thus needed to be removed.[17] Regardless of how we conceive of the movement that came to be known as *tenentismo*, its trajectory is clear: between 1922 and 1930, dissatisfied officers within the military organized a series of armed movements to overthrow the government. In the middle years of this history (1924–27), the Prestes Column became the leading symbol of tenentismo.

The tenentista movement did not have an overarching political ideology. To the extent that it had a platform, it included reforms like the secret ballot and more balance between the three branches of government. Its purpose, essentially, was to end the café-com-leite system. Although tenentismo did not have a unifying ideology, it did emerge in opposition to a clear target:



MAP 1.1. São Paulo revolt and retreat, July 1924–April 1925. Courtesy of Gabe Moss.

President Artur Bernardes, the former governor of Minas Gerais who was selected by the café-com-leite elites to run as president in 1922. The election placed the military and Bernardes in each other's crosshairs, resulting in the "false letters" scandal. Five months before the election, the Rio de Janeiro–based newspaper *Correio da Manhã* published two letters allegedly written by Bernardes in which he called Marshall Hermes da Fonseca—Brazil's most respected military leader—a scoundrel (*canalha*) and an "overblown sergeant" (*sargentão*). The letters were later shown to be forged, but they escalated tensions and led many in the military to cast doubt on the legitimacy of Bernardes's election in March 1922. The conflict continued, and, on

July 2, the new Bernardes government arrested Marshall Hermes and closed the Clube Militar, the officer fraternity of which Marshall Hermes was president. Three days later, the army staged a revolt in Rio de Janeiro, a small and unsuccessful uprising best known for ending in a gun battle along Copacabana beach. Most of the rebel soldiers who had escaped the nearby fort (the "Eighteen of Copacabana") were shot and killed. The abortive revolt etched July 5 as the origin date of tenentismo, setting into motion further events on the horizon.

Two years later, again on July 5, military rebels marked the second anniversary of the earlier uprising by staging a much larger revolt. Commanded by General Isidoro Dias Lopes—a gaúcho veteran of the Federalist Revolution of 1893–95—the coordinated action included revolts in São Paulo, Sergipe, Pará, and Amazônas. Only the uprising in São Paulo had any success, with the others being put down quickly. Despite heavy government bombing, the paulista rebels held São Paulo for nearly a month before retreating on July 28 and marching toward the Paraná borderlands. The São Paulo revolt resulted in hundreds of deaths and widespread damage to the city.[18] As the paulistas made their way west, either toward exile or to regroup for another push on Rio de Janeiro, a new front in the rebellion opened farther south in Rio Grande do Sul. And it was from within the gaúcho ranks that Luís Carlos Prestes would emerge and eventually lead the column on its march across the interior.