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The Bandeirantes of Freedom:
The Prestes Column and the Myth of Brazil's Interior

Through a reinterpretation of the Prestes Column rebellion—one of the most mythologized events in modern Brazil—this article helps reimagine the interior of Brazil as both a place and an idea. While this approach is germane to several famous examples of expeditions into the Brazilian hinterlands, the Prestes Column in the 1920s is a powerful case study to understand the intersection of national mythology, geography, and social exclusion. As a corrective to the dominant narrative of the Prestes Column and intervening in scholarship on myths more generally, I argue that the mythology of the Column emerged from and remained tethered to the long-standing symbolism of Brazil's interior, the so-called backlands.

The prevailing myth of the Prestes Column maps onto the grandiose details of the rebellion itself: from 1924 to 1927, a group of roughly one thousand junior army officers and soldiers marched 15,000 miles through Brazil's vast interior. (Figure 1) What began as an uprising in São Paulo in July 1924 seeking to overthrow President Arthur Bernardes soon evolved into a circuitous clock-wise journey across thirteen states. Beginning in the south, the rebels—known as *tenentes*, or lieutenants—then wound their way up and around the central plains and traversed the northeastern *sertão* before turning around and essentially retracing their steps, eventually going into exile in Bolivia in February 1927. Eponymously named for its main leader, Luiz Carlos Prestes, the Prestes Column fought over 150 battles against much larger and better-supplied forces of the federal army and local militias. The Column did not succeed in its original goal of toppling President Bernardes. Nor did it immediately bring about any of its liberal reformist demands that included the secret ballot, a balance of power among the three branches of government, and universal primary school education. But in having fought and

evaded government and local troops for two and a half years, and for having survived an extended journey into the backlands, the rebellion became known as the Undefeated Column, *a Coluna Invicta*. Prestes became the leading symbol of the march across Brazil and was lauded as the Knight of Hope, *O Cavaleiro da Esperança*.



Figure 1: Map of the Prestes Column. Front page of the *Diario Nacional*, April 19, 1928.

The Prestes Column remained an influential symbol long after the rebellion ended. The Column raised the profile of the tenente leaders and extended their influence to far-flung corners of the country, both expanding and politicizing the borders of what Octávio Ianni has called

“Brazil’s cartographic imaginary.”¹ In turn, this claim to a broadened national polity helped set into motion the Revolution of 1930 that brought Getúlio Vargas to power. Under Vargas, many of the tenente rebels became top politicians and Luiz Carlos Prestes, for his part, would split from his original compatriots to become a Marxist, eventually assuming the leadership of the Communist Party of Brazil. In the aftermath of the Column, the rebellion was commemorated and romanticized across a wide range of forms: Oscar Niemeyer, Brazil’s most celebrated architect, designed two monuments to the Column, Jorge Amado, Brazil’s most celebrated writer, wrote a biography of Prestes, and for the past century a series of novels, television shows, and musical ballads have amplified the adventures of the young army officers who defied the government, braved dangerous frontiers, and in the words of one observer, brought “the lantern of liberty to Brazil’s deepest interior.”²

This narrative was first articulated by the rebels themselves. Through their interactions with locals—efforts intended to also gain new recruits and supplies—and in their reports back to sympathetic politicians and journalists, the rebels cultivated their own mythology in real-time. The legend grew even stronger once the Column settled in exile, with newspapers serving as particularly strong platforms of myth-making. The Rio de Janeiro-based *A Esquerda*, to name one example, reported in early 1928 that “Without a doubt, a new mentality emerged in the interior, where the Prestes Column stirred the hearts of all Brazilians.”³ Through each mythologized retelling, the Column and the interior itself were framed as dual protagonists in the same tale of reawakening. As Jorge Amado wrote in his biography of Prestes, the interior “turned inside out, with its hardship on full display, discovers itself in this man, and he, Luiz

¹ Ianni, “Tipos e mitos do pensamento brasileiro,” 179.

² “O XXX Aniversário da Coluna Prestes,” *Nosso Povo*, 1954. Included in “Coleção Luiz Carlos Prestes,” Biblioteca Comunitária, University of São Carlos, Brazil.

³ “Nas paragens semi barbaras do Alto Paraná,” *A Esquerda*, 31 March, 1928, 3.

Carlos Prestes, discovers Brazil in its nakedness.”⁴ This storyline depicts the Column as a mobile force of national unity that shined a spotlight on the previously isolated and backward interior and, in the process, incorporated new regions into Brazil’s geographic imagination.

From this view, the Prestes Column fits squarely within the frameworks most commonly used by scholars of myth-making. Historians and social scientists such as Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, and Duncan Bell have theorized the relationship between mythology and national identity through the respective concepts of invented tradition, imagined community, and mythscape.⁵ These terms share the contention that societies coalesce around a set of ideas that produce a collective sense of belonging. Mythology, in essence, has been presented as a form of *inclusionary* story-telling. Yet the Prestes Column is a striking counterexample of how myths, despite a veneer of inclusion, are equally constructed through a process of imaginative *exclusion*: the glorification of the 15,000-mile march is premised on long-standing stigmas associated with where the rebels actually went. Brazil’s interior, like the marginalized spaces of any nation, has stood as a geographic and conceptual mirror, reflecting a mythologized identity back onto mainstream society’s sense of itself. The inhabitants of these excluded spaces serve an analogous role that juxtaposes the idealized qualities of the “legitimate” members of the national polity. Exclusion, rather a byproduct of mythology, is the pillar on which the idea of inclusion is based.

I argue that perceptions of Brazil’s interior provided the exclusionary core of the Prestes Column mythology. The symbolism of the backlands is one of exclusion: it relies on deeply rooted notions of backwardness, where the landscapes and communities of the interior have been presented as inherently uncivilized, the perpetual foil to the modernity of the southern coastal

⁴ Amado, *O Cavalheiro da Esperança*, 91

⁵ Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Bell, “Mythscales.” For an important reflection on Brazil’s nineteenth-century myths and histories, see Viotti da Costa, *The Brazilian Empire*.

regions. That the interior has historically been populated by Afro-Brazilian, indigenous, and mixed-origin communities adds a further racialized contrast to the supposedly “whiter” coast. During the rebellion and for decades afterwards, leaders of the Prestes Column and their supporters tapped into this stigmatized narrative. As such, the mythology of the Prestes Column was not only based on a coastal perception of the interior, it was a coastal creation itself. Despite the existence of competing narratives during the march where certain sectors of the interior presented the rebels as violent invaders, the dominant image was that which had been created by, and for, Brazilians from the southern and coastal parts of the country. This article will thus show how the inclusionary myth of the rebellion grew in a parallel symbiosis with the exclusionary myth of the interior more broadly.

From the countless examples that have proliferated in political and popular lore over the past century, an especially poignant reflection of this mythology comes from Miguel Costa, a Buenos-Aires born, São-Paulo raised officer who, alongside Prestes, was the main leader of the march across the interior.⁶ Costa wrote that the Column represented Brazil’s coming-of-age:

“infused with life, full of ideas, leading an indomitable journey across the most remote regions of our nation, always shining the sacred beam of Revolution... [the Column was] a laboratory for understanding Brazil [where] the coast discovered the backlands [and] learned about what happened in the interior; the locals, for their part, started to learn new words: freedom, democracy, rights.”⁷

As with all myths, that story is only partially true—particularly, as we shall see, because the rebels had not originally intended to go into the interior. To revisit the mythology of the Column, this article draws on a nickname coined by tenente leaders when they eventually began marching north: the bandeirantes of freedom (*os bandeirantes da liberdade*). In the seventeenth

⁶ Biographical details on the tenentes come largely from Macaulay, *The Prestes Column*.

⁷ Miguel Costa, untitled essay included in Arquivo Edgard Leuenroth, (hereafter AEL), Campinas, Brazil, in series Miguel Costa (MC), folder 56. This document was presented in 1962 by Costa’s son, Miguel Jr., three years after the elder’s death. As such, it is not possible to know the exact year the essay was written.

century, colonists from the region of São Paulo led slaving expeditions into Brazil's interior known as *bandeiras*, from the Portuguese word for flag, and bandeirantes became a term roughly akin to pioneers.⁸ On these inland excursions—originally targeting indigenous people and later, runaway African slaves—the bandeira would be carried as an emblem of society's venture into the backlands. Through the chronicles of their exploits, the bandeirantes helped cultivate the trope of Brazil's interior as a destitute space inhabited by escaped slaves, savage Indians, backwater peasants, and bandits. Over the following centuries, whenever groups ventured inland, whether to recapture slaves or extract natural resources, the bandeira would stand as a testament to the enduring image of rugged settlers in pursuit of glory and adventure.

The use of bandeirante imagery during the Prestes Column reveals three main insights. First, tenente leaders needed to depict their inland march not as aimless or accidental, but as a strategic choice. If seen as failed rebels forced to wander the backlands, the Column would likely lose public support. But if seen as modern-day bandeirantes, the rebels could march through the backlands with a perceived sense of purpose and bravery. Second, the rebel's chosen nickname mirrored an emerging trend in the 1920s, when a wave of "bandeirologista" scholarship, literature, and public artwork sought to rehabilitate the image of the bandeirante.⁹ Ana Lúcia Teixeira describes this push to reclaim the figure of the bandeirante as "dedicated to nothing less than the reconstruction and rediscovery of the nation."¹⁰ And whereas the bandeirologistas of the 1920s conducted much of their work in, and about, São Paulo, the Prestes Column's adaptation of the bandeira symbol allowed the tenentes to tap into a much larger mythology. The rebel march across the Northeast, particularly the state of Bahia, enabled them to invoke *Os Sertões*,

⁸ The classic work on bandeirantes is Taunay, *Historia geral das bandeiras paulistas*. More recent work includes Monteiro, *Negros da terra*, and the 2005 special issue of *Americas* edited by A.J.R. Russell-Wood.

⁹ Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity*, 37-40.

¹⁰ Teixeira, "A letra e o mito," 38.

the book written by Euclides da Cunha two decades earlier that had become an instant sensation for spurring debates about race and geographic determinism in Brazil. Finally, the seemingly oxymoronic fusing of bandeirantes (a slaving term) and freedom served to combine long-standing notions of frontier exploration with the political expediency of the 1920s. Unlike the colonial bandeirantes for whom conquest meant the capture of interior bodies and resources, the Prestes Column, according to its own cultivated legend, sought to conquer what it perceived to be the injustices of a “semi-feudal” society run by *coronéis*—oligarch-like landlords—and their corrupt government enablers. In this reframing of the bandeiras, the rebels saw themselves not simply as frontiersmen, but as liberators. Or so the myth goes.

As shown by scholars such as Durval Muniz de Albuquerque, Sarah Sarzynski, and Stanley Blake, the stigma and racialized tropes of Brazil’s interior, above all in the Northeast, existed long before the 1920s.¹¹ Yet the spotlight cast by the Prestes Column greatly amplified the constructed contrast between coast and backland. This interplay between inclusion (the Column’s mythologized image) and exclusion (the demonization of Brazil’s interior) helps explain how the rebels would become celebrated as heroes despite the fact that they resorted to violence at many moments along the march—especially in the Northeast when their supplies and morale were running low. As we shall see, this included instances of rape, murder and looting. For the legend of the tenente rebels, what actually happened in the backlands mattered far less than the symbolism of their passage into, across, and back out of the interior.

What has gotten lost in this mythology of the Prestes Column is not so much the encounter between the tenentes and the interior, but rather how the rebels framed their inland march, what that implied for mainstream perceptions of the backlands, and how the attention

¹¹ Albuquerque, *A Invenção do nordeste*; Sarzynski, *Revolution in the terra do sol*; Blake, *The Vigorous Core of our Nationality*.

brought by the Column perpetuated those views.

Befitting a national mythology of its stature, the Prestes Column has inspired an extensive body of literature with over sixty books written by professional scholars, journalists, and amateur local writers. The most prolific scholar is Anita Leocádia Prestes, the daughter of Luiz Carlos Prestes and a professor of history at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.¹² While her methodological rigor is beyond reproach, her books tend to lionize her father. This relatively uncritical approach might be understandable for someone writing about their own family, yet most scholars have similarly written about the Column within, rather than against, its dominant mythology.¹³ A notable case is the romanticized 1974 book from Neill Macaulay, a University of Florida professor who had famously fought alongside Fidel Castro in the Cuban Revolution.¹⁴ The second category, by far the most voluminous, includes journalistic and popular accounts.¹⁵ While the contexts of these books varied widely—published between the 1950s and 2010s—they continue to replicate the same dominant narrative. They recount in triumphant detail the various battles and expeditions of the rebel excursion and often involve the writer retracing a portion or even all of the Column's march across Brazil. In one telling example that shows the blending of mythology and research, a book from 2009 retraced the steps of three writers who, in 1988, had themselves retraced the steps of the rebellion's entire 15,000-mile journey.¹⁶ Finally, a third category covers regional books about the Column's passage through specific towns or states.¹⁷ This regional focus also overlaps with the large body of work on the

¹² Leocádia Prestes's publications include: *A Coluna Prestes*; *Luiz Carlos Prestes: um comunista brasileiro*; and *Luiz Carlos Prestes: Patriot, revolucionário, comunista*.

¹³ For example, Reis, *Luís Carlos Prestes*. An exception is Diacon, "Searching for the Lost Army."

¹⁴ Macaulay, *The Prestes Column*.

¹⁵ Examples include Meirelles, *As noites das grandes fogueiras*; Morel, *A Marcha da liberdade*; and Silva, *A grande marcha*. An exception is a book by Eliane Brum, a reporter in the early 1990s at *Zero Hora* who travelled through Brazil's interior collecting oral histories that painted a largely negative picture of the rebels.

¹⁶ Amaral, *Expedição Sagarana*.

¹⁷ Over twenty regional books include: Otaviano, *A coluna Prestes na Paraíba*; Bandeira, *A Coluna Prestes na*

Northeast, as studies of “bandit” leaders (*cangaços*) and the *coroneis* include chapters on their encounters with the Prestes Column.¹⁸

On the whole, existing literature has been shaped by, and in turn feeds into, the dominant narratives of both the rebellion and the backlands. In contrast, I knowingly employ the double-standard of a social historian writing about an event of military history: I am less concerned with the exact details of the march itself (e.g. troop movement and battles) than I am with the meanings that have been attached to those details. To balance the contours of myth versus history, the only time I “fact-check” the established narrative is to show where, and why, the memoirs written by rebel leaders omit certain cases of misbehavior and violence.

Along with archival sources (letters, high command bulletins, consular reports), I also rely on primary evidence that serves the added purpose of helping explain the emergence of the Column’s mythology: newspapers and memoirs.¹⁹ The 1920s coincided with the rise of mass-distribution newspapers and the Prestes Column became one of Brazil’s first major events to be followed in real-time across the nation.²⁰ As seen in Figure 2, the rebels also received copies of the news and were keenly aware of their own narrative. Newspaper coverage was also regionalized. Particularly after government censorship was loosened toward the end of the rebellion, national newspapers—especially the larger dailies in Rio de Janeiro—disseminated an increasingly glorified version of events. Local newspapers in the interior, on the other hand, were more likely to depict the rebels as invaders. Reflecting the power imbalance between the interior

Bahia; and Castro, *A Coluna Prestes no Piauí*.

¹⁸ For example, Bernardo Pericás, *Os cangaçeiros*; and Pang, *Coronelismo e oligarquias*.

¹⁹ For newspapers I used the digitized archive of Brazil’s National Library, searching various keywords and phrases related to the Prestes Column. These newspapers tended to be larger southern dailies. I also relied on the physical holdings of archives in Ceará and Minas Gerais that included clippings and microfilm from more regionalized newspapers across the Northeast. For the memoirs, I follow the work of Ann Laura Stoler in reading “along the archival grain” in order to distill the broader experiences and representations of the interior.

²⁰ For more on newspapers in the 1920s, see Tavares, “Imprensa na década de 1920.”

and southern-coastal regions, the triumphant narrative in national media gradually drowned out the dissenting voices in the areas where the Column actually marched. The second source of myth and evidence is the collection of memoirs, nearly a dozen in total, written by former rebels. The first wave of memoirs was published in the late 1920s, helping consolidate the Column's mythic image in the lead-up to the Revolution of 1930, with subsequent books published until the 1980s. Without exception, each author draws heavily on the stigmatized image of the backlands. I analyze all of these sources—archival documents, newspapers, and memoirs—for the details they provide and also the perspective they offer on how the intertwined mythologies of the Prestes Column and Brazil's interior evolved across the twentieth century.



Figure 2: Lourenço Moreira Lima (left) and lieutenant Fragoso read *O Globo*, likely late 1925. Source: CPDOC ILA foto 010.

Admittedly, the categories of interior and coast are problematic. Many of the states most often associated with the interior, such as those in the Northeast, actually have their own coastline, and the traditional “coastal” areas of the center-south also have inland zones. The city

of São Paulo, moreover, does not even sit directly on the ocean. My use of the interior-coast binary reflects its historical usage: even though the rebel leaders came from regions across the country—not only São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul, but also Ceará and Pernambuco—as educated and comparatively well-off Brazilians they saw themselves as members of coastal society. Consequently, whenever they spoke about the areas they traversed, “interior” was the most common label.

The terminology for those within the Prestes Column is equally important. I use the term rebels, tenentes, and Column interchangeably to describe the movement and its participants, again mirroring its usage at the time. I add the qualifier “leader” to distinguish the commanding officers from the cavalry, foot soldiers, porters, and women (as fighters, nurses, and accompanying partners) who made up the bulk of the Column. Most rebels, including many officers, came from middle and lower-class backgrounds, having enrolled in military academies in the first decades of the century as a means of education and upward social mobility; this was precisely the period when, as exemplified by the expeditions of Cândido Rondon, the army had also been expanding the presence of the Brazilian state into the country’s hinterlands.²¹ So despite calling themselves revolutionaries, the tenentes—aside from a few, like Prestes, who later became radicals—were far from “revolutionary” in a more traditional sense. Rather than advocating major structural change, they instead sought to defend and expand the “Pátria” (fatherland), drawing on the positivist teachings of their military education to call for reforms that would fulfill the ideals of the early Brazilian republic.²² And while the Column—which fluctuated between a high of some two thousand soldiers and a low of barely five hundred—did witness several injections of local recruits throughout its journey, whenever I mention “rebels” I

²¹ Diacon, *Stringing Together a Nation*.

²² For more on the Brazilian army in the 1920s, see McCann, *Soldiers of the Pátria*.

am referring to the majority, those who had participated since the initial revolts in São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul, and not the smaller number of more regionally and ethnically diverse fighters among the ranks.

This article is organized around three themes: intention, expectation, and representation. First, although the popular version of events often depicts the rebels as having always intended to go into the interior, they only turned north when federal troops blocked the Column's path to Rio de Janeiro. To justify this unintended route, Column leaders adopted a new discursive strategy and called themselves the bandeirantes of freedom. The interior thus offered a literal and narrative path to reframe the legitimacy of the rebellion. The second theme is the rebels' expectation of the interior. Using the example of the Column's passage through the state of Bahia, we see that the inadvertent march through the backlands left the tenentes ill-equipped to navigate the social realities they confronted. Whereas the rebels had assumed that locals would be eager, if largely ignorant, supporters, the adverse reception in Bahia led to the Column's most violent period of the whole rebellion. The final theme of representation shows how the tenente mythology took shape between the Column's exile in February 1927 and the Revolution of October 1930. Here, we focus on Luiz Carlos Prestes's rising profile as the Knight of Hope. Lionized in newspaper coverage as an intrepid, virtuous southern cowboy—the quintessential *gaúcho*—his status as a living legend was such that even when Prestes embraced radical politics and split from the tenentes, his symbolic attachment to the backlands nonetheless endured.

THE ACCIDENTAL BANDEIRANTES

The first theme of whether the rebels deliberately went into the interior is particularly important because the legitimacy of the Column is often framed around its intention to liberate

the impoverished rural communities. This sense of purpose is evident in an interview from May 1927, some three months after the rebels settled as exiles in Bolivia. Antônio de Siqueira Campos—one of the heroes of the first tenente revolt in 1922 who became a detachment commander during the 1924-27 interior march—told a journalist from *O Jornal* that the Column's "objective was to take its flag across the whole country, waking the people up from their indifference."²³ Luiz Carlos Prestes, who was only twenty-six years old when he led the 1924 uprising in his native Rio Grande do Sul, similarly looked back on the aims of the tenente rebellion: "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 with no hope of improving their difficulties and sufferings."²⁴

Contrary to these types of retrospective mythologizing, the rebels had not intended to go into Brazil's interior. The initial goal was to stage uprisings on July 5, 1924 in a few key regions and have all rebel forces converge on Rio de Janeiro to overthrow President Bernardes; these events were a continuation of the earlier—and unsuccessful—uprising of July 5, 1922, immortalized in the gun battle along Rio's Copacabana beach.²⁵ In 1924, only the revolts in São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul endured, as the smaller uprisings in Sergipe, Manaus, and Mato Grosso were quickly put down. The initial epicenter of revolt was in São Paulo, where the rebels withstood two weeks of heavy bombing by government forces before retreating from the city, eventually linking up with the rebels from Rio Grande do Sul. An option at this point was to retreat completely and end the rebellion by crossing into exile in Argentina. After several months of fighting battles across southern Brazil, many rebels did leave the country, most notably the

²³ "A marcha do terceiro destacamento da columna Prestes," *O Jornal*, 4 May 1927, 3.

²⁴ Luiz Carlos Prestes, interview in *La Nación* (Chile) 28 December 1941. As cited in Alexander, "Brazilian 'Tenentismo,'" 231.

²⁵ For more on tenentismo, see: Forjaz, *Tenentismo e alianca liberal* and Drummond, *O Movimento tenentista*.

original leader of the rebellion, General Isidoro Dias Lopes, a veteran commander who had fought against the federal government during Rio Grande do Sul's Federalist Revolution of 1893-95. Compounded by the increasing number of rebel soldiers deserting or dying, Prestes realized that the original plan for a direct march on Rio de Janeiro had to be adapted. The earliest indication of the turn to the interior comes in a letter from Prestes to General Isidoro in early 1925 outlining the planned strategy of a "war of movement."²⁶ Prestes's vision, which would become adopted as the official rebel strategy only a few months later, was for a guerrilla-style approach of constant movement that only engaged in battle when absolutely necessary. Along with requesting additional supplies from Isidoro—including 100,000 bullets and a hundred head of cattle, for food—Prestes declared that with a reinforced column 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 the only viable way to then circle back down on Rio de Janeiro. Over the following months, however, this initial adaptation continued to change as the rebel march got pushed further from the capitol. When the Column eventually crossed into the state of Mato Grosso in May 1925, it confronted a new reality that its fight, already almost a year old, would likely veer even farther from its original course.

In Mato Grosso, rebel leaders developed a rhetoric that reframed their change in direction. While camped near the Jacarei farm on May 3, Miguel Costa addressed the troops: "The Revolution, in its new military phase, will trace a new trajectory of victory in the fight for freedom... Soldiers! Never forget that you are all the bandeirantes of freedom and that the

²⁶ Letter from Luiz Carlos Prestes to Gen. Isidoro, 1925, exact date unknown, though most likely around February 8. Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil—Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Rio de Janeiro (hereafter CPDOC), SVM c 1924-1927.00.00-24.

greatness of Brazil depends on your courage, your strength, and your dedication.”²⁷ This proclamation stands as the first example in the historical record of the rebels using the phrase bandeirantes of freedom, and its invocation here is no coincidence. At precisely the moment when the Column began to turn northward, the bandeira—long synonymous with frontier exploration—was invoked to legitimize an unintended path and to encourage soldiers to follow deeper into the interior.

With the bandeira narrative beginning to take shape, the rebels also aimed to broaden their support base. The Column distributed a document amongst local populations that described the rebels as “Bandeirantes of Freedom, the men destined to commit their lives to this immortal conflict, whose motto is ‘Freedom or death.’”²⁸ A draft of this proclamation is included in the personal files of Juárez Távora, a native of Ceará who took part in the 1924 São Paulo revolt and eventually became Prestes’s chief of staff in the rebel high command. The draft document offers insight into how the bandeira myth was cultivated in real-time. Although the original version was addressed “To the people of Mato Grosso,” the drafted copy has handwritten edits to replace it with “To the people of Brazil.” Previously, the rebels had addressed similar announcements to specific locations, e.g. to the people of São Paulo, to the people of Santo Ângelo, to the people of the southern borders.²⁹ Two possibilities can be inferred here. By now directing its message to all Brazilians, the Column sought to present itself as a force of national integration, capable of uniting the historically fragmented regions of Brazil’s interior. This widening rhetoric also had more immediate, tactical implications: appealing to new audiences could help win over public

²⁷ Bulletin no. 9, 3 May 1925, Fazenda Jacarei, Mato Grosso. AEL, LML Série III Coluna, Subsérie Boletins, 426-29.

²⁸ “Ao povo brasileiro,” 30 May 1925. CPDOC JT dpf 1924.05.10 III-55.

²⁹ Examples, respectively, are from Letter from Gen. Isidoro to the people of São Paulo, 28 July 1924, CPDOC AAP 24.07.28; “Ao povo de Santa Angelo,” 29 Oct. 1924, CPDOC SVM c 1924-1927.00.00-10; and “Manifesto ao povo das Fronteiras do Sul,” 16 Oct. 1924, Arquivo Público Mineiro (hereafter APM), Belo Horizonte, included in AB-PV-Cx.07 Doc.131.

support and pressure President Bernardes to grant an amnesty deal. As heroic bandeirantes of freedom, perhaps the rebels could secure legal immunity and avoid the jail time that, if captured, likely awaited them.³⁰ The symbolism of the bandeira could thus be adapted to both the short and long-term needs of the increasingly uncertain rebellion.

Although the rebels had ventured farther north than originally intended, their location at this point in southwestern Mato Grosso still positioned them within relative striking distance of Rio de Janeiro. The ensuing battles, however, continued to push them east and to the north, and by the middle of June the rebel leadership had renamed itself “the 1st Division of the Liberating Army Operating in Northeastern Brazil.”³¹ That particular name does not appear to have become permanent, yet by identifying as the Army of the Northeast—despite still being in the central region of Mato Grosso—the rebels seem to have not only accepted their path north, but also to have recognized the useful symbolism of their “liberating” march toward the backlands. As the rebels crossed further into the Brazilian hinterland and with provisions running low, the interior held the promise of bodies and supplies. And conditioned by the folklore of the bandeirantes, the backlands also represented the ultimate landscape to prove—to themselves, to locals, and to audiences down south—their self-ascribed worth as liberators.

The term bandeirantes of freedom was developed as an on-the-fly symbol to meet the changing context of the rebellion. Yet this cultivated image of virtuous liberators was also part of the long-term preservation of the Column’s mythology, a dynamic that is evident in how the rebel memoirs strategically curated their use of evidence. Many of the memoirs include reproductions of original documents from the Column; in several instances, however, this

³⁰ The rebels would not receive an official amnesty until 1931, under Vargas. (AL Prestes, *A Coluna Prestes*, 285).

³¹ “1a Divisão do Exercito Libertador em Operações no Nordeste do Brasil,” 15 June 1925. CPDOC, JT dpf 1924.05.10 III-68.

material is not reproduced in full, omitting violent acts committed by the rebels. While details of certain crimes are included at different points in the memoirs, the censoring of reproduced documents suggests a concerted effort to insulate the Column's myth in perpetuity.

The most famous memoir was written by Lourenço Moreira Lima, who was born in Pernambuco, raised in Ceará, and after studying at the Realengo military academy in Rio de Janeiro he became a lawyer for twenty years. Known as the "brainy rebel" (*o bacharel ferroz*), Moreira Lima was made the rebellion's official secretary, a position that gave him a seat on the high command and tasked him with chronicling the Column's entire journey. His memoir, written in 1928 and published in 1931—with subsequent editions in 1945 and 1979—includes an appendix with the reproduction of over sixty primary sources. One of these documents is the rebel bulletin issued from Goiás in August 1925, six months before the Column entered Bahia.³² As shown in Moreira Lima's typed source, the rebel high command ordered the dishonorable discharge of two soldiers, one for looting a local house and another for attempting to kill a civilian. To Moreira Lima's credit, he included these details of misconduct. But this is only a partial representation of the disciplinary actions handed down that day in Goiás. The original hand-written bulletin counts an additional round of far more severe punishment: four soldiers were put in front of a firing squad and executed, the first for raping a woman and the other three for attempting to desert the rebellion, taking their rifles and supplies with them.³³ In comparing the memoir reproduction and the archival finding, Moreira Lima appears willing to show a certain amount of disorder within the rebel ranks. But showing instances of rape (a serious lack of morality) and deserting (a lack of conviction) would undermine the rebellion's image. With so

³² Moreira Lima, *Marchas e combates*, 555-59.

³³ Bulletin 16, Command of the Revolutionary Forces, Fazenda Aguas Brancas, Goiás, 7 Aug. 1925. AEL series Lourenço Moreira Lima (LML), III Coluna, Subsérie Boletins, 456-68.

much of the Column's legitimacy drawing from its supposed virtue in the backlands, the presentation of original documents in their unoriginal form offered a subtle though enduring form of myth protection.

BANDEIRANTES IN BAHIA, MYTH MEETS REALITY

To examine the second theme of rebel expectations for the interior, this section focuses on the passage through Bahia, the heart—both historical and imaginative—of Brazil's Afro-descendent population. (Figure 3) Similar insight can be drawn from nearly every period of the Column's march, but the time in Bahia, over four months between late February and early July 1926, is particularly useful for analyzing what the rebels expected to encounter, the realities they actually confronted, and why despite a lack of success the Column's mythology nonetheless continued to grow.

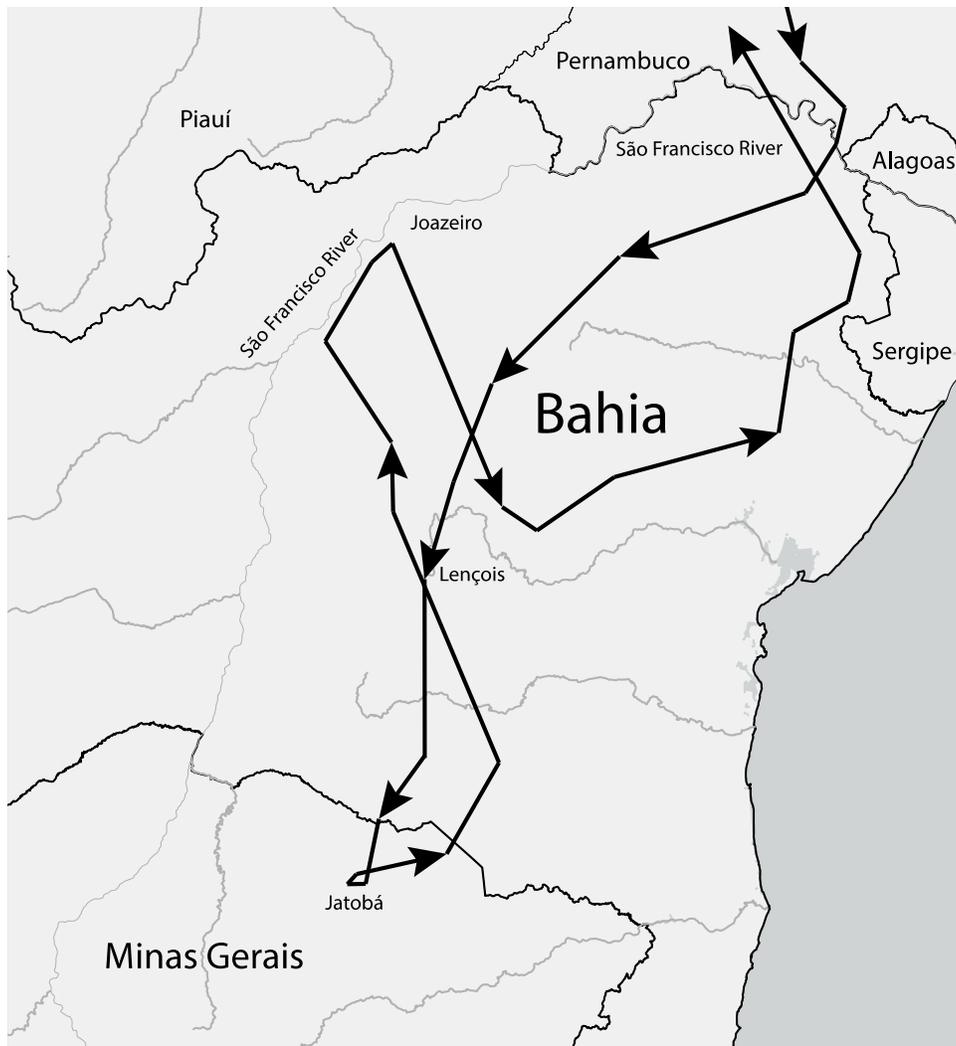


Figure 3: Map of Column's march and retreat across Bahia.

The Bahian interior stood as the mystical land immortalized by Euclides da Cunha's 1902 book *Os Sertões*, a chronicle of the violent standoff in 1896-97 between federal troops and a millenarian settlement at Canudos. Da Cunha had covered the war as a journalist for *O Estado de S. Paulo*, and the popularity of his articles led to the book that, similar to the coverage of the Prestes Column, depicted a clash between the coast (the federal army) and the interior (the mixed-race rural settlers). Every rebel memoir references da Cunha and it is clear that the tenentes saw themselves as continuing his legacy; they mimic da Cunha's lavish descriptions of the natural landscape and also his often-pejorative observations of sertanejos. In his 1952

memoir, for example, captain Italo Landucci—who had helped lead the “Italian Brigade” of immigrant fighters during the São Paulo revolt of 1924—recalled Bahia as an anthropomorphized place of danger, where the anguish described by da Cunha still pervaded:

It was the crude reality painted in such vivid colors by Euclides da Cunha... Destroyed farms, villages once flourishing, now in decay, houses dotted with bullets, everything showed the belligerent spirit of relentless fanatics, giving the environment a sense of desolation and as if this tragic spectacle, unfolding before our eyes, was not enough, we felt the effects of an unspoken conspiracy of nature itself hand-in-hand with the rebellious villagers. The [rough] features of the landscape, the heavy rains, the muddy paths, the vast bogs, entangled the movement of the Column.³⁴

Bahia, as the quintessential Brazilian backland, embodied the rebels’ stigmatized image of the Northeast. It was also where General Isidoro, while living in exile, had supposedly organized for a shipment of weapons and ammunitions to be sent.³⁵ These expectations grew as the Column advanced through the interior. Between June 1925 when the rebels first entered Mato Grosso and February 1926 when they finally entered Bahia, the tenentes marched some 2,000 miles across Goiás, briefly down into Minas Gerais, back up into Maranhão, and through Piauí, Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, and Pernambuco. During this period the Column fought nearly fifty battles that chipped away at their supplies and their energy. As the rebels traversed the Northeast, Bahia loomed as an almost-inevitable destination, standing as both a refuge to fortify their ranks and a symbolic final frontier to be conquered.

The Column had two interlinked expectations for Bahia: to obtain new soldiers and supplies, and to fulfill its self-projected image as liberators. Once the rebels turned north and rebranded themselves as the bandeirantes of freedom, Bahia offered the ultimate challenge to prove their legitimacy by defeating the infamous coronéis and their local militias known as

³⁴ Landucci, *Cenas e episódios*, 128.

³⁵ Moreira Lima, *Marchas e combates*, 169.

batalhões patrióticos (patriotic battalions). The rebels expected that the people of Bahia, long oppressed by the strongmen coronéis, would flock to help overthrow their abusers. As we shall see, neither of these expectations materialized. Through a combination of power wielded by the coronéis, propaganda distributed through local media, and the miscalculations—and condescending views—of the rebels themselves, local communities in Bahia were extremely reluctant to hand over food, clothing, and weapons, let alone to actually volunteer as soldiers. Unable to resupply themselves on their initial march across Bahia, the rebels soon turned around and began a six-month return journey to exile. During the retreat back across the state, the Column sought provisions and vented their frustrations by violently raiding homes and farms, a far cry from their initial vision of liberation in the sertão.

Despite the unmet expectations in Bahia, the Column's myth continued to grow. When the rebels left Bahia, their recent failures appeared to have little impact on their budding national prestige as the Undefeated Column. Before even entering Bahia, their legend was already becoming so premised on the symbolism of their passage through the backlands that, for mainstream audiences at least, the details of what then happened proved far less influential. Although true for the entirety of its march in the backlands, the Column's time in Bahia—accentuated by the violence of its retreat across the state—is evocative of how reality could not disrupt the rebel mythology taking root in Brazil's interior.

When the Prestes Column crossed into Bahia in February 1926, it had already marched over 6,000 miles. The allure of Bahia seemed to rejuvenate the rebels, who showed a level of enthusiasm rarely expressed since the start of the rebellion a year and a half earlier. On February 26, rebel soldiers gathered on the eastern bank of the São Francisco River, preparing to cross from Pernambuco into Bahia. The rebels spent all day and into the early night ferrying back and

forth across the two-mile-wide stretch of river. Moreira Lima described the silhouette of a commanding officer as his boat cut through the rough water toward Bahia:

And in the night, a delicious Northeast night, illuminated by the crescent moon that hung in the sky like a biscuit split in two, the athletic figure of a hero stood out on the bow, with a long black beard bristling in the wind, in that moment becoming like the legendary leader of an ancient Bandeira.³⁶

For the bandeirantes of freedom, Bahia marked their entrance at Brazil's ultimate frontier. In his memoir, Landucci recalled the crossing of the São Francisco River as a "magnificent victory [that] helped cement the legend, already growing, of the Column's invincibility."³⁷ And Moreira Lima's descriptions would become even more grandiose after his silhouetted bandeirantes crossed the river and began marching through Bahia: "it was as if Nature unfurled itself in blooming flowers to celebrate the arrival of the Undefeated Column."³⁸ Over the next four months, however, the rebel's excitement dissolved; at first slowly during their six-week south-westward progression toward Minas Gerais, and then in a vortex of anger and frustration when they turned around and retraced their steps—taking almost twice as long to do so—back toward the same river they had previously crossed with such triumph.

A cause of this frustration was the rebels' inability to recruit soldiers. In a self-fulfilling cycle, the lack of new troops in Bahia kept the rebel ranks and supplies low, which led them to more forcefully take supplies from locals, in turn dissuading people even more from joining the Column. As throughout the rebellion, the tenentes were far outnumbered by enemy forces in Bahia. The roughly 1,200 rebel troops confronted an enemy force of almost 20,000 soldiers, including the federal army and state police, and most importantly, the coronéis that each

³⁶ Moreira Lima, *Marchas e combates*, 274.

³⁷ Landucci, *Cenas e episódios*, 126.

³⁸ Moreira Lima, *Marchas e combates*, 276-77.

commanded between a few hundred and several thousand men.³⁹ Yet size alone cannot explain the Column's failure in Bahia.

At a first level, the coronéis and their patriotic battalions were far more potent than the Column had anticipated. Prior to their arrival in the sertão, the rebels expected that their message of liberation would be enough to topple Bahia's notorious strongmen. João Alberto Lins de Barros, a detachment commander who hailed from Recife, Pernambuco, wrote that "we imagined the great solidarity we would encounter from the oppressed populations ... To liberate the people of the interior from the political *chefes* and despotic coronéis, men made of hardened rope and leather, seemed to us a great step for the progress of our country."⁴⁰ This never came to pass, as the coronéis were the most formidable enemy in Bahia, adept at using clientelist networks, fear, and coercion to maintain local loyalties. Especially because federal soldiers had not succeeded in stopping the Column, the coronéis took on the primary role in pursuing the rebels. A chief army officer in the region, General Góes Monteiro, admitted as such: "The soldiers we have sent to fight [Prestes] have been absolutely incapable of doing so ... So far I have only been able to use the *patriotas*, everything else has failed."⁴¹ For decades the coronéis had cast a long shadow over the region. According to a US consular report, Horácio de Mattos, to name one example, controlled "a private armed force of some 4,000 men, all devoted to and dependent on him as a kind of feudal overlord."⁴²

Local deference to the coronéis was aided by a concerted effort from pro-government sectors of Bahia to paint the Column as violent invaders. State newspapers provided ample space

³⁹ Moreira Lima, *Marchas e combates*, 293.

⁴⁰ Lins de Barros, *Memórias de um revolucionário*, 149.

⁴¹ Report, 15 March 1926. Arquivo Histórico do Exército (hereafter AHEx), Rio de Janeiro. Acervo Góes Monteiro caixeta 4, caderno 16. For the federal pursuit of the Column, see Diacon, "Searching for the Lost Army."

⁴² "Movements of revolutionary troops in the state of Bahia," 17 April 1926. United States National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter USNA). Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Brazil 1910-1929, Microfilm 832.00-575.

for this narrative. One paper, the *Correio do Bonfim*, warned its readers of the “terror [and] destruction” that would be brought by the rebels who “for almost two years, in a desperate fight, driven only by greed and ambition ... have stormed from the south to the north like a cloud of dark thunder.”⁴³ Another newspaper, *O Sertão*—owned by the family of Horácio de Mattos—announced the arrival of the Prestes Column by renaming it, in a front-page headline, as “The Column of Death.”⁴⁴ As discussed earlier, rebel soldiers had committed crimes at several junctures during the 6,000 miles prior to Bahia. Though unquestionably terrible, this violence was punished by the rebel leadership—the death by firing squad in Goiás was a notable example—and it never occurred at the exaggerated form of wanton destruction alleged by the Bahian newspaper. In this context, the tenentes had to confront not only the armies of the coronéis but also a publicity campaign intended to stoke fear in local communities.

The failure to win the sympathy of Bahians can also be attributed to the actions and views of the rebels. Despite occasional expressions of admiration for some backland communities—rebel leaders were fond of residents in Maranhão, where 250 locals joined the Column—on the whole the tenentes held deeply contemptuous views of Brazil’s interior.⁴⁵ In his memoir Moreira Lima observed that local townspeople would hide in their homes or in the forests rather than join the rebel fight, a pattern that he explained as “the resulting logic of the profound and inexorable ignorance of our *sertanejos*, who are entirely devoid of patriotism... the people are semi-barbarous, having no notion of the *Pátria*... it is an amorphous mass with no idea of freedom, a true herd of brutes, living a purely vegetative life.”⁴⁶ Or in the words of Lins de Barros, the lack

⁴³ “O sertão assolado pelos bandos revolucionarios,” *Correio do Bonfim*, 21 March 1926.

⁴⁴ “A corrida da morte,” *O Sertão*, 11 April 1926. Ownership of the newspaper detailed in AL Prestes, *A Coluna Prestes*, 260.

⁴⁵ Moreira Lima, *Marchas e combates*, 205, 275.

⁴⁶ Moreira Lima, *Marchas e combates*, 182.

of support “was perfectly explained by the uncivilized state of those primitive people.”⁴⁷ In perceiving Bahians as passive, the Column was reinforcing the dichotomy between coast and interior; the view of sertanejos as languid and inferior not only demarcated a coastal sense of entitlement, it provided the coast’s rationale for even being there in the first place. In his seminal study on the “invention” of the Northeast, Muniz de Albuquerque observes that “If those restless southern adventurers, the famous bandeirantes, had widened Brazil’s frontiers through their nomadic impulses, it was the sedentary northeasterners ... that gave those frontiers meaning.”⁴⁸

This engrained prejudice shaped the Column’s interactions with Bahians. In a 1993 interview with journalist Eliane Brum, Manoel Lopes, ninety years old at the time, recalled that when the Column approached his town of Rio das Contas, the rebels lassoed him like a farm animal: “Ropes are made for a donkey or an ox, not for a man.”⁴⁹ Another interviewee, Lindaura Rosa da Silva, aged seventy-eight, recalled how the Column killed two of her neighbors in a similar manner: “The rebels destroyed everything. It was the worst thing that ever happened here. [The Column] killed Manoel Cândido and João only because they said they wouldn’t give their cattle to those lowlifes (*vagabundos*). They were tied up, dragged, and bled [to death].”⁵⁰ Nearly a century later, this violence, directed at a supposedly inferior people, still lingers in local folklore and memory.

When the myth of what the tenentes expected to encounter in Bahia—a steady line of recruits—finally gave way to the reality that actually awaited them, the result had dire consequences. On April 19 the Column left Bahia and crossed into Minas Gerais, a state that shared its southern border with Rio de Janeiro. The initial goal of marching on the capitol was

⁴⁷ Lins de Barros, *Memórias de um revolucionário*, 152.

⁴⁸ Albuquerque, *A Invenção do nordeste*, 118-19.

⁴⁹ Brum, *O Averso da lenda*, 126.

⁵⁰ Brum, *O Averso da lenda*, 143.

closer than it had been since the São Paulo uprising almost two years earlier, yet the rebels marched for only four days before turning around near the town of Jatobá. There are several reasons why the Column retreated after its brief excursion into Minas Gerais. Historian Todd Diacon explains that the federal army was far better organized in Minas Gerais and thus able to quickly mount a defensive block.⁵¹ Circumstances further suggest that when General Isidoros's resupplies never appeared, the Column was in no position to take on a full concentration of government forces. Moreover, the tenente memoirs show that after an unsuccessful march across Bahia, the rebels were tired, hungry, and frustrated.

When they re-entered Bahia on April 30 their frustrations spilled over into a bloody two-month retreat back toward the São Francisco River. If the Column's initial foray across Bahia had been defined by a hopeful, if misguided, vision of northeastern liberation, the retreat soon spiraled into a desperate outburst against a region that was seen to have spurned its cause. In the crosshairs of the tenente rebellion, Bahia was in a no-win situation: by virtue of its mythologized backwardness, the region was targeted by the Column as a site of liberation, yet when locals did not welcome the rebels with deferential open arms, they were castigated as ungrateful and irredeemable.

In their memoirs, the rebels do not deny the violence of their retreat back through Bahia. Instead, they often deflect blame onto the region itself. In this framing, any misdeeds were not the fault of the civilized, coastal liberators, but rather the suffocating influence of their barbaric surroundings. To go native, in this sense, was to succumb to the violent mythology of the Northeast. As Landucci wrote:

[W]e were engaged in a struggle for survival against thousands of Bahian sertanejos. Strategic and vicious propaganda had made them believe, these simple people, that we wanted to invade their lands and destroy their homes and [they]

⁵¹ Diacon, "Searching for the Lost Army," 435.

boldly resisted the advance of the Column. In this mortal landscape, where hatred seeped into every gesture, our reaction turned violent. Every day we fought, during the march, without pause. And because even the rare sources of water were guarded by these fanatics, who also hid their food, we obtained our water and food through bloody battles.⁵²

From late April to early July 1926, the Prestes Column marched east across Bahia and fought over a dozen battles and attacked several towns along the way. A report from the federal army observed that “during the rebel retreat, they doubled [the quantity of] their abuses and committed scenes of true banditry.” These acts, among other crimes, included the rape of several young women in Curralinho and Mato Verde, the murder of farmers attempting to keep the rebels from looting their stores, and the burning of as many as 220 houses in Agua de Regra, Tiririca do Bóde, Laranjeiras, and Canna-Brava.⁵³ Because this evidence comes from the government troops pursuing the Column, the scale of destruction may be inflated. But other sources corroborate the rebel behavior in Bahia. The bulletin of the Column’s own high command, for instance, mentions the expulsion of six soldiers for having “strayed” from proper conduct.⁵⁴ And a US consular report called “The month of May [one] of the most disgraceful episodes in the history of Bahia.” Along with describing incidents such as the rebels sacking the towns of Cannabrava, Macambo, and Mucugé, the US consul highlighted the violence committed by both sides, noting that “the Federal and State troops committed depredations far worse than any attributed to the rebels.”⁵⁵ With the rebels and their pursuers facing off in an increasingly violent trek across Bahia, the Column’s already low supplies and optimism—to say nothing of their support amongst local populations—dwindled even further.

⁵² Landucci, *Cenas e episódios*, 130.

⁵³ “A devastação e os crimes praticados pelos rebeldes,” 1 May 1926. AHEx, Acervo Góes Monteiro box 4, folder 34.

⁵⁴ Bulletin no. 23, Rodelas, Bahia, 1926. AEL, Series LML, III Coluna, Subseries Boletins, 511-21.

⁵⁵ “Activities of rebel troops in the state of Bahia,” 1 June 1926. USNA, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Brazil 1910-1929, Microfilm 832.00-581.

The rebels' final month in Bahia was spent staggering back towards the São Francisco River they had crossed with such fanfare only a few months prior. Landucci described the Column, soldiers and officers alike, as "barefooted, with beards and hair running long, presenting a scene of misery."⁵⁶ Lins de Barros similarly wrote that the rebels inched along their Bahia retreat "half-dead," without food and stricken by malaria: "We passed a whole month in that inferno along the banks of the [São] Francisco, boxed in on one side by an aggressive and insurmountable mountain range, and, on the other, by a mighty overflowing river."⁵⁷ The rebels finally re-crossed the São Francisco and exited Bahia on July 2, thereby liberating themselves of the savage, personified landscape that Landucci referred to as "an inferno of ambushes and torments of all kinds."⁵⁸ Moreira Lima, who had so vividly described the rebels' bandeirante-like arrival, now described their departure as "perilous, dragging down every one of us. Truly it was suicide."⁵⁹ So whereas the Column had initially entered Bahia under the silhouetted image of the heroic bandeira, the resulting disillusionment showed how the morale of the so-called bandeirantes of freedom was tethered to their false expectations of a bountiful passage through the backlands.

The lack of success in Bahia, however, did little to diminish the growing rebel mythology. If anything, their time in the lands of *Os Sertões* and their battles against the coronéis only amplified the prevailing sense of their invincibility. Despite pockets of physical and discursive resistance from Bahians who saw the Column as vicious aggressors, the power to define the rebellion continued to rest with mainstream coastal audiences. The legend of the Column thus served as its own form of bandeira, where coastal groups created a mythology,

⁵⁶ Landucci, *Cenas e episódios*, 139.

⁵⁷ Lins de Barros, *Memórias de um revolucionário*, 155-57.

⁵⁸ Landucci, *Cenas e episódios*, 129.

⁵⁹ Moreira Lima, *A Coluna Prestes*, 346.

brought it into the interior, and despite yielding briefly to the brutish siren of the backlands, they framed it as a success regardless of what actually took place. In Bahia, as throughout the march, myth was stronger than reality.

FROM BANDEIRANTES TO THE KNIGHT OF HOPE

The day after the rebels left Bahia, the headline of the Rio de Janeiro-based *A Noite* announced the publication of an eight-part series titled “The Prestes Column across Brazil.”⁶⁰ Accompanied by an almost full-page map (Figure 4), the article introduced readers to the materials that would be published over the following two months: “For all of Brazil, the existence of the Prestes Column, still in full effervescence, seems as if a mystery and, at times, a miracle. It is almost beyond comprehension that a handful of men not even surpassing a thousand, can trek on foot from south to north and north to center ... undaunted and triumphant, without being defeated.”

⁶⁰ “A Columna Prestes através do Brasil,” *A Noite*, 3 July 1926, 1.



Figure 4: Cover of *A Noite*, 3 July 1926.

This headline signposted the advent of what would become a central platform of myth-making: newspapers, particularly the sort of serialized exposés shown above. These multi-part essays were especially prevalent in the final months of the rebellion and throughout the first year of the Column's exile in Bolivia. In an expanding newspaper market competing for readers, these serialized—and often sensationalized—accounts showed how narratives were shaped by financial as well as political factors. The headline also marked the unofficial start of when the

Prestes Column was publicly referred to as the *Prestes Column*. Of the over 700 newspaper articles that comprise my research, the *A Noite* series is the first to explicitly call the rebellion by the name that, henceforth, would become its own synonym. Previously, it had mostly been called the revolt, the column, or the revolution. In the instances when the Prestes Column was referred to as such, it was to indicate the specific unit of soldiers commanded by Prestes. Yet from July 1926 onwards, once the rebels began their descent from the Northeast, in nearly all media coverage and subsequent public discourse, the rebellion became firmly attached to the image of Luiz Carlos Prestes, the Knight of Hope.

This final section discusses the third theme of representation, using the figure of Prestes to show how the myth of the rebellion grew out of the Column's imaginative link to Brazil's interior. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a thorough account of Prestes's personal trajectory between 1927 and 1930—particularly his embrace of radical politics and ensuing split from the tenentes that resulted in his abstention from the revolutionary events of October 1930.⁶¹ Likewise, more detailed summaries of the Revolution of 1930 can also be found elsewhere.⁶² But an overview of Prestes's status as the Knight of Hope reveals a central platform of the Column's growing mythology.

The representation of the Column is evident in the changing names associated with the rebels: from the bandeirantes of freedom to the Knight of Hope. While it appears that the term bandeirantes of freedom was used only by the rebel leadership, the Knight of Hope became a common phrase and stayed with Prestes throughout his life; by the time of his death in 1990, his

⁶¹ These topics are covered in the many biographies of Prestes, several of which are cited in this article's historiography section. Although Prestes himself wrote relatively little, an exception is Prestes, "Como cheguei ao comunismo."

⁶² Scholarship on the Revolution of 1930 is among the most robust in Brazilian historiography. A good starting point is Fausto, *A Revolução de 1930*.

political status was so fused with the symbolism of his time in the backlands that his obituary in the *Los Angeles Times* read “Luis Carlos Prestes: Brazil’s Lenin and ‘Knight of Hope.’”⁶³ Because Prestes’s popularity was tethered to his experience in the interior, we can trace both the inclusionary and exclusionary elements of the myth that grew around him. As the Knight of Hope, Prestes stood as a chivalrous southern cowboy who brought the prospects of freedom to previously backwards regions. This buoyant framing, however, relied on the landscapes and people of Brazil’s interior as a sort of story-telling prop for the gaúcho journey into the interior and back again. The power of this imagery became so entrenched in the legend of the Column that even when Prestes broke from his former compatriots, the mythology of the backlands endured.

Prestes’s nickname as the Knight of Hope was coined by General Isidoro, who took inspiration from an officer during the French Revolution, Lazare Hoche, known as le Chevalier de l’Espérance.⁶⁴ Although unclear when the name first filtered into popular discourse, newspapers, particularly those in Rio de Janeiro, were the ultimate platforms that “anointed” the Knight of Hope.⁶⁵ Prestes’s rising status was facilitated by the loosening of media censorship. After the 1924 revolt in São Paulo, president Artur Bernardes had declared a state of siege that, while never fully blocking newspaper coverage of the rebellion, left it somewhat blunted. In March of 1926, as the Prestes Column marched through Bahia, Washington Luís was elected Brazil’s new president and announced his intent to roll back the restrictions of the previous regime. When Luís assumed office at the end of the year, the state of siege officially expired, censorship was lifted, and coverage of the Column became even more amplified.⁶⁶ In several

⁶³ “Luis Carlos Prestes: Brazil’s Lenin and ‘Knight of Hope,’” *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1990, A40.

⁶⁴ Reis, *Luís Carlos Prestes*, 110.

⁶⁵ Prestes, *Luiz Carlos Prestes* (2006), 27.

⁶⁶ Woodard, *A Place in Politics*, 136.

instances this involved reporters traveling to Bolivia to visit Prestes in exile, leading to serialized exposés such as the ten-part “Listening to and Talking with Luiz Carlos Prestes” in March 1927 and the nine-part “Conversations with Luiz Carlos Prestes” in June and July.⁶⁷ One article even profiled Prestes’s mother Maria, who described her son as a shy, studious boy: “he was always such a good kid, all he wanted to do was help others.”⁶⁸ With the growing cult of Prestes’s personality, newspapers helped create a swirl of symbolism in which his own legend was firmly attached to that of the backlands. A December 16 article in the *Correio da Manhã* described Prestes as a living myth who “galloped above the forests, climbed above the clouds, as he ascended into a starry infinity.” The article’s lionizing of the Knight of Hope included the following extract that lays out starkly the exclusionary base of the growing mythology:

[Luiz Carlos Prestes] took the pulse of our savage Brazil, fraternized with our populations in the countryside, traveled through all the States, [taking] the seeds of culture to our rural populations ... This army, a legion of progress, triumphed: it brought the notion of goodness and duty, the feeling of human respect to the rude souls of our backlands, demonstrating to the savage Indian of our forests, all the generosity and kindness that lies in the heart of the white [people] from the coasts.⁶⁹

Over the following three years while Prestes lived in exile—first in Bolivia and then in Argentina—politics back in Brazil devolved further into a morass of political tension. At a moment of heightened political uncertainty, Luiz Carlos Prestes was seen as a potential unifier. Moreover, his political currency continued to derive from the symbolism of his march through the interior. As noted in an April 1929 article in *A Manhã*, “the platform of Luis Carlos Prestes, traced in blood, across the geographic map of Brazil, is the only one the people can trust, after so much dishonesty and ridicule. So, any politicians who right now want to win over the hearts of

⁶⁷ “Ouvindo e falando a Luiz Carlos Prestes,” 10-23 March, *O Jornal*; “Conversando com Luiz Carlos Prestes,” 28 June-29 July, *O Jornal*.

⁶⁸ “A mae de Prestes,” *O Jornal*, 16 March, 1927, 2.

⁶⁹ “Luiz Carlos Prestes,” 16 Dec. 1927, *Correio da Manhã*, 2.

the people, will have to speak to them about Prestes and in the name of Prestes.”⁷⁰

Two groups in particular courted the Knight of Hope, the Communist Party of Brazil (PCB) and the Liberal Alliance of Getúlio Vargas. In mid-1929, the PCB invited Prestes to run as their candidate for the 1930 elections, and on two occasions in late 1929 and early 1930, Prestes sneaked clandestinely into Rio Grande do Sul to meet with Vargas, who requested his endorsement for president.⁷¹ Prestes declined all of these entreaties and, ultimately, opted for his own path. In May 1930 Prestes released what became known as the May Manifesto.⁷² Short of fully embracing a communist orientation, which would come a few years later, the May Manifesto was a strong rebuke to the Liberal Alliance and a brand of national reformism that Prestes himself had helped popularize during the Column’s march. Calling on workers and peasants to rise up, Prestes outlined his vision for an “agrarian and anti-imperialist Revolution ... [fighting] for the complete liberation of our agricultural workers, of all forms of exploitation, feudal and colonial.” Prestes’s Manifesto charted a clean break from the tenentes by articulating a program grounded in the rural injustices he had seen in the Brazil’s interior.

The May Manifesto brought Prestes considerable pushback, most notably from his former tenente compatriots and their sympathetic allies in the press. These reactions were careful to denounce Prestes himself without denouncing the actions that had originally brought him to prominence. A front-page editorial in the *Diario Carioca* declared that while the newspaper had previously supported Prestes—“the flag-bearer of the movement ... the young soldier who crossed Brazil from one extreme to the other”—it must now withdraw support in light of his

⁷⁰ “Imperativos do momento politico,” *A Manhã*, 26 April 1929, 3.

⁷¹ Moraes and Viana, *Prestes*, 47-48.

⁷² The manifesto was published in “O capital Luiz Carlos Prestes define a sua attitude actual,” *Diário da Noite*, 29 May 1930, 1.

“strange” new manifesto.⁷³ Over the following six months, as Vargas’s forces maneuvered toward what would culminate in the Revolution of October 1930, a battle for public opinion played out in the newspapers over who was the rightful heir to the legacy of the Prestes Column. This included the publication of letters from Juárez Távora and General Isidoro—two of Prestes’s most important former compatriots—and an open letter signed by thirty-five tenentes distancing themselves from what the Knight of Hope had become.⁷⁴ In essence, these were efforts to purge the figure of Prestes from his symbolism as the Knight of Hope.

In the immediacy of the Revolution of 1930, Getúlio Vargas and his allies were able to disassociate Prestes the man from Prestes the myth. The mythology of the Column thus endured even if its most prominent figure was temporarily cast to the background. As an imaginative bridge between the long march of the Prestes Column and the events of 1930, the Knight of Hope was a discursive platform for amplifying the mythology of Brazil’s interior. Remember, for example, the above-mentioned 1927 article in *Correio da Manhã* that glorified Prestes for having “galloped above the forests, climbed above the clouds,” radiating the virtues of “the white [people] from the coasts.” This romanticized—and racialized—language is mirrored almost exactly in a battle hymn commemorating the Revolution of 1930, written two weeks after Vargas’s forces seized power. At this nexus of geography and mythology we see the evolving legacy of the interior:

By seas, rivers, jungles, mountains! ...
Blond hair on the brow of those who have won!

...
From the revolt the first alarms
From this sky under the clear blue

⁷³ “A nova directriz do Commandante Prestes,” *Diario Carioca*, 29 May, 1930, 1.

⁷⁴ Examples include Juárez Távora, “As novas ideias de Luiz Carlos Prestes e o problema brasileiro,” *Diário Carioca*, 19 June 1930, 1; and “O marechal Isidoro Dias Lopes discorda do commandante Luis Carlos Prestes,” *Diário Carioca*, 4 June 1930, 12. The open letter opposing Prestes is from Oct. 1930. CPDOC, series PEB c 1930.10.00-8 microfilm 390-91.

Echoing, they sprang to arms
The brave of the southern pampas.
North to south, south to north, east to west
Everything vibrates with intense emotion.
The avalanche of light you brought
Glorifies and redeems the Nation.⁷⁵

CONCLUSION

For the Homeric epic of its march through the so-called dark heart of the backlands, and as the catalyst for the careers of some of the most important figures in twentieth-century Brazil, the Prestes Column has attained a mythic status in Brazilian folklore and political history. This myth evolved during the march and has continued to grow for the past century. In a 1987 history of the Prestes Column, for example, the journalist Edmar Morel wrote that: “The Column experienced two totally different Brazils. Its gaucho troops were warriors, with an even temperament and accompanied by a faithful horse ... The *nordestinos* [on the other hand] were in poor health, malnourished, dressed in a cotton shirt and sandals made of tire rubber... It was a clash of two civilizations, as if they were two different races entirely.”⁷⁶ Statements such as these reveal the self-fulfilling stories that have defined and propelled the main narrative of the tenente march across Brazil.

As shown throughout this article, that myth is premised on the long-standing marginalization of where the Column actually went: Brazil’s interior. As both a place to be explored and an idea to be invoked, the interior gave shape to the legend of the Prestes Column. And with each retelling, the symbolism of the Column has grown symbiotically with that of the backlands. Rethinking the mythology of the Prestes Column allows for not only a new

⁷⁵ “Vencemos,” lyrics by Henriques de Casaes, music by Octavio Dutra, 12 Nov. 1930, published in Porto Alegre. CPDOC FC tp 1929.09.04 31.

⁷⁶ Morel, *A marcha da liberdade*, 60.

understanding of a seminal event in Brazilian history, but a new way to assess the political and conceptual role of Brazil's interior.

By reinterpreting the Prestes Column through the discourses and platforms of its mythologizing, we see how triumphalist stories cannot exist without their underlying stigmas. This study of the Prestes Column and Brazil's interior offers an example of how to approach the dominant histories of space and nation. To correct these narratives, we must seek to identify the deeper exclusionary roots that sustain the more inclusive elements of national mythologies.

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