

INTRODUCTION

Nearly blind and weakened from his ninety-one years of living, Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon spent much of his remaining life force dictating letters to national and international leaders. From his apartment overlooking the famed Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro, Rondon sent letters of all sorts to Brazilian politicians and foreign diplomats in 1956. He welcomed Ellis Briggs, the newly appointed ambassador from the United States, to his post. He congratulated the Norwegian ambassador to Brazil on the birthday of Norway's monarch. He contacted the Colombian ambassador on that country's independence day.

But the aged and increasingly infirm Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon engaged at the same time in correspondence of a different sort. In July 1956 he received a letter from Antonio Ferreira Silva, postmarked from the faraway town of Aquidauana in the far-western state of Mato Grosso. Silva, according to his own note, had served in 1909 as the first telegraph operator at the Utiariti station in northwest Mato Grosso. Incredibly, nearly fifty years later, Silva still worked for the Brazilian Telegraph Service. He was writing Rondon to seek support for his request for a transfer to the city of Belo Horizonte, so that he might end his career and spend his final days on earth near his family.¹

Utiariti. The name likely rolled off Rondon's lips with a wistful sigh. Sitting in his study, with the windows open, Rondon no doubt heard the familiar rhythms of waves washing across Copacabana Beach. But at that moment his thoughts were elsewhere and instead of waves, Rondon easily could



Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon. Courtesy of Comissão Rondon, Serviço de Registro Audio-Visual, Museu do Índio.

have conjured up a far different set of sounds: birds cawing, monkeys howling. Instead of the sound of cars rushing along Rio's busy Atlantic Avenue, in Rondon's mind at that moment shovels, axes, and saws clanged, chopped, and hummed. The shouts of children running ahead of the waves gave way to the cries of workers suffering machete wounds to the feet and hands. The glistening sun off the greenish waves of the Atlantic Ocean gave way to the glistening sweat on the backs of soldiers. The ocean itself vanished into his memories of the Amazon jungle. The weakened, elderly, and nearly blind ninety-one-year-old man once again became a vigorous, youthful, and feared officer in the Brazilian army.

This is a book about a man, an army commission, a country, and a nation. The man is Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon (1865–1958), a Brazilian army officer and architect of Brazil's current policy toward indigenous peoples. The commission is the Strategic Telegraph Commission of Mato Grosso to Amazonas (Comissão de Linhas Telegráficas Estratégicas de Mato Grosso ao Amazonas), commonly known as the Rondon Commission or by its acronym, *CLTEMTA*. The country is Brazil. The nation, well, that is more difficult to explain, as will become clear during the course of this study. Suffice it to say that the nation, thought of as an "imagined community," to use Benedict Anderson's well-known phrase, was under construction during Rondon's life, as it is, of course, to this day.²

The Rondon Commission, established in 1907, constructed the first telegraph line across the Amazon Basin. In addition, its members explored the vast territories of the Brazilian northwest, surveyed and mapped immense regions, and encouraged the colonization and settlement of the region. Rondon and his men also implemented his policies governing relations with indigenous groups resident in the region. The Rondon Commission exemplifies the issues and intricacies involved in the expansion of central state authority in Brazil and in the construction of a particular kind of Brazilian nation. The expansion of central state authority refers to the growing presence of central state officials in northwest Brazil, a vast region where landowners and local officials held sway and where residents often knew nothing about the government in Rio de Janeiro. Responding largely to military concerns (Brazil's troubles during the Paraguayan War, 1865–1870) and market issues (the Amazonian natural-rubber boom), central state authorities committed

resources to secure northwest Brazil via infrastructure development, an expanded military presence, and colonization schemes.

President Afonso Pena turned to the military to construct this new state presence in the interior. Rondon's job, as a military engineer, was to build an infrastructure of roads and telegraph lines that would connect the vast hinterlands with the coast. His decades-long quest to do so meant an expanded central state presence in the area, as officers and soldiers, sometimes as many as six hundred of them at a time, lived and worked in the region over the course of three decades. While they spent federal funds purchasing supplies from local merchants, they also fought with local residents, and Rondon and his officers challenged, although not very successfully, the authority of powerful landowners and potentates. In other words, members of the Rondon Commission strove to establish the physical presence of the central state in a lonely corner of the Amazon Basin.

These same men engaged in nation building as well, in that they attempted to create a unified community of "Brazilians" from a population whose loyalties and identities were much more local and regional in scope. In essence, Rondon sought to make the hinterlands part of the nation of Brazil as he and other urban Brazilians defined it. To do so he employed the accoutrements of nation building—speeches, flags, and civic celebrations—spending as much energy on such nation building efforts as he did on infrastructure development. Indeed, he considered infrastructure development important precisely because it promised to facilitate efforts to mold residents of northwest Brazil into citizens of "his" Brazil. Rondon spoke to local authorities about the greater glories of the nation and about the limitless future of the country as mapped out by himself and other national leaders. He lectured to soldiers and workers, tirelessly teaching them his official version of Brazilian history as a means to create the shared or imagined community of the nation. Most significant, he staged civic celebrations in the hinterlands and taught locals that certain dates were national holidays and that certain items—a particular flag, a certain song—were symbols of the nation.

Rondon directed much of his effort toward the indigenous peoples living in the Amazon basin. For good reasons, most of what has been written about Rondon examines his relationship with these people and the policies he developed to govern Indian-white relations in Brazil. This

literature is largely in Portuguese, however, so it is important to bring the subject to an English-speaking audience. When Rondon wrapped an Indian boy or girl in the Brazilian flag, he did so to send the message that Brazil literally and figuratively covered these people as well as whites. Language, religion, and dress increasingly signaled that the nation to which they belonged was now Brazil.

Rondon's efforts at national integration and infrastructure development and his design and implementation of Indian protection policies drew from the same intellectual source that shaped his ideas about the nation: Positivism. This intellectual movement and religion sparked Rondon's desire to carry out his strenuous work and gave him the fortitude to complete it. It produced in him a moral certainty regarding the correctness of his acts, as well as a fanatical devotion to the cause. Most important, Positivism formed his worldview and informed his blueprint for the nation. Simply put, building Positivism in Brazil was nation building for Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon and his colleagues.

To understand Rondon and his life's work we must take his Positivism seriously, for his career was, in a real sense, a decades-long effort to create a Positivist utopia in Brazil. Ironically, the Positivist utopia included the eventual elimination of large nation-states like Brazil, for Positivists felt that these entities prevented the unification of mankind and the creation of what they termed *Humanity*.

The Positivist ideal also included the elimination of standing armies, for a unified Humanity (the Positivists always capitalized the word) would have no use for such bellicose forces. The contradiction of Rondon, a career army officer, subscribing to a doctrine that preached the need to eliminate armies suggests that the Rondon Commission is best understood in terms of its contradictions. That is to say that the very things that guaranteed the successes of the Rondon Commission also limited its effectiveness.

Positivism inspired Rondon and his officers, but it also at times alienated powerful leaders and supporters, as when commission personnel criticized Catholicism, Catholic officials, and the influence of the Catholic Church in Brazilian political affairs. Likewise, the Positivists' belief that technology and machines would forge world unity and human progress, along with their promotion of the telegraph as the key to progress in Brazil, created another set of critics. Radio communications doomed

the telegraph line to obsolescence even before its inauguration in 1915, and opponents turned Rondon's faith in technology against him when challenging the commission's projects, its budgets, and its continued existence.

These contradictions limited the power and success of the Rondon Commission and highlight the fundamental weakness of a crop of recent, and very good, Brazilian studies of the Rondon Commission. For sound reasons these studies criticize and condemn Rondon for attempting to force his version of Brazilian citizenship on other peoples. However, in so doing, these studies exaggerate the successes of Rondon and his commission, because they fail to research and report on the myriad contradictions that crippled the implementation of his policies. As a result, both those who strongly favored Rondon's policies during his lifetime and those scholars who condemn them today grossly exaggerate the efficacy of his programs.

The misplaced belief in the power and results of the Rondon Commission is the real legacy of Rondon's work in Brazil. Thus, this book examines the very real limits of his influence in both the Amazon basin and in Rio de Janeiro, the nation's capital. For many authors the questions to ask are "Why was Rondon's blueprint for the nation so abusive of others, and why was he so successful in implementing it?" Instead, I believe it more accurate to ask, "Why do scholars believe he was so successful, when, in fact, he was not?"

Rondon's influence, in any case, is everywhere evident in Brazil. Any educated Brazilian today knows of Rondon and his efforts to contact, pacify, and incorporate indigenous peoples into the Brazilian nation. Most Brazilians can easily cite the famous motto of Rondon's Indian policy: "To die if necessary; to kill never."³ Students in the smallest rural villages study in schools that bear his name. Exasperated motorists in Rio de Janeiro fight traffic jams on the Avenida Marechal Rondon. Residents across the nation live in high-rise apartment buildings named after him. And, of course, citizens of the state of Rondônia confront his legacy in their daily lives.

Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon was born in the far-western state of Mato Grosso in 1865. His father died five months before his birth, and his mother, a descendant of the Terena and Bororo indigenous peoples, died when he was two years old. Sent to live with an uncle in Cuiabá,

Rondon graduated from normal school at the age of sixteen. Like many Brazilians, Rondon's only affordable option for further schooling was to join the army. Transferred to Rio de Janeiro, he studied at the Military Academy and at the Superior War College, graduating as a military engineer in 1890.⁴

Rondon played a small role in the events leading to the declaration of the Republic in 1889. Sent as a young officer back to his native Mato Grosso, he spent thirty years constructing telegraph lines. In 1927, at the age of sixty-two, he began the arduous task of inspecting and surveying all of Brazil's international borders, much of which he did on foot and via canoe, crossing some 25,000 miles of territory. Retired from the army in 1930, he led a very active life as president of the National Council for the Protection of Indians. In that capacity he lobbied successfully for the creation of the Day of the Indian national holiday, even while he devoted himself to the cause of Positivism. He died in 1958.

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This study grew out of my lengthy engagement with the literature on Rondon, the Brazilian Old Republic, and the related themes of nation building and state consolidation. Nevertheless, my goal is to keep this book accessible to a larger audience. Undergraduate students and those in the general public who are interested in history will, I believe, find the story of the commission interesting and even entertaining. To insure this I have kept my dialogue with the literature to a minimum in the text, although it does appear often in the notes. The one glaring exception is the chapter on Rondon's policies toward Indians, for given the amount and nature of work on this subject I found it impossible to construct my telling of this topic without wading into debates in the larger scholarly literature. I hope I have presented this discussion in a fashion that non-specialists also will find interesting.

Chapter 1 places the Rondon Commission in its broad historical and historiographical context. Chapter 2 narrates the construction of the line, while chapter 3 focuses on the lives of the soldiers sent to work on this project in the Amazon. Chapter 4 urges a renewed appreciation for the role Positivism played in Rondon's life and work. Chapter 5 discusses Rondon's and the Rondon Commission's interactions with indigenous peoples in northwest Brazil. Chapter 6 analyzes the commission's im-

pressive public-relations machine in terms of the successes and failures of those efforts. Finally, chapter 7 explains the continued significance of the telegraph line and of the life and work of Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon one hundred years after commission soldiers felled the first gigantic trees in the Amazon forest.

A Note on Brazilian Orthography

Several changes in Brazilian orthography have occurred since the creation of the documents cited in this study. In the notes I have maintained the original spelling of the documents, such as “escritório” instead of the modern “escritório.” The one exception is with newspapers that are still published today; for example, I will use the modern spelling of *Jornal do Comércio* instead of *Jornal do Commércio*. In addition, for a time Positivists used their own orthography. I have maintained the original spelling in these documents as well.