

B. Traven For Beginners

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Reviews of my work in the Nazi press, with few exceptions and those only recently, were always favorable. That arouses my suspicion—and even more the fact that they have not banned all of my books, but only four.

-B. Traven, private letter, June 8, 1933

My connection with B. Traven is pretty faint, but I should explain it for you, so I will. On the white side of my family, my grandfather was obsessed with the novels of the mysterious B. Traven, even going on camping trips in the desert with his guy friends in emulation of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, although unlike the *pinche yanquis* in that novel, they weren't overcome by greed and bloodlust, always making it back to civilization in one piece.

On the other side of my family, the Mexican side, my non-white grandfather lived in Mexico City from the 1930s to the 1950s, and it was during this time that he learned of the mysterious *gringo* who claimed to represent B. Traven in Mexico. My family was quite connected to the burgeoning cinema of Mexico and lucky enough to participate in its *Golden Age*. One of the many film-makers my family of actors worked with was Gabriel Figueroa, the man who shot *La Rebelión de los Colgados*, a cinematic adaptation of *The Rebellion of the Hanged* by the mysterious B. Traven, one of his six *Jungle Novels*. Traven was always lingering behind the camera during the shoot, only people thought he was Hal Croves, but I'll get to that. Just know, my grandfather was always two degrees removed from this mysterious writer.

La Rebelión de los Colgados came out in 1954, six years after the box-office smash of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, but it was far more political and subversive, meaning no one in the US has ever seen it. Anyway, I grew up knowing all about B. Traven, with my non-white parent constantly invoking *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre's* immortal lines, *Badges? We ain't got no badges! We don't need no stinking badges!*, as if that alone could solve all the world's problems.

Fast forward to 2022, and I'm pretty sure most anarchists in the world have never read a single book by B. Traven. Even though his books sold millions and millions of copies during the 20th century, this level of popularity is largely in the past, and there are few who remember that, when asked what books he'd take to a desert island, Albert Einstein replied, *it doesn't matter. The main thing is that they are by Traven*. Now, in 2022, most anarchists probably type the name B. Traven into the Google Search engine and end up seeing a white man in a colonial pith helmet. Given there's so much to read, this alone probably would make most people put off reading Traven for the rest of their lives.

And so, knowing you'll likely never read the books of B. Traven, I present to you a short biography and a review of his greatest work, the so-called *Jungle Novels* set in Chiapas of the 1900s. Along the way you might learn much about German and Mexican history, but just know I write this for the illiterate, and I don't mean that rudely. Capitalism doesn't want us to read, for good reason, and as you'll see from *The Jungle Novels*, some books are so dangerous you're never supposed to know about them. If you can't read these six novels, I hope you can read this article, because maybe then you'll realize just how much is lost if we don't try and remember.

The Bavarian Illuminati

I'm sure you've at least heard of B. Traven, given you're still reading, just as I'm sure you know nothing about him at all. It turns out his name was Otto and he was born in German-occupied Poland in the year 1882, the son of a humble brick-burner. He wanted to serve in the

clergy but ended up being a locksmith. Like all youth in the Prussian Empire, he was forced into mandatory military service from 1902 to 1904, an experience which forever turned him into an anarchist firebrand. He left his village shortly after in 1905 and disappeared into the writhing tumult of radical Germany.

After leaving home, Otto changed his name to Ret Marut. He was a theater director in Essen from 1907 to 1908 and then went on the road across the Empire, staging shows from Thuringia to Saxony. In 1909 he made his way to radical Berlin and joined another theater company there, allowing him to travel through east and west Prussia. He finally settled down in Düsseldorf in 1912, joining another theater where he told everyone he was born in San Francisco in 1882. At the time, anyone who wanted to change their life and start afresh claimed to have been born in San Francisco, given that after the Great Fire of 1906, all the city birth records had been destroyed, effectively wiping the slate clean for anyone needing an alias.

Marut stayed in Düsseldorf until 1915 when he moved to Munich, the capital of Bavaria. Here he met a woman named Irene Mermet who quickly became his friend, editor, and publisher. They published Marut's first work of fiction in 1916, *To The Honorable Miss S...*, an anti-war novella printed clandestinely in her apartment at Herzogstrasse 43, a work which many believe was actually written by Irene Mermet. In this first-person account of trench-warfare from the perspective of a now-dead WWI soldier, the narrator asks the reader, *what care I for life and fatherland? What is war to me? What is this plangent arousal of an entire nation to one mighty purpose of the will?*

The sadness of this tiny novel comes from the fact that the author dies in another pointless charge, just as the entire story is a giant letter to his lover Miss S, now bereaved, just one of many war-widows in this time of darkness. The only reason this subversive work escaped the near-total censorship of the German state was because it was essentially self-published and spread from hand to hand, becoming part of the radical ferment that was Munich in 1916.

The next year, Marut and Mermet began publication of an irregular radical magazine called *Der Ziegelbrenner*, or *The Brickburner*, named after the profession of Marut's father. This homage to his distant family was also a way of cheating the state censors, for they wrongly assumed this magazine was dedicated to the craft of brick-making. This sleight is the first real glimpse into the devilish sense of humor that Ret Marut possessed, a sense of humor that was perfectly welded to his *revolutionary praxis*, if you'll forgive that expression.

The cover of *The Brickburner* was not only red like a brick, it was designed like a brick, and this was long before people like the Situationists or *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* This was 1917, when WWI was still raging on all fronts, and the first issue that September boldly declared, *Don't Rebuild The Old—Build The New!* In the same issue, Marut said that he wished *to furnish with his publication building blocks for a better postwar Germany and for a better world in general.* In another display of subversive humor, the fictitious Ret Marut claimed full responsibility *for publication, editing, and content.* In reference to the contact address on the cover, he claimed that *people should not attempt to pay a visit, there is never anyone here. We have no telephone.*

To make this all a bit more terrestrial, I just want you to know that less than twenty issues of *The Brickburner* were ever printed in its four year run, and no more than 1,000 copies were printed per issue. This is basically what some of you do every month, semi-annually, or bi-annually with your zines and pamphlets, so keep it up. Ret Marut sure did, and it's hard to know if he was being serious, but he claimed, in an open letter to the Minister of War, that *we do not have a single subscriber from the working or lower-middle classes; all of our subscribers come from the ranks of professors, teachers, students, doctors, officers, artists, writers, independent scholars, and*

industrialists. Pretty weird, I agree, but that was 1918, when it was clear Germany was going to lose the war and everyone was poor.

To his friends and in the pages of *The Brickburner*, Ret Marut claimed to have private funds to sustain the magazine, something which might seem sketchy, naturally. However, I want you to imagine that Ret Marut, trained as a locksmith, was doing more than just acting in plays when he traveled across Germany, and I will happily assert that he was one of the great anarchist thieves, whose activities took place concurrently with the likes of Marius Jacob and Jules Bonnot. These men were all cut from the same cloth, to use a cliché, and their unifying characteristics were not just their literary natures and individualist anarchism, but their origins in the utter working class of a pre-modern Europe.

Anyway, I don't know where else he got these mysterious funds, but he had them, carrying him through to November 7, 1918, when the monarchy was deposed, a new Republic was declared in Munich, and a Social Democrat elected Prime Minister. Ret Marut made his anarchist position clear the following January when he declared, *I can belong to no party, since I see my personal freedom limited in belonging to any party, since being bound to a party line keeps me from developing into what I view as the highest and most noble goal on earth: to be a human being!*

In this same article, which was also circulated across Germany as a flier, Marut emphasizes that his *freedom is secured only when all other people around me are free. I can only be happy when all other people around me are happy. I can only be joyful when all the people I see and meet look at the world with joy-filled eyes. And only then can I eat my fill with pure enjoyment when I have the secure knowledge that other people, too, can eat their fill as I do. And for that reason it is a question of my own contentment, only of my own self, when I rebel against every danger which threatens my freedom and my happiness.* In this manner, Ret Marut reconciles his anarcho-individualism and his anarcho-communism, revealing in precise terms how they are one and the same.

A month later, the new Prime Minister was assassinated on his way to the Bavarian state assembly. Another Social Democrat was put in his place that March but this government was immediately challenged by the powerful Central Council, peppered with anarchists like Gustave Landaur and his friend Ret Marut, who had joined its Press Department censoring bourgeois newspapers. On April 7, their Republic of Councils took over Bavaria and began to institute immediate changes in Munich. The next day, Ret Marut was elected part of the Preparatory Commission For Forming A Revolutionary Tribunal, as well being elected a member of the Propaganda Committee. As he would later write, *this election by revolutionary workers' council represented [for me] the highest honor and highest recognition of [my] work which [I have] received from the November masquerade to the present.*

A week later, the Social Democrats brought in their army to restore order and arrested members of the Central Council, many of them anarchists. With these *Bavarian illuminati* in jail, the communists declared a second Republic of Councils and some of the anarchists went along with them, including Ret Marut. It's hard to say why an anti-Bolshevik like Ret Marut would go along with this bunch while they seized the government, but here's one possible reason.

Way before the Nazis, there was this thing called the Thule Society, or *Thule-Gesellschaft*, a right-wing occultist group that required all its members be pure *Aryans*. Before Hitler would go on to mainline amphetamine and rant about the *Aryan race*, this rotten Thule Society believed their *race* had come from the lost continent of *Ultima Thule*, and among their many insane beliefs was a deep hatred of Jewish people, who did not come from *Ultima Thule*. Anyway, on April 26, 1919, while Ret Marut served in the new communist-led insurrectionary government, a com-

mando of rebel troops stormed into the homes and offices of this Thule Society, making off with several members as prisoners.

Among them were Prince Gustave Franz Maria of Thurn and Taxis, Countess Heila von Westarp, and several other proto-fascists from the Thule Society. They were taken into a basement, lined up with some captured Freikorps soldiers, and shot down like rabid dogs. I would hazard a guess that Ret Marut was pleased with this development, potentially explaining why he served under a pro-Bolshevik government.

Oddly, the executed prince happened to belong to the House of Thurn and Taxis, the same royal house central to Thomas Pynchon's strange 1966 novella *The Crying of Lot 49*. In this coded-warning of a book, a mysterious counterforce called Tristero wages a centuries-long war against Thurn and Taxis. While the emblem of that royal house's ancient postal service was a trumpet, the emblem of Tristero's underground network was a muted trumpet, and as the main character of *The Crying of Lot 49* searches for Tristero, she somehow encounters Mexican anarchists in the Mission District of San Francisco, anarchists who seem to be part of this Tristero conspiracy.

Regardless, a lot of people hated Thurn and Taxis, especially their occultist Prince Gustave, and among them was Ret Marut, who probably smoked a cigarette and had a drink that night of April 30, 1919, trying his best to ignore the quickly approaching Freikorps and White Guards. There was hardly time to do anything else before intense warfare engulfed Munich, lasting until the ultimate defeat of the rebel Republic on May 1, 1919.

On that horrible day, Ret Marut saw the White Guards machine-gun innocent civilians just before he was captured and sentenced to death. While he waited to die, people sitting beside him were taken out and shot by soldiers loyal to the Social Democrats. When a fight broke out, Marut took this chance to escape, aided in some manner by two unknown soldiers who saved his life, somehow. Others were not so lucky, and in the clandestine issue of *The Brickburner* where he recounted his capture and escape, he dedicated the entire magazine to his fallen friends Gustave Landaur and Eugen Leviné, just two of the many anarchists murdered by the Bavarian government, now run by the Social Democrats.

Ret Marut immediately went underground, though not completely. As he wrote in the now illegal *Brickburner*, he traveled through *some sixty cities, villages, and towns in Bavaria [and] spoke to middle-class people, farmers, and workers*. On this journey, he *used the sole form of agitation which can bear valuable fruit, a form which is ancient and which Christ also applied: speaking from person to person, speaking to the smallest gatherings of people*. He may have gone to Vienna after this, just as he may have gone to Cologne and Berlin. His best friend Irene Mermet was likely with him, and it's likely they met with the anarchist Rudolf Rocker in Berlin, a man with anarchist contacts in Mexico. Most of their time was spent in Cologne, where Mermet was from, and the final issues of *The Brickburner* were likely printed here among a trusted circle of anarchists, comrades who helped organize Ret Marut's escape from Europe.

In August, 1923, after four years of hiding, Ret Marut appeared on the shores of the United Kingdom, claiming to be a US citizen. He was arrested on November 30 for *failing to register as an alien* and sent to the infamous Brixton Prison, although apparently he was treated well enough for him to begin writing his first novel, *The Death Ship*. This half-factual account of his efforts to flee Europe, partially written in case the authorities confiscated it, was a text that would confirm his story of being an American stranded without his passport. This ruse didn't exactly work, and during his imprisonment, the authorities forced Ret Marut to admit that he was in fact Otto

Feige from Scwiebus, Germany. While this admission may surprise you, it was the only way to convince the Home Office he faced a death sentence at the hands of their former enemy.

On the day he was arrested, the police were able to take a photograph of Otto Feige, but during the shot, Otto subtly puffed out his cheeks and lips, turning himself into what the anarchist Hugo from *The Iceman Cometh* would call *a little monkey face*. Along with his worker's cap and mustache, the man captured as Otto Friege looked nothing like Ret Marut, or the future B. Traven, and if you don't believe me, look at the photos I've included. That's all it took to avoid surveillance back then, and with this assurance of anonymity, Otto was released on February 15, 1924, now returned to his role as Ret Marut.

The whole time he'd been there, Ret Marut lived in East London, likely among the anarchists who also knew Rudolf Rocker, the anarchist he likely met in Berlin. After his release, Ret Marut continued to reside in this anarchist bastion and he likely knew the publishers of the *Freedom* anarchist newspaper and attended the famed Anarchist Discussion Group. It is highly likely he knew the feminist Sylvia Pankhurst and her anarchist husband Silvio Corio, given that a memo from the US State Department dated December 13, 1926 claimed that Marut was being *shielded* by Pankhurst, whatever that means.

The State Department was keeping tabs on Marut because in March of 1924 he tried to obtain a US passport using his San Francisco cover-story. He was denied a passport that April, the same month he signed onto a Norwegian boat as a coal-man but jumped ship before anyone noticed. As the State Department records confirm, this ruse convinced the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover himself that the dangerous anarchist Ret Marut was on his way to Morocco, which he wasn't. No one truly knows how Ret Marut crossed from the United Kingdom to Mexico. All we have to go on is *The Deathship* and its insane story of helplessness and greed.

Deathship To Mexico

Shortly after arriving in Tampico, Ret Marut jotted down in his notebook, *the Bavarian of Munich is dead!* From that moment onward, he would have two new identities. Not only would he be B. Traven, he was also Traven Torsven (or altering combinations like BT Torsvan or B. Torsvan). I have no idea what Torsven is supposed to be aside from a vaguely Scandinavian distraction, but I do know that *traben* is a Spanish verb for *lock*, and that to the untrained ear a Spanish *b* can sound very much like a *v*, so that when one says a word like *traben*, it comes out like *traven*. In other words, the *v* becomes a *b*. Get it? B. Traven!

Given he was definitely a locksmith and most likely an anarchist thief, I don't doubt his eyes immediately darted in his Spanish-German dictionary for the verb *lock*, but regardless, from the moment he set foot in Mexico, his past in Bavaria was locked away for good, or at least until the 1980s, but by then he was dead.

Back in the 1920s, when Traven arrived, Tampico and the coastal regions of Tamaulipas and Veracruz were being exploited by foreign petroleum companies, a sorry state that likely didn't jibe with the dream-like depictions of *rebel Mexico* that most radical Europeans received at the time. He didn't stay in Tampico for long, and in July of 1924 he moved to a rickety cabin north of the lagoons about thirty miles away from any urban center. As he described it, *the house stands completely isolated in that area of the bush. I had a fifty-minute ride on horseback to my next-door neighbor. For weeks I often saw no human face; I lived there completely by myself. The nights are*

long, it is pitch-black night at seven o'clock, even in mid-summer. There is no electric light, even the water for drinking, cooking, and washing is in short supply. And since frequent washing is not merely a relief here, but a necessity, I had to wash at noon and in the evening with the same water I washed with that morning. A poet's retreat.

With no immediate access to funds, which he apparently had to leave behind in Europe, Traven worked as a common laborer picking cotton at a plantation, driving cattle, and constructing oil camps for foreign companies, just like thousands of other poor Mexicans, all the while working with the IWW local in Tampico. Exhausted after these long days, he worked on the ending of his novel *The Death Ship* and began the sequel, *Die Baumwollpflücker*, or *The Cottonpicker*, technically his first but not issued as a bound volume until later. Instead, he sent chapters of this new work to Germany, and of all the magazines, they were serialized in *Vorwärts*, an official periodical of the Social Democratic Party, the same people who murdered his comrades in Munich.

Despite condemning him to death, the Social Democrats were now spreading the work of B. Traven across Germany, being the only *state-allowed opposition* capable of doing so with such effectiveness, and once again we see the same devilish, multi-dimensional humor bleeding out of everything this funny man set his mind to. It gets even better, though. The editors at *Vorwärts* were so taken by this elusive tale of a roaming labor agitator that they connected Traven with Büchergilde Gutenberg, a reputable German publisher, who agreed to publish *The Cottonpicker* as a bound volume.

On October, 11, 1925, Traven sent them an expanded version of the serialized novel, now titled *Der Wobbly*, or *The Wobbly*. In this book, Traven lays bare the corruptness of President Calle's government in Mexico and depicts a revolt against a system that sells off its land to US oil companies. In the same mail package, he also sent *The Deathship*, the book he considered the better of the two. *The Deathship* was published first, in April of 1926, and *The Wobbly* followed that June, making B. Traven an instant sensation in Germany.

To be honest, reading *The Deathship* is like reading hundreds of pages of those old IWW cartoons that depicted Mister Block, the hapless worker who wanders from disaster to disaster, only in this case it depicted passport-less Traven being tossed from nation-state to nation-state before signing onto a smuggler's *death ship*, having no other choice. One could look at *The Deathship* and *The Wobbly* as the story of Traven's arrival in Mexico, and with no other real information to go on, it's likely he really was a n IWW labor agitator around Tampico, doing his best to undermine the foreign *jefes* allowed inside by President Calle.

He was also extremely poor, so the money that came flooding to him from Europe not only lifted him out of poverty, he was relatively rich by Tampico standards, so he kept writing. After learning his publishers were interested in travel stories, he disappeared into Chiapas with \$1,500 and returned in August, penniless once again. So he kept writing. By October of 1926, he had sent off his third novel, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (which he may have written while in Chiapas). He'd tried a different press first, Union Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, but they rejected it because there were no women characters (ie: sex), and no proper conclusion. Their folly was a serious gain for Büchergilde Gutenberg, who published a beautiful edition in the winter of 1927, and by April a copy was in B. Traven's hands.

Money started flowing in again, and in winter of 1928 he published his experiences in Chiapas in a book called *Land des Frühlings*, or *Land of Springtime*. As he told his publishers, *I have had to deal with issues of race in the book in order to show that what is going on in Mexico is first and foremost the awakening of the Indian race. The opinion is widespread in Europe, particularly among*

the workers, that the Indians have all but died out, since people seem to talk and write only about the Indians dying out in the United States. I hope that I succeed in showing readers of my book that the Indian lives on.

During his first journey to Chiapas in 1926, Traven went with a party of thirty agriculturists, archaeologists, geographers, naturalists, and a single sociologist, an anarchist named Frank Tannenbaum, formerly a member of the IWW. Back in 1914, Frank became a sort of anarchist Christ character when he led a mob of hobos into an NYC church demanding a place to sleep, a crime for which he was jailed. Saved from a stint in the dungeon, he allowed himself to be absorbed into the safety of a position at Columbia University, a position that allowed him many opportunities to aid his surviving comrades.

Tannenbaum had run away from home and begun working at the offices of *Mother Earth*, the anarchist newspaper run by Emma Goldman in NYC. According to her, *we had all loved Frank for his wide-awakeness and his unassuming ways*. He then became a regular at the Ferrer Center, or Modern School, and it was here he volunteered to lead the homeless procession into a Catholic church. After getting out of jail and beating his case, Tannenbaum leaped into the academy and in 1922 he made his first voyage to Mexico, sponsored by the *Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana*, the labor-government backed trade union which had separated from the *Confederación General de Trabajadores*, the anarchist trade union represented by Rudolf Rocker in Europe, the man who likely helped B. Traven reach Mexico.

Working with the labor-friendly government, Tannenbaum studied a new school in the slums of Mexico City that had already changed the lives of over 900 students. He returned again in 1923 to curate and write the introduction for an anthology of Mexican artists, including Diego Rivera. His next journey involved taking an AFL delegation to Mexico City, something pretty cringe-worthy, but he wasn't the only anarchist mole working that angle, given the anarchist Lucy Robins Lang had Samuel Gompers wrapped around her finger at the time.

Tannenbaum finally convinced Columbia to pay him \$300 a month to explore Mexico, and it was with these funds that he eventually made it to Chiapas where he joined Traven on what was called the *Palacios Expedition*. It's unknown if Tannenbaum and Traven were aware of each other before meeting in Mexico, but it is known they met in May of 1926, traveling with the expedition from Veracruz to Tonalá to the *Sierra Madre del Sur*, through which they progressed slowly until they reached Jovel, or *San Cristóbal de las Casas*. On their journey, both men saw the poverty still being inflicted on the Mayans, even after the revolution, and it seems Traven was more moved by it than Tannenbaum, for he left the expedition in Jovel and proceeded into the jungle with his native guide Vitorino Trinidad, who first introduced him to the Chamula tribes. For almost the next two months, Traven dispersed over \$1,500 among the indiginous, arriving back in DF with hardly a peso on August 6, 1926.

Traven went back in 1927, and as I mentioned, his *Land of Springtime* appeared in 1928, a record of his first journey through Chiapas, with his guide Vitorino renamed Felipe. Once the book was out, Traven went on his third journey through Chiapas, this one lasting almost six months. While the Mexican state believed all the Lacandon tribes were wiped out long before, Traven seems to have known that was false, given he spent six months in the remotest part of Mexico, a place few would follow him into. To this day, there are very few Lacandon people, even less than some of the California tribes, but somehow Traven became their friend in 1928. They even gave him a bow and some arrows.

Shortly after returning from this third journey, Traven released his *sequel* to *The Deathship* and *The Wobbly*, a novel of defiance and strength called *The Bridge in the Jungle*. This would be his final novel with a white protagonist, for the next book he submitted was called *The White Rose*, with indigenous protagonists. It was a story of merciless US oil companies steam-rolling over the indigenous, as they had been doing in league with Calle's government.

For the first time, his publishers at Büchergilde Gutenberg censored his work, claiming it had anti-US bias, and in response he threatened to leave them, though he relented. The full text was serialized in a socialist Munich newspaper, bringing his words back to Bavaria, and the bound volume was published by Büchergilde Gutenberg in 1929. This was the last book he wrote while living in Tampico, and one day in 1930, with no warning, the man known as Traven Torsven, or BT Torsvan, or B. Torsvan, disappeared from the Gulf for good.

The General In The Jungle

The man known to the public as B. Traven moved across Mexico to the city of Acapulco, which back then wasn't a tourist nightmare but rather a sleepy little town on the coast of Guerrero. He settled into *El Parque Cachú*, a small estate with a restaurant run by the mysterious Maria de la Luz Martínez, a woman who would eventually pretend to be B. Traven's wife, although this wasn't close to being true. Her nickname for him was 'Mister' and he helped her with the restaurant and cashew orchard. Traven officially relinquished his hut in Tampico in 1931, permanently settling on Mexico's west coast, and it was in Acapulco that he began writing *The Jungle Novels*, or *Der Cycle die Caoba*, all published originally in German.

As I mentioned above, B. Traven's writing style is closer to the Mr. Block comic-strips than any *literature* I can point to, and it was in this acid, sarcastic spirit that he wrote the first volume of the cycle, *Government*, first published in 1931. The title is beyond appropriate, given the entire text can be read as a children's manual for what all *government* is, just as how it can be destroyed.

The novel opens sometime between 1900 and 1910 in a village in Chiapas called Bujvilum inhabited by the *Bachajontecs*, a branch of the *Tseltal* tribe. According to colonial rulers of Chiapas, this village had *a bad lot there. We send soldiers to burn their huts down time after time—but can't catch one of them. They always clear out into the jungle and you can't get 'em there. When everything's burnt and their maize fields laid flat and the soldiers are gone, out they come and build up their village again as if nothing had happened. Then we leave them alone for a bit, but we can't get any taxes out of them.* This is told by Don Casimiro, who says to Don Gabriel, *if you'd like to go there, I'll make you local secretary.* Being a ruthless capitalist who knows the barbaric rules of Porfirio Díaz' dictatorship like the back of his hand, Don Gabriel accepts the offer, and thus the anti-hero of *The Jungle Novels* is introduced.

To begin, Don Gabriel builds a store in Bujvilum, only he *could never grow rich on the proceeds of the store.* He tries selling alcohol but the indigenous don't want it, knowing its effects. When *two Syrian peddlers passed through the village*, Don Gabriel uses his power as a government official to force these Syrian merchants to pay him extortionate taxes for every item they manage to sell, for which they charge an extra 50 centavos to make up for this loss to the *government.* After this, he begins to offer credit to the indigenous so they might buy all these new, overpriced goods off the Syrians, for which they sink into debt.

When these indebted indigenous try to sell their cattle in Bujvilum, Don Gabriel hits them with so many taxes they threaten to take their cattle to Jovel, the nearest colonial city. With no other option, Don Gabriel appeals to their chief, Narciso, who orders all those who owe Don Gabriel money to sell their cattle for whatever the Bujvilum dealers offer. This is the first time Don Gabriel succeeds in swindling the indigenous, and his next act is to build a school, something he is bound to do by *government*.

However, after building this window-less hovel and teaching for three weeks, Don Gabriel *found that his pupils were still not sure whether the letter he chalked up was an A or a G*. Despite this, when submitting his reports to *government*, Don Gabriel claims the village school is working at *maximum efficiency, to which was added the note: "Ages from seven to fourteen. No illiterates."* On paper, Don Gabriel was a model local secretary, but the only problem for him was that *the school brought him no monetary return*. To remedy this state of affairs, Don Gabriel seeks the help of his brother, Don Mateo, an experienced tax-collector for *government*.

Don Mateo's grand idea is to enforce one of the many decrees of the dictatorship: *every boy in the place must come to school every day except Saturday and Sunday, when all schools are closed through the whole Republic. And the government lays it down that for every day of school a boy does not come to school his father must pay a fine of a peso to the secretary of the place*. Despite this seemingly promising idea, neither Don can ever discover exactly which child is missing or who their father is, thwarting their latest money-making scheme.

Soon enough, another financial opportunity arrives when *two Ladinos*, or two white Mexicans, arrive on horseback with 80 indigenous following behind, all of them bound for servitude in the coffee plantations of Soconusco. In a fit of inspiration, Don Gabriel demands a fictional fee from these human-traffickers, and not wanting to displease *government*, these two *Ladinos* pay 20 centavos a head, or 16 pesos, for the privilege of passing through Bujvilum.

Don Gabriel and Don Mateo's next graft involves selling alcohol for an indigenous wedding, constantly supplying more until someone commits a murder and several others end up in the rudimentary *jail*, a hovel which any human could break out of. Despite this fact, the indigenous have become so bewildered by *government* that they willingly pay six pesos for each prisoner to be released. Only the murderer is kept locked up at the end, with the Dons hoping to extract the maximum price for his head, and Don Gabriel soon takes this murderer on a journey to the big city of Jovel.

Their first stop is the indigenous village of Cahancu, and it is here Don Gabriel checks in with his friend Don Ramón, who offers to buy the prisoner for 60 pesos, rather than send this man to profit-less execution at the hands of *government*. Don Ramón will then sell this man to an agent of the *monterías*, the vast mahogany plantations where indebted indigenous slaves are worked to death within three years. As he explains to Don Gabriel, *the monterías and coffee plantations must have labor if the prosperity of the country is to be maintained and the Republic of Mexico to have an honored and respected place among the nations of the world*.

Up to this point, this is the most money Don Gabriel has ever made, and soon he and Don Ramón decide to begin selling indigenous to the coffee and mahogany plantations. Don Gabriel and his wife plan to move to Jovel for this venture, but back in Bujvilum, Don Mateo has grown into a vicious tyrant, imprisoning several indigenous men and attempting to rape a indigenous girl. To make sure this doesn't endanger his profits, Don Gabriel returns to the village and sends his brother Don Mateo away, his only company a traveling Syrian merchant named Don Elias.

On the way, they are ambushed by indigenous villagers from Bujvilum, who succeed in killing Don Mateo in revenge for his tyranny.

Back in Bujvilum, Don Gabriel prepares for his big move to Jovel. It should be noted that Jovel is the indigenous name for *San Cristóbal de las Casas*, but throughout the entire novel, it is referred to as Jovel, the colonial city Don Gabriel is now moving to, leaving unlucrative Bujvilum behind. For this to happen, he needs more money, so after skimming off his tax-collection, he then tricks chief Narciso into recruiting twenty indigenous youths into a *montería* work-gang. Of those twenty, six attempt to escape. One is shot, two are captured, and two are never heard from again. Only one escapes back home. *He was like a wild man, covered with blood, reduced to skin and bone with lips parched and split with fever. He told them in the village where the boys had been.* As his village learns, few people survive their *contracts* in the *montería* mahogany plantations.

For his part in enabling this, the village kills chief Narciso and then gives him a proper funeral. They would have killed Don Gabriel, only he had since fled to Jovel. After that, *Gerónimo, who was now chief, said one day when the men were assembled to decide upon the allotment of the common land among the new families, "I should like it best if the government forgot us for good. I have said all I have to say, my brothers and friends."*

In this tragic and definitive manner, *government* departs the village of Bujvilum once again, given Don Gabriel has left his position for the more lucrative profession of human-trafficker. He meets with much success tricking or enslaving the indigenous into plantation work gangs, and this effort eventually takes him to the village of Pebvil, where an indigenous uprising is about to take place. Enraged that the reigning Don Abelardo has claimed to have appointed their new chief, contrary to their ancient democratic process, these natives *did not desire war either with the government or with the Ladinos. They were not so foolish as to come out with machetes and shotguns against machine guns and mountain artillery. This is only done by civilized peoples when they want to lose two million of their best men and enslave themselves to debt for six hundred years.*

Instead of being like the idiotic, *civilized Ladinos*, something tremendous happens on January 1 of that year, sometime between 1900 and 1910. *As day dawned over Pebvil and the mist unwillingly broke up and drifted away and then topped the mountain in one leap, thousands upon thousands of Indians filled the square. This mass of people appeared as suddenly as if they had spent the night hidden among the bushes, waiting for the sun to send its first flicker of light over the crest of the mountain. Indeed, they filled the whole open space so swiftly and so evenly that it seemed they had been lying in wait between the blades of grass and in the crevices of the earth and then risen to their feet as one man.* Incidentally, this upsurge is identical to the tactics utilized by the EZLN in modern Chiapas, but I'll get to that later.

After witnessing this silent onslaught, Don Abelardo tries to get the colonial officials in Jovel on the telephone, only the dictatorship is so corrupt no one has repaired them in months. In a flash, the natives of Pebvil murder the Ladino-appointed chief and vanish, leaving Don Abelardo and the colonials besieged inside their compounds. According to the diaries of B. Traven, this event really happened in a village outside Jovel in 1929.

When the besieged colonials finally contact their peers in Jovel, the *government* dispatches thirty soldiers to Pebvil, but before they can arrive, Don Gabriel rides into town, looking for indigenous to ensnare for the plantations. He waits there until the soldiers arrive, hoping the native men will return from the jungle, and when fourteen of them do, Don Gabriel convinces the soldiers to arrest them, which they do.

Within days, Don Gabriel is marching these condemned men off to the *montería* mahogany plantations. As B. Traven reminds the reader in the last pages of this novel, *mahogany, when landed at New York, sold for seventy to a hundred and twenty dollars a ton, depending on the market, At such a price it was impossible to take the so-called rights of Indians literally, or any of those phrases about comradeship and respect for humanity.* In this manner, we come to the end of *Government*, written by the favorite author of Albert Einstein.

On The Wagon

After typing all of this up in Acapulco, B. Traven mailed the manuscript to Berlin, and in 1931 it was published by the Büchergilde Gutenberg. At the time of its release, many viewed the various Dons of *Government* as veiled references to the rising Nazis, and while this might have been easy to believe, all B. Traven did was simply and accurately describe the horrors of the Mexican dictatorship, one that had been erased from history by a massive, violent revolution. At the same time, he revealed how *all* government is corrupt, especially in its crudest forms. To B. Traven, *all* governments were equally horrible, even the allegedly *revolutionary* one in Mexico.

1931 saw the publication of another B. Traven title, the second of *The Jungle Novels*, and it bore the simple title of *Der Karren*, or *The Carreta*, or *The Wagon*. This *carreta* is central to the story, one that begins far away from the villages of Bujvilum and Pebvil. *The Carreta* sets the stage very succinctly in the first sentences when it introduces its protagonist: *Andrés Ugalde was of pure Indian stock, a member of the great Tselal tribe. He was a native of Lumbojvil, a finca in the Simojovel district. The full name of the finca was Santa María Dolorosa Lumbojvil. Lumbojvil was the old Indian name of an Indian village, or commune, and it meant "cultivated land."*

This village is around 100 kilometers north of Jovel, and *the same families continued to live on the finca as had lived there before the Spaniards came. True to the land and the soil, they waited quietly and patiently for the day when they would come into their own again.* In this village, young Andrés is hired by the local Don Leonardo to be a servant in his household, becoming beloved by this *jefe's* wife. Just like Don Gabriel in *Government*, Don Leonardo has opened a store in Lumbojvil filled with over-priced goods for the indigenous to buy, and one day Andrés' father comes in wanting to buy clothing for his son.

In a manner typical of the *Ladinos*, Don Leonardo has soon forced this man into debt. He doesn't utilize this debt immediately, and Andrés remains employed as a domestic servant. Andrés is even sent on journeys with messages and money to the big city of *San Cristóbal* where he watches the *carreteros* roll through the village, the wagon drivers who *made the journey fifteen times as long as the journey from Tenejapa to San Cristóbal—and from Tenejapa to San Cristóbal was a good day's journey for a pack mule.* In this manner, *Andrés got his first idea of the size of the earth on which he lived.*

One day, Andrés accompanies Don Leonardo to go sell some mules he'd purchased cheap in Chilón, deep in the mountains, and to get the best price, they take the mules to La Concordia, a settlement half-way to the Pacific Ocean. It's here that Don Leonardo stakes Andrés in a card game with one Don Laureano, valuing his life, or *contract*, at 60 pesos. Don Leonardo soon loses his servant and returns home with another. While his wife cared for Andrés and is enraged at his absence, she soon forgets all about him, given she has a new boy-servant.

Andrés is now the *indentured servant*, or slave, of one Don Laureano Figueróa, who was a *comisionista*—a *commission agent*—who lived at Chiapa de Corso. He was the representative of two of three hundred firms in Mexico, Puebla, Monterrey, USA, Spain, France, and other places besides, of which he knew no more than the names. Despite having purchased Andrés, this Don Laureano allows his servants to eventually work off their debt, making them *free workers* rather than slaves. With this faint hope of regaining some of his freedom, Andrés begins to learn the ropes of being a wagon driver, a *carretero*, and as he realizes, *without transport there is no civilization*. Regardless of the simplicity of his wagon, he is no different than any truck driver.

Andrés joins the grand caravans of *carretas* moving goods across the Republic of Mexico. After days of driving, these caravans settle down to camp, and when they do, these *carreteros* need to eat. As part of their payment, each *carretero* receives beans, rice, maize, and coffee. The preparation is left to them, and *the men cooked black beans in quantities large enough to do for breakfast as well, for frijoles take a long time to cook*. The drivers are also allowed to bring their wives, and together they cook these beans with lard, just as they cook their rice in lard that was heated in a pan and when hot enough, the dry grains of rice were added and stirred to and fro until browned. Then very slowly, little by little, water was added. As for the coffee, it is boiled over the fire with large amounts of sugar and drunk all night. This is the daily meal, supplemented only by wild fruit and animals they manage to pluck from the jungle.

Three years pass with Andrés learning how to handle the oxen and guide the *carreta*, working off his 25 peso debt and receiving actual wages, in coin. Andrés has even received a raise and now earns *forty centavos a day—twelve pesos a month*. This was no mean sum when he compared it with the four or five pesos a month which the laborers earned who worked in the sugar mills, brandy distilleries, henequen processing factories, brick works, timber yards he passed on the road and who had to work sixteen hours a day and lived, often with families to keep, more wretchedly than beasts.

With his actual wages, Andrés buys hats and clothing, all items that are quickly destroyed in the *carreta* caravans, and as B. Traven cynically remarks, *neither the law nor the State compelled him to*. He was entirely free to choose whether he contracted debts or not. Further on, Traven goes even further with his sarcasm by writing, *to contract debts is the greatest of all a worker's liberties*. Nevertheless, despite the constant need to buy things in this dictatorship of petty Dons, Andrés is able to save money, at least until he arrives in Balún-Canán for the festival of San Caralampio. Once again, it should be noted that Balún-Canán is the indigenous name for Comitán de Domínguez, and B. Traven uses only the native names for every setting.

Balún-Canán holds its festival of San Caralampio every February, and Andrés already knows this festival is designed by the Ladinós to steal all of his people's money. Gambling, carnival games, religious trinkets, all of it mesmerized and sucked up the pesos from thousands of Mayans, a trap Andrés doesn't want to fall into.

The first attraction he stops to listen to are some singers belting out a *corrido*, for this was the cheapest entertainment. You could stand and listen to the ballad singers hour after hour. You were not compelled to buy a ballad. The next attraction he stops at is the town church but he saw nothing in it but magic and mummerly and dressing up: just the dance of a witch doctor, and the muttering of incomprehensible formulas of enchantment and imprecation. It was not his fault if the people around him were nothing but a crazed herd gesticulating meaninglessly in a haze of smoke. As B. Traven explains, *with this discovery he ceased to be a child*.

Having successfully left the church without spending money, Andrés finds a fellow *carretero* eating enchiladas, and when he asks how much they are, he learns they're *one real for six, and*

they couldn't be better. Andrés finds the stall where these enchiladas are made on a *small tin stove in which charcoal was glowing.* On top of the stove lay a tin sheet with a shallow depression in its center. Fat was frizzling in this hollow. An old Indian woman crouched beside the stove, fanning the charcoal to a glow with a fan of bast. She was the restaurant's proprietor as well as its cook. She baked tortillas on the flat surface of the tin sheet, then filled them, according to her customers' desires, with barbacoa, guajolote, pollo, res, ternera, or queso, folded them over, and dropped them into the hot grease.

These type of passages go on for an entire two pages, all dedicated to this woman's enchiladas, and I'll let you know right now, this simple food is the greatest pleasure our Andrés experiences in the entire book. It's likely B. Traven simply was recalling his own favorite food from Chiapas, but he packs a lot into this scene. For example, he lets the reader know that the woman *took the orders in Spanish, Tsotsil, Tojolaval, Tseltal.* A Spaniard who had a stall opposite maintained that *this Indian woman could equally understand English and Arabic.* Her enchiladas are served in a small plate and *besides the varieties of meat, she put onions, tomatoes, red chiles, green chiles, green salad, citron leaves, calabaza flower, and twenty other herbs, leaves, and roots into her enchiladas.* As a consequence of serving such good food, *Andrés had to wait a long time before he got his enchiladas.*

This is the first money he spends in Balún-Canán, and his next stop is an activity that requires no money, the simple act of dancing, and it's at this *baile* that he meets a fifteen year-old indigenous woman, who he dances with. She has escaped from a plantation and speaks Tseltal just like Andrés. She hasn't eaten in two days, so Andrés buys her some enchiladas, though this time he asks *for a little salt, which was given to him in a banana leaf. A small lemon was also added.* As she eats, she claims to have no name, and that night she and Andrés decide to become a couple. She'll travel with him on the road with the *carreteros*, just as she'll allow him to name her *Estrella*, or Star.

As they travel in the caravan, seemingly free amid the dictatorship, Andrés learns that his father has been sold to none other than Don Gabriel from *Government.* With his father consigned to slavery and death in the *monterías*, Andrés resolves to go rescue him and asks his new love Estrella to wait behind, given the danger. Despite her sadness, she tells him, *"I will wait for you ever and ever."*

In The Empire Of Caoba

While *Government* was released in the earlier half of 1931, *The Carreta* was released in the latter half, giving readers the first two volumes of *The Jungle Novels.* That was the same year his novel *The Death Ship* sold over 100,000 copies in Germany. All of these books were being read as the Nazis continued to gather power, and during the course of 1932, B. Traven was off in Acapulco writing the third volume of his series, *March to the Montería.*

The original German title is honestly quite something: *Der Marsch ins Reich der Caoba: Ein Kriegsmarsch* (The March In The Caoba Empire: A War March). I have two editions of this book on hand as I write this. The first is the original US edition, published in mass-market paperback by Dell in 1962 without a hardcover preceding it. It seems the sage advisors at Dell wanted a quick, cheap edition to be sold in supermarkets to readers familiar with the film *Treasure of the Sierra Madre.* The publishers didn't care that this Traven title was being published out of order,

or that it was the third in a series, all they knew was that it was exciting, to them. By 1963, all of *The Jungle Novels* had been written, but the second to come out in the US was this Dell paperback edition of *March to the Montería*, while the fifth volume came out first, in 1951. Thanks to this type of commercial thinking, the fourth volume of *The Jungle Novels* wasn't translated into English until 1994, the year of the EZLN insurrection, but I'll get to that later.

The second version of this novel I possess is a first edition *Der Marsch ins Reich der Caoba: Ein Kriegsmarsch*, although unlike its predecessors, this blue cloth over boards with red title was printed and bound in Zürich, not Berlin. Shortly before this book went to print, the Nazis took over the German state on January 30, 1933. The director of Traven's publishing house, Bruno Dressler, wrote to him explaining that Hitler was just a flash in the pan. This was proven to be disastrously wrong on May 2 when the publisher's Berlin offices were raided by SA shock-troops. As one historian describes, *the German Workers Front annexed the press, employees were ordered to leave, and Dressler and others were taken into "protective custody."* Some leading figures [including Dressler] fled to Switzerland, and it was in this exile that the publishers finally released *Der Marsch ins Reich der Caoba: Ein Kriegsmarsch*, the same edition I now hold in my hands.

I'll be coming back to what happened next, but for now I'll tell you what's inside this third volume of *The Jungle Novels*. As I briefly mentioned, it's one of the most action-packed of these strangely written novels, and *The March to the Montería* begins by introducing a new protagonist: *the Chamula Indian, Celso Flores, of the Tsotsil nation, had a girl in Ishtacolot, his native village.* Celso doesn't have enough money to marry his girlfriend, so he leaves his village for a coffee plantation in the southern mountains. Once he has enough money, he descends through Niquivil and Salvador before making the long journey to Jovel, *the last town through which he had to pass to reach his native village and located only about twelve miles from it.*

During this entire journey, he has to pretend to be going home to his owner at an imaginary *finca*, all so no Ladino would try and rob him of his two years of wages. Unfortunately, Don Sixto and Don Emiliano are in Jovel when Celso gets there, and they promptly shake him down for 67 pesos, claiming his father owes them. Having no choice, Celso pays, wiping out his years of hard-labor and leaving him with only 47 centavos. He returns home broken in spirit, and the next morning, he learns from his father that the Dons have lied, given no such debt existed, but neither of them can do anything to get the money back, given they'll be promptly thrown in jail and sent to the *monterías*.

Celso gets back to work in the village, no better than when he left, and now his marriage is ruined, given his girlfriend's father no longer allows the union. All he wanted to do was build a house with his future wife and *live by constant hard work, for the very moment they stopped working, even if for only two months, there would be no corn and no beans to eat.* This is not to be, however, and Celso resigns himself to another period in one of the dictatorship's many death-camps. He imagines finding work at another coffee plantation, but when he stops in Jovel, two Ladinos recruit Celso as a messenger for a caravan currently headed to the *monterías*, the mahogany plantations (or caoba plantations).

During his brief messenger training, given to Celso by one Don Apolinar, we encounter one of this novel's many instances of *Spanglish*, and of *Spalemán*. First off, when Don Apolinar asks Celso, "*What's your name, muchacho?*", the word *muchacho* is spelled out in both English and German. In the English version, Don Apolinar then asks "*where do you come from?*" However, in the German version, he asks "*wo bist du denn her, hasta donde tienes tu tierra?*" If that's confusing, Traven basically just provides the German and Spanish side by side. Celso quickly answers,

prompting another example of both *Spanglish* and *Spalemán*. In the English version, after learning where he lives, Don Apolinar asks, “*That’s some leguas beyond la villa de Chamula?*” In the German version, he asks, “*das ist einige Leguas hinter Chamula?*” So there you have it, an example of *Spanglish* and *Spalemán* circa 1933.

When offered this messenger job by the *Ladinos*, Celso pretends he can’t take the *contract*, but *the slickest recruiting agent would not have discovered that the Ladino was not playing with the Indian but the Indian with the Ladino*. Using his people’s ancient bargaining practice, Celso successfully negotiates a four *real* a day wage, as well as a two peso bonus if he delivers the Don’s urgent letter within two weeks. However, once he agrees to this wage, the Don loads him up with other parcels, such as anti-malarial quinine, but Celso doesn’t seem to mind, leaving Jovel with money in his pocket.

The only reason Don Apolinar was forced to bargain with a native was because no one, *Ladino* or Chamula, dared to make the courier journey alone through the jungle. Only caravans provide enough protection from the dangers, but Celso leaves immediately, not wanting the Don to hire someone else for cheaper. He makes good time, *but no caravan of Syrian or Lebanese peddlers arrived in Jovel on its way to the monterías. And so no mounted messenger was sent after Celso to call him back*. Celso’s ultimate destination is a *montería* at Agua Azul, a series of beautiful waterfalls currently being fought over by the EZLN and the Republic of Mexico, but I’ll get to that a bit later. Just know that basically every village or city mentioned thus far in *The Jungle Novels* currently resides in Zapatista territory, and there will be much more on this subject, I promise. That’s why I’m writing this.

For example, Zapatistas still drink *posole*, or pozol, and when he stops to rest in a village, the local *mayordomo* offers him *fresh posole* that won’t get sour and moldy. This mixture of corn is placed in water, turning it milky and filling it with nutrients, a staple of the indigenous farmer in Chiapas. Another staple Celso encounters on his route is the village fire that *was always, day and night, at the disposal of the traveler, be he an Indian or a ladino*. Around this fire, *he ate his meat and the beans by tearing off a piece of tortilla, picking up the meat or the beans as though that piece of tortilla was a sort of napkin, rapidly rolling the piece of tortilla into the form of a small cone and pushing this cone, filled with meat or beans, into his mouth*.

In this village, he encounters one Don Policarpo who asks, “*Bueno, Chamula, come estas?*” in the English version and “*Como estas, chamula, wie geht’s?*” in the German. During this exchange, Celso realizes the already *bitter schooling he had received contributed to his newly acquired ability to think quicker and to say “yes” and “at your service, patroncito” slower*. Don Policarpo wants to travel with Celso to the *monterías*, but Celso holds out until he has extracted an additional three peso bonus from this anxious Don. This indigenous Policarpo was a traveling merchant peddler pretended to be a *Ladino*, even though he was a Chamula like Celso. *He spoke Spanish and Tsotsil as well as Tseltal fluently. This, of course, was of great advantage in his trade, especially in respect to most other small merchants, who spoke only Spanish or Arabic*.

In case you haven’t gathered, each of *The Jungle Novels* contains reference to Syrian, Turkish, Lebanese, or Arab merchants, and if you ever doubt this Islamic influence in Mexico, just go to your nearest *taqueria* and stare at the spit of *al pastor* rotating near the grill. Then, after that, head to your nearest shawarma shop and stare at the rotating spit of chicken rotating near the grill. In most cases, each of these spits will be crowned with a chunk of pineapple, and perhaps maybe a cherry.

Anyway, Celso eventually extracts the best terms from Don Policarpo and sets out two days later, only the road *was many times worse* than anyone could have described. The Don tries to delegate all the manual labor to Celso, but in the end Celso gets his way and makes the boss work as his equal. When they arrive at the first *montería*, Celso continues onward with a troop of workers towards his ultimate destination where he receives his final wages. He wants to go to the *monterías* in Agua Azul which, *owned by Canadians and Scots, enjoyed among the workers the reputation of being the only montería where the worker was treated almost like a human being*. Unfortunately for him, they weren't hiring, so Celso keeps walking through the jungle in search of a job.

Within a day and a half, he reaches a *montería* that's hiring. As he comes to learn, *each montería has, for exploitation, a territory the size of a European duchy, or of a medium-sized kingdom. Caoba trees don't grow close together, like pines*. In this *montería*, Celso will be paid fifty centavos a day, for which he is expected to produce two tons worth of caoba logs, or *trozas*. Of this fifty centavos, twenty were deducted for his meals at the camp, and over the course of his employment, he's forced to buy necessities at exorbitant prices. Eager to avoid permanent bondage or death, *Celso had been wise enough not to tell anyone that he was working only to earn a certain amount and that he would leave once he had enough money*.

Celso is also wise enough to know that *to hook again workers who had finished their contract was the business of human parasites, the so-called coyotes, who infested the monterías and their recruiting districts*. These *parasites* are identified as *coyotes* in both the English and German editions and are depicted as ruthless kidnappers who lash and hang anyone who tries to escape their *contract*. However, *the coyotes never hanged anyone with the intention of killing him. A dead man would not have brought them any money. Only the live brought returns*.

On the other end of the spectrum, *the enganchadores, that is, the regular labor agents, bought Indians from prisons in the villages by paying the fine for the Indian to the mayor of the village or to the secretary of the Government who acted in the village*, much as was depicted in the first volume, *Government*. The *coyotes* felt this payment to the government was *money thrown out the window* and thus resorted to kidnapping. To avoid both them and the *enganchadores*, Celso keeps silent about his plan to leave at the end of his *contract*, although he knows they'll still be trying to catch him when he leaves.

After two years of labor, he gets his excuse to leave the camp when the other loggers travel to Hucutsin for *La Feria de la Candelaria*, a local fair designed to steal the money from all the loggers who'd spent *long years imprisoned in the jungle*. This fair is nearly identical to the festival of San Caralampio depicted at the end of *The Carreta*, a place where, *exactly as sailors who, during their voyage were firmly resolved to marry, settle down, and raise chickens, spend their entire earnings in three days and three nights in taverns, dance halls and bordellos and then have to sign on again for a new long trip because they have not even enough money left to buy a bus ticket from New York to Harrisburg, so dozens of workers homeward bound from the monterías, after half a week's celebrations, are seen running after an enganchador, asking him to be kind enough to hire them again*. As a side note, I should point out that the English version refers to a *bus ticket*, while the German original refers to it simply as a *ticket*, or *Fahrkarte*.

Luckily, *Celso was no unexperienced Indian yokel who knew nothing about the world and its snares*. He does his best to avoid the *coyotes* and *enganchadores*, but his boss has already paid the notorious Don Gabriel fifty pesos to bring Celso back to the *monterías*, and two of the Don's *coyotes* stalk him through Hucutsin. In the manner described in *Government* and *The Carreta*, poor

Celso is eventually landed in jail, slapped with fines, and soon Don Gabriel is there to purchase his body. As one of the policemen explains, “*You’re very lucky to have found such a good and liberal friend as Don Gabriel who buys you out of this pestilent rat-hole.*”

Before starting the march to the *montería* with Don Gabriel, Celso finds he will be traveling with *some men of his own nation, the Tsotsiles*. It’s here, sitting among his people, all of them bound for servitude, that Celso has his grand epiphany, one echoed over sixty years later in the same jungles of Chiapas. Celso *would count himself among the dead, among the hundreds of dead working in the monterías*. It was now clear that *he belonged to the dead and so was free to do as he pleased...it all came to the same end. He was dead and man can die only once. Since he had become indifferent to everything he might as well start to make use of the limited freedom which the devil grants the dead.*

As if on cue, *the devil* appears, and his name is Andrés, the protagonist of *The Carreta*, last seen heading to the *monterías* to save his father. Celso is still so enraged at having lost his freedom that he picks a fight with this new arrival, and then the narrative of the story goes completely bonkers. This fight abruptly ends and the story travels backward in time, with the next pages dedicated explaining how one Don Anselmo was nearly killed when his work-gang of enslaved Bachajones rebelled. This seemingly unrelated digression is meant to remind the reader that, despite the bleakness of these stories, rebellion was still occurring.

The narrative then jumps back to Celso and Andrés, with the narrator explaining *people who fight at first meeting often become the best of friends*. Unlike the others, Andrés can read and write, just as he’s seen more of Chiapas after driving his wagons, and together they march to the *montería*, all the while sharing stories of this evil dictatorship. Under his new friend’s influence, Celso succeeds in killing one of the *coyotes* and then lets his horse drag the body up the trail until Don Gabriel finds it. After that, Celso refers to Andrés as *compa*, although in German it’s written as *Brüderchen*, or *brother*. I’ll remind you that all of these word choices were Traven’s.

Celso doesn’t admit to his assassination, not even to his new *compas*, and the other *coyotes* now live in constant fear of death. This fear proves well-founded when another of their captors goes missing, and after the other Tsotsiles notice, they begin remarking on the *coyote*’s diamond ring, which some think is actually a blue topaz. They’ve all seen it on his hand, and just as they become convinced Celso is taking the *coyotes* out one by one, the missing kidnapper appears, with his ring, having suffered a simple accident. It’s only later that this *coyote* is found impaled on a thin tree stump, and when Don Gabriel discovers this latest victim, he pockets the shiny ring on his henchman’s dead finger.

Unable to kill all their captors, the workers eventually reach the great Ushumacintla River and the *monterías* beyond. In the final pages of this bitter text, Traven writes that *the sons of Mexico who were canoed over to the opposite bank, entered a foreign country without knowing it. They were swept under the sovereignty of another government without being consulted. The mahogany companies recognized neither nationalities nor citizens’ rights, nor were they reluctant about kidnapping citizens of any country, nor about trespassing national borders. They only acknowledge the powerful Empire of the Caoba*. As Celso explains to his new *compas*, they must all *become like caoba, hard as steel*, for that is the only way they’ll survive.

Everyone Wants A Log

Unlike all his previous German language books, *March to the Montería* was published in Switzerland, not Germany. Shortly before its publication in 1933, B. Traven had earned the horrible of distinction of having his novels *The White Rose*, *Government*, and *The Carreta* placed on the Nazi banned book list. Strangely, all the others were fine with the Nazis, probably because they had white protagonists, unlike the banned ones. Anyway, as I mentioned, Traven's publishers had their Berlin offices raided by the SA on May 2, 1933, and many of his books were confiscated. As the Nazi officials explained, all of the books they banned were *destructive to our native manner of thinking and living*, and their new government was officially *against asphalt literature, which is written predominately for metropolitan man, to strengthen him in his lack of relation to his environment, to the people, to every sense of community, and to uproot him completely. It is the literature of intellectual nihilism.*

On May 10, 1933, the infamous night where the Nazis staged a public book burning in the Berlin Opernplatz, many of the titles were taken from the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*, or the Institute of Sexology, dedicated to the study of human sexuality in all its forms, including trans people, something the Nazis couldn't abide. As the library of this Institute burned in the Opernplatz, the titles turned to ash alongside the works of B. Traven.

Traven shifted his German copyright to the publisher's new office in Zürich so the Nazis couldn't profit from his un-banned works and sent the finished manuscript of *March to the Montería* to Switzerland on June 8, 1933. As I mentioned, the German title was *Der Marsch ins Reich der Caoba: Ein Kriegsmarsch*, with the subtitle translating as *A War March*. As Traven would explain to his publishers, *a war march without glockenspiels, oboes, or clarinets. A war march, rather, with blaring horns; heavy timpani; drums by the score; deafening cries; shrill whistling; the crack of whips; wild cursing; the tumult of pack animals sinking into the swamp or straying from the narrow mountain paths and plunging into the abyss; death moans of torturers and cannibals, punished by Indians; the construction and collapse of bridges; the crackle of evening campfires; the hiss of hungry tigers; the dull cries of great apes; the rebellion of mutinous Indians; the murmuring waters of powerful forest streams; the babbling of garrulous brooks in the jungle. That is the instrumentation of this war march which, like every war march, ends with the arrival at the scene of battle.*

Traven tried to retrieve not only the manuscripts, letters, and photos he'd sent to the Berlin office, but also the many hand-crafted objects he'd sent from Chiapas, objects he paid handsomely for, with the money going to various southern tribes. These objects were given to purchasers of his novels, and included rugs, serapes, hats, sandals, ceramics, hemp purses, tobacco pouches, obsidian tools, arrowheads, little baskets woven from hair, wood carvings, clay figurines, flutes, and dozens of other crafts. From his first journey to Chiapas in 1926 to his sixth journey in 1931, B. Traven distributed tens of thousands of dollars among the indigenous, and this is likely an understatement. Any historian can verify that after each expedition to Chiapas, he wrote to his Berlin publishers claiming to be broke, and there is no reason to doubt this. During his 1931 journey, his native guide, Amador Paniagua, a survivor of the dictatorship's *monterías*, was given 200 pesos by Traven, more than enough for him to marry his wife.

Unfortunately for Traven, not only did the Nazis in Berlin refuse to send back this collection of objects, his income quickly dried up, given no more money was coming in from Germany. With only Austria and Switzerland providing a market for his German-language books, Traven had to curtail his trips to Chiapas and concentrate on writing more books. As the political situation

worsened in Europe, a now impoverished Traven sat in his Acapulco cabin and began writing the next volumes of his series: *Trozas* and *The Rebellion of the Hanged*.

Unlike all the preceding volumes, these two novels take place in the same location, a vast *montería* along the great Uskamacinta River owned by the Caoba Exploitation Company. The center of camp is an administrative building, housing for the overseers, huts for the workers, and a bar, for *without the illegal bars and the gambling huts the life of the people who had to work there became, at any rate for a long time, virtually intolerable. The manual workers who lived there had to be allowed what they might call a sense of life. Otherwise they would have forgotten that there was any difference between themselves and the mules of the montería.*

In this wretched place, *all the time from sunrise to sunset, Sundays included, belonged to the Company.* When the first work-gang arrives at the beginning of *Trozas*, or *Logs*, they are all given 50 pesos credit at the Company store by the local tyrant, Don Remigio. Among this gang is Celso, the main character of *March to the Montería*, and he tells his *compas* to buy only what they need, having more experience than all of them. Andrés, the main character of *The Carreta*, is also among this work-gang, and he is the first to step forward to buy from the Company store. Everything is overpriced, which he is certain of, having seen the true prices of everything as a *carretero*, but he buys a mosquito net, a sleeping mat, and some tobacco for just over 25 pesos. This transaction takes two pages, leaving Andrés with 25 pesos credit at the store.

After witnessing this, all the other men, including Celso, purchase nothing more than 9 pesos worth of tobacco, infuriating the Don who hopes to further ensnare them in debt slavery. Little does he know that this is a coordinated act of rebellion among the natives, and as Celso reminds them, *it is better if he doesn't notice anything.*

The next stop for the work-gang is the *bodega*, the store where they'll be equipped with axes, climbing irons, and machetes for the *hacheros* (lumberjacks) and *macheteros*, each grouped according to the Don's whims. All of these items are deducted from the worker's credit, or added to their existing debt, as in the case of Celso.

More money is then deducted for their meals, exactly one and a half pesos per day for three meals a day. Two Chinese people cook this food for the entire camp, and they have *become prosperous only through their skill, their patience, and through an economy in their trade so skillfully devised that the famous feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes can surely not be regarded as a miracle.* There is an entire chapter devoted to these cooks, itself divided into four sub-chapters, and while none of the food is luxurious, its memory will soon take on all the trappings of heavenly manna.

It is in this Chinese-run mess-hall that the Dons learn that the Caoba Exploitation Company has sold the *montería*. As they speculate why this has happened, one of the Dons suggests *maybe that old fogey up there, the dictator, is tottering on his little chair and the Company wants to withdraw from the concession in time.* The new owners are the Montellano brothers, vicious Spaniards, and none of the Dons want to stick around for their reign. Don Leobardo will take a position at one of the Company's henequen plantations in the Yucatán, promising the others jobs at the Company's banana and cocoa plantations.

The new owners are Dons Severo, Félix, and Acacio Montellano, and not even the Chinese cooks want to be employed by these monsters. The entire office staff quits when the brothers slash wages and soon enough the *montería* empties out in a giant caravan bound for San Juan Batista and the Company office, all led by Don Leobardo. However, *when he arrived in Hucutsin he was told the Bashayones, whose villages and settlements lay on his road to the north, were once*

more in open revolt on account of the injustice they considered they had suffered in the last months from the government, especially from the *Jefe Político* and the minor officials. To be clear, what is being described are the events in the novel *Government*, and because of this rebellion, Don Leobardo leads the convoy to Jovel, depriving the Company of more workers.

Aside from the indentured servants, only the *coyotes* remain in the *montería*, and the brothers each grant them *unlimited powers*. To them falls the task of enforcing the work regime, which is only described in detail in *Trozas*. As B. Traven explains, *the first stage is the felling of trees. The second stage is the floating off of the logs. The third stage is the arrangement and shipping of the timber to the purchaser. Up to a certain point on the river the timber floats freely. All the logs bear the brand of the company to which they belong.*

Before these logs are floated north to the coast for export, they obviously had to be cut down, and *a feller's compulsory production was two tons of caoba a day, properly stripped, hewn, and ready for the water*. As punishment, *if the hacheros did not achieve their full tonnage they were not paid for the days on which they had not produced their full two tons*. In this nightmarish work regime, *there were no Sundays or holidays*. Fines are even levied on the *coyotes* if their districts produce less than fifty tons a day, an incentive for them to brutalize their workers.

As we learn, the *hacheros* went off to their work sites at four o'clock in the morning, a schedule enforced by the *coyotes*, one of whom is known as El Gusano, or *the worm*. While he's out in the jungle acting as slave-master, Gusano hears a voice in the trees, yelling *que se muere El Gusano, que se mueren los gusanos los malditos y que viven los Inditos!* or, as Traven would later translate to English, *El Gusano must die, the cursed one, and long live the Indians!* Gusano panics and shoots into the forest, but all he hears is laughter.

The *muchachos* believe this to have been the work of Andrés, only he denies it. Among them is Vicente, abducted from his village by Don Gabriel, and Andrés takes the youngster under his wing. During a confrontation with El Gusano, we learn that Andrés has been flogged and hung by this *worm* before, a torture known as the *fiesta*, or *party*. Just after El Gusano threatens Andrés with further punishment, the mysterious voice calls out from the woods, *El Pícaro y El Gusano, los hijos de un perro y de una puta; I'll sling their flesh to the wild pigs and their bones to the hungry dogs; and the same for Severo and Félix and Acacio, y ellos van a morir ya mas despacio*. Unlike before, Gusano doesn't fire blindly into woods, instead he runs as fast as he can back to camp.

The workers now suspect Celso as this rebel, the protagonist of *March to the Montería*, and even El Gusano suspects him for a moment, though he quickly abandons this thought. In the days ahead, Andrés catches his young buddy Vicente up on the situation in the lumber camp and teaches him the basics of driving lumber ox-carts, or *carretas*. He lets Vicente know that the reigning *coyotes* would *never dare to go into an Indian village, even with half a hundred revolvers hung round them. You'll find that all the time, everywhere; the feeblest, most pitiful wretches are the worst torturers of the defenseless. Cowardice is the mark of the dictator!* On a more hopeful note, this literate *carretero* assures Vicente *our revenge will come sometime*.

Andrés and Vicente have to wake up at four in the morning to move as many *trozas* as possible, given that by ten o'clock *it will be so unbearably hot by then that the oxen can't work anymore*. As he explains to Vicente, *the oxen work early and stop early, while we and the fellers have to work twice as long as the oxen*.

In this thick jungle, it's *never really dry* and the *crown of trees is too dense. No sunlight comes through to the ground. And down below it's all thick bush. Everything is always wet and muddy*. In this place, *it's only when the heavy rainy season begins that you know another year has passed, and*

the felled *trozas* have to be dragged through endless mud and deposited in *tumbos*, staging areas situated in river floodplains where the *trozas* can be drifted to sea.

Amid their toil, Andrés tells Vicente about the great Celso, the Chamula. *He is El Tate in our camp, the reverend father. He's already been here for years and knows more than the contratistas. El Pícaro and El Gusano both shit in their pants over him, they're so scared of him.* Vicente learns that Celso is no longer whipped or hanged, given he told the Dons he truly didn't mind dying, and that the more they tortured him, the less he would work. Believing him, the Dons leave him alone, at their peril.

Vicente receives a new name, *Nene*, and is told that *pozol is a very good thing and that you quench your thirst better with pozol than with water. Pozol soaked in water isn't dangerous. The pozol takes up a lot of room in your belly, so you don't have the same longing to fill your whole belly with water.* In case you forgot, *pozol* is still the *lunch* of choice for countless rural farmers in Chiapas, including inside the EZLN territory, where the whole of *Trozas* takes place.

At the culmination of this novel, after one of their *compas* dies of a snake bite, Celso stands beside his grave and proclaims, *"How tired I am. Hell and the devil, I'm as tired as a dog. And how I'd like to bash those two coyotes over the head."* With this burning wish possessing Celso's body, the fourth volume of *The Jungle Novels* comes to an end.

The Rebellion of the Hanged

When he went into the jungles of Chiapas in the 1920 and 1930s, B. Traven was escorted by several indigenous guides, one whom was named Amador Paniagua, a former slave in the mahogany plantations. It's unclear if this is the man whom Celso was based on, or Andrés, but it is clear that these guides ended up being Traven's friends, and their experiences are no doubt peppered throughout *The Jungle Novels*.

Traven wrote *Trozas* in Acapulco sometime between 1933 and 1936. It's unclear if he went back to Chiapas in this time period, but as mentioned above, he was broke again. He would write in 1934, *in spite of the seemingly enormous income I had in the past years, I own nothing—no villa, no house, no hut, no corner of land, no furniture, no fixed residence, and only the most necessary clothing.*

To make some money, Traven finally said yes to Alfred A. Knopf, the man himself, and allowed that hallowed US publisher to release English versions of his work, on the condition he be the one to do the translations. In 1933, Traven sent a strange version of *The Death Ship* to NYC, and once the editors at Knopf read this draft, they realized Traven had clearly not been born in the US, as he claimed in his bio. As the editor Bernard Smith explained, *in any given paragraph there was sure to be at least one impossibly Germanic sentence, and sometimes an entire paragraph had to be reconstructed.* Nevertheless, Knopf kept Traven's secret and even claimed the re-worked draft was the *English original*, so points to old man Knopf.

The US version of *The Death Ship* was released in 1934, earning Traven a \$1,000 advance on royalties, but sales were slow in the US and the future held little promise of more money. Not to be daunted, Traven plunged ahead on the fifth volume of *The Jungle Novels*, perhaps the most powerful of them all: *The Rebellion of the Hanged*.

This novel introduces yet another main character, *Candido Castro, the Mexican Indian of Tsotsil race*. He's living peacefully in his village with his family when his wife comes down with pan-

creatitis, forcing them to take her to a *Ladino* doctor in Jovel. This greedy parasite demands 200 pesos, and in order to obtain this money, Candido signs a *contract* for work in the *monterías* with none other than Don Gabriel, the anti-hero of *The Jungle Novels*. Before he can get this money to the doctor, his wife dies, and when Candido tries to get out of his *contract*, he is thrown in jail with his children until Don Gabriel swoops in to claim their bodies for the *montería* caoba plantations.

Inexplicably, rather than being labeled a *coyote*, Don Gabriel is identified as a *crimp* in the English translation of this book, an old sailor's term for a *waterfront recruitment agent*, or maritime pimp, a once vicious entity in ports along the coasts of the Americas, especially in San Francisco, the city where B. Traven once falsely claimed to have been born. In short, a *crimp* was a human trafficker just like a *coyote*, but only for sailors, making its inclusion in this translation as bizarre as it sounds.

The process Don Gabriel uses to *crimp* the indigenous by accusing them of a crime and then claiming their body is the exact legal process that took place in California from 1848 to the 1880s. While this practice was abolished in the US by the 1890s, it was the *modus operandi* of the Díaz dictatorship until the revolution of 1910 swept it away. When the dreaded Don Gabriel kidnaps Candido and his children, that revolution is still a few years in the future, caused by the exact indignities he will soon suffer.

Don Gabriel leads his work-gang up into the mountains, on the way picking up three random men claiming to be in search of work. Don Gabriel doesn't care about the stories they tell about why they're standing on the side of the road dressed in rags, all he cares about is that *each of them would bring him a commission of fifty pesos*. As they march, all the workers struggle under the heavy leather straps which compressed their foreheads as they took the weight of the burdens. This caravan passes through the town of Hucutsin and it's here that Candido's youngest sister Modesta joins the march.

At first she doesn't betray her intentions, merely joining the workers as they camp for the night. While she and her brother smoke cigarettes rolled in corn-husks, she tells Candido, "*I'm finished with serving the ladinos, the crafty whites. I shall go with you to the lumber camps. From now onwards the only service that matters to me is yours and the children's.*" Candido is reluctant, but he eventually agrees, and the narrative abruptly shifts to the *montería* which all of them are marching towards.

Since the events depicted in *Trozas*, the Montellano brothers haven't shipped a single load of caoba logs and their mortgage payment of 60,000 pesos is due at the end of the year, making all the brothers frantic for output. They instruct their *coyote* overseers to enforce a doubling of production, something the *coyotes* balk at, already afraid for their lives among the angry workers. In response, the Dons simply instruct them to be even more brutal, not caring about the consequences.

When Don Gabriel arrives, the brothers try to recruit Modesta into their kitchen, but when she is defended by her brother, the Montellanos order him to produce four tons of caoba a day, not the two tons stipulated in his *contract*, an output they now demand from all their workers. All of these lumberjacks grumble around the fire that evening, and soon Candido meets both Andrés and Celso, just as he hears the moans of rebel workers hanging by their arms from giant caoba trees. No one investigates these sounds, even the newcomers, for *they all know that, as on the farms, in the barracks, in the police posts or in the camps of prisoners in Veracruz, Yucatan, Morelos, Tabasco, Jalisco or Michoacan, it was better not to show oneself too curious nor to go deeply into the*

cause of the dolorous shouts, groans and wails which arose from the wells, the deep caves or from the vaults of ruined convents.

Out in the forest, Celso helps Candido produce his four tons of *trozas*, teaching him how to erect log and rope platforms above the massive caoba root structures so he can fell a tree in a reasonable time. Celso shows his heavily-worn hands to Candido and explains, “*They’ve peeled hundreds of times. The skin grew again like cartilage. That’s why I can cut six tons of mahogany a day if I wish. Naturally, I don’t cut more than four—or three, when I’m in a bad humour. But you can believe me that, when one of these fists comes down on a foreman’s skull, it cracks like a nutshell!*”

The story becomes violent and darker when a different work-gang is strung up by their arms from a tree. In the morning, two of them are dead. When a couple of survivors from this gang regain their strength, one of them manages to kill a *coyote* overseer, only he is killed in the attempt, with his comrade marched back to camp for punishment. When one of the Montellano brothers, Don Acacio, takes him into the woods to torture him, this rebel native, Urbano, summons his remaining spirit and subdues the Don. He ties him to a tree, stabs out Don Acacio’s eyes with massive jungle thorns, and then drowns himself in the river, thinking there is no other escape.

Soon after, a rebel worker named Martin Trinidad wanders by, steals the Don’s revolver and cartridge belt, and then buries it before anyone can see. Much later, after he’s found and brought back to camp, Don Acacio kills himself. His brothers return to the main camp and Don Felix tells his surviving brother: “*The business has to be kept dark. If the boys get a smell of the truth of this story, it may be dangerous for all of us.*” Don Felix explains to Don Severo that the dictator’s papers aren’t telling the truth of what’s really happening in Mexico, that recently he’s heard of *a train that was derailed, of a bomb explosion in a ship’s boiler, and of another which went off in Puebla police station. In Monterrey they caught a whole traveling coachful of men who were going about inciting to revolution and revolt against the Dictator...there’s no need to be a greater prophet to say that everything’s on the verge of collapse.*

The brothers decide to go easy on the workers, but *three days after the famous conference everybody had forgotten the resolution about treating the boys with greater gentleness.* This is the final straw, all the rebels begin to plan their escape, and for the first time in *The Jungle Novels*, we hear the eternal cry of *tierra y libertad!*, or *land and freedom!* However, despite all their planning, Candido and his family escape the plantation after one of his children dies in a drunken boat accident caused by the Dons. Unfortunately, Candido, his surviving son, and his sister Modesta are captured. Don Felix cuts off Candido’s ears as punishment, then his son’s ears, and within days Don Felix has tried to rape Modesta, who flees naked into the jungle.

When she finds the *muchachos* around their campfires, all hell breaks loose. Celso first kills El Gusano, smashing until his *skull was nothing but a bloody mass.* After that, the rebels make their plan to besiege the main camp, and as one of the rebels explains, *all our enemies must be killed, and we must kill all who can become enemies. If we have pity on them, we betray ourselves, we betray our women, our parents, our sisters, our sons and even those not yet born.*

In a beautiful passage that presages much that will come in 1936, B. Traven describes how, *whistling, singing, and shouting, the troupe of rebels advanced...relying on the force of revolutionary action which, when not enervated by politicians, has never left a real revolutionary in the lurch.* These *seventy brave men* and one woman encircle the Management compound, and as they do, one of the rebels sings the praises of Jules Bonnot’s favorite handgun, the weapon that started WWI, the *magnificent Browning.*

The rebels act with definitive violence. They make sure that *not one escaped*. *The attackers never failed to stop them. All were battered to a pulp. Their remains were brought into the office by the men, who immediately rounded up the camp dogs and pigs and shut them in with their corpses. And so the beasts devoured the dead to the last morsel.*

The final seventy pages of *The Rebellion of the Hanged* contain much wisdom about the process of starting and sustaining a revolution such as the one that occurred in Chiapas in 1910. I could go on quoting and narrating, but I'll stop here, because if *The Jungle Novels* interest you, if you want to read about the blossoming of one of the world's greatest rebellions, you'll not only have to read *The Rebellion of the Hanged*, but the crown jewel of the series, *The General in the Jungle*. While all of the other novels depict the barbarity of the dictatorship, *The General in the Jungle* is nothing but rebellion spreading out of the jungle, relentless in its fury to win *tierra y libertad*.

The Golden Age

Both *Trozas* and *The Rebellion of the Hanged* were published in Zürich in 1936, in German, thus limiting their readership to Switzerland and Austria. At the time, there were no Spanish translations of any B. Traven work, making it absolutely certain that no one in Spain read the thrilling conclusion of *The Rebellion of the Hanged* before an insurrection took place across the country, one which left the anarchists in control of Catalonia.

Just like the rebels depicted in *The Jungle Novels*, the Spanish anarchists relied *on the force of revolutionary action which, when not enervated by politicians, has never left a real revolutionary in the lurch*, and they quickly pushed back the fascists, only they were betrayed from within. While this well-documented Stalinist treachery was taking place, B. Traven published an open letter in the anarchist *Solidaridad Obrera* newspaper, exclaiming, *I greet you and all workers, peasants, and Republican soldiers who are fighting so heroically in Spain against the fascist monster. I salute the great men and women whom Spain has brought forth in these times of struggle, who with their lives are silently writing a new history of humanity.*

This letter was published in 1938, but within a year the fascists had triumphed across Spain, aided by not only the Nazis, but Stalin, who wanted to maintain a peace with Hitler. After the revolution was crushed, the Mexican government of President Lázaro Cárdenas opened up its borders to all anti-fascist refugees, just as it hosted the Republican government in exile. Mexico was one of the few countries to not recognize fascist Spain, just as it refused to recognize Hitler's 1938 annexation of Austria.

Unfortunately for *The Jungle Novels*, B. Traven ran into what we would today call *white people problems*. When he submitted *The General in the Jungle* to his now Swiss publishers, they replied that they *did not feel comfortable with the book's subject matter*. In a rage, Traven instead opted for a Swedish translation in 1939 and a Dutch edition in 1940. Both of these were perfectly timed, given Sweden was neutral, Holland was about to be invaded by the Nazis, and *The General in the Jungle* was essentially a thorough, entertaining, hand-held mini-manual for guerrilla warfare. Again, if you've made it this far, go read it. Seriously.

Anyway, back in Mexico, one had to be weary of the many Nazi spies who helped General Saturnino Cedillo in his doomed coup-attempt against anti-fascist Cárdenas, an uprising for which he, his family, and all his allies were wiped off the face of the earth. As you can imagine, the cap-

ital city of DF was an anti-fascist hotbed in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the birth of Mexico's short but beautiful *Golden Age*, before it was brutally punished by the *yanqui* dogs.

B. Traven was one of that *Golden Age's* hidden grandfathers, which is how my family first heard of the *gringo from Acapulco*. He first reared his head in DF when a wonderful woman named Esperanza López Mateos took it upon herself to translate his *The Bridge in the Jungle* into *Puerta en la selva*, which was then published in DF in 1941, the first Spanish translation of any B. Traven work. It was Esperanza who convinced Traven to get his work translated into cinema, and it was that same year, 1941, that Warner Brothers sent Traven a message from Hollywood, stating it had acquired the film rights to *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and signed a man named John Huston as director. Traven wrote back asking Huston to come visit him in Mexico, but Pearl Harbor was attacked a few weeks later and Huston was drafted to go make war-propaganda, which made him insanely famous. Film production was put off until after the war.

In the meantime, the indomitable Esperanza López Mateos had cranked out Spanish translations of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *Canasta of Mexican Stories* by 1946. Esperanza's brother would eventually become the Labor Secretary and President, while she herself was married to the brother of Gabriel Figueroa, the cameraman who would not only film *The Rebellion of the Hanged*, but direct members of my family in the *Golden Age* of Mexican cinema. Small world, huh? It gets even smaller. Traven was godfather to Figueroa's son.

After the war was over, John Huston had earned a reputation as an *impeccable patriot* for his propaganda documentaries, and under these laurels, he was contacted by a man named Hal Croves, the alleged agent of B. Traven. Their communications began in 1946, and Huston soon traveled to DF where he waited in his hotel for a week, unsure if Hal Croves would show. As John Huston would later narrate on film and in his autobiography, one morning he woke at dawn to find a short man standing at the foot of his bed.

If you doubted my assertion that B. Traven had once been Otto the lock-picking anarchist burglar, just know that John Huston himself confirmed that Hal Croves (ie: B. Traven) silently broke into his hotel room and waited for him to wake up. When he did, he handed over a card that identified him as a translator from Acapulco and San Antonio. He claimed Traven was ill and that he'd been authorized to act on his behalf on all matters pertaining to the filming of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. The two would meet again in Acapulco, where they went fishing, and during the cruise, Hal Croves wore a suit and tie and appeared to have no sea-legs.

Filming began in 1947, although it was shut down by the government, which believed Mexico was being portrayed unfairly. Production only resumed when Diego Rivera himself intervened, and that April the film crew traveled into the mountains of Michoacan. For his services, Hal Croves received \$100 a week in Hollywood cash, and during the shoot, he came to know an actor named Humphrey Bogart, who would eventually go on to resist the McCarthy witch-trials. The entire crew remembered Hal Croves, who some suspected was actually B. Traven, and none of them saw him again after production wrapped up and they returned to the US.

The film was a smash hit when it was released in 1948, even sweeping the Academy Awards (although it lost Best Picture to *Hamlet*). In this strange post-war pocket, a film based on the highly anti-capitalist adventure novel of a known anarchist was on the tip of everyone's tongue. That same year, the total copies of *The Treasure if the Sierra Madre* published in the US had reached over 400,000, and B. Traven was now rich again thanks to this truly remarkable movie. He was even formally awarded by the Screen Writers' Guild for *Best Written Western*, although he failed to show up to the ceremony and the award passed to co-author John Huston.

The reception was no less enthusiastic in DF, where it *ran for many weeks in Mexico City's largest cinema, with each of the three daily shows sold out. A monumental success, when one considers that in Mexico a film rarely stays on the program for more than a week. At 4 Mexican dollars per ticket, the theater took in 22,700 Mexican dollars the first Sunday the film ran.* People paid to see it once, twice, as many times as they could afford, that's how crazy the mania was for this motion-picture, and all this publicity led a Mexican journalist to ambush B. Traven in Acapulco, proving to the world that he was in fact B. Torsvan, caretaker of an inn and cashew farm near the coast.

Despite having his anonymity partially destroyed (no one knew who he *actually* was), B. Traven was excited about this new *Golden Age* of cinema, and eventually he became involved in the filming of his *The Rebellion of the Hanged*, for which he wrote the script. It was shot in Chiapas in the spring of 1953, supervised by Hal Croves, which meant a now flush-pocketed Traven was back among his indiginous comrades, although it's unclear what he did off-set or who he visited.

La rebelión de los colgados premiered as the Mexican State's entry at the Venice Biennale on August 28, 1954, and the media was driven into a frenzy trying to locate B. Traven, who was said to be in the audience. He actually was there, but no one ever found him, and the film, despite being a masterpiece, failed to win a single lion, either gold or silver, something Traven ascribed to *politics*. He wasn't wrong. The Venice Biennale was selected as a cultural battleground between the US and the USSR, with a CIA/Rockefeller-funded MOMA proxy curating the US exhibitions starting exactly in 1954. *La rebelión de los colgados* was far too radical, with its source material revealing that US companies profited off the chattel-slavery depicted in the motion-picture.

Back in Mexico, the film was an absolute sensation, a true highlight of this *Golden Age* of cinema, and lines formed around the block in endless cities. As Traven described, *in the lines formed in front of the movie theaters, one could see elegant women clad in fur coats beside poorly dressed Indian women, and all of them left the theater taken by the film.* This tiny description of the Mexico City premier reveals much about that brief *Golden Age*, when DF was the hottest city in the Americas, containing everything people found so appealing about noir-era Los Angeles, only ten times as *cool*.

My grandparents were lucky enough to experience this slicked back, dance-hall, shiny-car, movie-screen version of DF, those decades when Mexico got to experience the modern world in relative peace, having suffered little during World War II. My grandparents would endlessly describe this DF and bemoan its loss, a mirage on the horizon of what could have been, and during those heady times, every other film was shot by Gabriel Figueroa or written by B. Traven, such as the 1955 film version of his *Canasta of Mexican Stories*. That same year, one million copies of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* had been sold in the US. In the USSR, it was said over two million copies of *The Deathship* had been printed.

Just like Jack London, B. Traven had somehow gotten under the skin of Joseph Stalin, and both authors were freely printed in his USSR, even after his death in 1953. Speaking of Jack London, many people believed B. Traven was actually Jack London, who had faked his suicide and had been living in Mexico this whole time. Traven himself stoked this rumor when he wrote to a friend in the US: *London merely pretended to have committed suicide so as to 'get away from it all,' especially from his complicated love affairs and marriage problems, whereas in fact he secretly went to Mexico, changed his name and to avoid being recognized had his further books and stories published in German first and translated into English from the German with the intention to destroy*

his original style. Make of that what you will, but Traven himself admitted that his life bore far greater similarity in every respect to old Jack London, said to have died in 1916.

Unlike Jack London, B. Traven didn't write that many short stories, but of the few dozen he did write, one of them achieved near immortality inside Mexico. Its title is *Macario*, published in Switzerland in 1950, and it was stated in this tiny edition that a man named Hans Kauders had translated the text from the English original. This original then appeared in the US magazine *Fantastic* in 1953, then it was printed in one of those giant books, *The Best American Short Stories of 1954*, after which someone at *The New York Times* found it and named *Macario* the *Best Short Story of 1954*. While it wouldn't be translated into Spanish for some years, it is now fused with Mexican culture itself, part and parcel with a thousand *Día de los Muertos* celebrations.

B. Traven eventually moved to DF in 1957, only now he was married to one Rosa Elena Luján, whom he met through the filming of *La rebelión de los colgados*. Shortly after falling for her, B. Traven transferred all his wealth into her name, completely writing himself out of any financial control. Rosa had two daughters from a previous marriage to an older man. She was also 30 years younger than B. Traven and had the legal ability to leave this dirty old man in the dust and speed off with his millions of dollars, which she never did, so make of that what you will. For his part, this untrusting man seemed to have finally found someone trustworthy, and over the course of the 1960s, Rosa translated *Macario* and the rest of *The Jungle Novels* into Spanish, just as she promoted his work across the globe.

Rosa Elena Luján and her daughters, who B. Traven came to view as his daughters, had fond memories of going to eat with this strange man, who always knew where the best food was. As one of their friends recall, *there was a place in Tacubaya where you could get enchiladas for a peso and a Chinese place that served comida corrida, a three-course meal, for one peso and fifty centavos. Torsvan [ie: B. Traven] always knew the cheapest restaurants with the best food. We used to call him 'The Funny Man.'*

While B. Traven made many friends in the Mexican art, literature, and film scene, he also had many relationships with the anarchists who fled there for one reason or another. Among his friends in Mexico City was Ethel Duffy Turner, a former editor of *Regeneración* and friend of the late Ricardo Flores Magón. Another couple of friends he had were Mollie Steimer and Senya Fleshin, founders of the Anarchist Black Cross and friends of the late Emma Goldman, a couple of exiles who ran a photo-studio called SEMO. All of these anarchists lived in Mexico City before migrating to Cuernavaca, their chosen place of retirement, and it's in Cuernavaca that the B. Traven archives reside. Before these anarchists moved there, all of them kept low profiles in Mexico City, watching in awe as their comrade B. Traven spread his message across the globe.

The German film version of *Das Totenschiff*, or *The Deathship*, was released in 1959, with both Hal Croves and Rosa Elena Luján attending the Hamburg premiere in the flesh, a huge media spectacle at the time. Meanwhile, Traven's short story *Macario* was made into a film in 1960, becoming the first Mexican picture to be nominated for Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards, although it obviously lost. The next year, in 1961, the film adaptation of *The White Rose* was completed in Mexico, only the Mexican government prevented its release, fearing the reaction of the US, given its anti-*yanqui* content.

When it was finally released, it earned much praise in its home country, with many extolling the camerawork of Gabriel Figueroa, and it's still largely ignored in the US. Big surprise. Not to be deterred, Figueroa and Traven collaborated on their *Días de otoño*, or *Autumn Days*, a 1963

film based on a Traven short story. This time, given it depicted no US oil companies, the Mexican state allowed it to be released.

Before all that, in 1960, B. Traven published what would be his final novel, *Aslan Norval*, originally released in German, the story of a woman who uses her millions of dollars to build a canal across the US, coast to coast, an elaborate scheme to demilitarize the country and end the Cold War. It was so unlike anything he had written, even in its sentence structure, that everyone assumed Rosa Elena Luján was the true author, given its central female protagonist, another first for B. Traven. No one liked the book when it was released in 1960, and I still haven't read it. Oddly, it was just translated into English in 2020, released alongside a new edition of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, but the sage advisors at Macmillan saw too much risk in actually printing *Aslan Norval*, so for now it's only available as an *e-book* on their website. Feel free to pirate that shit.

Speaking of the wise lords at Macmillan, it seems one of their rowdy unpaid interns was able to write the description for *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, at least on the corporate website, and it's here they make the extremely bold claim that this novel was written **BY THE ELUSIVE AUTHOR WHO WAS A MODEL FOR THE HERO OF ROBERTO BOLAÑO'S 2666**. There's a lot going on in there. Odd to think of *2666* having a singular *hero*, but alright, fine. What they likely mean by *hero* is the character Hans Reiter, aka Archimboldi, the mysterious German writer who disappears in Mexico. If anything, he's a fusion of B. Traven and Heinrich Böll, given that Böll is actually Reiter's age and served as a conscript in the Nazi army. The one thing that Hans Reiter shares with Traven is the mysterious persona, and over the course of *2666*, the hapless reader is constantly led to believe that Hans Reiter is somehow responsible for all the evil in Mexico, when in fact he's actually a decent person, even if he is a German.

Once upon a time, in the 1960s, B. Traven was considered for the Nobel Prize, although he obviously didn't win it (something Heinrich Böll did). By the 1960s, the PRI governments of Mexico, while leading the country into rapid industrialization, were also increasingly making deals with the *yanquis* and growing even more repressive against social movements. The last traces of the *Golden Age* crumbled away in 1968 during the Tlatelolco Massacre in DF, where hundreds of students were murdered by CIA trained soldiers protesting the Olympics. According to one of his biographers, Traven *walked down to the Reforma to see the student protests* in 1968, but it's unclear if he tried to attend the one on October 2, 1968, the date of the massacre.

Mexico would now be punished for daring to have its *Golden Age*, and unfortunately B. Traven would die in this Mexico on March 26, 1969. As an added insult, the same President Ordaz who presided over the Tlatelolco Massacre wrote to Rosa Elena Luján after his death, cynically claiming that *few writers have penetrated so deeply into the Mexican soul*.

According to his wishes, B. Traven was cremated on March 27, with the urn then taken to Chiapas, where the ashes would be scattered. On April 17, Rosa Elena Luján and her children arrived in Jovel with the urn in a public ceremony. The next day, the urn was taken by plane to the jungle village of Ocosingo, a place which would be seized by the EZLN in 1994. Back then, it was still just a little village, and the local council held a public gathering before the true event, a funeral procession through the village.

As one of Traven's biographers narrates, *the real flavor of the event was Indian, particularly that afternoon as the funeral procession wound through the village: fireworks and Mexican music played on marimbas, hand drums, and flutes, with school children lining the streets throwing flowers. The procession headed for the most humble of the straw-covered mud huts at the edge of the village [where] the wake was held. That night hundreds of Indians walked by the urn resting on a table in*

the hut and said farewell in the dim light of four candles. The air was thick with the smell of tamales chiapanecos—pork, cornmeal, and plums wrapped in banana leaves.

One of these mourners was Vitorino Trinidad, a former guide to Traven, lifelong friend, and the likely inspiration for a character in *The Jungle Novels*. As the biographer reminds us, *the Tzeltal Indians who lived there, members of a Mayan tribe like the neighboring Lacandones, were Traven's friends, his "brothers," his "soul mates," as he called them. They gave him bows and arrows and entrusted him with ceramic cult objects.* The next day, his ashes were taken up in a plane and scattered over the jungle he loved so much, all while television cameras rolled. After the plane returned, the mayor announced that Ocosingo would henceforth be known as *Ocosingo de Traven*. This sub-name had been largely forgotten when the EZLN stormed in on January 1, 1994, triggering one of the bloodiest battles of that lightning insurrection.

EZLN epilogue

On one side of my Mexican family, my great-grandfather got caught doing something against the state, and for this he was forced into the Díaz dictatorship's army. My grandmother told me that he and the other conscripts could only drink horse piss on long marches, given all the water was reserved for the horses which pulled the cannons and machine-guns. When the dictatorship crumbled, he ended up being attached to one army or another until ending up under the control of President Obregón. At that point, my grandfather was a career soldier who could now drink water instead of horse piss.

In contrast, my other great-grandfather was a messenger for Pancho Villa during the revolution, but one day the front got too far away from him and the fighting ended. He drifted down south where he found a job as a train mechanic for a British lumber company that needed his skills to deforest central Mexico. His son, my grandfather, was born in the State of Mexico in the 1920s, before all the forests were cut down by foreign companies let in by President Obregón. My grandfather left these still forested mountains in the 1930s, heading with his family for the bright lights of Mexico City, and it was here he met my grandmother, who he married in the 1950s. That same decade, he returned to the place of his birth to find there wasn't a single tree left. When he was a child, you couldn't see the sky for the trees.

As I mentioned, Mexico City was truly glorious in the 1940s and 1950s, at least according to my grandparents and a lot of other people, but as I also mentioned, things started to get really bad, so my grandfather used our family contacts to get a job in Hollywood with the *gringos locos*. He came to Los Angeles alone in the early 1960s, saving enough money until he could bring his family (including my parent) to live in this city of cinema. If you can figure out who he is, good job, but all I'll reveal is that my grandfather became attached to the *yanqui* director Sam Peckinpah, having small roles in almost all of his cowboy movies, and one of his most bizarre appearances was as the wax-mold face of Alfredo Garcia in the now cult-classic *Bring Me The Head Of Alfredo Garcia*.

Thanks to this side of my family, I knew more about B. Traven than most people, but mostly as a composite image, the rare *güero* who spoke like a German but definitely wasn't a Nazi, who struck it rich and spread the money around in a way that mattered, who hustled his subversive works into both the US and Mexican mainstream. Thanks to the film version of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, the horribly racist Hollywood depictions of Mexico fell out of favor, replaced by

semi-accurate cowboy-ism *a la* Sam Peckinpah, who my family influenced like the snake on the Mexican flag. He's the white man who paid my grandfather, who set my family up in El Sereno. If you don't know where that is, it's not close to Hollywood. It's what we call *east of the river*.

While old Peckinpah was listening to my family's advice and depicting a Yaqui bandit gunning down soldiers in his *The Wild Bunch* of 1969, all the young white US radicals were reading B. Traven, and catering to this demand, the first US edition of *The Carreta* was released in 1970, the same year there were nearly 10,000 armed attacks in the country. Likewise, the first US edition of *Government* was released in 1971, the same year there were 6,000 armed attacks in the country. With the previously released 1962 Dell paperback of *March to the Montería*, along with the 1952 edition of *The Rebellion of the Hanged*, the young white radicals had all but two of *The Jungle Novels* on their shelves. Right on time, in 1972, the first US edition of *The General in the Jungle* was released, giving the kids yet another guerrilla war manual.

Things got really bad in the US during the 1970s, then they got worse in the 1980s, especially in Mexico, and it seemed like the only people who read B. Traven were forced to read him in Mexican schools, which were becoming increasingly impoverished. *Trozas* remained untranslated into English during this time, possessing in its pages some of the clearest connections between Mexican slavery and US corporations, but in the early 1990s plans were made to finally publish it in the US. As the pages were being laid out, an insurrection broke out in Chiapas precisely where *The Jungle Novels* take place, one whose spokesman was a *ladino loco*.

This white man was Subcommandante Marcos, and according to legend, MARCOS was a composite of the first letters of all the major cities seized in the insurrection, with O standing for Ocosingo, and so forth. Named after General Zapata and his revolutionary army, the Zapatistas quickly invaded the main cities of Chiapas before melting back into the jungle, much as B. Traven described two generations earlier. Despite losing those main cities in the counter-attack, from that day forth, most of southern Chiapas belonged to the Zapatistas, or the EZLN.

Again, according to legend, Marcos was once a white professor from DF whose loyalties lay with Marxism, Leninism, Maoism & Co. He and five others went into the jungles of Chiapas to *convert the natives* to their ideology but were instead converted themselves to the indiginous way of doing things. Marcos himself was shown an old picture of Emiliano Zapata by a native elder, who told Marcos this wasn't the first time rebels came through the jungle stirring up rebellion, a humbling lesson according to Marcos. It isn't clear if B. Traven ever came up in those conversations, but what is clear is that the EZLN hid in the jungle and grew in strength for a solid decade before revealing themselves in the insurrection of 1994.

One year after that uprising, Marcos was constantly in the public eye writing hallucinatory communiques as part of the *peace process*. Using his white-skin, his crafty *ladino* verbiage, his media-savvy, and his seething hatred of the Mexican state, Marcos became the Quixotic spokesperson for an army of Mayan rebels waiting in the jungle, somehow still alive after taking on the modern Mexican army. One year after the insurrection, in an open letter published in *La Jornada* in 1995, Marcos made his first clear reference to B. Traven when he referred to what was happening in Chiapas as *the rebellion of the hanged*.

Everyone who read this in Mexico knew exactly what he meant, given B. Traven books were literally required reading in school, and the film *La rebelión de los colgados* was still widely viewed as a masterpiece of the *Golden Age*. Almost a decade later, a Mexican scholar claimed in *La Jornada* that *what Traven left written in the Mahogany Cycle were perhaps suggestions that, some time later, the EZLN has put into practice, and they are also a testimony of what Marcos now writes in the pages*

of history. As late as 2017, after Marcos was reborn as Subcomandante Galeano, he explained that *we ourselves are the constant and ongoing update of the software “la rebelión de los colgados.”*

Unlike Emiliano Zapata, B. Traven and Marcos/Galeano were white men. While there was precedent for the indigenous trusting a kindred like Zapata, there was simply no precedent for the indigenous trusting a *gringo* like Traven, and had it not been for this wandering white man who made many friends in Ocosingo and across Chiapas, it’s possible the Mayans might not have trusted the *ladino* named Marcos when he came tramping into the jungle. Both Traven and Marcos entered the *selva* with their own ideas of anarchism and communism, only to find that the Mayans were already practicing a far more ancient form of communalism than their 19th century philosophies ever imagined.

Anyway, all of that clearly took a century to accomplish, just like writing this article, and this patient uprising hasn’t wavered in the nearly three decades since 1994, enough time for there to be two entire generations of Zapatistas born in the jungle, free from slavery, free from the state. A lot of people salivate over the EZLN territory, something which annoys the Zapatistas very much, and just like B. Traven, what the rebel Mayans would like you to do is start a rebellion in your own land, whether it be Bavaria or Berkeley, and just like B. Traven, if you ever need to flee, if you ever need help, there’s an entire world of freedom fighters waiting to assist you. With any luck, there always will be, so long as we preserve our memories. That’s about all I have for this *literary analysis*, but to formally conclude, even though it goes without saying, I must clearly state: **LONG LIVE ANARCHY! TIERRA Y LIBERTAD!**

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