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Brazilian Indian policy: an historical overview

The country along this river is a fine natural cattle country, and someday it will surely see a great development. It was opened to development by Colonel Rondon only five or six years ago. Already an occasional cattle ranch is to be found along the banks. When the railroads are built into these interior portions of Mato Grosso, the whole region will grow and thrive amazingly – and so will the railroads.

Theodore Roosevelt, *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* (1914)

At the beginning of this century, a wave of interethnic violence and conflict encompassed the southern regions of Brazil. During this period, Indians and pioneers contested vast areas of territory along Brazil's newly opened frontiers. In the forested area south of the Doce River and in the states of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo, Botocudo Indians resisted the invasion of their tribal territory and were nearly successful in forcing the abandonment of an Italian-settler colony at São Mateus. In the State of São Paulo, Kaingáng Indians interrupted the construction of the Brazil Northwest Railroad and maintained control over a 200-mile area between the Tietê, Feio, Peixe, and Paranapanema rivers. Farther to the south, in the Brazilian states of Paraná and Santa Catarina, colonization companies paid professional Indian killers to massacre the Xokléng tribe.[1]

News of these conflicts filled the pages of the national press and caused a bitter and highly political debate in Brazil. During this period, several professors of German descent were teaching

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racist social theories in the universities of São Paulo, and a number of continental missions called for immediate government action to protect the lives of European settlers in Brazil. The influence of these foreign elements was so great that the president of Brazil held several cabinet meetings to study the possibility of using the Brazilian Army to stop conflicts along the frontier. In the Brazilian Congress, a number of legislators argued that it was expedient, for purposes of national development, to use the same extermination tactics against Indians as those practiced by the U.S. military in the occupation of much of North America.[2]

At the same time, however, another group emerged that was horrified by reports of the massacre of Indian tribes. Many of these people were of upper-class background and belonged to scientific and philanthropic societies. Strongly influenced by French positivism, they vehemently reacted against the various pseudoscientific and racist theories that were gaining influence among cosmopolitan circles in Brazil. It was the responsibility of the government, they argued, to provide protection for the remaining Indian populations of the country. In time, these people believed, Indians would also take their place as citizens in the newly independent and republican nation of Brazil.[3]

The major spokesman for this position was a young Brazilian Army officer named Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon. Rondon was born in 1865 in the small interior town of Cuiabá, Mato Grosso, and as a youth attended military school in Rio de Janeiro. There he studied engineering and came under the influence of the positivist writings of the French social philosopher Auguste Comte. Today, Comte's philosophy of social evolution seems archaic and ethnocentric. At the end of the last century, however, it provided Rondon with a convincing philosophic framework for understanding the Indian societies that he had known through experience and observation as a youth.[4]

In 1890, the Brazilian government commissioned Rondon to carry out a series of military and scientific expeditions to the

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unexplored interior regions of the country. These expeditions lasted over a twenty-five-year period and received a large amount of publicity both in Brazil and abroad. During the course of these expeditions, the Rondon Commission laid over 2,270 kilometers of telegraph lines, mapped over 50,000 square kilometers of land, and discovered twelve new rivers in the Mato Grosso and Amazon regions of Brazil. In 1913, Rondon accompanied former American President Theodore Roosevelt on his world-famous geographical expedition through the wilderness regions of Brazil.[5]

In the course of these expeditions, Rondon also made contact with the Borôro, Nambikuára, and Paresí Indian tribes. For Rondon, these Indian societies were neither savage nor barbarian, but merely one stage in the overall development of human civilization. Rondon argued that the authenticity and value of these tribal societies could not be doubted and that it was the responsibility of the government to provide aboriginal peoples with the conditions needed for survival. A number of other young army officers shared his humanistic philosophy. In 1910, these officers were successful in convincing the government to create a special agency for the protection of Indian tribes.

The government named Colonel Rondon the first director of the new Indian Protection Service (SPI). As its name implied, the SPI was not an agency charged with the administration of Indian affairs, but rather was an institution whose purpose was to protect Indians against acts of frontier persecution and oppression. The legislation that established the SPI, and which was later included in several Brazilian constitutions, explicitly stated that it was the obligation of the Brazilian government to protect Indians against the destructive effects of frontier expansion and to defend their lives, liberty, and property against extermination and exploitation. In addition, this legislation recognized the rights of Indian peoples to exist on their own lands and to continue, under the guardianship of the government, their ancient and traditional ways of life.[6]

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The most novel aspect of this new policy was the intervention of the Indian Protection Service in the occupation and settlement of vast areas of Brazil. Under the direction of Rondon, a unique strategy developed for making contact with and pacifying formerly hostile Indian tribes. The basic notion behind this strategy was to convince Indians that the government was different from all other agents along the frontier. Teams of unarmed Indian agents, almost all of whom shared the philosophy and dedication of Rondon, would enter into Indian territories and place gifts of beads, machetes, and mirrors at the entrances to Indian villages. There they would wait patiently, sometimes for weeks or months, until the Indians would come forward and accept the gifts. Then, after a period of time, the agents would enter the villages and, using Indian interpreters, try to convince the native chiefs that the intention of the government was to protect them from outside encroachments and pioneer threats.

During this early period, the motto of the Indian Protection Service was "Die if it be necessary, but kill never." Using this pacifistic approach, scores of Indian tribes were brought under the direction and protection of the SPI. In the first two decades of its existence, the SPI created sixty-seven Indian posts in various frontier zones of Brazil.

According to the Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, the SPI lived up to the pacifistic ideals of Rondon during this early period. In the first twenty years of its existence, not a single Indian was killed or wounded by Indian agents, although several Indian agents died. Among the tribes pacified during this early period were the Kaingáng of São Paulo and Paraná (1912), whose lands are now covered by productive coffee plantations; the Botocudos (1914) of the Itajaí Valley, which is now one of the richest regions of Santa Catarina State; the Aimoré (1911) of the Rio Doce Valley in Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo, an area now occupied by towns, industries, and farms; the Umutina (1918) of the Sepotuba and Paraguay rivers, whose pacification

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made possible the exploitation of the large ipecac forests of Brazil; the Parintintín (1922), who had prevented the exploitation of large rubber tracts along the Madeira River and its tributaries; and the Urubús (1928), who had caused turmoil throughout the entire Gurupí Valley between Pará and Maranhão.

Nevertheless, as Ribeiro also notes, "the job of pacifying Indians was designed less for them than for Brazilian society as a whole." In case after case, Indians accepted the gifts and promises of government agents only to find that their territories were later invaded by rubber collectors, nut gatherers, cattle ranchers, and settlers along the Brazilian frontiers. The SPI tried to mediate in these encounters by establishing Indian posts in several areas, but more often than not Indian agents were ineffective in holding back settlers and in influencing state governments to provide legal titles for Indian lands. As a result, in almost every area of Brazil where the SPI functioned, Indians were wiped out by disease or became marginalized ethnic populations on minuscule parcels of land.[7]

The situation of Brazilian Indians (1957)

In 1957, Ribeiro published a lengthy statistical report on the situation of Indian tribes in Brazil. The study showed that from 1900 to 1957 more than eighty Indian tribes came in contact with Brazilian national society and through disease and contamination were deculturated and destroyed. During this period, the indigenous population of Brazil dropped from approximately 1 million to less than 200,000. In areas of agricultural expansion, six aboriginal tribes became extinct. In areas of pastoral expansion (cattle raising), thirteen tribes disappeared. In areas of extractive activities (rubber and nut collecting, diamond prospecting, etc.), a phenomenal fifty-nine Indian tribes were destroyed.[8]

The threatened extinction of the last remaining Indian peoples of Brazil was only a small part of the picture given in this report.

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Ribeiro showed that those tribes that had survived the initial depredations of the expanding Brazilian frontier were severely depopulated and living in the most wretched conditions.

The Kaingáng of São Paulo, for example, were reduced from 1,200 persons at the time of their pacification in 1912 to a mere 87 ragged and starving individuals in 1957. The Xokléng of Santa Catarina were reduced from over 800 to less than 190. The Nambikuára of Mato Grosso were reduced from an estimated 10,000 to less than 1,000. The once proud and thriving Kayapó Indians living in the region of Conceição de Araguaia in northern Mato Grosso were reduced from 2,500 at the time of contact in 1902 to less than 10 in 1957. Along the borders between the states of Pará and Maranhão in the Gurupí Valley, the Tembé and Timbíra tribes, whose population was estimated to number between 6,000 and 7,000 in a census of 1872, were reduced by 1957 to three villages of less than 20 persons each.

Ribeiro classified the remaining Indian tribes of Brazil into four categories depending upon their degree of contact with the agents of Brazilian society: relative isolation, intermittent contact, permanent contact, and integration. Tribes that had moved from a state of relative isolation to *intermittent contact* with Brazilian society numbered twenty-seven in Ribeiro's sample and were suffering the worst effects of disease and depopulation. In his report, Ribeiro wrote:

> Judging by known cases, the decimating effects of epidemics of grippe, measles, and other morbid agents carried by civilized peoples would have reduced their population by at least half of what it was while they were still isolated. There had been thoroughgoing transformations in their way of life, changes attributable to ecological and biotic factors rather than to the process of acculturation.[9]

According to Ribeiro, many of these tribes in intermittent contact with Brazilian society had developed strategies to deal with the new and dangerous invaders in their midst. Some tribes escaped into the jungles or unwanted refuge areas as a last retreat. Other tribes attempted to stand their ground and resist. Basically,

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all these tribes were attempting to maintain their independence in the face of an ever-increasing outside threat.

A similar situation faced the forty-five tribes Ribeiro classified as being in *permanent contact* with Brazilian national society. Population decline in these groups was also severe. The social organization and ceremonial lives of these tribes had been disrupted. Old patterns of cooperation had been broken down. Native subsistence systems had been undermined. These peoples had become dependent upon Brazilian national society and were forced to participate in the various regional economies of Brazil. Ribeiro noted that:

> Unlike the tribal Indian, the individual living in permanent contact was dependent upon the national society as an individual rather than a group member. Freed from the ancient system of social control by the breakdown of tribal sanctions, the group was headed for disintegration.[10]

The step from permanent contact to *integration* into Brazilian national society produced no better conditions for the surviving Indians of Brazil. Ribeiro wrote of these integrated tribes:

> At the turn of the century, their economic role was that of a reserve labor force, or of specialized producers of certain marketable commodities. They were an unwanted minority, restricted to segments of the lands they had formerly held or cast out of territory rightfully theirs and forced to roam from place to place.[11]

These integrated tribes numbered thirty-eight in 1957, and, in Ribeiro's words, "were enduring the most precarious conditions of life in the greatest misery." They had forgotten their ancient languages and customs, and were living as wretched and marginalized ethnic groups at the bottom layer of Brazilian rural society. Faced by discrimination and exploitation, these integrated tribes found it impossible to assimilate into Brazilian national life. "Some imponderable obstacle," Ribeiro wrote, "blocked their assimilation. There was a final step that they were unable to take."[12]

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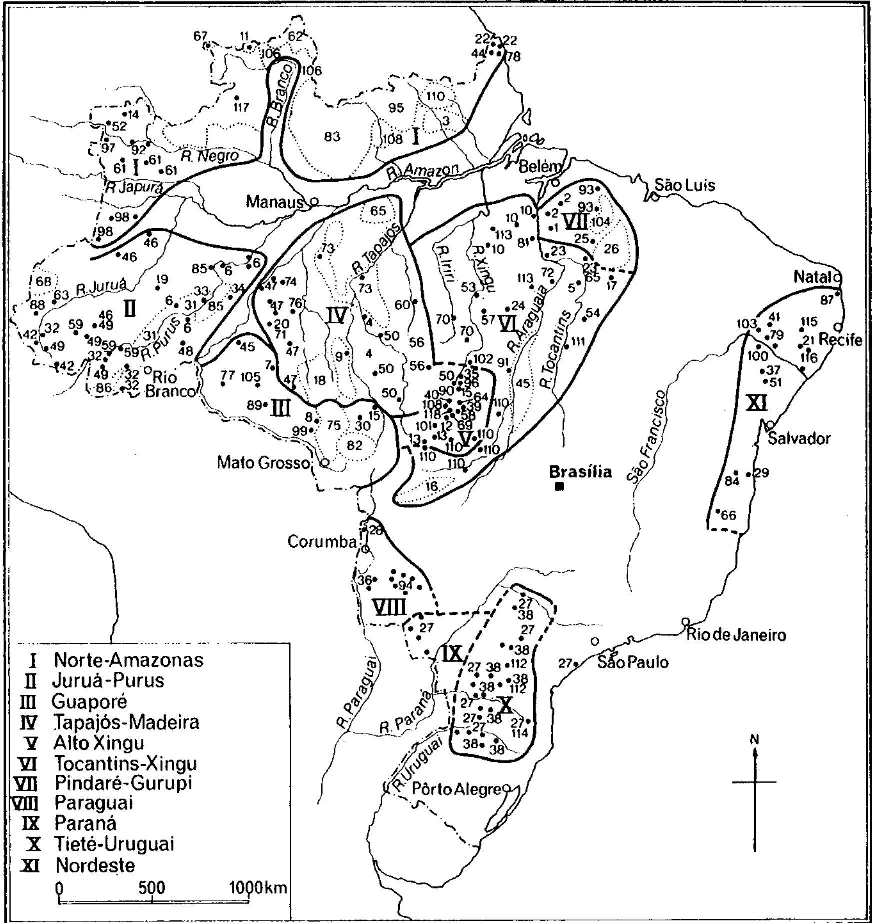

Map 2. Brazil: Indian groups and culture areas

Key to indigenous groups of Brazil:

1 Amaneyé
2 Anambe
3 Aparaí
4 Apiaká
5 Apinayé
6 Apurinã
7 Arara
8 Arikapú
9 Aripaktsá
10 Asuriní
11 Awake
12 Awéti
13 Bakairí
14 Baníwa
15 Beiço-de-Pau
16 Borôro
17 Canela
18 Cinta-Larga
19 Deni
20 Diarrói
21 Fulniô
22 Galibí
23 Gavião
24 Gorotíre
25 Guajá
26 Guajajára
27 Guaraní
28 Guató
29 Gueren
30 Irantxe
31 Jamamadí
32 Jamináwa
33 Jaruára
34 Júma
35 Jurúna
36 Kadiwéu
37 Kaimbé
38 Kaingáng
39 Kalapálo
40 Kamayurá

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In 1957, the major concentration of indigenous population was still in the Amazon and central regions of Brazil. Over 120 Indian tribes inhabited this immense area, living in small tribal groups that numbered between 100 and 500 individuals (see Map 2). Most of these tribes still subsisted from hunting, fishing, and gardening activities and maintained close attachments to their ancestral territories. The fate of these *isolated* tribes, Ribeiro argued, would depend upon two factors: (1) the nature of future economic expansion in Brazil; and (2) the ability of the Indian Protection Service to create a protective buffer between Indians and the frontiers of national society. Without such protection, Ribeiro claimed, the remaining isolated Indian tribes of Brazil would be contaminated by disease and eventually disappear.[13]

At the time of Ribeiro's study, several important changes were taking place in Indian policy in Brazil. From the postwar period onward, Indian policy was increasingly tied to regional and na-

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Map 2. Key (*cont.*)

41 Kambiwá
42 Kámpa
43 Karajá
44 Karipúna
45 Karitiâna
46 Katukína
47 Kawahib
48 Kaxararí
49 Kaxináwa
50 Kayabí
51 Kirirí
52 Kobéwa
53 Kokraimoro
54 Krahó
55 Krikatí
56 Kréen-Akaróre
57 Kubén-Kran-Kegn
58 Kuikúru
59 Kulína
60 Kuruáya
61 Makú
62 Makuxí
63 Marúbo
64 Matipuhy
65 Mawé
66 Maxakalí
67 Mayongóng
68 Mayoruna
69 Mehináku
70 Menkranotire
71 Morerébi
72 Mudjetíre
73 Mundurukú
74 Mura
75 Nambikuára
76 Numbiaí
77 Pakahanova
78 Palikúr
79 Pankarare
80 Pankararú
81 Parakanân
82 Parésí
83 Parukotó-Xarúma
84 Pataxó
85 Paumarí
86 Piro
87 Potiguára
88 Poyanáwa
89 Puruborá
90 Suyá
91 Tapirapé
92 Tariána
93 Tembé
94 Terêna
95 Tiriyo-Pianokoto
96 Trumái
97 Tukána
98 Tukúna
99 Tuparí
100 Tuxá
101 Txikão
102 Txukahamae
103 Uamué
104 Urubú
105 Urupá
106 Wapitxana
107 Warikyana
108 Waurá
109 Wayâna
110 Xavante
111 Xerénte
112 Xetá
113 Xikrín
114 Xokléng
115 Xukurú
116 Xukurú-Kariri
117 Yanomamö
118 Yawalapití

Source: "Indigenous Groups of Brazil," in W. Dostal (ed.), *The Situation of the Indian in South America* (Geneva, 1972), pp. 434–42.

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tional politics. By this time, Rondon was an old man, and he and many of his dedicated collaborators had lost influence over Indian affairs. Then, in the late 1950s, a new group of army officers and civil servants began to assume positions of power in the SPI.

During this period, a wave of bureaucratic corruption infested the administration of the SPI. The new SPI regime disbanded the Section of Anthropological Studies that Darcy Ribeiro had helped to create in the early 1950s. It entrusted several Indian posts to religious missionaries. It tolerated pacification expeditions that were detrimental to the welfare and safety of Indian tribes. It maintained very little control over the activities of Indian agents along the national frontiers. In simplest terms, during this period, economic rather than humanitarian considerations began to form the basis of Indian policy in Brazil.[14]

The Figueiredo Report (1968)

In 1967, the significance of these new directives became clear when world attention focused on Indian policy in Brazil. Previous to this date only a few people outside Brazil were concerned with Brazilian Indian policy. Then, in 1967, the Brazilian minister of the interior, General Albuquerque Lima, commissioned Attorney General Jader Figueiredo to carry out an investigation of charges of corruption among officials of the Indian Protection Service. Figueiredo and his staff of investigators traveled over 10,000 miles, interviewing scores of Indian agents, and visiting over 130 Indian posts. Finally, in March 1968, General Albuquerque Lima held a press conference in Rio de Janeiro where he made public the results of the twenty-volume, 5,115-page Figueiredo Report.[15]

According to one reporter who attended the press conference, the Figueiredo Commission had "found evidence of widespread corruption and sadism, ranging from the massacre of whole tribes by dynamite, machine guns and sugar laced with arsenic to the removal of an 11-year-old girl from school to serve as a slave to an

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