2

THE ACCIDENTAL MARCH

What we attempted, principally, was to arouse the masses of the interior, shaking them from the apathy in which they were living, indifferent to the fate of the nation, hopeless of any remedy for their difficulties and sufferings.—LUÍS CARLOS PRESTES, 1941

The above epigraph reflects a pillar of the Prestes Column's dominant mythology.[1] As noted by Luís Carlos Prestes in 1941—by that point a staunch communist, and imprisoned under the Estado Novo dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas—the legend of the column depicted the rebels as having always intended to go into the interior. With the column's legitimacy tied to its intention to liberate Brazil's impoverished rural communities, the legend of the Prestes Column evolved as one of purposeful awakening. But the column's interior march was accidental: once most of the original São Paulo rebels stopped fighting and went into exile, the column only turned north when federal troops blocked the path to Rio de Janeiro. Highlighting the accidental nature of the march is vital in order to foreground the mythologizing that, in the years and decades to come, would depict the column as a heroic quest to

liberate the interior. More than just calling attention to a misleading narrative in the rebel legend, such an intervention helps to explain how the symbolism of Brazil's interior could have a profound real-world impact—in this case, shaping the route and legitimacy of a military campaign.

Rebel leaders—first in São Paulo in July and then in Rio Grande do Sul in October—never envisioned a drawn-out march, let alone one that would wind its way up and through Brazil's vast interior regions. A close reading of the initial stages of the march reveals the foundations of the narrative that would form around Prestes and the column. Prestes's rise as the head of the rebellion was enabled not only by his military skills but also by the failures of his enemies and the decision of many of his commanding officers to abandon the fight. And, although there were indeed indications that Prestes was more attuned to rural poverty than most of his fellow rebels, the actual progression of his political worldview was slower than his legend suggests. Over time, the actual intentions of Prestes and his compatriots have become subsumed by a more heroic goal projected afterward.

The Gaúcho Revolt

The rebellion in Rio Grande do Sul would come to be led by Luís Carlos Prestes, a twenty-six-year-old gaúcho army engineer who, after being trained at the Realengo Military Academy in Rio de Janeiro, had returned to his native state to oversee the construction of railroad tracks near the border with Argentina. Prestes had not participated in the original tenente revolt of 1922, but he had been sympathetic to the movement, and by 1924 he became a full conspirator. Throughout the first half of 1924, Prestes was in contact with rebel leaders such as Juarez Távora, who sought to organize a gaúcho uprising to correspond with the larger events being planned for São Paulo. Yet, partially due to Rio Grande do Sul having so recently emerged from the 1923 "Libertador" rebellion against the state government, many gaúcho leaders were hesitant to embark on another war.[2] As such, when revolts launched in São Paulo, Sergipe, Pará, and Amazônas on July 5, 1924, nothing happened in Rio Grande do Sul. Over the coming months, Prestes and other gaúcho conspirators received few updates about the revolution; the news blackout resulted largely from President Bernardes having declared a state of siege after the July 5 revolt, which included heavy censorship. But when the retreating paulista troops made their way to Foz do Iguaçu in September, they were able to feed information across the border to newspapers in Argentina and Uruguay. These reports then made their way back to the rebels

in Rio Grande do Sul, along with the broadcasts of an Argentine radio station on the border.[3]

While serving as the chief engineer of the First Railroad Batallion in Santo Ângelo, Prestes corresponded with members of the revolutionary forces heading in his direction. In a letter on October 12, Juarez Távora told Prestes that the gaúcho uprisings were needed to reinvigorate the revolution. The rebels' retreat over the previous four months had left them cornered in the border regions of western Paraná, where they fought against federal army forces led by General Cândido Rondon, one of Brazil's most venerated military leaders, who had achieved prominence two decades earlier for overseeing the extension of telegraph lines into Brazil's interior and outward to Peru and Bolivia.[4] As the rebels fought against Rondon—thus creating a symbolic standoff between an earlier interior hero and an incipient one—their position along the Paraná border was a disadvantage both in terms of tactical positioning and because the close proximity to the border facilitated a steady leak of desertions. Távora suggested that "the forces of Rio Grande advance toward Ponta-Grossa, where we can celebrate, after defeating Rondon."[5] By setting the rallying point in the eastern Paraná region of Ponta Grossa—over three hundred miles from where both the gaúchos and the paulistas were currently stationed—Távora envisioned the revolution making a second charge back toward São Paulo and onward to the capital of Rio de Janeiro. The uprisings in Rio Grande do Sul did open a new front, but not in the way that Távora and other leaders had hoped. Instead of marching east, the gaúcho rebels would wind their way north and link up with the main concentration of paulistas, who themselves had been unable to break through Rondon's forces, which blocked the path to Rio de Janeiro.

Rebel commanders decided that the gaúcho revolt should begin on October 28. Forces were dispatched to four main towns: Uruguaiana, São Borja, São Luís Gonzaga, and Santo Ângelo, the latter being led by Prestes. Although he did not have the same military experience as the other leaders, Prestes proved himself an adept commander, and, in the coming days and weeks, he became the unofficial head of the new gaúcho front.

The uprising began on the night of October 28, when Prestes's forces of military and civilian recruits took over the town of Santo Ângelo. Wearing red ribbons on their hats as a marker of their rebel affiliation, the soldiers seized control of the town hall, the railroad station, the telegraph office, and the police arsenal.[6] These events would become implanted in local memory. One resident, Armando Amaral, would look back much later in his life and say that "my heart bursts when I remember my father and my brothers [that

day] with red scarves around their necks. I was there, I saw Prestes, a young man, thin and short, riding a brown horse."[7] With Santo Ângelo secured, Prestes distributed a pamphlet calling on his fellow gaúchos to support the revolt, either as fighters or by donating their automobiles, carts, and horses to the cause. The uprising had mixed results: the rebels were able to secure the initial four towns (Santo Ângelo, Uruguaiana, São Borja, and São Luiz Gonzaga) but failed to expand their control to surrounding areas, most notably at Ijuí (fig. 2.1), where civilians loyal to the state governor fired on the advancing troops, killing the rebel commander.[8]

From mid-November onward, Prestes's command in São Luís Gonzaga became the base of rebel operations. Under Prestes, the rebels began to print their own newsletter, called *O Libertador* (The liberator). With its title grounded in the rebellious traditions of Rio Grande do Sul—the libertador regional conflicts—the publication also took inspiration from the São Paulo rebels. Beginning in the July uprising, the paulista rebels printed a clandestine pamphlet, *O 5 de Julho*, that, according to historian James Woodard, was "distributed furtively but with surprising regularity among the pro-rebel faithful."[9] The government considered *O 5 de Julho* to be such a threat that it offered a financial reward to anyone who could reveal its editors and printer.[10] For the gaúchos, their newspaper, *O Libertador*, sought to counter

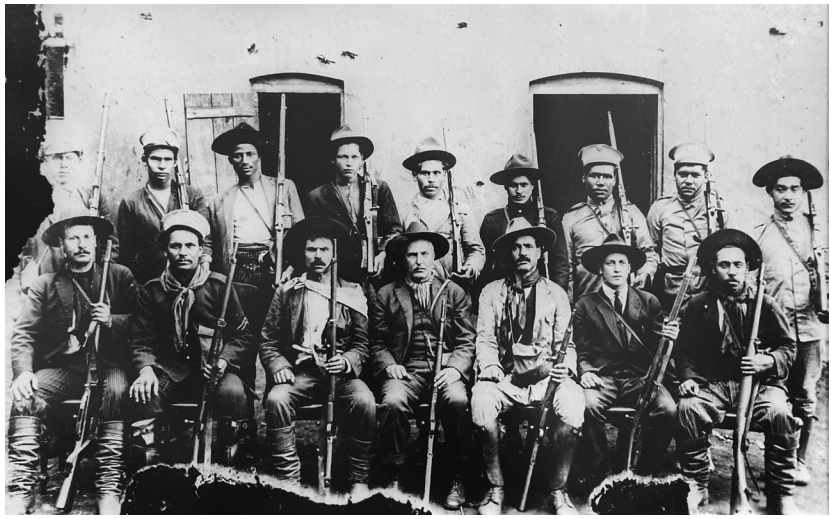

FIGURE 2.1. Loyalist defenders of Ijuí, Rio Grande do Sul. Like the rebels they fought against, the loyalists also dressed in the traditional gaucho clothing. Courtesy of the Secretaria Municipal da Cultura, Santo Ângelo.

Edição do Maranhão

N. 8

O LIBERTADOR

ORGAM DA REVOLUÇÃO

LIBERDADE OU MORTE

Redactores: Drs JOSÉ D. P. MACHADO, L. MOREIRA LIMA E MANOEL DE MACEDO

O despotismo sanguinario, que trypudia sobre as nossas liberdades, vendeu o Brasil aos banqueiros estrangeiros!

E' dever de cada brasileiro defender a Patria conspurcada por essa horda de vandalos, cujo unico ideal é o enriquecimento a custa da miseria do povo.

A's armas, mocidade sertaneja!

Carolina, 19 de Novembro de 1925.

MANIFESTO

POVO MARANHENSE:

A tyrannia politica que te opprime, reduzindo as tradições gloriosas do Maranhão a um farrapo de despotismo e villipendio, é, hoje, uma epidemia formidavel que assola, de norte a sul, todos os recantos da Patria brasileira.

O mesmo desespero sombrio que asphyxia as tuas legitimas aspirações de povo liberal — ora espezinhado pela brutalidade inconsciente de um governo falho de escrupulos e desprovido de patriotismo — afoga, nesta hora tragica de nossa Historia, como um diluvio de opprobios, a quasi unanimidade da consciencia nacional.

E debalde os homens, em cujos corações ainda se não apagou o sentimento do dever e a noção da responsabilidade, têm erguido o seu protesto contra a monstruosidade em que se vae transformando o sonho de liberdade dos Constituintes de 91.

A liberrima Constituição de 24 de Fevereiro está hoje transformada, por uma dolorosa irrisão do destino, em azorrague politico com que se abafam todos os direitos do povo e se justificam todos os caprichos e desvarios do poder.

A Democracia foi substituida por um conluio reduzido de autocratas — duvidosa elite, surgida de uma selecção rigorosamente negativa.

O voto é uma farça e a soberania das urnas é uma convenção facultativa e vaga á que se sobrepõem, sempre, as conveniencias e caprichos dos Senhores absolutos dos poderes publicos.

A justiça nem é cêga, nem enxerga bem, — possue, para infelicidade do povo, a visão obliterada dos que olham, ao mesmo tempo, para o montão de ouro com que se compram os venaes e para a espada de Damocles que ameaça a cabeça dos espiritos independentes.

A administração é um descalabro.

Os impostos escorchantes são uma industria lucrativa mas vergonhosa com que se exgotta a economia do povo para enriquecer os politicos sem escrupulos.

A lei é, emfim, um trapo com que a prepotencia dos governantes explora, implacavel e impunemente, a impotencia dos fracos ou desvalidos.

E para coroar o scenario teatrico dessa Babel de arbitrios e violencias forjou se a affronta maxima com que se poderia ultrajar os brios de um povo livre — essa coisa monstruosa que se rotulou no Congresso Nacional com o nome de "Lei de Imprensa".

Cerceada a liberdade do pensamento pela Lei Infame, os despotas desta infeliz Republica vão tangendo os destinos do Brasil, com a mesma impassibilidade absoluta com que os feitores broncos de outrora tangiam a passividade incondicional das senzalas de escravos.

Povo Maranhense:

Não renegues as tradições de liberalismo que te legaram os revoltados de Beckmann, combatendo o monopolio commercial dos Senhores da Colonia; nem desmereças o espirito batalhador dos teus antepassados que souberam dar a vida pela Independencia politica de nossa Patria!

E' inutil, deprimente e vergonhoso, supplicar, de joelhos, aos tyrannos o favor da liberdade que os nossos maiores souberam conquistar em prelios gloriosos. Levanta-te e resgata quanto [illegible] digno dos que luctaram, no passado, e respeitado pelas gerações vindouras!

Arma-te e segue a legião dos que, de Norte a Sul do Paiz, vêm desenrolando a bandeira rubra das reivindicações democraticas e ajuda aos que, desilludidos de supplicas e passividades, resolveram affrontar os tyrannos com esse argumento breve, mas supremamente convincente: — a bala!

MARANHENSES: — vós que sustentaes bem alto o facho brilhante da intellectualidade patricia, conquistando para o vosso berço o titulo glorioso de Athenas Brasileira — levantae agora, pela salvação da Patria e pela regeneração da Republica, o gladio vingador dos opprimidos e espoliados, juntando aos louros de Pericles a aureola de Leonidas e Milciades!

Carolina, 15 de Novembro de 1925.

General Miguel Costa

Coronel Luiz Carlos Prestes

Coronel Juarez Tavora.

15 de Novembro

A Republica completou o seu trigesimo sexto anniversario.

Lançando-se um golpe de vista para o passado, para os sonhadores que deram o melhor da sua vida pelo regimen do povo pelo povo, cresce a nossa admiração por esses patricios que presidiram a propaganda da nova fórma de governo e tomaram parte na organisação politica da nossa Patria, dando-lhe uma constituição lapidar, destinada a guiar os destinos de uma nacionalidade liberal e culta, pela superioridade moral que os caracterisava e os afasta dos pigmeus que, actualmente, desvirtuam os principios democraticos que constituem o apanagio das nossas conquistas politicas.

Os fundadores da Republica triumpharam a golpes de intelligencia, pregando pela palavra e pela escripta o evangelho da justiça, da liberdade e da paz, emquanto os seus coveiros, esses que hoje detêm os altos postos da administração, venceram pela pratica desenfreiada de todas as ignominias e vão arrastando o paiz para o seu inteiro esphacelamento.

Mas, os maos dias da Republica passarão, e ella, dignificada pelos sacrificios de tantos martyres, que têm vindo embebendo o territorio nacional com o sangue generoso das suas feridas, rasgadas nos campos das batalhas, erguer-se-á cercada de gloria para presidir os destinos da grande Patria Brasileira, na sua evolução para um futuro de paz e de liberdade.

A campanha revolucionaria

A campanha iniciada a 5 de Julho de 1924 em S. Paulo, não é conhecida pelo povo devido ao estado de sitio que vem envergonhando o paiz desde aquelle dia. Vamos hoje dar uma noticia succinta dos acontecimentos militares que se vêm desenvolvendo, desde o abandono da cidade de S. Paulo—

RETIRADA DE S. PAULO

Resolvido o abandono da capital paulista, teve inicio essa retirada em a noite de 27 de Julho, seguindo a tropa revolucionaria, em trens, para a cidade de Bauru. Desta cidade seguiu essa tropa pela Estrada de Ferro Sorocabana até o porto Joaquim Tavora, na margem esquerda do rio Paraná.

Emquanto o grosso da columna revolucionaria marchava para aquelle porto, o seu flanco guarda, sob o commando do então major Juarez Tavora, combatia vantajosamente o inimigo em Victoria, Araquá e Botucatú e a retaguarda, constituida pela 3a. Brigada, do commando do general Miguel Costa, empenhava-se em varias acções em Salto Grande, Paraguassú, Agua Clara, Indiana, Santo Anastacio, Coatá e Caiuá. Ao chegar a vanguarda da columna no referido porto, teve de enfrentar uma numerosa força inimiga, commandada pelo [illegible]

FIGURE 2.2. Cover of the eighth issue of *O Libertador*, printed in Carolina, Maranhão, on November 19, 1925. Courtesy of Museu Histórico de Carolina.

the "malevolent rumors" circulating in pro-government newspapers that depicted the rebels as murderous thieves.[11] Over the course of the entire rebellion, the tenentes would use local printing presses in various towns to publish ten issues of *O Libertador* (fig. 2.2), serving as one of the column's main platforms to inform local populations of their movements and to call for volunteers to join their fight.

After the July uprising in São Paulo, the revolution had been organized as a single force under the command of General Isidoro. But, with the new front opened in Rio Grande do Sul in late October, Isidoro anointed the

gaúchos as a second division and appointed Prestes commanding officer. Prestes's promotion was not entirely a function of merit and came about only after Isidoro's original choice, General João Francisco, retreated into exile in Argentina.[12] While stationed in São Luiz Gonzaga as the new head of the gaúcho division, Prestes only authorized one major operation, a December 2 attack on the railroad town of Tupanciretã—after an eleven-hour standoff, the rebels retreated in defeat. Prolonged, stationary battles such as these would weigh heavily on Prestes, and, in the coming months, he would develop a new approach that would keep the rebellion in motion for over two years.

When Prestes and his troops returned to São Luiz Gonzaga after failing in Tupanciretã, an emissary from Isidoro instructed the gaúcho rebels to leave their native state of Rio Grande do Sul. With the paulista revolutionaries still entrenched in the western Paraná borderlands, the plan called for Prestes to lead his forces north toward the Contestado and Cima de Serra regions. Prestes's announcement of the march north was not well received by the gaúcho soldiers, many of whom deserted the revolution rather than leave behind their home state. On December 27, Prestes and his force of some two thousand soldiers headed north, but their path was blocked by fifteen thousand loyalist forces.[13] To break through what would later be called "the siege of São Luís," Prestes planned a series of strategic retreats. During the night of December 27, Prestes sent advance units to briefly engage federal troops before retreating again. The subsequent pursuit brought the federal forces closer to São Luís Gonzaga. Prestes ordered a single detachment to stay engaged with the enemy to simulate a complete retreat, while the remaining gaúcho rebels made a rapid rendezvous at São Miguel das Missões. Prestes's strategy paid off (map 2.1). In the middle of the night, all seven detachments of loyalist troops descended at once, failing to notice the rebel troops quietly marching away from São Luís Gonzaga. Before daybreak, Prestes gathered his troops and marched northeast toward the Ijuí River and, from there, onward to the northern corners of Rio Grande do Sul.[14] News of Prestes's maneuver spread through the rebel ranks and earned him widespread acclaim, including from the paulista high command. João Francisco wrote to Prestes and declared that, by "breaking the enemy's siege, dispersing him, and continuing on your desired path, that constituted one of the most brilliant operations of this campaign and it is even on par with any of the most celebrated acts of military genius carried out at any other time in history."[15] Such hyperbole would help launch and sustain Prestes's heroic status.

MAP 2.1. Rebel escape from the Siege of São Luís. Courtesy of Gabe Moss.

As would be the case throughout the rebellion—and even more so in the decades afterward—local narratives took shape along the column's march. One such example offers an explanation for Prestes's escape at São Luís Gonzaga. When the federal army prepared to descend on the town, a group of local housewives prayed to Saint Lourdes, offering to build a shrine in her honor if she helped to spare the town. Saint Lourdes, according to the story, answered the women's prayers and guided Prestes through the nighttime maneuver. As seen in figure 2.3, the women upheld their promise, and two years later they built a shrine to Nossa Senhora de Lourdes.

FIGURE 2.3. Inauguration of the shrine to Saint Lourdes, December 12, 1926, São Luiz Gonzaga, Rio Grande do Sul. Courtesy of the Secretaria Municipal da Cultura, Santo Ângelo.

The rebels continued north (map 2.2), and on January 9 they arrived at the Uruguay River, the border between Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. Heavy rains left the river impassable, and the rebels spent almost two weeks marching along its eastern banks, looking for a safer place to cross. The rains also meant that the terrain, already a challenging thicket of dense forests, was swollen and difficult to traverse. The plodding of the several thousand rebel horses made the ground almost impenetrably muddy.[16] Having left behind pampas fields and easy access to cattle, food now became an issue. João Alberto Lins de Barros recalled that whereas 30 men would normally eat from a single cow for their customary churrasco meal of barbecued meat, as many as 120 men now had to share the same animal.[17] And, in a letter to Prestes dated January 14, Dias Ferreira reported that his unit had to make

MAP 2.2. Rebel march, October 1924–April 1925. Courtesy of Gabe Moss.

one cow last several days in addition to the fact that "corn, manioc, potatoes, salt—we have nothing here."[18] Scarcity pushed the rebels to seize supplies from nearby inhabitants.

Nearly seventy years later, a local named Severino Verri remembered the column's passage through the region: "I didn't think it was right for them to take things without paying, but at the time we couldn't say anything."[19] Antônio Francisco Bortolini, who was nine years old when the column passed near his family's farm, recalled that, aside from leaving a single milk cow—so that the children would not starve to death—the rebels took almost everything else, including flour, sugar, clothes, cattle, and pigs. Even if out of

necessity, this process left a mark on the rebels as well. Antenor Medeiros Pinto, a fighter who had joined Prestes in São Luiz Gonzaga, spoke with guilt about the process of stealing from his fellow gaúchos: "You know, at first we asked people for things, and they gave to us because they were afraid. They knew that if they didn't give it to us we would take it either way. . . . Without meaning too, we became thieves."

Leaving Rio Grande do Sul

After two weeks, the gaúchos arrived in the port town of Alto Uruguai. On the heels of an exhausting march and looking out across the water at Santa Catarina, many rebels rethought their choices. Rather than crossing into a new Brazilian state toward more fighting, almost two hundred rebels escaped into Argentina on a ferry farther downstream. The desertions at Alto Uruguai left the gaúcho rebellion with a little over one thousand soldiers.[20] As Prestes recalled, "For gaúchos, going to Santa Catarina was like emigrating [to another country]. They considered it like leaving their home."[21] When they began crossing on January 25, the only boat they found could barely hold three horses at a time—a considerable challenge, given that the rebel cavalry included almost 1,500 steeds. The soldiers built a wooden raft that sped the process along, but it still took until January 31 for the entire rebel body to enter Santa Catarina.[22]

During the river crossing, the question of women came to the fore. From the start of the gaúcho revolt in late October, the rebels had marched with a group of almost fifty women, referred to as *vivandeiras*. Yet while preparing to cross into Santa Catarina, Prestes prohibited them from continuing north. In a rare example of disobedience, Prestes's troops ferried across the river all of the women, several of whom stayed with the column for the entire course of the two-year rebellion. As will be discussed, these women played key roles as fighters, nurses, cooks, and companions. On the morning of their departure into Santa Catarina, Prestes awoke to find the vivandeiras among the rebel ranks, a number of them on horseback and ready to ride north. According to Lourenço Moreira Lima, upon seeing that his men had defied his orders to bring the women along, Prestes softened his stance, feeling "ashamed to abandon them in those desolate backlands and allowed them to continue the journey."[23]

Within Brazil's patriarchal society, the presence of women in the rebellion was a cause for alarm. As scholars such as June Edith Hahner and Cassia Roth have shown, this was a key period of women's movements in Brazil advocating for expanded employment opportunities and political rights—in this

context, some observers saw the vivandeiras as evidence of broader social change.[24] The front page of the newspaper *A Capital*, for example, reported with disdain on the sightings of "many women in military clothing. They surely want to prove that they desire not only jobs in public, but, also, to take up arms."[25]

During its short passage through Santa Catarina, the column was plagued by desertions. Along with a steady stream of rebel soldiers abandoning the fight, a detachment commander named João Pedro Gay deserted the rebellion, taking many of his troops with him. The loss of Gay's unit was one of the most significant thus far; it reduced the remaining gaúcho column to some eight hundred soldiers—less than three months prior their numbers had stood at over three thousand.[26] These desertions were symptomatic of various conflicts simmering within the rebel ranks, including a pervasive lack of discipline. Prestes worried about the conduct of his troops, reporting that "more so than against our actual enemies, we have had to fight against the weakness and low morale of some of our own soldiers."[27] For gaúcho commanders, a key problem in these early phases was how to maintain order now that the initial excitement of the uprising had dissolved. Meanwhile, the leaders from São Paulo confronted much larger questions about how—and whether—to continue the revolution.

In the early months of 1925, the paulista high command faced two main challenges. First, its stronghold in western Paraná was under serious strain. Although revolutionary forces controlled the rebel headquarters of Foz do Iguaçu and the river town of Guaíra, their third holding of Catanduvas was nearly broken. From this period forward, the rebels won very few battles. Second, there was a growing tension between the "old guard" revolutionaries and a few of the younger commanders. The former was headed by General Isidoro, who advocated for disbanding the revolution, arguing that, once in exile, the rebels could better negotiate an amnesty with the Bernardes government. The latter, in contrast, rallied around Miguel Costa, the commanding officer of one of the paulista division's two brigades. Tensions grew as the revolution stretched past the half-year mark.[28] This conflict never entirely went away, as Isidoro and Costa would later fight on opposite sides during the 1932 "Constitutionalist" uprising in São Paulo.

As the senior rebel leadership faltered—whether for reasons of age, health, morale, or the lessons learned from past experience—the gaúcho rebels continued their march north, crossing from Santa Catarina into Paraná on February 7. João Alberto recalled the challenges of moving through Paraná, writing in his memoir that "[we] fought against nature. The road . . .

was getting worse and worse. It was a rarely used path, in the middle of an untouched forest—a road blocked by the trees and, at times, almost obliterated by it. We no longer had the pastures of the [Rio Grande] farmers to feed us. We were starting to run out of beef."[29] Along with a shortage of food, the rebels dealt with a lack of medical supplies that made it difficult to care for the injured soldiers. One officer wrote to Prestes from the river town of Barracão requesting medicine for his men, one of whom was suffering greatly from pulmonary tuberculosis after being shot in the lung.[30] As would be the case throughout the two-year rebellion, supplies were at a premium, and Prestes could not send much assistance to his suffering troops. A rebel commander would recall that, in moments when the column's medical stores were particularly low, some of the vivandeiras would administer "Women's Health" (Saúde da Mulher), a tonic that was meant to regulate one's menstrual cycle and was purported to help boost energy levels.[31] With a lack of supplies, Prestes remained persistent in requesting more aid from the revolutionary high command.

In one of these letters to Isidoro, Prestes coupled his request for supplies with the operational plans for what he called a "war of movement" (*guerra de movimento*). Prestes's vision, which would become adopted as the unofficial rebel strategy a few months later, was for a guerrilla-style approach of constant movement that only engaged in battle when absolutely necessary. With its emphasis on efficiency, a war of movement was a potential solution to the dwindling conditions of his troops. Of the eight hundred rebels under his command, only five hundred had weapons, and they were down to ten thousand bullets and ten automatic rifles. Prestes saw his war of movement as a way to outlast the war of position (*guerra de reserva*) that "most favors the government that has munitions factories, endless money and enough illiterate [soldiers] to throw against our guns."[32]

Along with offering the first articulation of Prestes's military strategy, this letter stands as a watershed document in the history of the Prestes Column. Here, Prestes offered one of the earliest indications of the rebellion's turn to the interior. Compounded by the increasing number of soldiers deserting or dying and accounting for the positioning of both the gaúcho and paulista troops in Paraná, Prestes realized that the original plan for a direct march on Rio de Janeiro had to be modified. He declared that with reinforcements he could march north and soon descend on Rio de Janeiro, perhaps through Minas Gerais. Prestes hoped that, with a well-supplied and quick-moving force, a detour up and around central Brazil was a viable way to then circle back down on Rio de Janeiro. Over the following months, this initial

adaptation continued to change as the rebel march got pushed further from the capital.

At the end of February, Isidoro replied to Prestes, providing a frank summary of the revolution's shaky status. Writing on letterhead from the Mate Laranjeira Company in Foz do Iguaçu—the region's largest corporation, devoted to the cultivation of yerba mate tea—Isidoro explained that many soldiers and even some officers were "semi-nude and barefoot," and that their stocks had dwindled to 3,000 thousand bullets and 1,500 rifles. In terms of money, they were down to only 20 contos, meaning 20 million réis (Rs 20:000$000), the equivalent of $2.4 million in 1925 value, or 15 million USD today.[33] Despite this situation, Isidoro told Prestes that they must hold out for at least another month. As Isidoro explained, this was necessary in part for the high command and their allies in Brazil and abroad to procure more supplies; the additional time would also facilitate a possible amnesty agreement with the Bernardes government.

The campaign for amnesty was led by João Batista Luzardo, a federal deputy from Rio Grande do Sul, who had grown up in Uruguaiana on Brazil's most southwestern frontier. Luzardo was also a veteran gaúcho fighter, having participated in the Libertador rebellion of 1923. As an allied politician working in Rio de Janeiro, Luzardo organized a secret committee to pressure the federal government into negotiating with the rebels. The central demand in any peace talks remained the same: Bernardes's resignation as president. If Bernardes would step down, Isidoro was willing to order the rebels to lay down their arms.

Newspapers and the Opposition Press

While Isidoro busied himself with the logistics of the rebellion, there was also the battle for public opinion: What did the Brazilian public think of the events unfolding in western Paraná? The answer requires a brief overview of the state of newspapers in Brazil, particularly the opposition press. As mentioned earlier, the rise of tenentismo was linked to the advent of mass market newspapers in the 1920s. Previously, Brazilian newspapers tended to be somewhat niche, marketed toward the literate upper classes and focused on politics and culture. But industrialization in the early twentieth century helped to create an emerging urban middle class that, in turn, fostered a larger reading public with new consumer interests. A report from 1923 observed that "with the modernization of the press . . . media companies became infinitely more complex. . . . Newspapers became an issue more

of money than of political or literary debates. . . . Winning over the public, therefore, was less a battle of ideas than a simple question of business."[34] Especially for the large daily papers in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the adoption of what Nelson Werneck Sodré calls a new "business structure" encouraged several innovations.[35] The *Jornal do Brasil*, for example, hired Brazil's most popular writer of the era—at a salary of twice what the paper's editor made—to create a recurring feature called "Mistérios do Rio" that focused on crime, prostitution, and scandals of all sorts. To sell more copies, newspapers sought to meet and facilitate demand for increasingly dramatic stories.

The paragon of Brazil's emerging newspaper industry was Francisco de Assis Chateaubriand Bandeira de Melo, either known simply as Assis Chateaubriand or by his eventually ubiquitous nickname, Chatô. Chateaubriand became one of the most influential media figures in Brazilian history—often referred to as the tropical Hearst—and his rise as a media magnate coincided with the start of the tenente rebellion: he purchased his first newspaper, the Rio de Janeiro–based *O Jornal*, in September 1924, as the paulista rebels were marching toward the Paraná borderlands, and six months later he acquired a second paper, in São Paulo, the *Diário da Noite*. Along with a major influx of advertisement revenue from companies such as Antarctica Beer and General Motors, one of Chateaubriand's first changes at *O Jornal* was to consistently publish multipart serialized pieces, known in Brazil as *reportagens*.[36] The first reportagem under Chateaubriand was about the English explorer Percy Fawcett, who had disappeared while trying to discover a lost civilization in the Amazon—an early indication of both the form (serialized exposés) and the content (marches in Brazil's interior) that would soon coalesce in coverage of the Prestes Column.[37] Chateaubriand, it should be noted, had been born in Paraíba and raised in Pernambuco before moving to Rio de Janeiro at the age of twenty-five, seven years prior to purchasing his first newspaper. As a coastal elite, albeit one with personal roots in the Northeast, Chateaubriand symbolized the type of mainstream figure who used the Prestes Column to talk about the interior.

Chateaubriand, who was a staunch critic of President Bernardes, began running *O Jornal* in a climate of censorship. The martial law declared by Bernardes after the July revolt in São Paulo had been extended through the end of 1925, giving the government increased power to control public dissemination of news.[38] The Bernardes regime placed a particularly heavy hand on the *Correio da Manhã*, the main opposition paper, which was forced to stop circulating entirely between September 1924 and May 1925—a vacuum of sorts for the opposition press that further enabled the rise of Chateaubriand.[39]

The tight grip on newspapers was especially apparent in the aftermath of the gaúcho uprisings in October, as the government censored reports of the revolution's newly opened front. A US consul report from November 8—ten days after Prestes rose up at Santo Ângelo—noted the lack of public information about the events in Rio Grande do Sul: "Owing to the strict censorship the local newspapers are well controlled, and only a select few know definitely what is going on."[40] Despite the censorship in place, over the course of late 1924 and early 1925 Brazilian readers (mostly in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, though with some stringers in northern newspapers) could still access information about the rebellion, especially via *O Combate*, an anarcho-syndicalist São Paulo daily.[41] And, when the initial revolt evolved into the column's prolonged march across the interior, more mainstream coverage was provided by Chateaubriand's newspapers, as well as others in Rio de Janeiro such as *Gazeta de Notícias* and *A Noite*.

At the start of the rebellion, the majority of the press did not support the rebels. Newspapers such as *O Paiz*, *Correio Paulistano*, and *A Noticia* celebrated the victories won by loyalist forces, ran profiles of disillusioned rebels who had deserted, and highlighted the ragged state of the rebellion.[42] Under a headline of "Knock Out!," an article in *Gazeta de Noticias* likened the rebel passage through Santa Catarina to a boxing match in its final round, where Prestes's "disorganized" and "disheveled" forces showed that they "rose up [only] to then fall back down. . . . Soon, the ref will count to ten and nobody will get up."[43]

The Unofficial Formation of the Prestes Column

Against a media backdrop that tended to paint the rebels in a negative light, the gaúcho forces spent the months of February and March in the Contestado region of southern Paraná. Toward the end of their march through the Contestado, the rebels escaped from a particularly challenging position that, unlike the battles at São Luís Gonzaga, had little do with any brilliance from Prestes. Instead, as would happen at several moments during the next two years, the column succeeded by the grace of their enemies' failures. In the early evening of March 24, as the rebels retreated from the town of Barracão, they were advanced upon by two enemy forces: a federal army unit coming from the southwest, and a state unit from Rio Grande do Sul approaching from the east. In the lowlight of dusk, the two loyalist forces mistook each other, thinking they had found the rebels, and both sides open fired. A gun battle between the two allied units played out over four hours, killing two

hundred of their own.[44] During the crossfire, the rebels evaded all confrontation, and, with the path now cleared by the loyalist blunder, Prestes marched his troops forward.

In the first weeks of April, two meetings occurred that changed the course of the rebellion. On April 3, Prestes met with Miguel Costa, the commander of the only active paulista brigade. The previous week, Catanduvas—the final stronghold of the São Paulo rebels—had fallen, and Costa now oversaw all that remained of the original paulista rebellion. Meeting in the Paraná town of Benjamin Constant, Prestes and Costa decided on a new plan to lead their troops to the central state of Mato Grosso, where they hoped to launch an offensive on Rio de Janeiro.[45] The two leaders marched with their troops north, with a stop in Foz do Iguaçu on April 12 to debrief with General Isidoro.

In his memoir, Tabajara de Oliveira recalled the uncertainty that precipitated the Foz do Iguaçu summit. Isidoro had recently returned after meeting in Argentina with representatives of Bernardes's government, and an amnesty agreement now appeared impossible. Many of the paulista rebels—having fought for over nine months—wanted to end the revolution and cross into exile. The gaúcho rebels, on the other hand, arrived in Foz do Iguaçu with what Tabajara de Oliveira described as an almost mythic aura:

> The legendary Prestes Column appeared in the Alto Paraná. At the front marched the unmatched figure of the heroic Siqueira Campos, a full beard [and] dominating gaze exuding energy. . . . . Immediately afterwards the gigantic João Alberto came forth, awkward [but] good-natured, unburdened by the responsibilities that he would take on later in life. . . . And finally, from the depths of the forest, willful, with a youthful air, framed by a big black beard, radiating confidence, Luís Carlos Prestes appeared, the most revered moral and intellectual leader of the time.[46]

In their meeting, Isidoro argued that the most viable choice was to cross as exiles into Argentina, while Prestes and Costa insisted—successfully, in the end—on the need to maintain the rebellion. Isidoro authorized the revolution to continue, though he returned to Argentina, where he would remain the nominal leader of the rebellion. Most of the paulista commanders joined Isidoro in exile, through several leaders opted to keep fighting, including a veritable who's-who of eventual political leaders in mid-twentieth-century Brazil: Oswaldo Cordeiro de Farias, Djalma Dutra, Juarez Távora, Antônio Siqueira Campos, and João Alberto Lins de Barros.[47] The forces that continued fighting became the First Revolutionary Division, under the command of

Miguel Costa. The overall division was comprised of two main detachments: the Rio Grande Detachment led by Prestes and the São Paulo Detachment led by Távora.[48] And, in an effort to maintain more systematic records of their actions, the rebels organized an internal bulletin of the high command that, for the next two years, under the direction of Lourenço Moreira Lima, would chronicle battles, promotions, punishment of disobedient soldiers, and all manner of details relating to the march.

This reorganization also marked the most important step to-date in the evolution—both mythologized and real—of what became known as the Prestes Column. Although the rebellion would not be referred to as such for another year, the leadership handed to Prestes in Foz do Iguaçu in April 1925 was the column's unofficial start. Miguel Costa remained the highest-ranking commander, yet from this point forward the rebel column would effectively become Prestes's column.

The restructured rebel division left Foz do Iguaçu with 1,500 soldiers, but those numbers dipped over the coming weeks as troops from both detachments continued to sneak across the river and abandon the revolution. These desertions were noted tersely in the rebel bulletins as well as in the pro-government media, where it was reported that deserters were arriving daily in Argentina.[49] Under a heavy downpour of rain, it took almost a week to advance north along the Paraná River.[50] Rather than cross at Guaíra and arrive directly into Mato Grosso, as initially intended, Prestes now thought that the best alternative was to cross the river thirty miles downstream at Porto Mendes and then march through Paraguay and back into Brazil.

To realize this plan, the rebels had to first contend with the Paraná River. At this bend, the Paraná was nearly five hundred meters wide with towering cliff edges. Moreira Lima remembered looking out with awe at the "steep granite banks and abrupt cliffs, reaching a height of more than one hundred meters. The speed of its currents is prodigious, creating a vast series of whirlpools, whose noise can be heard from a great distance away."[51] A lack of boats made the difficult crossing even harder. After a few days of waiting, the rebels commandeered a Paraguayan steamship on route from Asunción and spent three days ferrying their 1,500 people and 1,000 horses across the river.[52] The revolution, even if briefly, had now landed on foreign soil.

The rebel march through Paraguay required a diplomatic approach. Aware of the deep and bitter enmity between Brazil and Paraguay, column leaders delivered a lengthy statement to Paraguayan troops stationed in Puerto Adela, proclaiming that, "we are moved . . . by no intention of violence toward our brothers of the Republic of Paraguay. . . . We explicitly declare ourselves

ready to respect your laws and to help you if it is necessary to defend the integrity of your sovereignty."[53] The note made its way to Asunción and was read aloud in the national parliament by the minister of foreign relations. The rebels encountered no resistance in Paraguay.

Early Exposure to Injustice

Given that many of the column leaders would later champion themselves as defenders of the downtrodden, it is notable that they did not take action when exposed to the plight of Paraguayan peasants. Eastern Paraguay was dominated by the Mate Laranjeira Company, the continent's largest supplier of yerba mate tea, and an enterprise that controlled a large swath of land and political influence across the Triple Frontier region.[54] The rebels marched along the Mate Laranjeira plantations, where they witnessed workers laboring under backbreaking conditions. In the historical record, the only evidence of any concern for the mate workers comes from the 1928 memoir of João Cabanas, who devoted several pages describing their hardships. The memoir is inflected with disdain for both the workers and their repressive employers:

> In the middle of this human flock that seemed to have emerged from ungodly places where the sun does not shine, and where there is no civilization, the famous overseers stand tall, arrogant, radiating health, and well-dressed with fine ponchos draped over their shoulders, [and] elegant silk scarves around their necks . . . these modern and bloody overseers have no soul and no conscious, [they] are brutal to the point of violence, tasked with driving their slave-like workers until they break. [All] to extract the precious [tea] leaf from the wild forests that . . . transforms into gold.[55]

Cabanas, however, abandoned the rebellion upon crossing into Paraguay, and even if rebels such as Prestes did have similar reactions, they left no record of it. In some of the column's first encounters with injustice in the countryside—a key theme in its eventual legend—the rebels did not confront the Mate Laranjeira Company. As Brazilian rebels on foreign soil, Prestes and his troops likely felt that they were in no position at that moment to take action. Along with the disjuncture between the rebels' inaction at the time and the narrative of liberation that they would later proclaim, material reasons shaped the column's decision to avoid this confrontation. In the early phases of the revolution, the company had allowed Isidoro's men to use

its port and railway facilities in Paraná, and one of the company's directors was an old friend of Juarez Távora who had given him money and false papers for an earlier reconnaissance into Paraguay.[56] Moreover, once the rebels crossed back into Brazil, they made several purchases of food and supplies at Mate Laranjeira outposts, and, in one instance at least, representatives from the company donated money directly to the rebels for their passage through Mato Grosso.[57]

The rebels spent less than five days in Paraguay, marching two hundred miles through the Mbaracaju hills and across a series of smaller river crossings. The difficult terrain made it nearly impossible to march on horseback, and most soldiers proceeded entirely on foot. Moreira Lima recalled the ragged state of the column in Paraguay: "The Division looked miserable. Soldiers and officers were barefoot and almost naked, covered in filthy clothes, with long beards and straggly hair falling across their chests and shoulders."[58] Faced with these conditions, and aware of the brief window before the column was meant to cross back into Brazil, several rebel officers deserted, including Filinto Müller and João Cabanas. As preparations for the river crossing were in motion, Müller fled into exile, taking weapons and money from the rebel stocks, and Cabana deserted almost immediately after crossing into Paraguay.[59]

Feeling relieved to exit the exhausting terrain in Paraguay, the rebels crossed into Mato Grosso on May 2 with what seemed like a heightened sense of resolve. Writing during the column's first full day back in Brazil, Miguel Costa reported: "We have reentered national territory with our spirits strengthened."[60] With the column now marching north, the rebels created a new rationale for their unintended path through the interior. As we will see in the chapters to follow, the rebels' emerging discourse tapped into the long-standing symbolism of Brazil's interior as a way to legitimize their actions. These efforts were meant both for local communities—on whom the column would increasingly depend for supplies and recruits—as well as for national audiences following the march in newspapers and political speeches.