Let's begin with the end—the end of the world. In a distant continent, in the near-desert of a country known for its jungles, we have the small village of Canudos. This is the end of the world for some 25,000 inhabitants who, out of fellowship, hope, and desperation, have arrived to witness the end of time. This is after all the end of a momentous century, with astounding changes, but surely the Earth's last.  
  
It is here we find *The War of the End of the World* by Mario Vargas Llosa. The story is ostensibly about the 1896 and 97 War of Canudos, a war in which the full might of the Brazilian Army is eventually brought down on an isolated starving village in an inhospitable land. Vargas Llosa uses his art form to show that this is more than a military war. It is a war of ideas and ideology. It is a war to right the wrongs and the insults that have accrued through the years. The last vestiges of slavery were outlawed just a decade before. Political factions are in full propaganda mode. Zealots of all worldviews (economic, nationalistic, and divine) are fighting for their beliefs, both secular and heavenly. Brothers are fighting brothers. The educated, the elite, and the salt of the earth, all from a population of mixed ethnicity, will play some part in this pivotal moment in Brazilian history.

The story starts with the counselor, Antonio Conselheiro, a charismatic wonderer with messianic messages. He is “tall and so thin he seemed to be always in profile”. After decades as an itinerant preacher and builder of rustic churches, he has attracted a following of outcasts. They see the apocalypse in the droughts, floods, plagues, and famines of this northeastern Brazilian state of Bahia. It is 1893 and they need a home in which they can await their eternity. This new home is Canudos, named for the straws or reeds by the river Vasa-Barris, next to which the town is built. The inhabitants want to give it the name Belo Monte, Beautiful Hill, but Canudos is the name that has stuck. This land is the property of the Baron de Canabrava, a member of the old-guard aristocratic faction, and one of the central characters in Vargas Llosa’s story.

The inhabitants of this town are succeeding at repelling the state police of Bahia and the army of The Republic of Brazil. Three times, against ever larger forces, the *jaguncos* (rebels) have managed to send the army of dogs home, tails between their legs, with only primitive weapons, using stealth, cunning, and knowledge of the land itself. But this can't stand. The new nation’s pride is at stake; the Republic must put down this rebellion in the backlands. Never mind the cost. Wrongs must be righted. Insults must be avenged. Civilization must leap forward into the new century.

The people of Canudos see things very differently. They are rebelling against the new Republic and the religion of nationalism, where taxes are like tithes (page 21) and civil marriage is an abomination (to say nothing about the metric system). This “motley collection of human beings” appears to want to be left alone, but will fight tooth and nail against atheists, Protestants, and Freemasons. They are certainly not saints. In fact, they are sinners of the worst sort. They have repented of their sins; or have they? Are these former thieves and murderers really done with their thuggery? This is the supposed reason that neighboring towns complained to the authorities of Bahia, and ultimately why state and national forces marched against them. Vargas Llosa indicates this may be correct. He says of Abbot Joao and Pajeu, “they knew how to fight”, and so accompanied those procuring provisions in nearby towns (page 50).

How do we meet the many characters in this story? In the opening pages, the story introduces characters in a 3rd person omniscient fashion. Later, we meet many characters through their own thoughts or the thoughts of other characters. The 3rd person omniscient fades. We are left to rely on vignettes from each character's point of view. These perspectives are certainly colored, but they are all believable and authentic.

I’m sure we will discuss many of these characters. I’ve touched on the Counselor. Let me pick a couple of others. Perhaps the biggest aberration is phrenologist and revolutionist, Galileo Gall, who represents the European ideas of Proudhon and Bakunin. Marx is mentioned once (page 123); Gall writes that Marx predicted that is was not in “highly industrialized societies that great uprisings would take place…but in backward, agrarian countries, whose miserable peasant masses had nothing to lose—Spain, for instance, Russia, and, why not? Brazil”. For him, “Satan—the first rebel—is the true prince of freedom” (page 16). Here’s a person of science (hence his first name), who can read people's heads, but not read the stars in the night sky (page 290). His idealism is absurd in the context of Canudos, and his death in the middle of the book, although it comes as a bit of a surprise, is appropriate. The Baron tells him he is “irredeemably lost” (page 251). He doesn’t understand why Rufino would be upset that Gall raped Rufino’s wife, Jurema. During their one-on-one battle he says to Rufino “You blind, selfish, petty traitor to your class – can’t you see beyond your vainglorious little world?” (page 292). Maybe the triangle of Rufino, Gall, and Jurema symbolizes the treatment of Brazilians (those of native and African descent) at the hands of Europeans. Speaking of triangles, there are others: the Baron, Baroness, and Sebastiana; the reporter, Jurema, and the Dwarf. The story is told in four parts, but one of them is hardly long enough to be a part. Another triad?  
  
Reading closely, Gall is the 3rd major character to be mentioned. The 2nd turns out to be the reporter. Working with a goose-quill pen, he is the one who tells the editor of the *Jornal de Noticias*, Epaminondas Gonclaves, that the strange man who wants to post an ad about a rally for those in “solidarity with the idealists of Canudos” is “A Scotsman who has been going around asking people in Bahia if he could feel their heads”. The reporter is the only unnamed major person in the whole book, as far as I know. He seems to represent something of the writer Euclides da Cunha. (da Cunha wrote the canonical history of the war, the 1902 *O Sertao*, *The Backlands,* upon which Vargas Llosa and others have heaped much praise.) The reporter may also represent some of Vargas Llosa. (The reporter has told the Baron that someday he will “be the Oscar Wilde of Brazil” (page 356).) Vargas Llosa can only imagine how the reality of Canudos occurred. He is just as incapacitated as the nearsighted journalist, who has lost his glasses and must rely on the help of others to see what takes place.

Back to the counselor: he fades as the story progresses. We hear *about* him more than we hear *from* him. By the end he only speaks in whispers. The Counselor’s followers pick up his story. The war, if it is to be called that, is then told from their perspective, as well as the soldiers, Jurema, the dwarf, and the reporter. It is in these stories that we must delve if we are to understand the end of Canudos and why it was the end of the world for so many.