

Jôfre Corrêa Netto, the Fidel Castro of Brazil (1921 to 2001)

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Shortly after the Cuban Revolution of January 1959, Jôfre Corrêa Netto became famous as a peasant leader in Brazil. This was a surprising transformation for a man who had worked as a teamster and served his country as a soldier during World War II before taking up the roving life of a traveling salesman (*mascate*) and herbal healer (*herbanário*). Like most Brazilians of the era, he grew up in the countryside and knew the life of peasants and rural workers, but this was not a life he chose to follow. He was much too gregarious, undisciplined and rebellious to spend his life watching vegetables grow. His charismatic qualities and not a green thumb caused the press to turn him into Brazil's "Backlands Fidel Castro." They saw in him a colorful and willing advocate for thousands of threatened tenant farmers in a frontier region of São Paulo state where he had gone to sell pots and pans. Overnight, Jôfre became a peasant leader linked to the Brazilian Communist Party and it proved an identity suited to his personality and an appropriate fit for the moment.

In 1959, Brazil entered the final stage of its Populist Republic, a period marked by the dramatic appearance of peasants and rural workers in the mass media and politics. With everyone from the president to peons calling for agrarian reform, it was as if Jôfre had responded to a second call for national service after the war. Without the slightest sense of contradiction, he blended his war service as a soldier with his service as a peasant leader by adopting the name "Captain Jôfre." By fighting for the rights of rural workers, he saw himself as continuing the WWII fight for democracy, despite experiencing constant persecution by the military police and several arrests and jailings for threatening national security. The 1964 military overthrow of civilian government ended his career as a Communist peasant leader and returned him to a life of wandering, odd jobs, and eventually a military pension for his war service. Jôfre's biography, a story of personality shaped by class, party, regional, ethnic, and national identities, helps illustrate significant aspects of Brazil's Populist era and its aftermath. It also shows how, when the moment is right, individuals can rise above their conditions and join with others to influence history.

The complications in recounting Jôfre's life begin with his birth. Like most poor Brazilians living in remote areas before the 1950s, Jôfre's birth went unrecorded. Until the late 1980s, when scholars and journalists demonstrated an interest in his life story, Jôfre gave his birth date as April 3, 1921. With growing interest in his life as a Communist militant, however, Jôfre began to assert that this date was incorrect and that he had really been born in 1917, a date seemingly chosen to associate his birth with the Bolshevik Revolution and the birth of the Soviet Union. He became all the more emphatic about this date as the Soviet Union itself collapsed, a process which left him feeling angry and dismayed. Identifying with diverse struggles against the imperialist United States, he dressed himself like Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat and then like Iraqi

leader Saddam Hussein and scrawled “Communist Party Base No. 1” on the front of his house in large, runny red-paint letters. Although the records confirm neither 1921 nor 1917 as his birth year, Jôfre’s determination to sustain his rebellious profile suggests the earlier date was chosen to impress and that 1921 is a sounder starting point.

Rebellion and turmoil marked Jôfre’s youth. Political rivalries and dramatic socio-economic change set off rebellions around Brazil in the 1920s and 1930s. The state where Jôfre says he was born, Rio Grande do Sul, initiated some of the revolts and participated in all of them. As Brazil’s southernmost state, the historian Joseph Love explains, Rio Grande developed a bellicose tradition of defending Portuguese-America against its Spanish-American rivals Argentina and Uruguay, which border Rio Grande to the south and west. Its rolling pasture lands gave rise to the *gaúcho*, the Brazilian cowboy, known for his independence, loyalty, and ferocity. Where cowboys in the United States mastered the .45 caliber six-shooter, the *gaúcho* defended himself with a *facão*, a sword-like knife kept stuck in the belt of his blowsy pants. He enlisted in rebellions that seemed to be about power but increasingly related to confrontation between the traditional landed oligarchy and a rising conglomeration of urban, modernizing groups that favored industrial development and professional government.

Determining where Jôfre stood in the midst of this upheaval is not an easy task. The lack of a birth certificate and baptismal record makes Jôfre’s claims of parentage impossible to confirm. He has consistently reported his parents to be Pedro Corrêa Netto and Joana de Figueiredo da Silva and his birthplace as Santo Angelo das Missões. Jôfre’s sense of origin as a *gaúcho* from Santo Angelo formed a strong part of his identity and yet it seems certain that Jôfre was not born in Santo Angelo and if he was born in Rio Grande do Sul, he spent very little time there before moving up river to the state of Mato Grosso. In a 1989 interview, for example, Jôfre says he was born in Rio Grande do Sul but that his mother raised him in Mato Grosso from the time he was three years old.

Santo Angelo sits close to Rio Grande do Sul’s northwestern border with Argentina. There, dividing the two countries, is the wide Uruguay River, used by shippers to carry goods from rivers farther inland to ports down river, including the Atlantic Ocean port at Montevideo on the River Plate. Jôfre remembers nothing about his time here but a half-sister he never knew, Olga Alves Godoy, says their father Pedro operated a crude barge on the river, hauling firewood and lumber from Mato Grosso (“Dense Forest”) to Rio Grande. Olga and Jôfre never met because they each had different mothers. While Jôfre does not remember meeting his father, the younger Olga recounts talk of their father having a second family. Since Jôfre is quite certain that his mother Joana was from Mato Grosso and recalls growing up with *her* father and brothers, it seems quite possible that Pedro formed a family with Joana in Mato Grosso during his travels to gather lumber there. In this scenario, Jôfre loses his claim to being a *gaúcho*.

In matters of identity, facts often matter less than feelings and in this case, Jôfre expresses an uncanny identity with a father who abandoned him and a place he cannot remember and may never have seen. In this way, Jôfre is both representative and exceptional, for until the mid-20th century many Brazilians had little more than family

lore to document their origins and yet, few were as driven as Jôfre to give life a sense of purpose and direction by building a strong sense of identity. Jôfre not only came to celebrate his gaúcho origins as a badge of freedom and strength, he also found in the father he cannot remember a model of manly behavior.

Jôfre's father Pedro was known as a doctor because people came to him for herbal cures. Until 1932, health care specialists in Rio Grande could practice without formal training or license. Those who in other contexts might have been called snake-oil salesmen or medicine-men could earn the prestigious title of doctor in Rio Grande if their cures did the trick more often than not. It seems Jôfre's father knew his trade and impressed his neighbors and his son Jôfre, for this was a trade Jôfre pursued later on, at a time when health care standards and the law were not quite so lax.

In his trades as healer and barge operator, Jôfre's father traveled a lot, establishing a peripatetic life his son would later adopt. João Pires Netto, Pedro's nephew and Jôfre's cousin, speculates that the elder Corrêa Netto abandoned Jôfre in 1924 when he and João's father joined a barracks revolt initiated in Santo Angelo and led by army Captain Luís Carlos Prestes. The rebellious soldiers, tired of ill-treatment in the ranks and frustrated by the backward policies of Brazil's landed oligarchy, converged on Santo Angelo to demonstrate their solidarity with a similar army revolt in São Paulo state. By October, historian Neill Macaulay reports, several hundred troops and civilians followed Prestes and other commanders on an epic, two-thousand mile march through the backlands of Brazil before withdrawing to Bolivia in 1927. Due to his medicinal skills, Pedro left with the troops, João claims. Another rebellion of national import started in Santo Angelo in October 1930 when local Lt. Col. Pedro Góes Monteiro became military leader of the conspiracy that ended the First Republic and brought to power in Brazil Rio Grande do Sul governor Getúlio Vargas. Both Olga and João believe Pedro participated in this movement, claiming Pedro was an especially courageous man.

Jôfre, who did not know these particular stories, nevertheless grew up with the impression that his father was not only brave but a "Communist." This is improbable. Although Captain Prestes eventually became the Brazilian Communist Party's general secretary, he did not join the party until 1931. The party had been founded by a group of intellectuals and artisans in Rio de Janeiro in 1922 and its links to Rio Grande do Sul were limited to a few radicals in Porto Alegre, the state capital. The timing and distance of these events from Santo Angelo makes it unlikely that Pedro's philosophy was significantly influenced by communist ideology. But there does seem to be something to the idea that Pedro was a man of action who participated enthusiastically in rebellion, a tendency said to be characteristic of gaúchos. Whatever the truth, Jôfre's identity has been shaped by the notion that his father was brave and willing to challenge authority and this idea left a family heritage of militancy for his son to emulate.

Pedro's behavior also seems to have left his son with the idea that it was manly to be a womanizer and dead-beat dad. Pedro may have had as many as four children with Jôfre's mother, five with Olga's mother, and untold numbers with other women, for he seems to have spent very little time with either of these two known families. In Brazil at that time (and to this day), Pedro's "way" with women conveyed socially appealing

values of virility, dominance, and freedom. Jôfre followed in his father's footsteps. In 1949, he had a common law wife with whom he had at least one child and in 1961 he married Jandirá Freitas Campos, a student activist, with whom he had three children. There was a third common law wife, too, with whom he had two children. He spent almost no time with his various families, has no stories to tell about his children, and proudly reveals to his male listeners that he has had many additional liaisons and untold numbers of illegitimate children. By the 1990s, his extended family included a second and third generation of fatherless families and troubled children, many of them debilitated and marginalized by the modern scourge of drug abuse and trafficking.

One woman seems to have had a significant impact on Jôfre's life: his mother Joana. "She was everything to me," Jôfre told me in 1997. "She taught me everything. She taught me about character and how to be a cultured person. As a seamstress, she was a master craftswoman." The support of his mother's family enabled him to attend school for three years, probably in the late 1920s, a privilege few in his class then enjoyed. His ability to read and write at that time placed him a notch above the average backlander. As Jôfre remembers it, his mother and father had another son before him—Ney Corrêa Netto—and after him, a daughter of forgotten name who soon died. Jôfre and Ney grew up together but had little contact after the elder son left home in the mid-1930s; the brothers have not had any contact at all since 1961. With his father gone, Joana earned money to raise her sons by sewing. Eventually Jôfre dropped out of school and began work as helper to an ox-cart driver, spending as many as two to three months away from home following the teamster's life. Until he was 13 years old, he walked in front of the oxen, leading them down miles and miles of dirt track, setting up camp along the roadside, where Jôfre remembers roasting such wild game as snakes and fowl. Thereafter, the family migrated to São Paulo state, where they moved from place to place, with Joana sewing and Jôfre pursuing odd jobs and eventually developing some skills as an electrician.

Tired of wandering and underemployment, Jôfre eventually followed the advice of his mother and joined the army. "She told me," Jôfre said, "that poor people never become more than corporals or sergeants but that the army still offered more support than she could." Moreover, in 1939 Vargas instituted a mandatory military service law for Brazilian men. Those who lacked a card documenting their service could not apply for government jobs, benefits, or register to vote; once caught, those without cards had to pay hefty fines. Jofre's mother may have recommended the army to him in these circumstances but Jôfre put off enlistment until October 1940. On the fourth day of the month, he presented himself to the fourth infantry battalion in Quitauna, São Paulo, and was enlisted as a healthy, single, literate, white male with brown hair and clear brown eyes who worked as an electrician and knew how to swim. Toward the end of his life, Jôfre made much of his Army days and when he was not reminiscing about his activities as a Communist peasant leader, Jôfre's core identity was as a veteran of WWII.

World War II was a transitional moment in the history of Brazil's armed forces, as historians José Murilo de Carvalho and Peter Beattie have shown. Since the rebellion of 1930, the army had grown in status, and people began to see it less in its traditional role as a destination for social outcasts and more as a professional, nation-building

institution. It was this idea of the army that must have caught Joana's attention and although it was still in transition during the 1930s, the army had become a respectable institution in the 1940s and soldiers were increasingly seen as men of honor and guardians of the nation. The soldiers of the World War II Brazilian Expeditionary Force (*febianos*) were the first to earn this stature. As veterans, they eventually gained public support for an unprecedented level of old-age benefits, including a pension, medical care, and free housing.

Jôfre's identification with the army seems in sharp contrast to his life as a Communist militant, yet this was a normal if somewhat complicated contradiction, the kind of commingling of opposites that typifies Brazil. Long-time Communist leader Luís Carlos Prestes, for example, began his radical journey as a disgruntled army captain. Although Prestes' ideology and partisanship alienated the army hierarchy and he was jailed from 1935 to 1945, many officers and soldiers respected him for his intelligence, rigor, and nationalism. All the same, the army among all the armed forces of Brazil introduced a program of ideological indoctrination as early as 1934 that aimed to eradicate communist thought in the ranks. Jôfre claims, however, that he was introduced to the Communist Party while in the army. This was a common claim due in part to western alliance with the Soviet Union during the war. Under Prestes and especially after 1945, the PCB shared with the army a hierarchical structure, regimentation, social leveling based on merit, and dedication to defining and advocating solutions to national problems. These consistencies, rather than the stark contrasts between them, contributed to Jôfre's ability to feel patriotic and at home in both organizations. In his mind, he worked to build and defend the fatherland in both the army and the party.

Nothing in Jôfre's service record supports his contention that clandestine Communists helped awaken his political consciousness while in the army. He remembers his time there as one of constantly challenging authority. During the first two years of his enlisted service, his activities were so predictable that they filled only a page or two in the record books kept by army scribes. By the end of 1942, he had reached the pinnacle his mother had envisioned for him by first being promoted a corporal and then a third sergeant. But he never wore three-stripes, and certainly never attained officer status as his "Captain Jôfre" nickname later suggested.

Something happened in the last quarter of 1942 that completely changed his relationship to the army and from then on, the record books recount a perplexing history of repeated bad conduct, desertion, insubordination, and, consequently, months in the brig, including many days of solitary confinement. What had happened? Jôfre explains that a dramatic shift in his attitude came when he learned his mother had died toward the end of the year. "There was this mean sergeant who decided not to tell me my mother was sick and dying until she'd already passed away," Jôfre recounts. The withholding of such important information about this most valued person in his life struck him as high treason and he rebelled against this stern paternalism with barely a pause until dishonorably expelled nearly three years later.

When looking at this record and comparing it to Jôfre's later conversion to proud WWII veteran one cannot help but marvel at his inventive regeneration. He appears as

a quintessential Brazilian *malandro*, a clever manipulator, who because of Brazil's oppressive social structure, is seen as heroic in popular culture. The *malandro* is honored, argues the anthropologist Roberta da Matta, because he is someone who turns weaknesses into strengths, who defies class boundaries and paternalist structures, to build for himself, his friends and family a life of greater comfort and autonomy. He is someone with few privileges who turns inside-out the exclusive, hierarchical Brazilian system, making it work for him. Jôfre saw active duty during WWII only from July 13 to August 6, 1943 when he was sent to help guard a power plant; this was one year before Brazil's expeditionary force invaded Italy. Both before and after this three week period of active duty, Jôfre spent most of his time imprisoned. And yet, to meet him fifty years later at the veteran's compound in Brasília, the federal capital, one would think he had led the final assault on the German stronghold at Monte Castello and earned the rank of captain for bravery under fire. As he aged, Jôfre increasingly identified himself as a *febiano* despite his shabby service record. In 1981, he successfully appealed to have his dishonorable discharge forgiven and gradually accumulated the array of government benefits reserved for ex-combatants. By the mid-1990s, Jôfre typically sported a military beret and kept his veteran's identity card in full view as a badge of honor and privilege.

After his expulsion in January 1945, Jôfre followed an obscure path, working at odd jobs, selling pots and pans, prescribing herbal remedies, running numbers, writing letters for illiterates, and falling afoul of the law. He was arrested in 1953 for battery and in 1956 for knifing a man, serving several months in jail each time. The conservative press made much of his criminal record in order to diminish his leadership after the land struggle broke out in Santa Fé do Sul. They added to the list above, two detentions in 1950 for "identity verification," one in 1952 for a beating, one in 1953 for vagrancy, one in 1954 for gambling, and a "background check" in 1955, but none of these appear in Jôfre's official police record; perhaps the authorities invented these added charges to discredit him. In either event, Jôfre seems to have passed much of the 1950s living on the margins of mainstream society, bouncing around country towns trying to make a living and avoid police attention. The rap-sheet indicates the former soldier encountered a rough life as a civilian but one shaped by a capacity to thumb his nose at Brazil's elitist social structure.

Around 1957, Jôfre arrived in the Santa Fé do Sul region of São Paulo for the first time. In 1988, he told historian Nazareth dos Reis that he moved to the area to find land to farm. In a 1989 interview, he told sociologist Vera Chaia that he had been invited there by an army buddy, a "discharged captain named Guiné," to invest in some land on Grand Island at the confluence of the Grand and Paranaíba rivers. In his 1997 interview with me, however, he said the São Paulo state central committee of the PCB had sent him to the region to agitate among peasants, covering up his political activities by working as a traveling salesman. He told all of us that at first he lived among some fifty families who farmed disputed land in the flood zone of the river bank and that at some point in 1957, while he was away, the man who claimed to own the land had their makeshift homes burnt down and their crops destroyed. "By the time I came back from my travels," Jôfre told me, "they'd burned down forty-five homes, lean-tos, burnt down

with what little money each family had saved over the whole year, burnt down with their harvests stored inside.” Jôfre and the others blamed José de Carvalho (Zico) Diniz, the area’s largest private landholder, for this attack.

This event proved to be the first battle in a confrontation between Jôfre and his peasant allies, and Zico Diniz, his business partners and their retainers in what escalated into the so-called “Grass War.” This prolonged conflict turned Jôfre from a backland’s wanderer into somebody people called the backland’s Fidel Castro, an honorable moniker for almost any Latin American in the context of Cuba’s daring revolution. It uplifted him from a man with few to no connections, not even family, to someone with a rich and varied web of relationships. As Roberto da Matta has explained, relationships, more than any other single factor, define who you are in Brazil. By simply asking the question, “Do you know who you are talking to?,” a man immediately conveyed a sense of power through his relationship to others. Jôfre, this abandoned, demoted, dishonored, much-persecuted roamer, was suddenly mixing company with powerful politicians, union leaders, journalists, and foreigners. Out of respect for his leadership capacities and his military service, he became “Captain Jôfre” to many. All his years of travel, diverse occupations, fitful soldiering, confrontations with authority, and living by his wits suddenly became the stuff of priceless skill and charisma. “God gave me an instinct for leadership,” he said in a 2001 documentary about the Grass War.

By the late 1950s, Brazil was entering a unique period in which doors opened for the agency of people like Jôfre. As the world economy realigned following the war, Brazil enjoyed increased demand for products such as coffee and increased foreign investment as U.S. businesses sought opportunities abroad. “Economic development” and “modernization” were bywords of the era. President Juscelino Kubitschek promised “fifty years of progress in five” and started construction of Brasilia to signal the country’s modernity and advancement. Brazil’s 1958 World Cup victory, its first ever, demonstrated to many that Brazil was indeed “the country of the future.” Part and parcel of these changes was an awakening of mass society, particularly in the countryside, where political movements began to engage the rural underclass. While acclaimed novels and movies in Brazil’s burgeoning cultural industry mined backlands folklore for a sense of national identity, rural workers and peasants themselves insisted on being included in the modernization process. They wanted electricity, appliances, motorized transportation, hospitals, schools, unions, fair wages or prices, and the chance to prosper with the rest of the country and the world. A body of laws grew to offer rural workers rights and duties like other working class Brazilians. In December 1958, for example, Law 3,494 gave tenants the right to have their tenancy prolonged by up to two years so long as they notified their landlords in advance. Such laws inspired peasants to fight for broader social and political participation. Jôfre’s emergence as a peasant leader on the frontier of São Paulo, Brazil’s wealthiest and most industrialized state, coincided with this set of changes.

Santa Fé do Sul was founded in 1948 and the events that took place there had roots in its development process. Much of the region’s land had been purchased in 1946 by a colonization and immigration company known as CAIC. The company, which

was controlled by some of the state's richest and most established growers, represented the transformation of São Paulo agriculture away from its traditional strength in coffee and toward greater diversity. For the most part, CAIC sold or leased land to middling family farmers who intended to grow a variety of crops. In the case of Santa Fé do Sul, however, one landlord—Zico Diniz—bought two extremely large sections of territory, amounting to more than one-fifth of the original CAIC purchase. These were known as the Fazenda Mariana and the Fazenda São João do Bosque.

Diniz represented an expanding force in Brazilian agriculture, the cattleman. As the urban population of Brazil grew, especially in industrial centers like São Paulo, the market for beef expanded. Diniz intended to capitalize on this market by clearing the forests off his Santa Fé land and turning it into pasture. To do this economically, in an era before the widespread availability of machines such as bulldozers, he employed a sub-letting system. By written contract, he rented large portions of his land to a couple of tenant-contractors (José Lira Marim rented the Fazenda Mariana and Joaquim Nogueira rented the Fazenda São João) who then sublet it through oral agreements to hundreds of migrant families. As tenant-farmers, the migrant's job was to clear the land of dense, tangled woods, cultivate it, and then plant *capim-colonião*, a vigorous pasture grass. They were supposed to make a living by selling surplus food from their crops and by earning a little money for each acre of grass they planted. Tenant-contractors Marim and Nogueira earned money by selling the cleared wood for firewood, lumber, and railroad ties. Zico Diniz claimed half the wood sales profits and, after three to five years, stood to gain more than 18,000 acres of new pasture for his cattle herds at virtually no cost. This was how it was supposed to work, at any rate.

This tried and true method of exploiting both natural and human resources ran aground in April 1959 when Jôfre inspired some of the tenant-farmers to up-root the grass they themselves had planted in their crops at the behest of Nogueira and Marim. The potential threat to the established order posed by Jôfre's activities had been under observation by São Paulo's secretive "political and social order" police for several months. In early March, an agent reported Jôfre's participation at a neighborhood meeting organized in São Paulo to protest the high cost of living and a spy at a meeting of the PCB's rural labor organizing front (ULTAB) noted the presence of this "communist and leader of the Santa Fé farmers association." The spy reported that Jôfre denounced Zico Diniz for treating "long-resident peasant families in Santa Fé like animals." Earlier intelligence showed Jôfre had earned some clout in the region by campaigning in 1958 for Santa Fé do Sul mayoral candidate Deraldo da Silva Prado. Inaugurated January 1, 1959, Mayor Prado warmly received a petition from "thousands" of farmers living in the county. The petition asked for his help in providing for their medical and schooling needs. The petition also requested that the mayor and city council support the peasants in "creating an association of farmers" so that the farmers and municipal government could "work together more easily and less painfully to help Santa Fé grow and to promote a better standard of living for the greatness" of the state and the "pride" of the nation.

The list of those who signed the petition has not surfaced so it is difficult to assert that Jôfre was responsible for it. It is clear, however, that by March the police had

identified Jôfre as a leader of the Santa Fé peasant movement and by June, when a large assembly of more than 1,000 peasants formally founded the association, Jôfre was elected president by acclamation. His apparent connections in São Paulo, his role in the April grass uprooting, and his charisma propelled him to leadership.

But what caused his involvement in the first place? Although the sources are plentiful for this period of his life, they are silent or ambiguous about his sudden appearance as a full-fledged political activist. It should be said that Jôfre's recollection of this period rejects the notion of transition. He argues that his father was a communist, that he became a Communist in the army, and that the PCB sent him to Santa Fé do Sul to organize the peasants. But this version is almost certainly false. Although the authorities persistently assumed he was a Communist, PCB leaders deny it to this day. In 1994, head PCB rural labor organizer Lindolfo Silva said that "Jôfre had nothing to do with us, nothing more than a similar outlook in his head. Jôfre was just making the most of the situation, to defend those people." After the uprooting, the PCB sent Pedro Renaux Duarte, acting president of ULTAB, to Santa Fé to help settle the situation. "I don't know if he was a member of the party," Duarte told me. "He was a natural leader from the area." The police said he was called Captain Jôfre because he had violent tendencies and was "militant." But all other sources contend it was his charisma that earned him this title. "He was the darling of all the peasants," said Duarte. "It's a name I got from the people," Jôfre said in 1989. They admired him, he says, for his aggressive response to the 1957 incident in which their riverside farms were burnt down. He claims to have pursued outside support for the peasants in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. This is possible but unlikely unless he had relationships established for him by someone else, given his evident lack of connections.

There were Communists in the region and at least two became connected to the association: Arlindo Quiozini, a tenant-farmer on the Fazenda Mariana who owned a small rice processing machine, and Olimpio Pereira Machado, a peasant poet who Jôfre claims to have befriended in 1957. It is quite possible that these two influenced Jôfre to get involved and that they came up with the idea of seeking alliances and founding an association. Readers of PCB newspapers also knew that since 1954, the party had pursued a strategy of founding associations in order to enhance the rights of rural workers and peasants. By 1959, dozens had been formed in the state of São Paulo, and, despite their questionable legal standing, they often helped the rural working classes defend themselves and gain political experience. More than likely then, Jôfre simply got caught up in local circumstances, learned from his friends, and found in the association a stage for his storehouse of skills.

As the grass began to grow and stifle the farmers's crops in March, Jôfre stepped up his activities. Before the up-rooting took place, he threatened the action in several confrontations with the tenant-contractors Marim and Nogueira. Contacts with lawyers seem to have encouraged him. Roberto Valle Rollemberg, a politically-connected lawyer from Jales, the region's judicial and administrative center, spoke for the nascent association at Mayor Prado's inauguration and a Santa Fé lawyer and publisher, Nuno Lobo Gama D'Eça, donated his services to the association and its members. In conversations with these attorneys, association leaders developed the argument that

Law 3,494 gave tenants the right to prolong their stay on the land. Moreover, a wave of agrarian reform measures from Cuba to northeast Brazil, where a sugar plantation was being considered for expropriation and distribution to resident workers, led Jôfre and the others to argue that if the tenant-farmers held on long enough, they might be able to permanently keep the land they had cleared and planted. Jôfre promoted these ideas and claimed the association's position was supported by law. In a society where the law always seemed to favor the powerful and the wealthy, to be an impersonal force of oppression, most people appreciated its power. The supposed legality of the plan to stay on the land and the morality (or justice) of up-rooting the grass to restore the crops, gave Jôfre's arguments considerable weight. To have the law on *their* side meant turning the world upside down, a social revolution of sorts. And it was just the idea of this turning tide that made Jôfre so threatening.

Anticipating the tenant-farmers' resistance early in April, Diniz appealed in court for a preventive injunction against Jôfre and the association. The court asked the police to open an investigation. The authorities concluded that the association was subversive, allowing them to close it down by confiscating its belongings, basically some leaflets, legal papers, and a desk located at a boarding house in the village of Rubineia. But these measures did not stop Jôfre's plans. Rather than be intimidated, he took the lead in organizing an up-rooting of 60 to 240 acres on the Fazenda Mariana. "The peasants set off with Jôfre leading them on horseback," said Benedito da Silva, an area resident. "It was Jôfre's way of implanting his leadership," said Laurindo Novaes Netto, Rollemberg's law partner.

The sources agree that Jôfre Corrêa Netto instigated the "grass war" and inspired the tenant-farmers to resist being expelled from their farms. By April 1959, the expulsion of some 800 families—perhaps as many as 5,000 people—was imminent. The contracts Marim and Nogueira had with Diniz obliged them to return one-half the land they'd rented by September 1959 and the rest by September 1961. The first half, where the majority of the peasants lived, was to be delivered as pasture by the end of January 1959. Some argue that Nogueira and Marim misled many peasants, promising them that their tenancy would be for five years. Others had arrived recently and just when their first crops began to grow, the overseers ordered them to plant grass and leave. Newspaper reports speak of their hardship and misery. The grass stifled their food crops and some complained of starving. Many were lucky to eat meals of roast *capivara*, a giant rodent, and boiled roots. Some noted an increase in the death of infants. One family still living in the area in 1999 reported the tragic loss of five babies during this period. They complained that it "wasn't just " to entice poor migrants to the region with promises of great opportunity, only to kick them out just as they had succeeded in turning the wilderness into productive farm land. Reluctantly, some began to plant the capim in their fields. But Jôfre and his comrades in the association understood the tenant-farmers' misery and seized on their complaints and needs to resist their expulsion. They adopted an ancient method of resistance by destroying the product of their labor in order to take control of the situation. Some tore up the grass and announced their intentions to stay put. Intuitively, Jôfre grasped the core injustice. "My friends," Jôfre said, "let's treat these grass clods well so that we can send them to

Diniz and the governor to eat!” Speaking for many, he said no to the idea that the farmers quietly give up their crops and livelihoods so that cattle could be grazed for a meat market few of them could hope to enjoy.

This audacious act attracted considerable attention from authorities, the media, and politicians, and led to Jôfre’s incarnation as the “Fidel Castro of the São Paulo Backlands.” Naturally, one of the first reactions came from Diniz and his agents. Soon after the April 16th uprooting on the Fazenda Mariana, the landlord filed a complaint against Jôfre and the association and a list of nineteen named and other unnamed tenant-farmers, appealing to the court to block them from further uprooting activities and demanding indemnity payments. The Fazenda Mariana swarmed with police and Jôfre sought refuge on the Fazenda São João where he soon organized another uprooting. In May and June, reporters from São Paulo’s two leading papers, *Ultima Hora* and *O Estado de São Paulo*, arrived to cover the story. The Rio de Janeiro-based news magazine, *O Cruzeiro*, also sent a reporter and a crew arrived from São Paulo’s nascent television industry, TV Tupi. Press attention raised questions about the behavior of authorities and the duties of the state, pressuring politicians and bureaucrats to get involved in settling the dispute. Jôfre enjoyed the attention. He had always demonstrated an unusual flare for fashion by wearing peculiar hats and boots, but now he adopted revolutionary-chic by cultivating a beard and sporting a beret. Jokingly, his associates started to call him Fidel and the allusion found its way into police reports and the popular press. On May 16th, as part of a nine-part series on the events in Santa Fé do Sul, *Ultima Hora* ran a cover story about Jôfre’s role titled “Backlands ‘Fidel Castro!’”

The name itself propelled Jôfre to national attention partly because of the timing. From its start, stories about the revolution in Cuba appeared regularly on the cover of Brazilian newspapers. The dark, bearded faces of Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara became readily recognizable images, ones associated with proud nationalism, militancy, and working class rights. Jôfre’s military background, his height, dark beard, and backlands peasant organizing activities gave people enough reason to imagine the comparison. For authorities, the similarities were more than skin deep. They worried that Santa Fé, with its river access and links to three states, was strategically located and that Jôfre had the motivational skills to set off a rebellion among what they assumed to be a group of illiterate, ignorant, desperate, and easily manipulated peasants. While Castro had a tenuous relationship with Cuban Communists, the network of Cold War military and police agencies in the Americas assumed he was a Red. Since Jôfre worked closely with known PCB activists in Santa Fé, his “Fidel Castro” nickname gave authorities pause. But they never expressed a doubt that they could contain the Grass War, and there is no reason to question their confidence. No one spoke of revolution: both Silva and Duarte of the PCB saw in the event and in Jôfre a chance to enhance their image and utility as power brokers of the working classes to government authorities, not as revolutionary leaders of the masses. In 1997, Jôfre insisted that he never intended to model Castro, either in appearance or in behavior. “I take off my hat to Fidel and Guevara but if I’d followed their line in Santa Fé, needless bloodletting would have resulted,” he said. “I never followed Fidel’s approach, I followed the PCB’s.”

The party’s approach was oriented by a “popular front” strategy. They sought

alliances with the “progressive bourgeoisie” to fight against the “feudal lords” and those willing to sell-out to “imperialists.” In their thinking, a democratic, national capitalist system had to precede the socialist “stage of history.” The Brazilian Communist Party, like the Communist Cuban Popular Socialist Party, was not a revolutionary party. And Brazilians, like Cubans, were not revolutionary people. The Communist parties of both nations had trouble with Fidel and Jôfre because they refused to take orders. Backed by wealthy parents, a rigorous Jesuit education, and a law degree, Castro imposed discipline on himself and his followers but his independence and “adventurism” scared the Communists. Jôfre’s background differed entirely from Fidel’s but he too irritated Communists with his independence and lack of discipline. If Jôfre had been a trusted party operative in the region, the Grass War would never have happened because this was just the sort of provocative act the party avoided in order to build its credentials as a respectable and serious proponent of orderly progress.

Jôfre’s behavior served the party by grabbing headlines and drawing attention to the problems of the rural poor, a constituency the PCB had been trying to make its own since the mid-1940s. But Jôfre’s behavior also produced the Grass War’s only bloody encounter, something the Communists wanted to avoid. On the morning of August 5th, Jôfre stopped at a bar on his way to catch a train to São Paulo when a gunman shot him in the face and leg with a .38 caliber revolver. The first bullet, fired point blank, smashed through his teeth and lodged miraculously in his jaw. The second bullet, fired at his gut, missed its mark, too, when Jôfre reacted quickly to the first shot. The shooter, later identified as a man named Silva Preto, fled the scene and bystanders are said to have run about town yelling, “They’ve killed Jôfre! They’ve killed Jôfre!”

But “they” had not killed Jôfre. By the next morning he had arrived by plane in a São Paulo hospital for treatment of his wounds. Duarte argues that Jôfre brought the shooting on himself by refusing to follow party restrictions against speaking out, drinking, and chasing women. Jôfre could not be silenced and the more he spoke out against Zico Diniz and his allies, the more Duarte worried about his safety and the image of the party. Jôfre spent lots of time in bars and relished the attention his new fame brought him. Some alleged that Silva Preto shot him in a dispute over “a blond whore.” Predictably, Jôfre’s opponents dismissed the shooting as a “personal matter” but this is doubtful. Although Silva disappeared and the state never tried or convicted anyone for the crime, many fingers pointed at the Fazenda São João administrator Joaquim Nogueira. Nogueira admitted that the shooter worked for him and that he wanted to see Jôfre dead. After the shooting, the police suggested he leave the area until tensions relaxed. In 1987, he told historian Nazareth Dos Reis that he challenged Silva to shoot Jôfre “as a joke.” But naturally Nogueira stopped short of admitting he hired an assassin. Like Jôfre’s supporters at the time, most analysts agree that it was a political crime, designed by Diniz or Nogueira to silence an agitator in hopes of reestablishing control in the region.

After Jôfre’s departure, control was gradually regained by the state government. The governor sent to the region a versatile biologist named Paulo Vanzolini as troubleshooter with special powers to contain and settle the dispute. The PCB assisted him in a clever way. While the party condemned the shooting and threatened violence, it

also worked to find a compromise. The PCB put out the order that if any other peasant were shot they would “burn down the fazendas, not leaving a single tree standing. It will be violence against violence.” In this way, the party used the incident to gain some leverage and convince the governor to take the conflict seriously. Duarte then worked closely with Vanzolini to persuade the tenant-farmers to accept a one year extension on their tenure. By the end of September, they managed to convince Diniz and his men to allow most of the others to stay on until July 1961. Lawyers for the two sides wrote a model contract and Vanzolini attended mass meetings organized by the association to get it signed; they also rode horseback around the vast property to get the reluctant ones to accept the deal. (Foreshadowing future trouble, some worried that by signing the contract they were giving up on the promise of owning the land that Jôfre had spoken about.) The party presented the contract deal as a great victory. At the end of September, the weekly PCB tabloid, Novos Rumos, ran an article titled “Landlord Loses the Grass War.” It featured a photograph of Jôfre, with a caption that described him as the “leader of the Santa Fé do Sul peasants.” In the photo, Jôfre projected an image of great confidence. He sported a mustache and stood, in a relaxed pose with his left hand in his coat pocket.

Jôfre had been on his way to a São Paulo rally organized by the PCB when Silva shot him. When finally released from the hospital in mid-September—with one of the bullets still embedded in his mouth—he found the party had more work for him to do. For a few weeks, they put him through training in communist ideology and clandestine organizing methods. His notoriety after the shooting seemed to enhance his value as a peasant spokesman and the party directed him to speak at various protest rallies and to “preside” over the founding of rural labor associations and unions. In this populist period, when political leaders and parties vied with one another to be the legitimate voice of the so-called masses, Jôfre served to strengthen the Communist’s claim to leadership of the rural working classes. This image mattered to the party since more and more politicians and groups sought rural constituents. (A lawyer and Socialist party politician from Northeast Brazil named Francisco Julião and his Peasant Leagues organization stood out among competitors.) Jôfre’s effectiveness in this role was acknowledged in a 1970 English-language publication when he was described as one of “two authentic peasant leaders of national reputation” that the PCB counted among its ranks. Ironically, Jôfre had few credentials as a peasant but he certainly knew how to motivate them.

In November, Jôfre was back in Santa Fé do Sul. From his São Paulo hospital bed in August 1959, Jôfre had proclaimed his intention to return to the fight in Santa Fé. “I’m going back,” he told a reporter. “Threats don’t mean anything to me. The peasants need me to carry the movement forward.” The police ridiculed his presence in the region, describing his failed attempts to revive the movement by bragging about his travels and meetings with the São Paulo governor and President Kubitschek. But on November 19, he organized a public event to celebrate setting the founding stone of what was planned to be the association’s new building near downtown Santa Fé and a number of dignitaries and peasant militants participated. The success of the ground-breaking ceremony inspired a new attitude of concern among the police. Later secret

police reports noted that peasants took off their hats to him on the street, called him Captain Jôfre, and treated him “like a god.” An informant concluded that “a greater rural agitator than Jôfre can’t possibly exist.”

Jôfre worked at another level during his second appearance in the region. Using techniques he learned during his post-operative tutelage with São Paulo Communists, Jôfre held clandestine meetings to convince the tenant-farmers to defy their contracts by not planting grass in December and January. When outsiders hired by Nogueira and Marim planted grass in the tenants’ fields, some acted quickly to uproot it. In December, a group of merchants sent a petition to government officials requesting more protection from the militants in order to avoid a repeat of 1959. Paradoxically, some of these same merchants had supported Jôfre and the association previously, calculating that peasants would be more reliable consumers than cattle. Tensions flared as more police were sent to the area. In February 1960, the police raided the homes of peasant militants and arrested a group of twenty-nine on vague charges, intimidating them before being forced to release them. In March, the news that a decadent sugar farm in the northeast state of Pernambuco had been expropriated and distributed to Peasant League members revived expectations of Jôfre’s land reform vision coming true in Santa Fé. In April, Jôfre traveled to São Paulo to attend a conference of union leaders, thanking them for their support and appealing for their continued solidarity. In May, Jôfre presided over a “roundtable” discussion in Santa Fé with political leaders and agricultural experts that was attended by “hundreds of tenants and their families, including their little children.” Those in attendance called for prolonging tenancy once again in order to await the governor’s decision on distributing the land.

But Zico Diniz and his associates opposed land reform and new negotiations. To fight back, they repeated some of the violent tactics of 1957. His henchmen burned down a number of farms and planted grass directly in the peasants’ crops. But as the cool fall breezes of the high, dry plains came in, the situation suddenly changed with Jôfre’s arrest and imprisonment. On May 23, Jôfre was indicted and on June 2, some six weeks before an expected showdown over the expiring contracts, he was arrested and detained in Jales under the provisions of the National Security Law. Jôfre was held in jail for three months before being convicted. Aimed at Communists, the 1953 national security law allowed for the “preventive imprisonment” of individuals deemed a threat to the “social order.” On July 18, a judge used the law to charge Jôfre with threatening order by “inciting the Santa Fé do Sul farmers to act against a judicial decision” barring further grass uprooting. The police hoped Jôfre’s imprisonment would reduce the chance of trouble in the region since without him, they concluded, the “farmers have no leader.”

Police hopes were dashed by subsequent events. The association and its officers survived Jôfre’s arrest and the jailing itself seemed to intensify rather than relieve the struggle. In June, association vice president Olimpio Machado Pereira published a poem celebrating the inspiration of “fearless Jôfre” and the importance of the peasant organization in resisting the violent actions of “big sharks” like Diniz. Association lawyers Rollemberg and Novaes Netto went to work appealing for Jôfre’s release and petitions from politicians and union leaders began to arrive at the Jales

court. In July, Olimpio expressed “indignation” toward authorities for the charges of subversion leveled against Jôfre and concluded that peasants “know perfectly well that Jôfre was no agitator but a man who cried out against injustice.” The real agitators, he wrote, were Diniz and the Jales judge. Later in the month, fifteen tenants were arrested after they uprooted nearly 60 acres of grass in protest against Jôfre’s imprisonment. Another large tenant family then tore up more than 100 acres in protest over the arrest of his neighbors. Realizing how little had been gained by Jôfre’s arrest, the governor sent Vanzolini back to the region in August.

Vanzolini encountered a difficult situation when he arrived. The police did not follow his orders and the gunmen of Diniz and Nogueira had the run of the place. They terrorized resistant tenant-farmers by filling their water wells with dirt and burning down their shacks. Vanzolini befriended Olimpio, telling the secret police that he was useful and that it was better not to arrest him until calm had been established. With Olimpio’s help and the backing of the governor, Vanzolini began to regain control. He had belligerent policemen replaced, confiscated Diniz’s gun, and had his henchmen arrested. Then he worked on the tenants, concluding that forty-two out of 600 remaining families wanted to stay. For the majority, the state offered several sacks of rice and transportation to government land where they could start new farms all over again, but no financial aid. Belligerent tenants used the association to sue Diniz for damages against their personal property and the destruction of their farm buildings. Vanzolini tried to buy off some while Diniz, now disarmed, used cattle as a weapon, letting 500 loose on the Fazenda Mariana and 1,000 on the Fazenda São João. The back of the movement was broken and at the end of the month, when Vanzolini felt he had settled the conflict, the secret police arrested Olimpio and other association leaders and confiscated all their remaining possessions. The Grass War was over but Jôfre lived on.

Jôfre waited in jail until September when he was tried with Olimpio and other association leaders. On September 4, the court convicted them of trespassing and of threatening national security by inciting violent class struggle, sentencing Jôfre to three years and the others to sixteen months jail time. Releasing these “political prisoners” became a cause celebre for the Communist party and one that succeeded at the end of the year when the Supreme Court overturned the convictions. The Court unanimously supported the defendants’ argument that using hoes to uproot grass on land they had rented constituted neither a violent act nor a private property invasion. By the first of the year, Jôfre was free again. He spent the next twenty months in liberty, traveling from town to town, speaking out against “feudal landlords,” organizing rural workers, serving as a peasant delegate at state and national conferences, and celebrating the Cuban revolution. He told Brazilians in January 1961 that they should “imitate the Cuban revolution which, even though it was small, demonstrated great strength in overthrowing North American trusts.” In November 1961, a play written about the events in Santa Fé and featuring a protagonist based on Jôfre premiered at the first national congress of rural workers, where Brazilian President João Goulart made an appearance.

Arrested again in September 1962 for threatening national security, Jôfre spent the remainder of the populist era in jail. During his imprisonment, Jôfre continued to serve the rural labor movement as a symbol. Communist organizers and publications

exploited him to document the injustices faced by the rural working classes. In May 1964, almost two months after the Brazilian armed forces had toppled the presidency and cracked down on social movements, especially those tied to the Communist party, Jôfre returned to society. Interrogated by the secret police upon his release, Jôfre denied affiliation with the Communist party and the “peasant leagues.” He must have known that the times and power relationships had changed. The new military regime had declared war on the left-wing. The Fidel Castro of Brazil had lost his canvas and he became a near ghost until historical researchers began to paint his portrait in the 1980s.

Jôfre’s identification with Fidel Castro offers insights about Brazilian society in the early 1960s. As we have seen, very little in Jôfre’s background, character, and behavior supported the comparison. The police accused him of seeking this identity by growing a beard in the spring of 1959 but within a month, they also reported that he had cut it off and was now “wearing a moustache like Joseph Stalin.” Clearly this was just Cold War speculation and reveals nothing about Jôfre’s sense of self. The daily newspaper *Ultima Hora* coined the “Backlands Fidel Castro” image and used it whether or not Jôfre had facial hair. Samuel Wainer published the newspaper and he was well-known as a supporter of the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB) which was founded by President Getúlio Vargas in 1945. This party promoted working class organization through government sanctioned unions, associations, and leagues. Its political candidates sought the support of organized workers by promising better wages, lower prices, and more social services like schools and clinics. As a typical populist party, a nationalist platform was fundamental. For many Latin Americans, Castro was a brave nationalist, someone who stood up against a dictator-puppet of foreign interests to reclaim Cuba for the benefit of Cubans. For Wainer, describing Jôfre as Fidel meant linking Brazilian experience to Cuban experience and the PTB to what appeared to be the triumph of populist and nationalist causes. While Jôfre stood in for Fidel, the landlord Zico Diniz played the role of the dictator who would not let the rural working classes advance. By attaching the Fidel Castro of Brazil handle to Jôfre, Wainer must have also hoped to sell more newspapers to his largely working class readership. The name said more about Brazil at the time than it did about Jôfre.

As an individual, Jôfre was transformed by the Grass War of Santa Fé do Sul. We cannot know for certain what triggered his transformation from a malandro to a militant but whatever it was, it changed his life. He was almost forty years old in 1959 and he discovered a calling in the Grass War that took him far beyond his own concerns, that made him someone who mattered. Psychologists might emphasize the influence of a fatherless upbringing in shaping Jôfre’s rebellious character. Jôfre prefers to emphasize his origins in the combative state of Rio Grande do Sul and argues that he descended from a long line of Communists. But Communist ideology rarely broached his lips and played a very small part in the Grass War. It is just as easy to find Christian origins for the most typical PCB phrase of the era, “the land belongs to those who work it.” Among the multiple sources for his awakening one must list his army service, the actions of his peasant comrades, the support of Communists, and the context of Brazilian populism.

As the 1950s unfolded, equal rights for rural workers and promises of land reform sprang from the campaign baggage of Brazilian politicians. The link between the

nation's success and the well-being of peasants was still quite tenuous by 1959 but, inspired by populist rhetoric, the tenant-farmers of Santa Fé do Sul latched onto the idea. Among them, the itinerant non-conformist former soldier and self-proclaimed gaúcho named Jôfre Corrêa Netto proved himself most adept at merging his own identity with this emerging national identity. Elaborating on his World War II role in the struggle against fascism, he encouraged his colleagues to call him Captain Jôfre and associated with Communists in building an organization to fight for the peasant's right to participate in the country's progress. He seems to have started this campaign haphazardly, without fully understanding its significance. At first it may have seemed like another road adventure in a life already full of detours. But the attempted assassination made it clear the stakes were high. The shooting and his education among professional Communist activists in São Paulo turned him into a serious militant. He could have disappeared from the stage but he rose instead to confront his assailants and continue the fight in a far more disciplined fashion. On one level, he ceased to be an individual and became a social being, a historical agent. While events in Santa Fé *made him*, he made *them*, too.

To learn more, consult the following sources:

Peter M. Beattie, The Tribute of Blood: Army, Honor, Race, and Nation in Brazil, 1864-1945 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

This book looks at what the army meant to soldiers and helps us understand why Jôfre may have been both attracted and repulsed by his military service.

Roberto DaMatta, Carnivals, Rouges, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma Translated by John Drury (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1991).

DaMatta's book examines the intriguing character and social role of the *malandro* in Brazil.

Joseph Love, Rio Grande do Sul and Brazilian Regionalism, 1889-1930 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971).

This detailed study of Jôfre's supposed home state explains the significance of being a *gaúcho*.

Clodomir Santos de Moraes, "Peasant Leagues of Brazil," in Agrarian Problems and Peasant Movements in Latin America ed Rodolfo Stavenhagen (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 453-501.

This article remains the most succinct and accurate overview in English of peasant political activism in Brazil during Jôfre's time.

Cliff Welch, The Seed Was Planted: The São Paulo Roots of Brazil's Rural Labor Movement (University Park: Penn State Press, 1999).

São Paulo state was at the center of rural labor militancy in Brazil and this book explains why.

Cliff Welch, "The Shooting of Jôfre Corrêa Netto: Writing the Individual Back into Historical Memory," Radical History Review 75 (Fall 1999), 28-55.

This article closely examines different perspectives on the attempt to kill Jôfre in 1959.

Cliff Welch and Toni Perrine, Grass War! Peasant Struggle in Brazil 2001 VHS 34 m. Distributed by The Cinema Guild, New York, NY.

Archival footage and interviews with participants such as Jôfre bring the conflict in Santa Fé do Sul alive.