

The Trials of Maria: Deforestation and Genocide in Southern Brazil

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Full-Blooded Bugre

Maria, who lived in a small town in the state of Paraná, southern Brazil, called herself a Bugre. “Full-blooded Bugre,” she said, and in all her family and village she was the only one who claimed it proudly. Bugre, however, was a word commonly used until the beginning of the twentieth century to refer to Indigenous people in the south of the country. It comes from the French *bougre* and means something like savage, heathen, uncultivated, or all of that at once. This word is charged with derogatory senses. It is ultra-signified, for at every use more and more negative signs are attached to it. It not only carries in itself a history of violence, but also works as a portal, which opens itself to a past of cruelty and allows us to glimpse the social relations from which it has emerged and in which its use was once considered lawful.

The region Maria lived in was marked by a tension between Indigenous people and white settlers, still ongoing during her lifetime. The history, however, has always been told from a white’s perspective. The image that they construed for themselves—one of heroic entrepreneurs, bravely conquering the wilderness and its even more wild inhabitants, prompting progress and evolution to the nation—has become the official historical record, and thus the Indigenous peoples have been erased from history. Many people continue to call the Amerindians from the south “Bugres.” And so what Maria called herself.

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Project of Nation: Poverty

But here where we live, in Germany
desperation and treason to the fatherland rule
and because of such conditions
we set out on this path.
All the youth escape,
the future is banished.
For that we seek peace,
in the country Brazil.²

These lines were composed around 1825, at the beginning of the German immigration wave to Brazil, in order to pay tribute to the kindness of Brazil's emperor, Dom Pedro I, for offering a helping, father-like hand to the Germans, who fled a country ripe with treachery, consumed by misery, and where absolute desperation ruled. The Song of Brazil, or "Das Brasilienlied," reveals not only the social and economic constraints to which the German settlers were submitted, but also the image Brazil had in Central Europe—a result of imperial propaganda, which sought to attract European immigrants, at the same time it concealed the terrible grievances of Black slavery. Black and Indigenous people, already tortured, raped, and brutally killed by the country's financial elite, were systematically excluded from public policies as well. The project of social whitening was more successful in some Brazilian states, particularly in the south of the country, where a milder climate and a nature more similar to Europe's presented strong appealing elements.



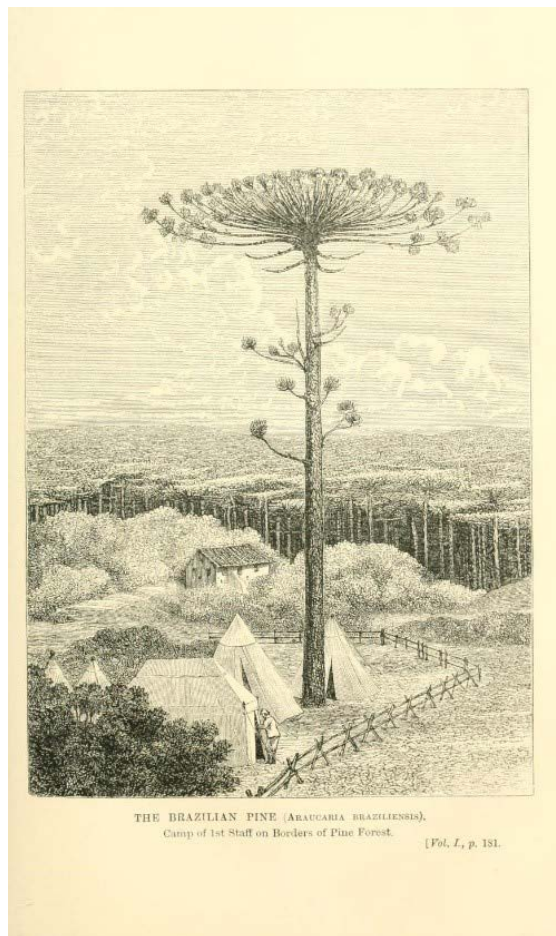
An advertisement for a transatlantic shipping company.³

2 Doch hier bei uns in Deutschland / Herrscht Not und Volksverrat / Und weil durch diesen Umstand / Beschreiten wir den Pfad / Es fliehen all die Jungen / Die Zukunft wird verbannt / So suchen wir den Frieden / In dem Brasilienland.

3 An advertisement for a transatlantic shipping company, unknown creator, n.d. Source: Peter Tamm Sen, Stiftung/ Internationales Maritimes Museum Hamburg. Available at: <https://www.imm-hamburg.de/presse/pressebilder>. Last accessed, April 19, 2022.

Ships from the Hamburg-Südamerika line transported emigrants who sought more than just to reset their difficult lives in another country, to adapt to the climate and to local cultures as far as necessary, but who have also ended up creating hybrid identities, as German cultural elements mixed with Brazilian ones. The first generation of German immigrants was composed of manual laborers, farmers, bakers, and small shopkeepers. By the end of the nineteenth century, bank clerks, speculators, investors, and other petty capitalists joined their countrymen in Brazil. But the vast majority of emigrants comprised poor and humiliated people, who found in Brazil another place to be poor and humiliated.

Trees, Land, People



Paraná pine⁴

The emigrants who moved to the southern states found a vast space to occupy. It was necessary, though, to put an end to the infinity of majestic Paraná pine trees, hundreds of years old, and to make sure that the Indigenous peoples who already inhabited the region were kept at bay. In the south of the country, the relationship between Europeans and Indigenous peoples, particularly the Xetá, Xokleng, Guaraní, and Kaingang, very rapidly escalated from fear to violence.

4 Source: THE BRAZILIAN PINE (ARAUCARIA BRAZILIENSIS), Camp of 1st Staff on Borders of Pine Forest, unknown creator, n. d. In: Thomas Bigg-Wither, *Pioneering in South Brazil: Three Years of Forest and Prairie Life in the Province of Paraná*. London: J. Murray, 1878, pp. 192.

Between the European settlers who ordered the deaths of the Amerindians, the Brazilian thugs and marauders, and the Indigenous population being butchered, remained the immigrant families, elderly people, women, and children, living in a state of terror. They feared the Amerindians, but the panic spread by the invaders was accompanied by hatred and destruction. Set apart by worldviews, language, and culture, deaths followed the first acts of violence throughout the woodlands. There certainly had been warmongering and alliances between Amerindians and Europeans since the beginning of colonization. As the whites expanded, opening up more and more tracks that cut through Indigenous territory and founding more and more villages and military settlements, the conflicts with the Indigenous peoples multiplied. In the south, livestock, mules, and cattle drive enterprises opened up the colonization of Indigenous territories, for which the methods of law manipulation, fraud, or overt attack of Indigenous peoples were employed. So, while in the beginning of colonization the Amerindians were chased in order to be enslaved, by the end of the nineteenth century greed targeted not their bodies but their lands. Especially in the states of Santa Catarina and Paraná, the local Indigenous peoples became known as “Bugres”—but mostly the Kaingang and the Xokleng were ascribed such a derogatory designation. From such epithets, though, much worse things derived. If European immigrants built towns and commerce, by contrast, the grim face of their legacy is destruction. Nature, animals, humans, nothing remains unaffected in side of unbridled greed.

Maria’s house, a small timber cottage, lay deep in the woods. Among the trees, she built her story, in language she dwelt and made her home. There, where colonial expansion expressed itself symbolically and encroached the land, trees remained standing, bushes sprouted again, and people survived.

For the Enemies, the Law

All available mechanisms mentioned above were wielded in order to steal the Indigenous peoples’ land: attempts of establishing alliances, manipulation of colonial law to legitimate land expropriation, document forgery, and, of course, expeditions of so-called just wars (*jus ad bello*), because the Amerindians, allegedly violent and dangerous, were the enemies of the state and of the oligarchies. The massacres the Indigenous people underwent are probably the most violent, filthy, and shameful chapter in the history of the southern Brazil states, the aspects of which became ever more serious and pervasive. To this day, the southern states’ governments do not even have the decency of remembering the past, of contributing decisively to historical reparations, and of acting in favor of the Indigenous communities.

There is a structure of thought in which such actions (and nonactions) are embedded, and still almost two hundred years later. As the Indigenous territories were being conquered—not conquered, stolen—by farmers and colonizing companies interested in founding new settlements, the state took charge of keeping the Amerindians from revolting. Thus, religious

missions arrived in the region in order to congregate and convert the Indigenous peoples to Christianity. There existed many Indigenous groups and subgroups, so this whole history is quite complex. There were many resistance hotspots, but there was no force that could resist European violence. Indigenous leadership was persuaded and vanquished, some peoples surrendered, others were converted, and by the end of the nineteenth century almost all of southern Brazil had been dominated by farms and settlements. Only a few places had still not been encroached, such as some Kaingang territories in Paraná and Xokleng in Santa Catarina. That is the reason for some of the epithets, such as “Bugre”: the intention was to ascribe labels of violence, treachery, filth, and ignorance to the Amerindians. For in that way it would be easier to convince people that they were enemies of the local inhabitants, the institutions, the law, the Church, and even of God himself. Therefore, groups such as the Xokleng who kept challenging the whites endured the bulk of violence. As when the settlement of some regions began in the nineteenth century, like in the Itajaí Valley, Indigenous populations had already suffered from decades of forced migrations and violence—for the Indigenous people, the law; for the immigrants, leniency.

Bounty Hunters and Hunters of Amerindians

Many of the towns in the south have been founded by colonizing companies. Some of them were European in origin, a fact that was used as advertisement in their original countries and in Brazil in order to add value to the enterprises and draw people eagerly to join them. Other small settlements had been founded by ordinary citizens, many of them immigrants, who would from hence brag of their entrepreneurial instincts and praise the mild southern climate—so comforting to weary European bodies. In their presumptuous pride they would also glorify their own diligent, patient, and honest character, as if it were a European preserve, inherent to their own spirit.

Waves of European immigrants crossed the seas and penetrated the southern woodlands. There came Italians, Poles, Ukrainians, but mostly Germans. From the woods they have extracted their products, nature has been altered, controlled, and subjugated for their sake. To this white, pristine, and vain dream, the Indigenous people were but a hurdle to overcome. The relationship between Indigenous peoples and German settlers was a very complex one, but there is no doubt that ground was gained by the Europeans' initiative. At every theft, every offense, every small disruption of the order, more violence resulted from the settlers. The European wrath could not be tamed. Thus, two movements emerged simultaneously in Santa Catarina. On one side, there was a group comprising local businessmen, settlers, and so on: the ordinary citizens who willfully supported the murder of Indigenous people. The local newspapers intended to make reports with a sober tone, saying it was a necessity in face of the Indigenous peoples' attacks and brutality. Alas, how inhumane can ordinary citizens be when fully fed with hatred and driven to a certain course.

Groups of men specialized in hunting and murdering Indigenous people began to form, the so-called *bugreiros*. It was a profession, and a rather prestigious one, for it implied a deep knowledge of the forests, despite its vile purpose and callous and monstrous tasks. The job was to kill Indigenous people: men, women, children, elderly people. To hijack and enslave the survivors, usually children and their mothers. The German settlers made requirements to local representatives for the government to pay for such endeavors. Some of them said the purpose was to drive the Indigenous people into the woods, others claimed that it was to avenge a particular crime, but the truth is that the *bugreiros* were professional murderers. Local politicians, farmers, settlers, and all European people who believed nature and other beings' lives belonged to them mobilized those groups. Men nowadays praised, men after whom towns were named.

The cruelest of the *bugreiros* was called Martim. Martim means warrior of Mars. He was the leader of a band of more than twenty *bugreiros*. For a few days, they would spy on the group targeted to be murdered, wait for when rituals were to be performed, ideally when ritual beverages were ingested. Then, in the middle of the night, they would slowly and stealthily approach the settlement, cut the bows' strings and create havoc, shooting with their guns or setting the huts on fire, so that the startled and sleepy people would come out of their hammocks. The Indigenous men's first thought was to rush to their broken weapons. Babies were hurled up and stabbed alive in front of their mothers. Demoralized and exhausted men watched—amidst the flames, the cries of pain and despair, and the injured bodies crawling frantically—the destruction of their lives, of their customs, and of their hopes, before being themselves shredded by the machetes. The murderers then cut the ears and heads from the dead in order to deliver them to whoever ordered the slaughter, bound to pay a certain value for each dead person. The government of Santa Catarina did nothing, quite on the contrary, the politicians themselves commissioned the deaths. There are images of the results of such raids, some of which even became postcards at the time. Not only was the killing of Indigenous people not concealed, but the slaughters were also proudly publicized. One picture is particularly devastating. It displays a typical image of the group: half of the people are standing, right in front of them others are crouched. The twelve men standing are *bugreiros*, murderers, and torturers. At their feet, lying like prey, are two Xokleng women and eight small children. The men wear hats and traditional southern garments with large scarves around their necks. Some of them show a few minor injuries, resulting from the previous night massacre. They stare at the camera, with stern and proud gazes. The central figure, a slightly shorter man, smokes and smiles with a mocking expression. The women, at the feet of the people who had cut their fathers, brothers, husbands, uncles, and grandfathers into pieces, weep and hold their children. After the night of terror, in which they witnessed the murder of their whole family, they do not know what the future reserves for them, whether they will be enslaved, sold, or locked up in a convent. Their small children, very scared, have their heads down and do not stare at the photographer's lens. Some of them cry, others are exhausted, others even are ashamed. Posing for posterity beside the men who tore their fathers' bodies, destroyed their

homes, and drove their mothers to despair is one more moral punishment for being an Amerindian in Brazil.



Bugreiros with Xokleng women and children⁵

Korikrã, the Indigenous Girl

There were those who defended the murder of Indigenous people, that is to say, those who openly advocated their extermination, while others claimed the bugreiros' purpose should only be to drive the Indigenous people into the forests. Others still believe the bugreiros were only defending the settlers or avenging attacks. The other side, however, allegedly more humanitarian, responded to one Dr. Hugo Gensch, a physician in Blumenau who radically opposed the murderous settlers. He ascribed the concept of civilization only to the Europeans and did not recognize the Indigenous cultures as being equally sophisticated. For that, he believed, by transforming Amerindian cultures he would grant the Indigenous people civilization. According to his view, the Indigenous people should not be driven out, let alone killed, for, after all, it was their territory, and the onset of violence should be credited to the settlers. Each side possessed their own resources, and their opinions were upheld in local newspapers, so Gensch and the settlers publicly attacked each other for years. For the former, the Amerindians possessed the same mental qualities as the non-Indigenous people, and their innate intellectual abilities would allow them to acquire all the cultural values available. And that should put an end to the violence. Dr. Gensch's objective was to civilize the Indigenous people, that is to transform their native culture into a form of European culture. For the civilization that transforms is the same one that kills. One side desired the killing of bodies, the other of spirits.

5 Bugreiros e suas vítimas II (Bugreiros and their victims II), unknown photographer, n.d., Source: Online collection *Os Índios Xokleng—Memória Visual*, Acervo Virtual Silvío Coelho dos Santos (AVISC)/Núcleo de Estudos dos Povos Indígenas (NEPI). Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/avisc/7993800953/in/album-72157631552809908>. Published on September 16, 2012, retrieved on April 19, 2022.

In order to prove his project's validity, Gensch adopted a Xokleng girl called Korikrã. She had survived one of the slaughters carried out by European settlers and was brought to the doctor, who raised her according to German education. Korikrã was renamed. Her new name? Maria. Maria spoke perfect German, read Goethe's poetry, and should ultimately be considered as a German spirit inhabiting an Indigenous body. But Maria had been transformed by social and cultural constraints. She was forced to forsake her mother tongue, to give up on trying to go back to her Indigenous culture, and to adapt her body mannerisms to the tenets of Germanic morality. The frustration resulting from such transformation was interiorized and she was never able to proudly proclaim her Indigenous ancestry, like her namesake did.



Hugo Gensch with his wife and daughter⁶

Gensch thought he could use his own adopted daughter's singular case of social experimentation to attest that the Indigenous people could become similar to the Europeans. For surely the end point of all human evolution was the European. Gensch publicized his experiment, presented his results at scientific conferences in Europe, wrote a book, exchanged letters with experts. Gensch came to the defense of the Indigenous people, fiercely criticizing the so-called pacifications, and he wanted to prove that the violence employed by the Amerindians was not arbitrary, but only a response to the European attacks, not something innate, but a cultural issue. Through German education, he believed, it would be possible to change the Indigenous people, which means in the end that, for Gensch, the Amerindians were nothing but inferior people, with lesser mental faculties, less evolved. Of course, it is ambiguous. For if he, by extinguishing the Indigenous cultures had the intention of extinguishing the Indigenous people themselves, at a moment when people felt free to preach that the Indigenous people should be murdered, and went so far as to hire hit men to do so, that could be considered progressive in relation to the slaughter.

6 Maria Korikrã com a família do Dr. Gensch, em Blumenau: Uma trágica história (Maria Korikrã with Dr. Gensch's family in Blumenau: A tragic story), unknown photographer, n. d., Source: Online collection *Os Índios Xokleng—Memória Visual*, Acervo Virtual Sílvio Coelho dos Santos (AVISC)/ Núcleo de Estudos dos Povos Indígenas (NEPI). Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/avisc/7993759405>. Published on September 16, 2012, retrieved on April 19, 2022.

The incentives to the murder of Indigenous people went beyond the borders of Santa Catarina. The head of the Paulista Museum in São Paulo, another German called Hermann von Ihering, wrote in a scientific article that from the Kaingang people one should not expect elements for progress, and that for populations not conducive to progress there was no other solution but extermination.

And he was one of the most relevant public intellectuals in Brazil prior to the World War I. Murdering Indigenous people was not only a practical matter but an ontological one.

Maria and Decolonial Semiotics

Subsumed within the so-called civilizing discourse is the idea of progress, that humanity treads on a perfectionating trail and that its hurdles must be removed. But in face of such staggering cultural difference, it is futile to speak of humanity as a whole and think we humans improve ourselves spiritually, that we naturally set out in search of perfection, when every generation is confronted by unspeakable brutality. The idea is rather pernicious. There is neither progress nor obstacles, let alone spiritual improvement. We are gullible to the lies we tell ourselves to legitimate our hatred and greed. That is what the ideology of progress is about, to make people believe in individual refinement absorbed in the idea of a natural process of social evolution, when there is nothing but oppression, misery, and destruction in an entanglement created by a system inherently violent and unequal. The discourse according to which human societies evolve and its hurdles eliminated has translated into the most horrific human actions.

But in Brazil this was the political discourse of the economic elites, either regional or national, for whom the ordinary citizen's anger and militancy against the Indigenous peoples were beneficial, because they coveted the lands. Capitalism, that is to say the people who are responsible for maintaining it, does not have the creation of economical guidelines as its objective, as people think. That is a consequence, not a cause. The capital creates an economy, not a financial one, but rather an economy of affections. The capital creates mechanisms of supply and demand of desires, an economy of production of yearnings, distribution of anxieties, consumption of illusions, regulation of delusions and imaginations, and, of course, a law for the elimination of identities.

Hence, in a colonized country such as Brazil that kept all the political, economic, and cultural structures from colonization, one cannot separate capitalism from colonialism. The end of colonialism did not imply the end of slavery, for example, and the end of slavery did not generate the conditions for equality. The European colonists wanted the Black people as servants and the Amerindians to die. Colonialism has ended, but the administration of the state, the economic and political powers have not been altered. Colonization has scarified the Brazilian mentality, and such scars have never been healed. The power relations have been molded by colonization and the ideas about the social places of minorities, women, Black people, and Indigenous people are remnants of the social structures that have grounded a social hierarchy in which white men have occupied the summit and made

use of the rest of the population at will. Colonialism is a kind of collective archetype: the mind has been molded by these power relations, so that it expresses itself almost automatically in this manner. It is necessary to take this into consideration in order to fight such a mental framework. The purge of colonialism begins by language, by transforming signified and signifier, by the political appropriation of language. Full-blooded Bugre, as claimed by Maria. But in southern Brazil the situation is crystal clear: a hundred years ago, European settlers wanted Indigenous peoples' land, the latter of whom would then be persecuted, hunted like animals, surrounded, and tortured. Their grievances were ridiculed. The state of Santa Catarina, apart from having never asked forgiveness to its Indigenous inhabitants for the expropriation of their lands and the successive killings, has also tried to dissociate itself from the brutality it legitimated. And despite fostering some dialogue and compensation, nowadays it still claims certain parts of the land held by the Xokleng people, in a clear reiteration of colonial mentality. Presently, the judges of the Brazilian Supreme Federal Court still have to decide whether the state of Santa Catarina or the Indigenous peoples are the legitimate owners of the land.

Traumatized and terrified people, forced to forever display their agonizing pain beside smiling, victorious murderers, is more than an image of massacre against Indigenous peoples, it is what we are as a nation.

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