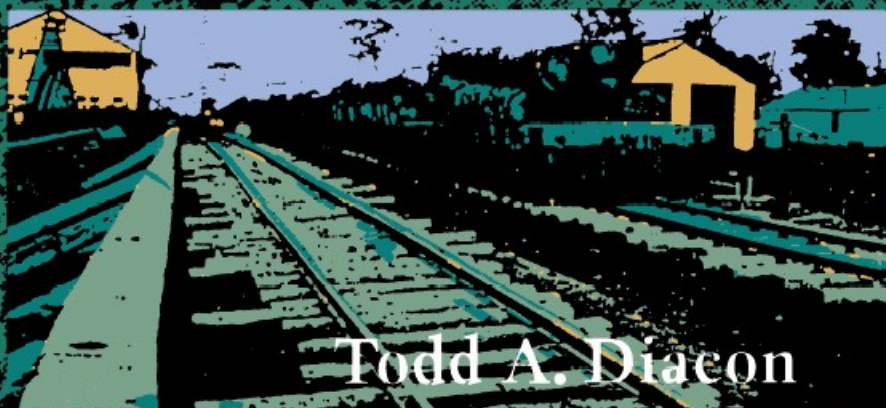


**Millenarian  
Vision,  
Capitalist  
Reality**

BRAZIL'S  
CONTESTADO  
REBELLION,  
1912-1916



Todd A. Diacon

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**Millenarian Vision,  
Capitalist Reality**



*Colonists at Cruz Machado Colony general store*

**Millenarian  
Vision,  
Capitalist  
Reality**

BRAZIL'S

CONTESTADO

REBELLION,

1912-1916

TODD A. DIACON

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appear on the last page of this book.

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*For Dorothy Hoch Diacon (1929–1977)  
and Nathan Diacon-Furtado*



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In closing, I wish to note that it was my grandmother, Evelyn Cox Hoch, who encouraged me to become a historian. Now approaching her one hundredth birthday, in 1916 Grandma enrolled in her first Latin American history course at the University of Kansas, just as the Contestado Rebellion drew to a close. Whether by reading to me when I was a youngster, or by recounting family history as I grew older, she never let me forget about the past.

Finally, thanks Dad, for surviving.

*Knoxville, Tennessee  
May 1991*

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**Millenarian Vision,  
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## The Contestado Rebellion

On the night of 7 February 1915, Domingos Crespo ordered his 200-man elite guard to the rim of the valley. Below them, well hidden beneath the thick pine forest canopy, some 10,000 men, women, and children prayed and prepared for the coming battle. At dawn the cannon fire began, and soon the Brazilian army officers ordered the first charge of their 1,000-man strike force. The members of the Crespo guard were crack shots, however, and from their positions behind trees and boulders they beat back the Brazilian army's every advance. By the end of the day the officers had had enough, and they barked the orders for a general retreat. Members of the Crespo guard immediately congratulated themselves on the victory. Below them, 10,000 voices rose in a deafening chorus of "Praise be to God," "Long live the monarchy," and "Viva José Maria."<sup>1</sup>

In early 1912 a mysterious man began wandering around the backlands of the Brazilian states of Paraná and Santa Catarina in the so-called "Contestado" region. Soon he gained fame as a powerful *curandeiro* (healer), a man who, with his supply of herbs, could heal virtually any ill. He moved from *fazenda* (ranch) to *fazenda*, where residents would greet him with pleas for help.<sup>2</sup>

This mysterious man, whose name was Miguel Lucena Boaventura, had earlier deserted from the Paraná security force. A literate man of around forty years of age, he soon adopted the name José Maria, presumably to take advantage of the fame of João Maria, a popular healer who had lived in the region some twenty years earlier. Local legend tells that José Maria brought a small boy back to life a few months after arriving in the area. By doing so he solidified his fame as a powerful healer, and some people began to follow him on his journeys throughout the backlands.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Millenarian Vision, Capitalist Reality

In addition to his medicinal activities, José Maria began preaching to those gathered about him. He spoke frequently of the evil of the Brazilian Republic (declared in 1889) and argued that monarchy was God's true, and holiest, form of government. At night he read aloud passages from *The History of Charlemagne* to his growing audience, which numbered 300 followers. At these readings he dwelled on Charlemagne's personal courage and on the holy war he waged against the infidel Moors in Spain.<sup>4</sup>

José Maria's popularity alarmed local officials, especially given that the memory of the bloody Canudos millenarian revolt was still fresh in their memory.<sup>5</sup> Fighting began in Irani, Paraná, on 22 October 1912, when a hundred-man unit of the Paraná state militia attacked the people they called *fanáticos*. José Maria died in the clash, but to the horror of most urban Brazilians the rebels defeated this force, killing its commander, Colonel João Gualberto. Calm soon prevailed, however, for José Maria's followers dispersed throughout the area.<sup>6</sup>

Sometime during mid-1913, a rumor swept through the Contestado claiming that José Maria was not dead. Instead, he was waiting in heaven for the moment to return and establish a "holy city" in the *sertão* (interior). Not only would José Maria return but so too would all those believers killed at Irani. Together they would form the army of St. Sebastian and prepare for the 1,000-year war of Charlemagne.<sup>7</sup>

Euzébio Ferreira dos Santos, the religious landowner who in 1912 had invited José Maria to preach at the patron saint celebration of the village of Perdizes Grandes, now traveled throughout the area preaching of the return of the mystic healer. Soon, Euzébio's son Manoel began having visions in which José Maria appeared. In one vision, José Maria ordered Euzébio, via Manoel, to sell all his goods and move to the rugged area of Taquaraçu (Taquarassu). Others were to do likewise, and once at Taquaraçu they were to share their wealth.<sup>8</sup>

João Paes de Farias remembers watching the "rebirth" of the millenarian movement at the home of his father, Francisco Paes de Farias (nicknamed Chico Ventura). One night in December 1913, Euzébio and his daughter Teodora arrived at the Paes de Farias home in Perdizes Grandes. Euzébio spoke wildly of the return of José Maria and of the visions of his son Manoel. He and Teodora then fell to the floor, wrapped themselves in a white sheet, and later emerged, in João's words, fanaticized. At that point Euzébio gave the order to settle the holy city of Taquaraçu.<sup>9</sup>

By December 1913, some 200 people lived at Taquaraçu. Local officials once again considered their presence a threat, and on 29 December 1913, government soldiers advanced on the redoubt. Once within visual distance the soldiers witnessed an unbelievable sight,

one that caused the most jittery of the men to desert immediately: before them stood twenty-four rebel soldiers, dressed in white astride white horses, their white banners snapping in the breeze. These were the *Pares de França* (Peers of France), Charlemagne's imperial guard, now come to Taquaraçu to protect the holy city.<sup>10</sup>

It was not much of a battle. Shots from well-hidden rebels ripped through army ranks. Officers panicked, and both officers and soldiers fled the scene in an anarchic retreat. José Maria had protected his followers. The *fanáticos* had defended Taquaraçu.<sup>11</sup>

The December victory convinced larger numbers of Contestado residents of the power of the millenarian movement. Daily they arrived at the gates of the city, some with a few head of cattle, others with nothing. In February 1914, government soldiers massacred rebel women and children in an unguarded camp. In response, the *fanáticos* adopted a more aggressive strategy of attacks against local *fazendeiros* (landowners), the holdings of the American-owned Brazil Railway Company, and European immigrant colonies.<sup>12</sup> In early April 1914, 200 *fazendeiros* signed an angry petition demanding government protection.<sup>13</sup> On 5 September 1914, a band of 300 rebels destroyed two Brazil Railway station houses, along with a company sawmill and sections of railroad track. The rebels killed 100 people. They then ambushed the federal force sent to oppose them, killing its commander, Captain João Teixeira de Matos Costa.<sup>14</sup>

The millenarian rebels now dominated the rugged border area between the states of Paraná and Santa Catarina. One army official estimated that they controlled a 30-square-kilometer area and were able to move freely within a 28,000-square-kilometer area.<sup>15</sup> Some 20,000 men, women, and children now lived in the several redoubts spread throughout the region.<sup>16</sup> The rebels had killed the regional army commander and destroyed the facilities of the Brazil Railway Company. Their power now reached mythical proportions among both believers and nonbelievers alike.<sup>17</sup>

In response, Brazilian federal authorities named General Fernando Setembrino de Carvalho to lead an intensified campaign against the rebels. Carvalho arrived from the state of Ceará, where he fought against the millenarian-political rebellion led by the famous Padre Cícero.<sup>18</sup> General Setembrino de Carvalho demanded, and received, a large influx of men and matériel. He began his campaign backed by 7,000 soldiers.<sup>19</sup>

Given rebel numbers, their complete mastery of the region's rugged terrain, and the failures of his predecessors, Setembrino de Carvalho opted for a war of attrition. He surrounded the entire region, began a scorched-earth policy, and gradually narrowed the rebels'

#### 4 Millenarian Vision, Capitalist Reality

field of operations.<sup>20</sup> As early as December 1914, starving women and children straggled into the federal camps, but "rarely did armed and healthy men appear."<sup>21</sup> In late January the trickle turned into a flood, with more than 2,000 people surrendering. At that time emaciated women began giving their starving, lice-ridden children to any town dweller willing to accept them.<sup>22</sup>

Weakened by starvation and sickness, various smaller rebel redoubts fell to government forces in early 1915. In February, soldiers captured the Santo Antonio redoubt and burned the settlement's 500 wooden shacks. Redoubts at Pinheiros, Reichardt, Marcello, and Josephina were also destroyed.<sup>23</sup> Those rebels who did not surrender now made their way to the newly formed redoubt of Santa Maria, whose population soon ballooned to more than 10,000. There starvation continued to plague the rebels. Boiled cowskins became the staple of the rebel diet, and one ex-resident of Santa Maria remembers how children rushed to drink the blood of freshly slaughtered cattle. To avoid such tumult, Santa Maria's leaders began slaughtering cattle only late at night.<sup>24</sup>

On 8 February 1915, General Setembrino de Carvalho ordered the 1,800-man Southern Division to attack Santa Maria. This was the attack so incredibly repelled by the 200-man Crespo family guard. Faced with this defeat, Setembrino de Carvalho returned to the strategy that had served him so well: siege and starvation. To block rebel supply lines he deployed his 7,000 soldiers, who at that time represented nearly one-half of the entire Brazilian army! He then ordered his artillery units to begin daily shellings of the redoubt. Finally, in early April 1915, Captain Potiguara and his force pierced the center of the redoubt, killed nearly 600 rebels, and burned 5,000 houses. Santa Maria had fallen after a siege of nearly two months.<sup>25</sup>

As government troops concluded operations in late 1915 and early 1916, crowds cheered General Setembrino de Carvalho's return to Rio de Janeiro. Army officials praised his efforts, although the rebellion's US \$250,000 price tag no doubt tempered their spirits.<sup>26</sup> In the *Contestado*, however, no one celebrated. There, both the victors and the vanquished faced a countryside in ruins, and both wondered where their next meal would come from.<sup>27</sup>

### **The *Contestado* Region**

Bordered by the Iguaçú and Negro rivers to the north and the Uruguay River to the south, the *Contestado* region fits between 26° and 28° southern latitudes and 50° and 52° western longitudes. In the east the



**Figure 1** The Contestado Rebellion Zone

rugged mountains of the Serra Geral do Mar dominate the landscape. There, peaks over one mile high give way to long narrow valleys. Moving to the west, rolling hills appear, but the elevation never drops below 2,500 feet. In all areas the Paraná pine (*Araucaria augustifolia*) spreads out its umbrellalike canopy, providing the region with its distinctive “fresh air” smell. To the east the forest becomes so thick as to be virtually impenetrable. In the west the forest gives way to grasslands suitable for grazing.

During the Contestado Rebellion, one army officer complained of the difficulties of operating in the region. Narrow mountain and forest footpaths forced soldiers to march single file. Wagon traffic was impossible in many areas. Cold rains soaked uniforms and forced soldiers to discard their heavy boots when they stuck in the mud. At that time the Contestado was an isolated region, and it continues to be so to some extent today. A footpath connecting the area with the coast did not open until 1787. Not until after 1945 did a paved road open between the Contestado and Florianópolis, the state capital of Santa Catarina. Even today no paved road directly links Florianópolis with Lajes (Lages), the largest city in the Contestado region.<sup>28</sup>

The term “Contestado” as used throughout this book refers to a

## 6 Millenarian Vision, Capitalist Reality

region that was the object of a long-standing border dispute between the states of Santa Catarina and Paraná. The dispute, which involved half of present-day Santa Catarina, began in the colonial era. It acquired new importance with the creation of the province of Paraná in 1853 and the occupation of the contested lands by that province. In 1904 the Brazilian Supreme Court ruled in favor of Santa Catarina in the dispute, but Paraná officials refused to recognize the judgment.<sup>29</sup>

In 1905 the government of Santa Catarina organized the first of several invasions of the border zone. Armed with Winchester rifles, the Santa Catarina force seized control of the Canoinhas area. Later, in 1911, the Santa Catarina government created the municipality of Canoinhas to secure its hold on the region. Between these years, partisans clashed numerous times, especially in the Canoinhas–Rio Negro area. The dispute ended in 1916 with an accord recognizing the Santa Catarina claim.<sup>30</sup>

Historians continue to discuss the relationship of the border dispute with the outbreak of the rebellion. At the time, each state accused the other of using the rebellion as a means to win control of the contested zone.<sup>31</sup> It is true that several Santa Catarina citizens involved in the Canoinhas incursion later joined the millenarian movement. Chief among these was Aleixo Gonçalves, who became one of the most important leaders of the millenarian movement. In the end, however, this border dispute between elites did not influence the majority of the millenarian movement's participants. As noted by one soldier at the time, "The true inhabitant of the Contestado, the often ignored peasant, is indifferent to competing jurisdiction claims." On this point historian Marli Auras agrees, arguing that for the Contestado peasantry, the state simply did not exist.<sup>32</sup>

### **Millenarianism in Brazil and the Contestado**

Mention the Contestado Rebellion, and most scholars think of the Canudos Rebellion, made famous by Euclides da Cunha and, more recently, Mario Vargas Llosa.<sup>33</sup> This confusion occurs both in Brazil and, to a larger extent, in the United States. Within Brazil, many of those who have heard of the Canudos Rebellion or of the famous millenarian movement led by Padre Cícero in Joazeiro (Juazeiro do Norte), Ceará, know nothing about the Contestado Rebellion. In southern Brazil, most people know of the Contestado but only in the sketchiest sense. Why, then, study such an apparently insignificant rebellion?

The reasons are many. As we have seen, the sheer size of the rebellion merits study in itself. At one point some 20,000 rebels controlled 28,000 square kilometers of territory, that is, roughly 3 percent of Brazil's national territory. This was clearly an unacceptable threat to a national elite attempting to impose its vision of a nation. As such the rebellion is an important example of the ways people in the periphery resisted the process of nation building and consolidation, a process that threatened their way of life.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, the appearance of two massive millenarian movements (Joazeiro and Canudos) at the beginning of the Old Republic (1889) has led some scholars to focus on political events as a key to understanding millenarianism in Brazil.<sup>35</sup> The 1889 miracle of Joazeiro brought tens of thousands of pilgrims to Padre Cícero's church, and this ability to attract a large following made him an important figure to regional elites bent on consolidation under Brazil's new federal system.<sup>36</sup> In turn, battles with ecclesiastical authorities over the authenticity of the miracle led Padre Cícero to cooperate with these elites, thereby explaining why his movement was never violently repressed by federal authorities. Likewise, partisan political struggles explain why local and regional elites first cooperated with, and then attacked, Antonio Conselheiro and his followers at Canudos.

Other scholars explain the timing of Brazil's massive millenarian movements largely in terms of the material changes taking place in Brazil at the turn of this century.<sup>37</sup> In the Brazilian Northeast, a series of devastating droughts stripped peasants of their subsistence, thereby increasing the prestige of millenarian leaders who offered food and shelter. In the Contestado, peasants joined a movement dedicated to destroying the railroad company that stripped them of their land. Millenarianism became the vehicle of peasant protest, it is argued, because religion generated the kind of high exaltation and fever necessary to organize an illiterate and isolated peasantry.<sup>38</sup>

Clearly the Contestado Rebellion included these kinds of material and political issues. The Contestado rebels sought the return of the monarchy as God's chosen form of government, a fact that guaranteed a violent reaction on the part of national leaders as the movement grew. National policies and concerns also prompted the construction of a railroad in the region. Thus, the study of the Contestado Rebellion is significant because it suggests how rural concerns shaped the actions of urban-based politicians in the Old Republic.

At the same time, it is important to study the Contestado Rebellion because it erupted in reaction to the transition to capitalism in the region. In searching for the origins of the movement, we are thus