

ROESSLER VS. BIRD HUNTERS: “PASSARINHADA” AND ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN THE SOUTH OF BRAZIL

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Abstract:

Southern Brazil is a region characterized by an inter-ethnic framework, which originates from, among other factors, the European immigrants who colonized the area from the nineteenth century on. Henrique Luiz Roessler, a tax agent for hunting and fishing as well as a descendant of German immigrants, started repressing the “passarinhada”, a name used either for the hunting of wild birds or a gastronomic ritual. Roessler was sued by the hunters and became the target of a defamatory campaign by Italian immigrants and their descendants, who were the main practitioners of bird hunting. The

conflict between the agent and the fowlers led to the formulation of negative images of both sides, setting up an inter-ethnic “war of representations”.

KEY WORDS: Hunting Supervision, Henrique Luiz Roessler, Bird Hunting, War of Representations, Nature and Migration

Introduction¹

The conflict that shall be analyzed in terms of both daily practices and mental elaborations at first glance seems to be a quite localized episode in the countryside cities of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, in the far south of Brazil. However, it is best understood when framed in the broader context which allowed the meeting of characters whose interests and world views had come into conflict. In this context we highlight the colonization of America by successive waves of immigrants and the incipient process of the Brazilian government in regulating a realm of policy that today we call “environmental”.

Contemporary Rio Grande do Sul is a multi-ethnic society, a result of different historical processes that occurred in distinct temporal patterns. From the sixteenth century on, the native populations began to live with settlers from the Iberian countries, and later with the growing populations from Africa. The well known mass immigration of Europeans to America in the nineteenth century led to the colonization of the three southern states of Brazil by a population of small landholders, among which stood out the Germans, Italians and Polish², who, through the so-called “colonies”, contributed their agriculture to the regional economies. These formed clusters and the cities they generated continued to receive waves of immigrants in later times since, as we know, immigration works by a process of “networks” (Ramella, 1995).

Southern Brazil received its first waves of German immigrants in 1824 (São Leopoldo, Rio Grande do Sul) and 1829 (São Pedro de Alcântara, Santa Catarina). They founded the original nuclei of occupation in lands with irregular topography, which were covered in swamps and unusable for extensive cattle raising. Deforestation was the main form of colonization, coupled with the rudimentary technique of burning, which was already practiced by indigenous people with low environmental impact (Dean,

¹ This article contains partial results of Elenita Malta Pereira's Master's thesis entitled "*Um protetor da Natureza: Trajetória e Memória de Henrique Luiz Roessler*", a historical biography of Roessler from the perspective of environmental history, defended at the Graduate Program in History at UFRGS in 2011, supervised by Dr. Regina Weber. Files accessed: Henrique Luiz Roessler's Private Files (APHLR); Museum of Media Hipólito José da Costa (MCSHJC).

² The original identification of these groups was very diverse and depended on regional origins, but as is known, immigrant populations in the host society are usually identified in a simplified way (Poutignat, Streiff-Fenart, 1998: 144). In southern Brazil, this process generated a representation that confines immigration to three groups whose descendants would be positively considered “pure” (Weber, 2002).

1997). Since the German occupation was successful, the authorities increased the supply of land to the Italian as well as Polish immigrants who arrived in the 1870s. These groups were a part of the large waves of Europeans who came to America in the late nineteenth century motivated by, among other factors, better forms of transportation and communication (Klein, 2000). The northern and southern regions of Rio Grande do Sul are characterized by distinct biomes (Atlantic Forest and *Pampa*, respectively), and have acquired different social profiles. While the southern region, known as the *Pampa*, had been occupied by large cattle ranchers in previous centuries, immigrants were allocated to the northern part of the state. In this area the plains were occupied by the Germans, who arrived first. The Italians, on the other hand, occupied an area of mountains which was difficult to access and located at an altitude of more than 300 meters, which housed an extensive Araucaria forest as well as numerous species of wild birds.

Some historians began to study the impact of this immigration on the environment using the theoretical perspective of environmental history. Environmental history emerged in the United States in the 1970s, amid the boom of environmental movements and conferences on the global crisis sponsored by the UN, and it generally involves “the role and place of nature in human life” (Worster, 1991:201). In this field of study, relationships between human beings and nature are understood to be a two-way street: humans alter the natural elements as much as natural elements transform humans. The largest effort of this approach is the attempt to place society in nature, the latter being considered a conditioning agent or a modifier of culture (Drummond, 1991). According to Armiero (2010: 4), “Linda Nash introduces a different perspective on the environmental history of mass migration”, considering that “not only have humans mixed their labor with nature to create hybrid landscapes; nature – already a mixture of human and nonhuman elements – has intermixed with human bodies, without anyone’s consent or control, and often without anyone’s knowledge” (Nash, 2006: 209). In this way, “migrants themselves have been nature on the move. Their bodies have interacted with the new environment which was not simply raw material for the making of their dreams” (Armiero, 2010: 4).

Illegal hunting and the confrontations between hunters and agents are both themes addressed in the works of Louis Warren and Karl Jacoby, two historians who study North American environmental history. In *The Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America*, Warren (1997) addresses illegal hunting in the states of Pennsylvania, New Mexico, and Montana. In Pennsylvania, the conflict occurred between the hunters hailing from Italian ethnic groups³ (the poachers) and the wildlife officers, and it became bloody when Seely Houk, a rigorous officer, was assassinated. The author perceives that those confrontations “were nothing less than struggles over the place of human society in the natural world” (Warren, 1997: 14). The motives for that friction were complex and ranged from simple greed to cultural practices, including resistance to laws and the government's transformation of hunting areas into natural parks, changing radically property rights and hunter's rights, among other things. As in southern Brazil, the Italians hunted birds in the United States, and because of this, “they were considered a principal threat to bird life and therefore an incipient cause of this potential apocalypse” (Warren, 1997).

In *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation*, Jacoby integrates social history and environmental history while he analyzes the conflicts arising from the creation of three areas of conservation in the United States, Yellowstone National Park (the first natural park in the world), the Adirondack Park, and the Grand Canyon. In these three cases, the changes and laws adopted for conservation transformed “previously acceptable practices into illegal acts: hunting or fishing redefined as poaching, foraging as trespassing, the setting of fires as arson, and the cutting of trees as timber theft” (Jacoby, 2001: 2). The acts of rural populations and indigenous peoples who lived in the areas became illegal, and classified by conservationists as malicious and outdated. As he explores the folkloric traditions of these groups, “from the bottom up”, Jacoby makes use of the concept of “moral ecology” as a “counterpoint to the elite discourse about conservation” (Jacoby, 2001:3). At the beginning of the conservation movement, the role of the state was to standardize

³ According to Giralda Seyferth (1986: 530-532), “the definition of an ethnic group must contain two important aspects: it is a group whose members have an attributed distinctive identity, and its distinctiveness as a group is almost always based on a culture, an origin and a common history (...). The main criterion for the definition of ethnic group in more recent studies is the ethnic identity, based on the notion of ethnicity (which emphasizes the positive aspects of belonging to an ethnic group)”.

and simplify “what had been a dense thicket of particularistic, local approaches toward the natural world” (Jacoby, 2001: 197-198).

As she analyzes the burden of German and Italian occupation on Rio Grande do Sul, Bublitz (2010) proposes a revision (from the standpoint of environmental history) of the historiography produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on European settlements in the state. Several previous studies have shied away from this analysis and preferred to approach the colonization pattern, associated with rural property, poly-culture, predominantly free manpower and progress (Roche, 1969; Manfroi, 1975; Lagemann, 1980). According to Bublitz (2010: 71), “the victory over the chaos of the forest was celebrated by the immigrants. The cutting and burning was fully justified not only for economic purposes or to ensure survival, but due to the religious orientation of the settlers, who were destined to 'tame' and transform nature”. This exploratory urge, justified as necessary for the region to become “civilized”, had a number of effects on the environment: hunting, logging, cattle raising, farming and human settlements “caused changes in the ecosystem, affecting the local fauna and flora” (Bublitz, 2010: 88).

Along the same line of critical thought, Gerhardt (2009) examines the colonization in the city of Ijuí, also in Rio Grande do Sul, a process that led to major changes in forest areas of the northern region of the state. From 1890 on, various ethnic groups occupied the site, predominantly German, Italian, Austrian, Latvian and Polish, knocking down an extensive portion of Atlantic Forest, which was perceived ambiguously: it was a threat and a nuisance, but at the same time it was the source of useful materials. According to Gerhardt (2009: 86), the immigrants were proud of performing human labor, as they were, “able to explore, to overthrow, able to control or civilize nature, to move the boundary between civilization and the wild”.

Along with the waves of immigrants who occupied rural lots, many Germans occupied urban areas, as was the case of the family of Henrique Luiz Roessler (1896-1963), who settled in São Leopoldo. Beginning in 1939, Roessler held the position of Forest Deputy and agent for Hunting and Fishing. Both jobs were linked to the Ministry of Agriculture, the agency that at the time was in charge of what we would call today

“environmental protection”. Supervising hunting and fishing, especially bird hunting, became one of the most difficult tasks for Roessler. The problems faced by Roessler should be associated with the relatively embryonic stage of the Brazilian bureaucratic structure.⁴ The publication of the first Forest Code and the creation of the Forest Service by the Ministry of Agriculture⁵ led to the creation of a Forest Police, made up of agents and deputies. These men were tasked with monitoring forests and applying the law. The position of Forest Deputy was incorporated into this police force and, in the case of Roessler and his colleagues, was not paid – which reveals an incipient level of institutionalization in this realm of state activity in Brazil.

The regions that received Italian ethnic groups in Rio Grande do Sul used to be the backdrop of clashes and even duels between Roessler and wild bird hunters, since immigrants in Brazil continued with their hunting habits. Once they settled in the northeastern region of the state, before they could harvest the production of their crops, they had to eat what the environment provided them with. Besides fruits and vegetables, the abundance of various animal species – including birds – made hunting a custom passed down to the following generations. Over time this led to a serious environmental problem, according to Roessler's complaint. *Polenta*, a traditional element of Italian cuisine⁶, would be accompanied by birds, allowing the advent of the *passarinhada*, a dish also known as *osei, polenta e toccio*: bird, *polenta* and sauce.

From Roessler's point of view, bird hunting was the main problem of legal supervision.⁷ From a conception of Jewish-Christian nature, he would not tolerate that birds, in divine creation “the most beautiful ornaments of nature”, be slaughtered for culinary purposes. Roessler wrote in his texts⁸ that the fowler, also called “*passarinheiro*” was “a black-

⁴ In 1930, the "New Republic" (“*República Nova*”), or “Vargas Era” was implemented in Brazil – a period in which the government of President Getúlio Vargas sought to modernize the country. An important set of laws and administrative agencies began operating from that period on.

⁵ BRAZIL, Decree No. 23793 of 01/23/1934; BRAZIL, Decree-Law No. 982 of 12/23/1938.

⁶ Typical food of the cuisine of ethnic groups Italians, prepared with corn flour.

⁷ ROESSLER, H. (03/15/1954). Telegram to the Service of Hunting and Fishing of Porto Alegre (APHLR).

⁸ From February 1957 on, Roessler became a columnist for the newspaper *Correio do Povo*, one of the leading newspapers in Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul. In this paper, he published about 300 articles on the state's environmental problems at the time, proposing solutions, denouncing irregularities and publicizing the urgent need to protect nature. Ninety-five of these articles were selected and organized into a book (Roessler, 2005).

souled pervert, with an accursed blood inheritance, a disciple of the devil or a madman” (Roessler, 2005: 106). Killing birds, as well as bringing harm to agriculture, was a “great sin against God” (Roessler, *Correio do Povo*, 08/01/1958). In turn, “*passarinheiros*” hated him. He was the authority responsible for overseeing them, and he was strict, pursuing “defenseless settlers”, “invading their homes” to seize weapons. Roessler's work disturbed the pleasure of hunting and also the delicious *passarinhadas*. His German descent along with the fact that he did not make exceptions for hunters led the settlers to associate him with Nazism. A major mobilization against Roessler started to take shape among the inhabitants of the cities where he worked. They employed various strategies to resist his strict supervision in order to continue with their hunting activities.

The hunting and the *Passarinhada*

In *Senhores e Caçadores [Whigs and Hunters]*, Edward Thompson (1997) addresses the influence of the so-called “Black Act”⁹ on English society in the 18th century. This law considered hunting, wounding, stealing fawn or deer, clandestine rabbit and hare hunting, and unauthorized fishing to be crimes. Regular handling of forest goods was important to guaranteeing property rights and royal privileges. For example, among the English forests, the one in Windsor had the specific function of “proportioning to the King a distraction from the preoccupations of the state” (Thompson, 1997: 32). To keep a stock of game at his disposition, the nobles used to construct parks contiguous to their homesteads, generally in woods and forests, fencing in the location with high brick walls and a team of guards, which didn’t always impede conflicts with the peasants who invaded the areas in order to hunt.

In Brazil, the hunting of various animals was practiced by the indigenous peoples and Portuguese colonizers. According to Ihering (1953), in the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, the tapir, boar, capybara, various species of deer, jaguars, whales, etc; birds, doves, partridges, guans, and lapwings were among the preferred animals to hunt. The lapwings were hated, “by the hunters, as they may have had a pact with the game to

⁹ The Black Act was decreed in 1723 in England for the punishment of hunters who used weapons and disguises to lure game. It was difficult to “furtively catch a deer, pheasant, hare, or salmon, and disguise was the primary protection of the clandestine hunter. The ‘blackening’ (...) refers to the hunting of deer with ‘painted face’ masks or in disguise.” (Thompson, 1997: 68).

quickly announce the approach of any person, screaming without stopping: quero-quero, quero-quero, which is enough for the game to be at the very least forewarned” (Ihering, 1953: 77). Moreover, various species of birds were hunted, like the ones Roessler surprised in his diligent supervisions (thrushes, sparrows, etc).

The *passarinhada* issue, which led to a passionate defense of the thrush, a common local bird¹⁰, was indeed one of the biggest environmental problems faced by Roessler. According to De Boni and Costa (1979: 179), hunting was an Italian custom “that rose from the need for food and was encouraged by the abundance of birds”. For the authors, it is not possible to talk about hunting without mentioning the *passarinhad*as,

which were a considerable sociological reason for parties, and motivated community solidarity. On a specific day during the hunting season a group of hunting friends would meet, divide up the hunting grounds, and leave early with special whistles to call the birds. They hunted until noon and, in the afternoon, they cleaned the game. The next day, they arranged the preparation of the birds (the *passarinhada*) at the home of a friend. Then several families met, other foods were also served, and everyone had an excuse to have one more glass of wine (De Boni, Costa, 1979: 170).

To prepare the dish, the larger birds (pigeons, nhambus, aramides) were separated from the smaller birds (thrushes, rufous-collared sparrows). The latter required special preparation; after the removal of their entrails, they were seasoned with bacon and sage leaves, and cooked whole or halved. It was important that they be well-roasted so the bones could be eaten as well. Among the techniques and weapons used for hunting birds, De Boni and Costa mention the traps to catch them; the slingshot¹¹, used in clandestine hunting in times of prohibition, because they were not noticed by the inspectors; and the most diverse types of shotguns, used in the legal periods for hunting. Breeding seasons were not always observed, however. Hunters ventured out with shotguns even on those days.

¹⁰ Among other species of thrushes, the most common in Rio Grande do Sul are the *sabiá-laranjeira* (Rufous-bellied Thrush) (*Turdus rufiventris*) and the *sabiá-do-campo* (Chalk-browed Mockingbird) (*Mimus saturninus*) (Sick, 1997).

¹¹ The slingshot (*bodoque*), also called sling, was used by Indians and Europeans. The Charrúa and Minuane Indians used it as a war weapon (Teschauer, 2002: 59), as well as the “old Portuguese” (Bluteau, 1712-28: 230).

It is important to note that the term *passarinhada* was used by Roessler to name either the act of hunting or the dish and the festivities that often accompanied it. Rosana Peccini (2008:3) observes that “the *passarinhas* were festive because they gathered friends and neighbors of the community around the food (...), full of stories, tales and feats, making true odysseys”. The hunting, preparation and sharing of the *passarinhada* were important cultural elements for Italian immigrants. It became so strong a tradition that it only declined in the late 1960s, when stricter laws were published, like the new Hunting Code¹². However, an interesting cultural exchange in the culinary field offset the loss of the *passarinhada*. For example, the advent of the *galeto al primo canto*¹³, that according to Ruben Oliven (2006: 202) was “invented by the Italian settlers who migrated to Brazil; it does not exist in Italy, it is a characteristic dish of Rio Grande do Sul”. The Italian hunting was not confined to birds, however. To say that the *galeto* originated from the *passarinhas* is a reduction, or half-truth. It is more correct “to say that the settlers prepared their roasts, the game (and among them were the birds), sticking pieces of meat interspersed with bacon and sage. The meats were varied and could be that of birds, goats, rabbits or partridges”. What happened was some sort of exchange; the *galeto* has come to represent “birds, partridges, goats, or even common teals, among others” (Peccini, 2010:120-121).

Thus, this historiography of Italian immigration in the South of the country points to the fact that the *passarinhada* was a cultural practice present since the first waves of Italian immigrants arrived in Rio Grande do Sul during the large immigrations at the end of the 19th century, and it became a very appreciated part of their diet. With time, as the custom was transmitted to the following generations, it caused an environmental impact on the region, with a significant decrease in the populations of the hunted species¹⁴. However, there isn't enough research to affirm that the *passarinhada* was a specific tradition of the Italians, as other ethnic groups also killed and ate birds (like indigenous peoples, Portuguese, and even Germans). It was a dish that was sporadically a part of

¹² BRAZIL, Law No. 5197, 01/03/1967.

¹³ *Galeto al primo canto* is an expression in Italian which means a bird in its first song, meaning it is slaughtered while it is still quite young, about 25 days old. “It is a term used to identify the chicken weighing 550 grams, clean” (Peccini, 2008).

¹⁴In his articles, Roessler reported large amounts of dead birds seized on his journeys of inspection. Hundreds and even thousands of birds (thrushes, woodpeckers, sparrows, and other species) were being caught each weekend in the cities of the Italian colonization. See more in Roessler (2005).

their diet, generally on the weekends, because the days off were necessary for performing the hunt and the preparation, as well as the tricks to escape supervision.

If the event of the *passarinhada* eventually took on the features of an ethnic conflict, it cannot fundamentally be interpreted from this aspect. The events that we will follow below, which happened in the South of Brazil in the mid-20th century, refer us to the punishment processes for popular practices as described by Warren (1997) and Jacoby (2001) for the case of the United States at the end of the 19th century, as well as by E.P. Thompson (1997), and Peter Linebaugh (1983) for 18th century England. In more rural English areas, the populations saw old hunting, fishing and plant collection customs become criminalized because they affected the hunting privileges of the nobles. Also, in various artisanal trades in urban areas, the customary rights to the appropriation of a portion of the work (raw material or products) came to be repressed during the transition to the market economy that established the monetization of work relations (Linebaugh, 1983: 118-134). The English circumstances at the end of the 18th century, those of the United States at the end of the 19th century, and in Brazil in the first half of the 20th century all have something in common. The growing presence of a legal and state apparatus that encountered resistance among the populations it affected, even though the focus of the normalizing action of the state was very different in the three contexts. This process of criminalization of popular practices, which is common in all societies that modernize and urbanize, gains an “environmental” character in Brazil at the beginning of the 20th century, something that had been nonexistent in earlier centuries. In the 1930s, during the government of Getúlio Vargas, various laws and protectionist codes are published just as bodies are created to supervise and protect the natural elements of Brazil¹⁵.

The smear campaign and the lawsuit

In exercising his function, Roessler was involved in violent episodes in the regions that practiced the *passarinhada*. For the rigidity with which he applied the rules of hunting, he was prosecuted several times by hunters. One of these lawsuits came from the supervision led by him on March 28, 1954, outside Caxias do Sul. It occasioned significant repercussions in the state, leading to rather aggressive manifestations of

¹⁵ Within the legislation, the first Brazilian Forest Code (BRAZIL, Decree-Law 23.793) and the Hunting and Fishing Code (BRAZIL, Decree-Law 23.672) are featured. See more in Drummond, 1998-1999.

resistance by descendants of Italian immigrants. Hunters Rico Zanesi and João Boldo filed complaints against Roessler the following day because when they were hunting in the rural municipality of Caxias do Sul, the most important region of the Italian colonization, they were beaten “with rubber” by him. The hunters declared that the agent ordered them to kneel and hit them with a baton, striking one blow for every bird they killed¹⁶.

Along with Boldo and Zanesi, members of the Toigo family, who were neighbors of the two hunters, testified against Roessler. Ângela Toigo stated that additionally, on March 28 in the morning, she was in front of her house when her husband, Vitório Toigo passed by “running, chased by men with guns in their hands”. The pursuers shot at Vitório two times, who did not enter the house, but went to the nearby bushes. Ângela also said that her daughter “passed out from fright” due to the shots. Then, a green jeep reached the locale and out came a tall, fat man, “who said to be the Regional Deputy for Fishing and Hunting, and asked the declarant to hand over the shotgun she had in the house”. At first, she did not want to give it up, but after half an hour of discussion she ended up handing the weapon to Roessler¹⁷. Vitório Toigo’s version was that he was in his basement when he heard “a gunshot coming from the bushes, in his lands”. He then went to see what was happening when he saw a dark-haired man with glasses who, upon seeing him, “put his hand on the handle of the gun”. Toigo “thought it was a criminal and, for that reason, he ran into the woods”, while the man fired twice. He could not tell if the man was shooting up or in his direction. Toigo stayed in the woods until noon, when he heard that the men who were on his property were hunting supervisors and that the Regional Deputy for Fishing and Hunting had taken away his shotgun¹⁸. In turn, Boldo and Zanesi were referred to medical evaluations, which found injuries such as “spots, swelling and bruises”¹⁹ on both men.

Roessler denied the accusations, saying it was not true that he had assaulted the hunters with a baton, “forcing them to kneel down and striking them for the number of birds

¹⁶ Statements of João Boldo and Rico Zanesi. In: CAXIAS DO SUL POLICE STATION (3/30/1954). Police Inquiry No. 73/54 (APHLR).

¹⁷ Ângela Toigo's Statement. In: CAXIAS DO SUL POLICE STATION, Caxias do Sul. Op. Cit.

¹⁸ Vitório Toigo's Statement. In: CAXIAS DO SUL POLICE STATION, Caxias do Sul. Op. Cit.

¹⁹ Expert report on João Boldo and Rico Zanesi, In: CAXIAS DO SUL POLICE STATION, Caxias do Sul. Op. Cit

they had slaughtered”²⁰. In his version, he was attacked by Rico and Zanesi; the “baton blows” were a last resort of self-defense, not punishment. As to the complaints of the Toigo family, Roessler said that “to stay on good terms with the declarant, João Boldo denounced his neighbor and friend, who was also hunting, Vitorio Toigo”. Since he fled to the woods when he noticed the arrival of the inspection jeep, the supervisor asked Ângela to convince him to surrender the gun and the hunted game. She went to where Victor was hiding and came back with “a double-barreled shotgun, 28 gauge, and a bag containing twelve birds”²¹. Then Roessler wrote a record of violation and seizure, which was signed by two neighbors, since Toigo took shelter in the woods.

In addition to the complaint at the police station of Caxias do Sul, the hunters contacted the press in the region. On April 2nd, the newspaper *Diário do Nordeste* published on its front page in capital letters, the headline: “Wave of revolt and indignation against the splenetic agent Roessler increased”; and under the heading: “New details about the violence committed – cowardly attacks on ladies in the absence of their husbands – Hundreds of telegrams are being sent to the Secretary of Agriculture by associations, clubs and prominent figures – New victims” (*Diário do Nordeste*, 04/02/1954). A picture of two men beaten by Roessler, still showing the marks of this violence on their bodies, accompanied by three other hunters, illustrated the story. The text indicated that the journal took the hunters' side, initiating a violent campaign to attack Roessler:

News of the robberies and acts of villainy perpetrated by Henrique Luiz Roessler, an agent of the Service of Hunting and Fishing, in Ana Rech, 4th district of Caxias, and in São Gotardo, a quiet village of Flores da Cunha, sent a wave of anger and indignation through all the homes and social centers of Caxias do Sul. All the forces of the society mobilized in a few hours in an unprecedented act of solidarity, in order to apply due punishment to the violator of the law who will have to pay for his barbaric acts perpetrated against children, women and men of the colony and on numerous homes (*Diário do Nordeste*, 03/31/1954).

On April 11th, the newspaper *Geração Nova*, of Bento Gonçalves, a city near Caxias do Sul populated by Italians, reported on its cover the “protests against Roessler in the Congress”. In a speech at Congress, Congressman Achilles Mincarone read the contents of a letter he sent to the Minister of Agriculture, stating that the incident “was a true

²⁰ Henrique Roessler's Statement. In: CAXIAS DO SUL POLICE STATION, Caxias do Sul. Op. Cit.

²¹ Henrique Roessler's Statement. In: CAXIAS DO SUL POLICE STATION, Caxias do Sul. Op. Cit.

orgy, in which cowardice, shielded by the number who made up the caravan, stood out in the boisterous agents of public authority” and asked

Your Excellency to appoint a trusted person to carry out thorough investigations in the cities of Caxias do Sul, Bento Gonçalves, Flores da Cunha and Garibaldi, where in mid-March officials from the Service of Hunting and Fishing stationed in São Leopoldo inflicted the most incredible arbitrary acts, including even the beating of defenseless settlers, under the pretext of repressing hunting in that region. (...) I am certain of the fulfillment of what I ask now, on behalf of the farmers in those municipalities (*Geração Nova*, 04/11/1954).

In the same issue there was an article signed by the director in charge of the newspaper, Paulo Mincarone, son of the Congressman above, with the explicit intention to offend and provoke Roessler. We transcribe some passages from the “Open Letter to the *Cangaceiro*”, which resort to images of threatening social characters such as “*cangaceiro*”²² and “Nazi”:

The scoundrel to whom this article is addressed was in the Bento Gonçalves countryside sometime in mid-March, performing some of his notorious *cangaço* journeys. This time, he was accompanied by thugs, carrying out a series of savageries and mischief against peaceful farmers that were typical of his snitch personality (...). He did not even respect the universal principle of the inviolability of the home, which can only be invaded with a warrant, and even then only during daylight. (...). The arbitrary acts were so numerous and so varied that they are already known to all. Given the impact they had, we will not specify any particular case. (...) the students who speak the least, but do produce and thankfully still have some honor left, and have always been on the side of those who work honestly, advise the following:

1st – Advise farmers to open fire on the aforementioned *cangaceiro* Roessler and his notorious gang of bandits.

2nd – During the Easter period, when we will all be in Bento Gonçalves, walk with a loaded shotgun. Do this not in order to kill birds, but to vex the gang led by the bastard Henrique Luiz Roessler. We already know that they will not accept the challenge, given the natural cowardice they demonstrated when they beat up immobilized farmers who had no possibilities of reaction before the guns of Gestapo agents commanded by the Nazi Roessler (*Geração Nova*, 04/11/1954).

We can see how Roessler's work bothered the press of Caxias do Sul and Bento Gonçalves. Roessler, who in his struggle for the protection of nature did not exempt himself from conflict, was shaken by the extremely aggressive terms used, and by the open threat of death. He filed criminal charges against Paulo Mincarone for publishing the report transcribed above, considering it to be a “violent article, abusing and

²² Those involved with the “*cangaço*”, a form of professionalization of violence that occurred in the northeastern states of Brazil, in 1920-1930, in which gunmen (*cangaceiros*) were hired by prominent landowners to kill their enemies. According to Jasmin (2006: 17), one of the hypotheses for the legitimization of this kind of violence is “the lack of representation of the power of the state in the Sertão [an arid desertic area in the countryside of Brazil's northeastern region], coupled with the predominance of private power related to land possession”.

slandering the plaintiff, to whom he attributes profanity and words that disgrace his personal and professional dignity, untrue facts and acts, while furthermore advising and recommending farmers to use their firearms against the signatory of this lawsuit. The writer's attitude is not only an outrage to journalistic ethics, it is the type of attitude that demands enforcement so as not to go unpunished, as stated by the law. Mincarone is one of the journalists that takes advantage of the freedom of the press, and does not hesitate to gratuitously slander and abuse those who perform their duties and have a past of integrity to look after". (Roessler, Representation against Paulo Mincarone, no date). Moreover, the "letter" summoned, on behalf of the city students – because the newspaper was an organ of the Union of Students of Bento Gonçalves – the local farmers to shoot the Forest Deputy. Both Achilles and Paulo's discourses seem very well articulated in the family newspaper which was probably created for electoral purposes, because both would run for different political offices that year.

Another Bento Gonçalves' newspaper that also spoke out against Roessler was *Jornal do Povo*. In the April 15, 1954 edition, a whole page addressed the subject, with headlines like "Violence performed by Hunting and Fishing Agent Henrique Luiz Roessler confirmed", "Roessler beats people, breaks into homes and 'seizes' weapons", "Replacement of Deputy requested", "Anger and indignation of the people of Caxias" (*Jornal do Povo*, 04/15/1954). The report included the photograph of the hunters assaulted by Roessler (showing small bruises) and, in addition to the metaphor of *cangaceiro* it called him a gangster: "may Mr. Henrique Luiz Roessler do his job as an agent within the strict determination of the law. May he fine, process, and seize the weapons of offenders. But may he not want to become a *cangaceiro* of our forests. May he not intend to create the reputation of a gangster in this region". The local marshal allegedly told the newspaper that one of the victims, "held at gunpoint by a thug", reported in the investigation that they had been beaten as many times as the amount of birds they had killed. In the article there were also ethnic provocations made towards Roessler:

Certainly the abusive agent missed Nazism, the times of Dachau, the nights that he gathered friends at home to delight in the transmission of the Berlin station, telling tall tales of the sinking of Allied ships in several different seas. If we search his behavior well, we may find other reasons for the procedures described above, other than the zealous enforcement of hunting and fishing regulations. In the shameless letter he sent

to the City Council of Caxias do Sul, he revealed himself to be a vicious racist, with an aversion to the men who make up the ethnic melting pot of our region. The police are right to establish a corresponding lawsuit so that legal explanations may be provided to the inadvertent victims of his arbitrary acts. This is not the only thing that must be done. The substitution of this agent proves itself to be urgent, hopefully by someone that can enforce the law while also knowing how to stay within its bounds. (*Jornal do Povo*, 04/15/1954).

Roessler is accused of being a racist and a Nazi, which according to the newspaper would explain “the arbitrary acts and violence” committed by him. We found no evidence that he had propagated “Nazi doctrine” in the city where he lived, nor any written document that led to infer that Roessler was a “follower of Hitler”, even considering that, “until 1938, when the first measures against Teutons and against the activities of national-socialists in Brazil were taken, the Brazilian government had demonstrated growing sympathy towards the National Socialist regime” (Gertz, 1987: 63), which changed from 1942 on, when Brazil broke ties with the Axis. If Roessler had spoken in favor of Hitler, defending Nazism in the early 1930s, it would not have been odd in that moment because Vargas – for whom Roessler had great admiration²³ – expressed enthusiasm for the Nazi and fascist regimes, and sought to be a leader like Hitler and Mussolini in the Estado Novo regime, which he established in 1937. The accusations of “being a Nazi” made against Roessler in the fifties can be attributed to the context of international condemnation of Nazism. It gained strength with the defeat of Germany and, in Rio Grande do Sul, it allowed the Italians to surpass the Germans in terms of a positive image for their own group (Weber, 2004).

However, the harsh words did not come only from the Italian-Brazilians, since Roessler also addressed them through hostile messages. The agent often referred to hunters as “*gringos*”²⁴, “fowlers”, “maniacs”; and to the *passarinhas* as a “great shameless deed performed by these damned and phony people”²⁵. In a letter to the Director of the Hunting and Fishing Division, Roessler noted that “everyone knows the nature of the Italian descendants, who insist on being against the law”²⁶. In a report sent to his boss, in which he narrated that he freed Boldo and Zanesi after imposing the infraction notice,

²³ Roessler admired Getúlio Vargas because in his administration in the 1930s, a series of laws and codes to protect nature were published. The agent also empathized with Vargas' party, PTB.

²⁴ The more general meaning for gringo is “foreigner”; the use of this term by the Germans to refer to Italians is due to the fact that the latter arrived later in the immigration process to Rio Grande do Sul.

²⁵ ROESSLER, H. Letter to Marli Guinter. São Leopoldo, 08/31/1961 (APHLR).

²⁶ ROESSLER, H. Letter to Ascanio Faria. São Leopoldo, 08/28/1954 (APHLR).

the agent proved to be sorry: “for the sake of camaraderie, I left them at the doors of their homes. This act of weakness of mine was a big mistake. I was not yet familiar with the soul of the gringo, in spite of having dealt with men of Italian origin for 15 years”²⁷. Also in his writings, Roessler did not spare the customs of these immigrants: “We are convinced that none of the addicts would have missed such a rare opportunity to make a fine *passarinhada*, even under the risk of supervision intervention” (Roessler, 2005: 104); “the great multitude of fowlers, the terrible bird killers, [hunt] by instinct, to satisfy unusual appetites” (Roessler, 2005: 105). In the article “The Slaughterhouse of Bad Hunters”, Roessler explains that the hunters of “small branch game” seek the forests of neighboring cities “to carry out their despicable massacres of the poor little birds”, because “in the Italian Colony there is no more life in Nature” (Roessler, 2005: 121). Contextualizing this fact – and we need to consider that this was Roessler's war – he could not understand the appetite for birds, because he had an idealized and religious view of nature.²⁸

It is interesting to note the correspondence between the view that the Italians had of Roessler – they manipulated his descent, accusing him of “being a Nazi” – with the use of some expressions by Roessler that can be considered racist, addressed to the Italians. At this point, the “two sides” competed in name-calling: to be accused of being a “Nazi”, “a cangaceiro”, “a bastard”, “a vagabond”, “a crook” or “a fanatic bandit” was parallel to being called “gringo”, “pervert”, “madman” or “a *passarinheiro* (fowler)” who does not obey the laws. In reality, the hunters recognized themselves in a non-negative way as “*passarinheiros*”, as is demonstrated by the fact that the sender of the two anonymous letters to Roessler signed them as “the willing fowler (*o passarinheiro disposto*)”. Just like Roessler, both the sender and the writers of the newspapers could be called “racist”.

An aspect to be considered regarding the editorial policy of the aforementioned newspapers is that they clearly had political and electoral goals, since these were the media through which their owners could spread their ideas and political opinions for electoral purposes. In other articles of the analyzed publications, the writers also used

²⁷ ROESSLER, H. Report sent to Carlos Costa Meira. São Leopoldo, no date (APHLR).

²⁸ For a discussion of Roessler's idea of nature and its link to religion, see Pereira (2011a).

harsh words to address political enemies. In Roessler's case, newspapers run by candidates for the city council and congress disseminated a negative image of Roessler in order to get elected with the votes of *passarinhada* lovers, thus actively collaborating in the fight against the agent.

Imaginaries built in the "war for representation"

Roessler received two anonymous letters, signed by the same sender, "the Willing Fowler of Caxias do Sul". The first, dated April 24, 1952, was addressed "to the fanatic bandit Roessler and his pack of gangsters who claim to be hunting agents (...), stupid and pretentious, trying to convince others that the bird is useful to agriculture". According to the hunter, the settlers knew "that birds are a plague, and therefore must die (...)". Using profanity like "vagabond crook, head of the bandits", the author stated that Roessler had no moral composure because he ran "like a lunatic through the fields, creeping through the woods", through "wetlands, climbing mountains, with a gun at his waist and a baton in his hand, going after the fowlers to seize their weapons and write infraction notices, chasing us out of sheer malice, only to spoil the pleasure of the poor settlers who do nothing wrong" (The Willing Fowler, 04/24/1952).

Dated June 17, 1954, the second anonymous letter shows an even greater hatred towards Roessler, in terms that exceeded the aggressiveness of the previous letter, containing threats to the agent's life. It made clear that the motive of the quarrel, if not completely political, at least implied the author's support of the PTB, the Brazilian Labour Party (Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro)²⁹, to which belonged congressman Mincarone, who had sent the Minister of Agriculture an indictment against Roessler:

"For the infamous Herr Roessler, persecutor of innocent foreigners:"

In 1952, shortly after I wrote you a letter, God answered our prayers, curses and promises by tossing you in the river, which resulted in sawing off your leg. We thought we would be free of your infernal persecution forever. We happily celebrated your doom with fireworks and great *passarinhad*as. In every Italian colony there were feasts and joy, because you had received a fair and deserved punishment, and no longer would you trouble anyone. But we were wrong. You returned with an artificial leg to continue embittering our lives, in a worse way than before, because you developed an inferiority complex and still want to be a bully. Now in view of your latest bandit deeds, we have decided to declare your death sentence, because we cannot wait for another divine punishment, nor do we trust in the Justice of men. You do not yet know the vengeful soul of the *gringos*, especially the Calabrians and Tyroleans, who have now put you into a criminal lawsuit (...). The order is shoot you in the face to blind you and then to kill

²⁹ Party created by President Getúlio Vargas that had strong popular support.

you with rifle butts (...). When Pasqualini takes over this damned rotten government, his first act will be to allow the *passarinhas* and bird hunting, extinguishing this crappy Service of Hunting and Fishing (...). All good men of Caxias and the neighboring cities who have been hit so hard in their favorite sport, which is the killing of birds, will show what the vote of a free people is worth. A people that are conscious of their rights and that will show how to kill mockingbirds at will, because mockingbirds are only good to us when fried and accompanied by *polenta* and good wine. However, you will not live to see this, because by then you will already be buried. Your coffin is ready to take you back home. Never again will you enter into our woods to play the *cangaceiro*. Then there will be great joy in the Italian colony again (The Willing Fowler, 06/17/1954).

In 1952 Roessler had an accident in which he lost his right leg. This kept him away from supervision for almost one year. He began using an artificial leg. This was celebrated by the hunters as a great victory. The “Willing Fowler” revealed his support for the PTB when he mentioned that Pasqualini (the party’s state government candidate) would take over the government – which did not occur, because Pasqualini lost the election. On the other hand, Roessler had sought, through a letter sent in June 1954, help from the Congressman Wolfram Metzler³⁰, an integralist accused of being a Nazi³¹ who was arrested during the Second World War. Since Metzler spoke in Roessler’s favor, he brought another reason for the Deputy to be associated with Nazism, as we saw in the newspapers’ stories.

In addition to political connotations, we can see interesting ethnic significance in the letter. The writer used the exogenous designation of “fowler (*passarinheiro*)” in a non-negative way, suggesting that there was “a solidarity among the persons thus named, perhaps because as a result of this common designation, they were collectively given a specific treatment” (Poutignat, Streiff-Fenart, 1998: 145). The writer of the letter reveals ties to different representations, which can effectively express themselves together in the same individual or social group: a) identities of regional origin (Calabrian and Tyrolean), for which the demonstration of courage is a way of “ethnic honor” (Weber, 1994: 272), which is understandable for farmers who emigrated before

³⁰ Wolfram Metzler was a founding member of the integralist movement in Rio Grande do Sul, who later joined the Party of Popular Representation (Partido de Representação Popular) – PRP (Tonini, 2003: 52-53). Integralism was a political movement that emerged in Brazil in the thirties, inspired by European integralist movements, characterized by its association with religious morality and nationalism. It was banned in 1938 and, with the return of democracy in Brazil in 1945, many of its supporters joined the PRP.

³¹ Nazism, Germanism and Integralism, different phenomena, were treated as something homogeneous in the Estado Novo period (Gertz, 1991).

the Italian unification; b) the favoring in the host society of a broader identity (“Italian colony”), allowing a joint action of these emigrants; c) the link to values of citizenship, present in national and democratic societies (voting, rights, “free people”), notwithstanding the preference shown in the text for more archaic methods of justice.

Coming out as a “fowler”, along with the title “willing”, transformed the negative connotation into a positive one. It can also be seen as another form of resistance to hunting supervision, which Roessler represented. He was the agent who had troubled the hunters the most and therefore, he became the target of a great deal of collective hatred. In this case, the “willingness” explicitly showed resistance: the fowlers were willing to continue hunting (not accepting the prohibitions) as well as fighting against the agent, which was expressed in the frequent death threats to him. All the attacks against Roessler show, in fact, that he was not seen as a government agent. Criticism of the laws prohibiting hunting was rarely shown, and these laws would obviously not seem fair to the Italian group even if they were implemented by another agent who acted differently and who was of a different ethnic origin than Roessler. This frame of history seems to indicate a weakness of government apparatus³², that the agent sought to compensate with a strong stand, causing those affected by the – still incomplete – Brazilian standards of protection of nature to direct their resistance at him.

Final Considerations

The rivalry between Roessler and the Italians can be interpreted as a localized version of a sort of a “war for representation”³³ among the Italian and German ethnic groups formed by immigrant communities in Rio Grande do Sul. Several historians have written on the rivalry between Germans and Italians (Piccolo, 1990; Gertz, 1996; Giron, 2008). Summarizing their arguments, we can list differences in religion, language, business and population competition, and the Italians’ difficulty with integration as the main causes of this rivalry. In the specific case of the hunting agent Roessler and the hunters of Italian descent, the reason for the conflict was the *passarinhada*, that is, the different ways of seeing and using nature.

³² Roessler and other state forest deputies did not even receive a salary. He often complained of lack of funds or even a vehicle to carry out inspection trips.

³³ Concept developed by Bourdieu (2007) and resumed by Chartier (2002).

In the dispute between Roessler and the *passarinheiros*, there was also an appeal to ethnic stereotypes. The two “sides”, in using negative images to refer to their rival, built representations – which can be as concrete as the “reality” or even come to constitute reality itself – with the intention to devalue the “other”. In this “war of representations, in the sense of mental images and also social manifestations meant to manipulate mental images” (Bourdieu, 2007: 113), it does not matter if the representations are true, but it does matter if they influence the construction of an imaginary for the groups³⁴. The agent not only reaffirmed the image of the descendants of Italian immigrants as “gringos”, he also used the representations of “perverts”, “violent”, “madmen”, “cursed inheritance”, “inherent vice”, “*passarinheiros*”, “terrible bird killers”, “bad Brazilians”, “mad and phony people”, “mentally unbalanced”, and “murderers”, among others. To Roessler, the taste for *passarinhas* was a genetic defect inherited from the ancestors of Italian origin; the generations of descendants born in Brazil, who because of this “accursed inheritance” were “bad Brazilians” since they had not managed to get rid of the addiction.

On the part of the “Italians” there was built an image of Roessler as a violent and cowardly person when they named him a “*cangaceiro*”, a “beater of defenseless settlers”, “seizer of weapons without a warrant”, “scoundrel”, “bastard”, “bandit”, who went to the cities of the Italian colonization to practice “savage acts”, “barbaric acts against women and children”, “mischief” with his “gang of robbers”, in an “abuse of authority”. Furthermore, this imaginary was linked to the representation of Roessler as a Nazi, as we saw in the use of stigma related to Nazism, such as “fifth column”, “pig”, “Gestapo agent”, “agent who missed Dachau”, “racist”, “follower of Hitler”, “monster”, “*Herr Roessler*”.³⁵ The memory of the Second World War that had ended only nine years before was certainly still very strong, and the defeat of Hitler and the Germans along with the condemnation of Nazism favored such negative representations. Many

³⁴ To Patlagean (1993 [1978]: 300), it is on the “problem of the relationship between social reality and the representational system” that the history of the imaginary must be built.

³⁵ According to Rambo (1994: 49), “discriminatory practices in relation to German and other non-Lusitanian origins became routine in the period between the years 1938 and 1945. These practices found fertile ground on a series of stereotypes that mostly Germans suffered: ‘*alemão batata*’ (‘potato German’), ‘fifth column’, ‘Nazi’ and more. Racism against black people in North America and South Africa was condemned, but it was not clear that there was also discrimination here against Germans, Italians and Japanese”.

German descendants were accused of being Nazis; however in Roessler's case, not only was he of German ethnic origin, he was the government agent that repressed a custom that was important to the Italian groups. Associating him with violence and Nazism was a form of resistance that these groups found in the attempt to continue practicing the *passarinhas*. The hunters' manifestations, in the media and in the statements that started the court fight, could be interpreted as acts of resistance against Roessler's supervision; they reacted to the criminalization of a cultural custom inherited from their ancestors.

In a similar fashion to what happened in England during the 18th century and in the United States in the 19th century (at the birth of the conservationist movement, when traditional customs became crimes), in Rio Grande do Sul, the practice of the *passarinhada* was “framed” in a negative way. In our case study, there occurred a confrontation between two opposing visions about nature: the vision of the Italian hunters, to whom the *passarinhada* was something normal and not a reprehensible practice, and the vision of supervisor Roessler, to whom the *passarinhada* was illegal and a threat to nature, a conception based on the environmental legislation published in Brazil from the 1930s on, and supported by conservationist ideals.

At the end of these both symbolic and material clashes the two sides suffered defeats and accumulated victories. Paulo Mincarone was elected as a State Representative for PTB for the period of 1955-59. By virtue of an article of the Statute of the Government Employee (Title I, Article 4), that did not allow the performance of unpaid duties (Brazil, Law 1711, 10/28/1952), Roessler was removed from the positions of Forest Deputy and Agent for Hunting and Fishing in December 1954, which should have been much celebrated by *passarinheiros*. However, in early 1955, he founded the first entity of environmental protection in the state, the Union for the Protection of Nature (União Protetora da Natureza, UPN), and in the same year he got a new credential with the State Department of Agriculture to continue monitoring hunting and fishing. Through UPN, he undertook an extensive education campaign on the protection of all natural resources of Rio Grande do Sul, especially the birds; with his new credential, he continued to hamper the leisure of hunters and the pleasures of the *passarinhas*.

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