

The Conquest of the “Gigantic Green World”: The 1964 Brazilian Military Dictatorship’s Harm on the Amazon Rainforest

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Abstract

Today, over 20% of the Amazon Rainforest has been destroyed and thousands of Indigenous people have perished. This is not an accident. In fact, its systematic destruction can find its roots heavily in the policies of the Brazilian military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. While historians have studied Brazil’s dictatorial government’s harm to the Amazon, environmentalists have documented ecological deforestation, and scholars have reported Indigenous displacement, existing scholarship fails to recognize these as interconnected historical processes relating to Brazil’s colonial history. This paper argues that Brazil’s military government employed Amazon colonization campaigns and Indigenous extermination efforts disguised under the guise of national development and Operation Amazonia, deliberately reviving and institutionalizing colonial extraction patterns and cementing the Amazon as a frontier for both local and global exploitation. By situating the dictatorship within Brazil’s broader history of Amazonian governance, tracing colonial patterns, and studying Indigenous resistance movements, the essay aims to understand the destruction of the Amazon as more than an environmental crisis but rather a colonial and labor issue. Because contemporary Brazilian development programs echo 1960s strategies, only by studying the Amazon’s history and understanding environmental conservation, Indigenous sovereignty, and labor justice as inseparable struggles can Brazil begin to undo the colonial habits it still practices today.

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I. Introduction

On October 9, 1970, a centuries-old Brazil nut tree crashed onto the Amazon rainforest floor. Standing over it triumphantly with a large chainsaw was Brazil’s president, General Emílio Garrastazu Médici (1969–1974), as his entourage of aides and cabinet members applauded his conquest. Soon, a large bronze plaque was nailed to the jagged stump, reading, “On these banks of the Xingu, in the midst of the Amazon jungle, the President of the Republic began the construction of the Trans-Amazonian Highway, a historic start to the conquest of this gigantic green world.”¹ This beheaded tree, celebrating the founding of an ambitious highway development project spanning the Atlantic coast of Brazil to the Peruvian border, foreshadowed a dark future for the Amazon’s trees, biodiversity, and Indigenous inhabitants.

The Amazon is the largest rainforest in the world, its lush canopies holding over 410 Indigenous communities, not including countless uncontacted communities, and 10% of the planet’s known biodiversity.² Although the rainforest covers over 59% of Brazil’s land area, it remains sparsely settled by non-Indigenous Brazilians, housing a mere 4% of the nation’s population. Consequently, the region remained unscathed by infrastructure projects until the mid-1960s.³ However, after the authoritarian regime Médici would later lead seized power in the 1964 military *coup d’état*, it swiftly adopted the nationalist motto *Integrar para não entregar* or “integrate to not surrender,” codifying the occupation and exploitation of the Amazon before foreign powers as a core political goal in the program called Operation Amazonia.⁴ The proposed 2,500-mile highway, the biggest development project in South America, was just one component of the military government’s policies to “[conquer] this gigantic green world.”⁵

Even though the supposedly promising road project was abandoned in 1974, its highway construction—including the expansive feeder roads and blossoming settlements developed during the four years of construction—threatened over 200,000 Indigenous lives and proliferated deforestation to unprecedented levels.⁶ The Amazon regulates the global climate by absorbing roughly 100 to 200 billion metric tons of carbon each year, making it essential to the world’s survival.⁷ However, about 20% of the Amazon has been destroyed in the last fifty years, beginning in the middle of the aforementioned military dictatorship.⁸

The dictatorship’s drastic, ambitious policy changes for the Amazon and transformative development projects raise the following questions: Why was the conquest of the Amazon rainforest a core part of the Brazilian military dictatorship’s political agenda from 1964 to 1985? Through the Trans-Amazonian Highway and other Amazon colonization projects, how and to what extent did Brazil’s military dictatorship transform the Amazon into a site of violent geopolitics and resource extraction? How did those policies affect Indigenous peoples, laborers, and biodiversity?

This paper argues that Brazil’s military dictatorship (1964–1985) used Amazon colonization projects and Indigenous extermination campaigns as land and power grabs disguised as national development projects. Through these campaigns, the military government’s reign revived and institutionalized extractive colonial legacies and cemented the Amazon as a frontier for local and global exploitation, producing its current state of devastation. While these policies ushered in the growing devastation of the Amazon’s ecology and inhabitants, Indigenous and labor resistance movements grew, making the causes of environmental conservation, Indigenous survival, and labor rights fundamentally interdependent.

II. Literature Review

Postcolonial scholars generally agree that imperialism has affected the Amazon’s governance. Thomas E. Skidmore’s *Brazil: Five Centuries of Change* demonstrates how Brazil’s history has been characterized by continuous themes of violence and social inequalities.⁹ In the article “The Amazon and its peoples have a history—and that’s why the forest is what it is,” archaeologist Eduardo Neves investigated the impact of exterminating Indigenous communities and enslaving Black people since Portugal’s colonization of Brazil. He asserts these colonial legacies have deeply influenced Brazil’s governance, historic exploitation of the Amazon, and systemic mistreatment of Indigenous Amazonian communities.¹⁰ Elsewhere, Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn’s *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers and Defenders of the Amazon* further argues that modern deforestation in the Amazon cannot be understood without studying the 500 years of deforestation. Analyzing “centuries of development, destruction and social change in the Amazon,” Hecht and Cockburn demonstrate how actions of local elites often puppeted by movements of international capital have significantly increased the destruction of the Amazon, explicitly referencing the Brazilian military dictatorship’s tactics.¹¹

In fact, although prevailing nationalist scholarship and even Brazilian history textbooks have celebrated the 1964 coup as progress, Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta’s *A Present Past: The Brazilian Military Dictatorship and the 1964 Coup (The Portuguese-Speaking World)* proposed a counter-authoritarian perspective, revealing stories of censorship, genocide of Indigenous communities, and extraction during the military government.¹² Luiz C. Barbosa’s article “The People of the Forest against International Capitalism: Systemic and Anti-Systemic Forces in the Battle for the Preservation of the Brazilian Amazon Rainforest” adds complexity to this narrative by introducing the United States and other Western powers as supporters of the coup and the Amazon’s development.¹³

Historians have studied the 1964 coup and the subsequent military reign from an outside perspective, while other scholars—particularly subaltern and environmental scholars—have looked inward, using a post-colonial lens to debunk narratives pushed by the Brazilian government and the United States. In this way, these researchers have explained how the Amazon and Indigenous survival are intertwined. Tracing the life of environmental activist Chico Mendes, Andrew Revkin’s *The Burning Season: The Murder of Chico Mendes and the Fight for the Amazon Rain Forest* argues that the Amazon’s wellbeing is contingent upon human rights, labor rights, and the survival of the Indigenous communities.¹⁴ *Masters of the Lost Land: The Untold Story of the Amazon and the Violent Fight for the World’s Last Frontier* by Heriberto Araujo explains how the Trans-Amazonian Highway and the government’s conquest campaign actually unified laborers, farmers, and Indigenous communities to protect the rainforest.¹⁵

When studying the Amazon, existing scholarship has examined Brazil’s colonial legacy, the military dictatorship of 1964 to 1985, and Indigenous resistance largely as separate historical subjects. However, this paper argues that these subjects are best understood as interconnected processes. In this vein, the coup of 1964 and the military dictatorship formed a key bridge between Brazil’s long colonial history and the continued harm of the Amazon’s ecology and Indigenous societies. Unlike many former texts, this paper highlights labor resistance movements and Indigenous voices to explain the firsthand impact of dictatorship and examine government policies through a decolonial historical lens.

Colonial Conquest and Legacies

Driven by the potential for economic growth, early colonization and exploitation of Indigenous land laid the foundation of long-standing violence toward the Native people in Brazil. Indigenous communities, including the Kayapo, Yanomami, Asháninka, Waorani, and Ticuna peoples, have been living in the Amazon for over 11,000 years, densely populating the area with roughly twenty million people.¹⁶ For centuries, Indigenous communities have maintained a profound, sacred connection with the land, peacefully coexisting with their

environment and integrating it into their cultural heritage, traditions, and legacy. Although some communities engaged in hunting and gathering practices, others used their deep ecological knowledge of the Amazon to transform the rainforest’s naturally low-nutrient soil into *terra preta*, nutrient-rich dark earth, to harvest food.¹⁷ By cultivating fertile *terra preta* soil, the Indigenous communities helped the rainforest flourish to nearly 390 billion trees in 2025.¹⁸ This centuries-long cultivation not only ensured the peoples’ survival but helped shape the Amazon into an epicenter of biodiversity that it is today.

However, whereas Indigenous communities saw the land as a home to protect, Spanish and Portuguese colonizers viewed it as a divine gift of land, resources, and power. After Christopher Columbus encountered the Americas in 1492, in 1494, Spain and Portugal aimed to fortify themselves as world powers by dividing the non-Western world between them through the Treaty of Tordesillas. The Americas were predominantly allotted to Spain, but the Amazon was deliberately split between the two powers “for the purpose of trade, barter, or conquest of any kind,” a testament to how the rainforest was always viewed as a valuable commodity from the onset of conquest.¹⁹ The Amazon’s supposed vastness and lack of borders made its exploration particularly intriguing to many European explorers. Starting in the sixteenth century and fueled by curiosity and greed, soldiers, missionaries, scientists, and entrepreneurs guised as explorers launched countless expeditions, approaching the “beast” of the Amazon from different directions.²⁰ Frequently, the explorers barely survived the rainforest, returning home with maps and chronicles describing Indigenous communities, gold sightings, and the majestic Amazonian nature. For example, in 1642, Spanish explorer Fray José de Maldonado, in his journal, *Relación del descubrimiento del río de las Amazonas*, explained:

To attempt to name the multitude of barbarian provinces, pagan nations, and diverse indigenous peoples inhabiting the banks of this mighty river—as well as the significance its discovery has held for the Spanish Crown and the importance its future conquest will entail, the riches it harbors, the produce it yields, the fertility of the land it waters, the abundance of fish it breeds, the variety of animals it sustains, the fruits it offers, and the precious commodities it provides—would require a lengthy history rather than this brief account.²¹

These reflections demonstrated both European colonizers’ perceptions of Indigenous communities as inferior and subhuman and the explorers’ belief in rumors of a treasure trove of riches hidden in the Americas, which they encoded into the symbol of “El Dorado.”²² Initially conceptualized in 1541 by Spaniards Gonzalo Pizarro and Francisco de Orellana, the first documented explorers of the Amazon, this mythical lost city was allegedly teeming with gold.²³ Although these explorers found starvation and harsh terrain instead of this utopia, the dream of El Dorado spread through chronicles such as that of Maldonado, motivating centuries of conquest disguised as exploration.²⁴

Realizing the value of the Amazon, European powers—Spain, Portugal, England, France, and the Netherlands—scrambled to control the region.²⁵ To establish dominion through settlement, Portugal swiftly established the captaincies-general, or *capitanias hereditarias*, program, which gave citizens the honor and responsibility of governing a Portuguese territory in Brazil’s northeast and transforming the region into profitable hubs with direct access to the Amazon’s riches. Between 1534 and 1536, on behalf of King João III, nobleman Martim Afonso de Sousa bestowed thirteen land grants upon petty nobility, merchants, soldiers, and sailors. In the charter, de Sousa proclaimed, “I enjoy rewarding [captain-generals], thought it best to draw up and execute the said charter for said land, where he must now go to dwell, populate and exploit.”²⁶ The threat of European competition prompted Portugal towards institutional settlement near the Amazon, streamlining the previously individual, impulsive expeditions.

In the subsequent two centuries, Portuguese settlement and extraction completely altered the Amazon’s terrain, threatening its biodiversity and Indigenous populations for the first time in its existence.²⁷ During the settlement through the captaincies-general program in the mid-1500s, Portuguese colonists brought foreign crops and flattened the “untamed” Amazon terrain into arid cattle ranches ideal for trade. Roaming cattle occupied Indigenous territories, trampling and consuming Indigenous gardens and hunting grounds. Consequently, these ranches displaced Indigenous communities.²⁸ Beyond the cattle ranches, colonists soon identified Brazil’s climate and geography as ideal for sugar production. Beginning in 1530, Portuguese colonists established a plantation economy to harvest sugarcane in the Northeast, and by the seventeenth century, Brazil had become one of the largest sugar suppliers in the world.²⁹ Colonists captured and exterminated Indigenous communities to gain autonomous control over the region and create a labor force for the successful plantation economy. In fact, in 1713, Junta das Missões de Pernambuco, an institution in charge of evangelizing and conquering the Indigenous people of the colonial Northeast for the king, declared, “All males and females from seven years old upwards were to be captured and denaturalized. It was agreed that the Junta’s decision on captivity and extermination would be followed ... to Rio [de Janeiro].” Although “extermination” in the original Portuguese text has been read as “elimination through death” by some translators, others have revealed how the term could also mean “expulsion,” describing the transfer of Indigenous people in Rio Grande do Norte to the bottom of the coast to

work on plantations in Rio de Janeiro.³⁰ This policy decided two fates for Indigenous communities—death or enslaved labor after forced removal—exemplifying how Portuguese occupation of the Amazon and extraction of its resources depended on the simultaneous exploitation and domination of Indigenous communities.

However, Indigenous communities continuously and successfully resisted enslavement and encroachment through rebellion and adaptation. For example, in 1541, the Quijos people rebelled against the Gonzalo Pizarro expedition by harassing explorers and liberating people taken captive to provide directions to the colonists to the supposed riches. This resistance of the Quijos people quickly transformed into a larger movement, where several Indigenous nations worked together to expel conquerors, often effectively forcing colonizers to abandon their territories and inspiring resistance among Indigenous nations from distant regions.³¹ In the seventeenth century, the Quiruba (or Kirub) peoples sustained continuous uprisings, seizing numerous Brazilian cities and halting Western expansion of Brazil’s frontier until the twentieth century. Ultimately, by maintaining a permanent state of war and intelligent diplomatic and political strategies, Indigenous communities helped prevent complete colonial control even as late as the late eighteenth century. In this way, these communities frequently forced Portuguese and Spanish colonists to recognize Indigenous nations’ authority and avoid their territories.³² However, due to exposure to foreign diseases colonists brought with them, such as measles, influenza, smallpox, and typhus, approximately 90% of Indigenous communities in the Americas died within a century of contact with European people.³³ Furthermore, colonists’ brutality and the inhumane working conditions on sugar plantations more directly displaced and killed Indigenous communities, helping perpetuate the misconception that the Amazon was uninhabited and free for the taking. Even so, Indigenous groups fought for their people and the Amazon’s survival, making Brazil’s conquest slow and arduous, enabling large regions deep inside the Amazon to remain *terra incognita* or “unconquered land” for centuries.³⁴

While the Amazon did not reach current levels of deforestation through cattle ranching, land grants, and extermination and exploitation of Indigenous communities, this colonial period transformed the rainforest into a popular source for global resource extraction, portending the Amazon for a future of irreparable destruction. After decades of border disputes over the 1474 Treaty of Tordesillas, Spain and Portugal signed the Treaty of Madrid in 1750, codifying the Amazon’s territorial split, stating that “all that it occupies upstream from the Marañón River, or the Amazon, and the land on both banks of this river, up to the places mentioned below, shall belong to the Crown of Portugal.”³⁵ Portugal now officially owned 60% of the Amazon and was determined to protect its new borders and keep resource extraction local, so the country quickly stationed military officers at strategic areas and ports. After Brazil gained independence from the Portuguese Empire on September 7, 1822, the emperors of Brazil maintained a seclusionist policy and refused to open the Amazon to global commerce, affording the region a few more decades before extraction from the rest of the world. However, years of American and British pressure finally pushed Brazil to open the Amazon in 1886.³⁶ In this vein, a leading advocate of Brazil’s anti-isolationist policy, U.S. Navy Lieutenant Matthew Fontaine Maury, saw the Amazon as an extension of American Western expansion, extending the Amazon as America’s right, claiming it would be unjust to deny a “Christian, civilized, enlightened man’s use of the fairest portion of God’s earth.”³⁷ Thrown into the global economy, the Amazon was at the mercy of greedy world powers, private corporations, and global booms and busts. For instance, in the 1880s, as the United States and Europe industrialized, demand for cheap rubber grew, creating a great demand for slave labor and rapid resource extraction from the Amazon. Private businesses depleted millions of rubber trees and forced thousands of Indigenous communities and low-income migrants into modern slavery.³⁸ Between 1879 and 1912, European rubber companies alone killed over 100,000 Indigenous people in the Amazon through enslavement, displacement, execution, and torture.³⁹ The Amazon’s internationalization, especially through the rubber boom, brought a new wave of Amazonian ecological destruction and Indigenous genocide, which would explode in a few decades.⁴⁰

Brazil’s Rise of Military Dictatorship

As was common during colonial rule, approximately one to two percent of the population held more than half of post-independence Brazil’s land. With it came political power and control over production and trade with the global market, to which Brazil had opened itself.⁴¹ To meet global demand for its resources, the Amazon became the center of labor politics and land struggles, where landless Brazilians and Indigenous communities were cycled through modern slavery as landowners grew their wealth and power. Elites with large masses of land predominantly maintained political power through authoritarianism, military interventions, and alliances with rural landowners who worked to suppress local opposition to maintain control over the resources and land.⁴²

However, as labor strikes increased, governments were forced to reckon with Brazil’s labor issues. In 1930, at the beginning of dictator Getúlio Vargas’s reign, union membership grew to 220,000 people, with 4,000 members being communists. Vargas prohibited strikes and demonstrations, hunted and arrested labor leaders and communists, and shut down labor publications.⁴³ In 1946, Brazil established a representative democracy with a new, more liberal constitution, which stated, “The Powers of the Union are the Legislative, the Executive, and the Judicial, independent and harmonious among themselves” and “the expression of thought is free and shall not be

dependent upon censorship.”⁴⁴ This Constitution reaffirmed individual freedoms and the separation of powers, but in 1961, when President João Goulart rose to power, he sought to implement left-wing nationalism, labor populism, and reformism to reduce land inequality persisting from colonial structures.⁴⁵ In 1964, President Goulart announced his Basic Reforms Plan to a crowd of 150,000 students, union organizers, and public servants, “[promising] redistribution of large non-productive agricultural properties, the application of 15% of Brazil’s income to educational programs, and socializing the profits of multinational companies and applying them to re-investment in Brazil.”⁴⁶ However, just seventeen days after this announcement, President Goulart was ousted by a military coup.

Even before taking office, Goulart was surrounded by opposition. Fearful of Goulart’s left-leaning platform and the threat he posed to their land and power, military elites opposed Goulart taking power from his predecessor, President Jânio Quadros, who resigned in 1961. Goulart was allowed to take office only when his presidential power was reduced within a parliamentary system, making his reforms difficult to implement.⁴⁷ Previous right-wing conservative governments had favored landowners and urban-industrial bourgeois—the exploiters of landless labor. Therefore, Goulart’s ideas of land redistribution and national control of key industries like oil refineries were not only a provocative pivot from Brazil’s capitalist governance since Portuguese colonization but also a direct attack on the authority of middle- and upper-class elites. Throughout Goulart’s presidency, the Brazilian military—with the United States—established strategic propaganda campaigns to turn public sentiment against the presidency, creating ideal conditions for a coup.⁴⁸

Some distance north, Goulart’s labor reforms (although unaffiliated with the Communist Party) alarmed the United States at the height of the Cold War. At that time, the United States was trying to spread its dominance and capitalism while eliminating the perceived threat of communism and Russian influence worldwide. Goulart’s left-leaning policies, especially the nationalization of American enterprises in Brazil and the Brazilian core industries of rubber and oil, threatened to spread communism throughout Brazil but also eliminate American access to the Amazon. To the United States, toppling a growing power like Brazil under Goulart meant stopping the cancerous growth of communism throughout Latin America.⁴⁹ In March 1963, President John F. Kennedy instructed his aides, “[W]e’ve got to do something about Brazil.”⁵⁰ With the CIA’s intelligence closely monitoring Goulart and maintaining contact with anti-Goulart figures, the United States began to financially support Brazilian capitalist civic groups, pro-United States legislators, and anti-communist media and educational initiatives alongside Brazilian elites with aligned interests.

With American funds, the Brazilian Institute for Democratic Action, or *Instituto Brasileiro de Ação Democrática*, a conservative publication and think tank, started producing anti-communist documentaries, articles, and soap operas. This content positioned anti-communist actions and a potential coup as democratic saviorism against a dictator shoving his ideology down Brazil’s throat.⁵¹ Additionally, the United States began publishing anti-Goulart content, encouraging public support of American intervention efforts and bringing Brazil into American political consciousness for one of the first times. Specifically, in August 1961, the *Hartford Times* published a cartoon of Cuban leader Fidel Castro dragging a disheveled man labeled Cuba while encouraging Brazil to become communist. This cartoon encouraged Brazil to question and fear the consequences of communism (or the “Cubanification” of Brazil).⁵² Moreover, on October 23, 1960, the *New York Times* published an article on its front page called “Northeast Brazil Poverty Breeds Threat of a Revolt,” portraying poverty-stricken Brazil in dire need of American aid and intervention.⁵³ Thus, the United States painted the eventual overthrow of Goulart’s regime as inevitable and necessary.

To make matters worse, Goulart began his presidency during an economic stagnation, growing inflation, and political polarization. He was unable to address this economic downturn because the predominantly conservative Congress blocked his labor and agrarian reforms aimed at driving growth.⁵⁴ Additionally, increasing economic troubles made it easier for locals to digest anti-communist, saviorist propaganda and demand change. In 1964, Goulart’s announcement of his reforms was the final push of rage and fear for local elites and the United States. On March 28, 1964, U.S. Ambassador to Brazil Lincoln Gordon called for greater American escalation against President Goulart via a telegram to the U.S. Department of State:

Goulart is now definitely engaged on campaign to seize dictatorial power, accepting the active collaboration of the Brazilian Communist Party, and of other radical left revolutionaries to this end. ...

There is a real and present danger to democracy and freedom in Brazil which could carry this enormous nation into the Communist camp.⁵⁵

Furthermore, on March 31, 1964, the Brazilian military, led by General Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco (1964–1967), launched a rebellion in Rio de Janeiro to oust Goulart. As this *coup d’état* unfolded, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson approved Operation Brother Sam, which positioned “a U.S. naval task force with an aircraft carrier, a helicopter carrier, six destroyers and oil tankers” on the Brazilian coast, ready to provide intelligence and supplies in case of retaliation and a civil war.⁵⁶ However, this operation never took effect, as on April 2, 1964, Goulart fled into exile to prevent a civil war, marking the success of the coup and the transition of power to

Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco. For years, the military elite referred to this coup as a people’s revolution, a momentous moment for democracy and freedom rather than the start of a military dictatorship that would span 21 years.

Operation Amazonia

The newly appointed president, Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco, framed his presidency as a temporary measure to eradicate the communist threat, restore order, and eventually return Brazil to a true democracy. Unlike his predecessor, Castelo Branco was heavily conservative, centering his regime on militaristic nationalism, anti-communism, and pro-Western philosophies. To amass power and move away from a constitutional democracy, Castelo Branco passed the Institutional Act or *Atos Institucionais (AI)* No. 2, enabling “the government to abolish the existing parties and to make all future elections of president, vice-president, and governor indirect” in 1965.⁵⁷ Castelo Branco called removing elections and separating powers necessary steps to protect the nation and fight inflation.⁵⁸ The military dictatorship further entrenched structural inequalities by freezing wages, intensely punishing labor strikes and any other demonstrations by passing the decrees AI-5 and AI-13, which legalized torture, executions, and deportation of any “malignant actors” and encouraged censorship while touting the military dictatorship as a government that would save Brazil.⁵⁹ Furthermore, to strengthen Brazil, Castelo Branco argued that the country needed to protect itself from foreign communist influences and reconnect with and control its geological space, which meant turning toward the Amazon. During a period of great economic and political instability, the military government used the Amazon under the guise of establishing national sovereignty, stimulating economic growth, and preventing foreign interference.

Although countless governments and nations had already exploited the Amazon, in 1966, the military government’s colonization of the Amazon, also known as Operation Amazonia, launched the most destructive, deliberate plans for the rainforest’s colonization and deforestation to date. Operation Amazonia was defined by the motto *Integrar para não entregar* or “integrate to not surrender,” which meant that if Brazil did not colonize the Amazon and further integrate it into the country, Brazil would essentially be surrendering the rainforest and its seemingly infinite resources to foreign powers.⁶⁰ Castelo Branco put Brazil in competition with foreign powers, to the chagrin of the United States, suggesting that Castelo Branco’s reliance on American support during the 1964 coup was driven by strategic self-interest more than ideological alignment. In this way, Castelo Branco packaged his military dictatorship’s transformation and destruction of the Amazon into nationalist messaging, claiming aggressive integration plans were essential to the country’s survival. This image of global competition over ownership of the Amazon and its resources was reminiscent of European nations’ race to explore and seize the Amazon in the 1500s, indicating how the rainforest had been a geopolitical battleground for over five centuries. The military dictatorship argued that colonizing and exploiting the Amazon were essential to Brazil’s growth and development, but the Amazon allowed these elites the opportunity to redirect land and labor issues while maintaining and growing their power and wealth.⁶¹

Land Grants

To colonize the Amazon and engage in large-scale resource extraction, the military government embedded colonial tactics in its policies and federal agencies. The first step was physical occupation through land grants and cattle ranching, similar to the captaincies-general program during colonization. A guiding motto of this project was *uma terra sem homens para homens sem-terra* or “land without men for landless men.”⁶² Like Portuguese and Spanish colonizers, this slogan assumed that the Amazon was empty and ready for the taking, erasing Indigenous inhabitants. The military government decided to populate the Amazon with landless Brazilians demanding better wages and rights, especially those impacted by the 1970 drought in northeastern Brazil. This region was already one of the poorest parts of the country, with local rural elites holding the majority of the land, so a catastrophic drought pushed landless laborers experiencing poverty into crisis. Protests demanding water, land, and basic human necessities grew, and tensions between rural elites and landless laborers skyrocketed.⁶³ Offering land grants to these poor, landless Brazilians saved the government from angering rural elites, one of the biggest supporters of the government, and pushed the regime’s agenda of occupying the Amazon to make the land productive.⁶⁴

To support agricultural expansion and mass migration to the Amazon, the military government created Amazon-focused instructions and legislation, codifying colonization practices into law. In 1970, General Emílio Garrastazu Médici created the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) to help settle families on public lands in the Amazon.⁶⁵ To promote large agribusiness and industry, the authoritarian regime established the Superintendency for the Development of the Amazon (SUDAM) Law 5173 in 1966.⁶⁶ This federal agency organized and assisted occupation, settling landless laborers into the northeastern part of the Mato Grosso state and the Suia-Missu ranch, covering 450,000 hectares or 1,737 square miles.⁶⁷ Targeting these areas, the dictatorship deliberately sent settlers into known Native territories to displace inhabitants and have Brazilian landless laborers deal with the “Indigenous problem” for the government. Additionally, SUDAM offered large

financial incentives and tax cuts for citizens, especially farmers and ranchers, to clear and colonize the Amazon for the government.⁶⁸

Because the government encouraged intensive resource extraction and frontier expansion over long-term conservation, cattle ranching was the fastest, most effective manner not only to establish ownership but also to clear the rainforest and make it productive for capitalist pursuits. Farmers would burn large areas of forested land to quickly and cheaply clear all of the trees.⁶⁹ Beyond this, monocropping was a popular farming technique where farmers used these cleared lands to plant a single type of lucrative crop, like sugarcane, frequently stripping the land of its nutrients.⁷⁰ Moreover, heavy propaganda campaigns in the 1960s called cattle ranching a critical, nostalgic part of Brazil’s agricultural history, promoting ranching and beef production even more than perennial crops. Specifically, since the 1960s, cattle populations in Brazil have increased from 5 million to 70–80 million heads.⁷¹ The military government transformed innocent cattle into unknowing leaders of the greatest forest colonization effort, with cattle ranching causing 80% of current deforestation in the Amazon rainforest.⁷² Furthermore, by stripping the soil of nutrients and maintaining grass pastures, roaming cattle would keep the lands grazed and overworked, preventing the regrowth of the Amazon’s native trees and biodiversity. Cattle also release destructive quantities of methane, a gas that significantly increases greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. Even so, despite its irrevocable, devastating harms to the Amazon’s environment and biodiversity, cattle ranching was the ideal farming method for both the military dictatorship and the farmers due to its low labor requirements, cheap lands, and self-transporting commodity.⁷³ Especially with the price fluctuations of perennial crops and crop diseases, cattle ranching—despite being the more destructive agricultural practice—was the most stable way for farmers to make money, highlighting Brazil’s colonial ideology of prioritizing profits over preservation.⁷⁴

However, while the military government’s “land without men for landless men” made Operation Amazonia seem specifically created to aid small farmers and landless people, it mostly transferred thousands of hectares of land to large corporations, such as major cattle ranching agribusinesses and mining and industrial enterprises, to build corporate wealth.⁷⁵ These enterprises included foreign corporations, such as a German cattle ranch owned by Volkswagen, contradicting the regime’s “integrate to not surrender” messaging of blocking foreign access to the Amazon.⁷⁶ Frequently, these conglomerates recruited landless cheap laborers, migrants, and Indigenous people to rapidly destroy the Amazon and make the land productive, increasing modern slavery and environmental harm in the Amazon.⁷⁷ Additionally, land grants to corporations often reallocated land originally granted to small farmers and landless laborers. The military government’s vague language on land grant titles for smallholders made it arduous for these individuals to prove their permanent rights and easy for corporations to expand their settlements and steal from landless laborers despite claims of “official ownership.”

Because land ownership rights were not clearly defined and SUDAM was rapidly giving away land titles, many of which overlapped, the military government created a “Wild West” of land grabs and conflicts in the Amazon, exacerbating the destruction of the rainforest. With little to no regulation, the military government gave away the Amazon to landless laborers looking to escape poverty and systemic inequality by becoming landowners, corporations trying to expand their businesses, land speculators trying to raise land prices, and anyone looking to make a profit.⁷⁸ All these parties further pushed the Amazon’s frontier, incorporating it into Brazil’s influence, acting as proxies for the government’s conquest campaign. Riddled with corruption, SUDAM also ignored when lucrative industries violated laws that had been implemented to maintain the Amazon’s natural landscape as long as the government got a cut of the profits.⁷⁹ Without enforcement of these regulations, people found loopholes and other illegal tactics to increase their farms’ yields and profits while significantly harming the forest and displacing Indigenous people. For example, the Law of the Fifty stated that landowners could deforest only 50% of the natural land. To bypass this rule, landowners sold the untouched 50% of their land to their relatives. Next, these relatives would deforest 50% of this land and sell the rest, continuing the cycle of destruction and displacement.⁸⁰ Essentially, the military government encouraged any form of exploitation, including land grabbing, illegal logging, illicit mining, and farming and cattle raising with illegal environmental liabilities.⁸¹

This land-grab frenzy and government-supported illegal activity not only expedited the destruction and colonization of the Amazon but also filled the rainforest with violence and conflict, leaving the environment and Indigenous inhabitants at the mercy of greedy modern-*bandeirantes*. In colonial Brazil, *bandeirantes* were Portuguese settlers who hunted for riches and Indigenous people and expanded Brazil’s frontier in the unregulated Amazon. Centuries ago, these settlers robbed, tortured, enslaved, and murdered Indigenous inhabitants and spread their deadly diseases.⁸² As protection for Native communities, the 1946 Constitution stated that “the possession and occupation and rights to the land of the indigenous communities where they are permanently located will be respected.” However, in 1967, the military government changed the word “respected” to “recognized,” a subtle language shift that obscured the national commitment to upholding Indigenous sovereignty.⁸³ Because the government said it would “recognize” Indigenous territories, it was also distributing lands within Indigenous regions and ignoring land grabs and modern *bandeirantes*’ attacks in which it was complicit. This invasion displaced Indigenous communities, making it difficult for them to survive as subsistence-based peoples. Or, this invasion made some groups—especially the Guarani-Kaiowá peoples, as documented in contemporary

ethnographies—slaves on cattle ranches and among industries constructed on their own lands.⁸⁴ Further penetrating deeper into the Amazon, land-grabbers and settlers came into contact with Indigenous people who had never contracted Western diseases or received vaccines, making illnesses like the flu, measles, and smallpox fatal to these Indigenous peoples (a 30–50% death rate).⁸⁵ Overall, during the military dictatorship, at least 8,350 Indigenous people perished, nearly destroying numerous nations, such as the *Avá-Canoeiro* people, and reducing the total Indigenous population to just 100,000 people.⁸⁶ These Indigenous fatalities were not simply collateral damage but rather the direct result of policy meant to clear the Amazon of both its resources and Native peoples.

Development Projects

To develop the Amazon and improve access to newly settled lands, the military government launched large infrastructure projects in the Amazon. These operations included military posts, feeder roads, hydroelectric dams, and the centerpiece of General Emílio Garrastazu Médici (appointed president in 1969 after Castelo Branco and General Artur da Costa e Silva’s 1967-1969 rule): the Trans-Amazonian Highway (BR-230). However, the infrastructure project was simply a seed. Two years after Médici beheaded the Brazil nut tree, breaking ground on construction, Médici returned with an entourage of aides, cabinets, and supporters to a section of the highway’s opening in 1972. This time, the surroundings were pristine and clear of wildlife, and the Asurini and the Parakanã Indigenous inhabitants were replaced with excited civilians waving Brazil flags and cheering for the cameras. Even so, this celebration was brief, and the highway project’s environmental destruction made the project crumble a few years later.⁸⁷

This 4,000-kilometer project ran horizontally across the Amazon and was designed to make the entire region accessible for deforestation, settlement, and industrial production. This pathway would connect fragmented towns in the Amazon to Brazil proper, bringing numerous migrants and laborers to megacorporations and enabling 70,000 landless laborers and small farmers to reach lands promised to them via the land grant program.⁸⁸ Generally, this highway provided the necessary logistics to further occupy and exploit the Amazon. To build this road, laborers cleared kilometers of land, often in Indigenous territories, using bulldozers and chainsaws, and filled the former *terra preta* with cement. However, the highway’s construction was so difficult it was almost lethal.

The construction labor force comprised the same drought-displaced poor laborers from the Northeast who had been promised land in exchange for work. Laborers worked long days in temperatures exceeding 35 degrees Celsius, and the humidity provided the perfect breeding ground for mosquito-borne illness. Malaria, yellow fever, snake bites, and industrial accidents took countless lives.⁸⁹ Oral histories recorded in 2000 revealed that once a laborer died, they were removed from the payroll and left on the road. Although the lack of records of these workers makes it difficult to estimate the death toll accurately, it was likely between 2,000 and 5,000 people. Overall, only 6,000 of 70,000 families made it to the Amazon lands promised to them.⁹⁰

Médici believed that the highway could be built in two years, but the wet Amazonian soil created an unstable foundation, requiring more fortification and additional time to be completed. Moreover, in 1974, with a dwindling labor force, the government ran out of money. Although the highway was never complete, the damage had already been done. This road intruded on countless Indigenous nations, including the Asurini do Tocantins, the Parakanã, the Araweté, the Suruí, the Cinta Larga, the Kayapó, the Arara, the Juruna, and the Kraô, causing mass displacement and death.⁹¹ With 80% of its population uprooted by the highway, the Panará people almost reached extinction.⁹² Beyond this, these roads introduced more of the Amazon to land-hungry settlers and corporations, producing large settlements near the highway. During Médici, 40% of the Amazon was occupied, and 900,000 square miles of land were deforested. Furthermore, 95% of the current Amazon deforestation seen today has occurred within 5.5 km of the highway.⁹³

Indigenous Extermination Campaign

Beyond the displacement and deaths caused by the settlement and infrastructure projects, the military government explicitly institutionalized the genocide of Indigenous communities, cementing colonial patterns of violence into policy and state-sanctioned campaigns. Historically, lumberers and development workers have defrauded, displaced, and even massacred Indigenous communities they did not consider the rightful owners of the land. Therefore, in the 1910s, to protect Indigenous communities from further harm, Colonel Candido Mariano da Silva Rondon created the Indian Protective Service (SPI).⁹⁴ However, with the dictatorial regime’s hostile takeover in the 1960s, the SPI became a puppet agency that legally permitted white settlers to kill Indigenous communities, poison children, and force women into prostitution.⁹⁵ Although SPI’s initial goal was to protect the land and the rights of the Indigenous people, it ultimately exploited the very people it was created to help.

In 1967, Brazil’s Minister of the Interior and public prosecutor Jader Figueiredo compiled the *Figueiredo Report*, recording the full scale of injustices and harassment of Indigenous people. This report documented massacres of entire tribes by dynamite, poisoned sugar cane, and machine guns and listed perpetrators, many of whom were SPI officials.⁹⁶ Most officials embezzled funds, stole lands, and profited from cattle ranching, but

some “lethally introduced smallpox into isolated villages and donated sugar mixed with [poison].”⁹⁷ After mass poisoning, diseases, and forced labor, the Kajkwakhratxi-Tapayuna people were formally declared extinct in 1976, and many other nations, including the Cinta Larga people, were not far behind.⁹⁸ Because the SPI committed such atrocities, everyday Brazilians were encouraged to participate in this cleansing. This deliberate indifference and complicity from a federal organization created to protect Indigenous populations illuminated the regime’s genocidal politics.

Every day, Indigenous people were murdered and tortured by landowners and government officials to clear land. Additionally, these groups were captured and traded as slaves for the megacorporations taking over their lands. While the Figueiredo Report was heavily censored and largely forgotten until 2012, some international entities pressured the Brazilian government to dissolve the SPI. More than one hundred officials were charged with over 1,000 heinous crimes, but no one was held accountable.⁹⁹ In 1967, responding to the backlash toward the SPI, the military government established the reformed National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples (FUNAI).¹⁰⁰ This group claimed to have created rehabilitation centers for Indigenous communities promoting better health, providing new professions, and contributing productively to Brazil, but in reality, FUNAI established “concentration camps.” In 1972, Senator Osires Teixeira from the military dictatorship party remarked, “Brazil has been the victim of ignoble exploitation of its indigenous policy by foreign media outlets, when, in fact, we all know that Brazil was the only country on the continent that, in the pursuit of its civilization, never decimated indigenous tribes.” In reality, testimonies from “prisoners” revealed long days on farms pulling weeds, starving, and even being dragged by military officers’ across the soil to “civilize” them, or force them to lose their culture and assimilate. Over time, hundreds of people were sent to these camps.¹⁰¹ Without its Indigenous inhabitants, the Amazon lost its loyal protectors, leading to its disastrous future.

Resistance Movements

The military dictatorship’s policies caused seemingly irrevocable destruction to the Amazon and Native communities and severely punished demonstrations, but Indigenous laborers, environmental conservationists, and students did not stop resisting, contributing to the regime’s downfall. In 1977, labor organizer and conservationist Chico Mendes and his comrades in the Xapuri Rural Workers’ Union formed a human chain around the Amazon’s trees to stop cattle ranchers from cutting down the trees to create more grazing land. This was an *empate*, a peaceful protest to resist Amazon deforestation.¹⁰² Stuck to a tree, Mendes gave inspiring speeches explaining how the Amazon’s destruction was not merely an environmental issue. Mendes was the child of rubber tappers who had begun working alongside his parents at age nine, acutely aware that the rainforest’s survival was directly connected to that of rubber tappers and Indigenous communities.¹⁰³ Labor rights, Indigenous rights, and environmental preservation were inseparable, and this intersectional approach helped Mendes create fierce opposition for the military regime.

Although rubber tappers engaged in *empates* were beaten, arrested, and shot, they were often successful at convincing laborers hired to clear lands to surrender their saws. Additionally, this movement continued to grow. In 1986, Indigenous communities joined the Xapuri Rural Workers’ Union in an *empate*, calling for greater protection of their homes.¹⁰⁴ This collaboration was especially threatening to the government because rubber tappers and Indigenous communities had historically been pitted against each other over the forest’s resources. In 1988, Mendes and his comrades drove the Brazilian government to create its first protective reserve, restricting logging on 61,000 acres of rubber-tapping land. However, because this victory threatened cattle ranchers, corporations, and others aiming to profit from the Amazon’s resources, movement leaders faced extensive violence, including mass assassination.¹⁰⁵ In December 1988, Mendes was fatally shot by a cattle rancher, who had been brought to the Amazon through Operation Amazonia. This murder spread international attention to the Amazon’s destruction and Mendes’s decades of resistance, even making the front page of *The New York Times*.¹⁰⁶ For the first time, the world stood in solidarity with the fight to protect the Amazon. For instance, international organizations, such as the World Bank, pivoted from funding exploitative developments—the infrastructure projects and megacorporations that directly contributed to the dictatorship’s wealth—to conservation projects. This international pressure and local outrage forced the Brazilian government to establish 8 million acres of nature as reserves, which would have been unfathomable just a few years earlier.¹⁰⁷ To this day, Mendes’s legacy and movement continue to inspire labor and environmental changes in Brazil.

Simultaneously, in 1983, after years of resisting repression, millions of labor organizers, students, artists, and marginalized communities banded together to form the *Diretas Já* movement. Through revolts throughout the year, these protesters called for better wages, political freedom, and the right to vote. In 1984, this campaign erupted, and protesters covered the city streets in the largest political rally in Brazilian history.¹⁰⁸ In March 1985, the military dictatorship fell due to this resistance, coupled with economic crisis and international scrutiny, initiating a new era of civilian-led democracy.

III. Conclusion

To increase Brazil’s economic productivity, the military dictatorial regime perpetuated the Portuguese colonial legacy of exploitation of centuries-old ecological systems in the Amazon and the Indigenous communities that sustained them. Additionally, the regime revealed that the destruction of the land and its Native people had always been linked. Through organizations like PIN, SUDAM, and FUNAI, this government built the infrastructure, legal framework, and institutional corruption necessary to expand industrial output in the Amazon rainforest but harmful to its biodiversity and Indigenous residents. Instead of addressing deeply entrenched inequalities, Operation Amazonia steeped Amazonian soil in modern slavery and transformed the rainforest into a capitalist playground, connecting the Amazon to Brazil’s greatest labor issues. Although the Amazon has been colonized and exploited for centuries, the military governments’ aggressive policies and institutionalization of colonial tactics have created a damaging colonization campaign from which the Amazon is still struggling to heal. The Amazon has continued to be riddled with unregulated cattle ranches, illegal mining, and mega-conglomerate resource extraction, seeds sown by Operation Amazonia. Currently, the Brazilian government is responsible for 80% of all deforestation in the Amazon rainforest, and if deforestation continues at the same rate, the world could be consumed by massive ecosystem collapse and expedited global warming.¹⁰⁹

Due to the immense impact deforestation has on the planet, a rise in advocacy for monitoring and regulating deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has emerged.¹¹⁰ Many international and domestic initiatives encourage conservation and sustainable development, and the largest contribution to conservation is \$340 million. The latter is from G-7 nations for the Pilot Program to Conserve the Brazilian Rainforest. However, these efforts have been ineffective due to the loophole Brazil has used to continue development in the Amazon, which echoes measures implemented in the 1960s under Castelo Branco and Médici. *Avança Brasil* (the Advance Brazil program) is a government program that finances major infrastructure projects in the Amazon to modernize Brazil’s industrial agriculture, timber, and mining sectors. From 2000 to 2007, the Advance Brazil program invested \$40 billion into projects in the Amazon, such as highways, railroads, gas lines, hydroelectric projects, power lines, and river-channelization projects. As in previous decades, these developments have continued to decrease biodiversity and make Indigenous lands unlivable, further displacing Native residents.¹¹¹

Deforestation will continue to be a problem, but by analyzing Operation Amazonia and understanding how the Amazon got to its current state, history indicates that the solution to saving the Amazon not only lies in environmental conservation but also in preserving Indigenous and labor rights. For instance, by regulating corporations that mine resources in the Amazon, Brazil could improve working conditions and end modern slavery. Conversely, by slowing down production through improving wages and working hours, the government could reduce environmental extraction. Examining how deforestation harms both biodiversity and Indigenous communities has revealed that promoting the long-term health of the environment and our planet is to listen to Brazil’s first environmental stewards: its Indigenous communities. This may seem infeasible, but certain initiatives, such as New Zealand’s Treaty of Waitangi settlements and Canada’s Indigenous co-management frameworks, have succeeded at providing self-governance to Indigenous communities.¹¹² Continuing to deforest the Amazon would cause not only ecological collapse but also the loss of Indigenous communities’ invaluable environmental knowledge, culture, and legacy. Only by studying the Amazon’s history and understanding environmental conservation, Indigenous sovereignty, and labor justice as inseparable struggles can Brazil begin to undo the colonial habits it still practices today.

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