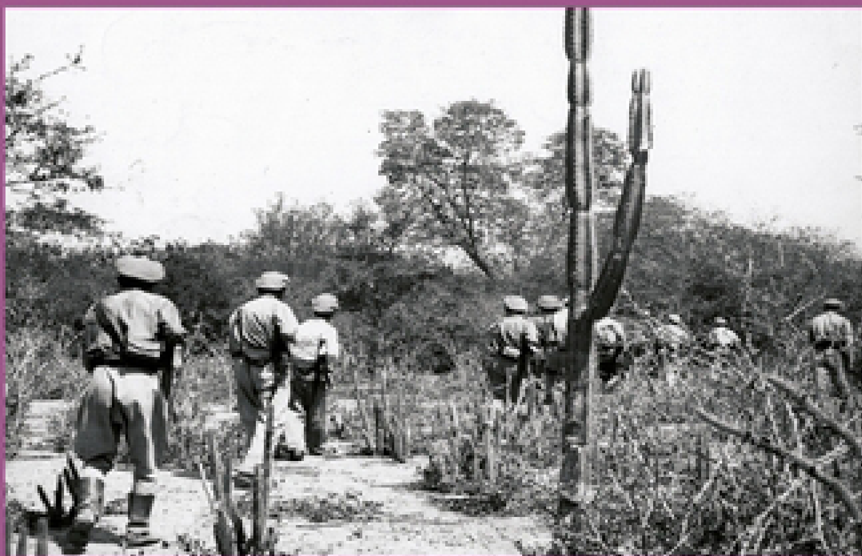
The Chaco War

Environment, Ethnicity, and Nationalism

Edited by Bridget María Chesterton



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1

Introduction: An Overview of the Chaco War

Bridget María Chesterton

In the early twentieth century, the English travel writer Julian Duguid found himself in Buenos Aires searching for adventure. His idea was to travel by mule across land contested between Bolivia and Paraguay. An "Irish-Argentine" informed him that the region he wished to travel through was dangerous because "Bolivia and Paraguay were in the middle of a squabble about a piece of land called the 'Chaco,' and that . . . [they] might blunder into a war at any moment."[1] And "blunder" they did. This "squabble" developed into a full-scale war in 1932 and, as it turned out, the deadliest international conflict in Latin America in the twentieth century: the Chaco War. Over ninety thousand Bolivians and Paraguayans lost their lives in what Duguid later chose to title his memoir: the "Green Hell."

Duguid was not alone in this description. Soldiers, missionaries, immigrants, and historians have also described the vast Gran Chaco of South America as *el infierno verde*. Europeans at the beginning of the twentieth century considered the region desolate and, consequently, there were only a few regions of the world less traveled by Europeans. They, along with Paraguayans and Bolivians themselves, generally considered the Gran Chaco notoriously hostile to human settlement and short on easily accessible natural resources. Even so, the region is a vast expanse of land that encompasses territory in four nations; it stretches from Formosa in Argentina, to Mato Grosso in Brazil, the Andes Mountains in Bolivia, and the Paraguay River in Paraguay. The area under dispute between Bolivia and Paraguay, the Chaco Boreal, consists of about 100,000 square miles (259,000 km^2) of land running southeast from Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, to the banks of the Paraguay River across from Asunción, Paraguay. The region is notorious for its harsh climate, with droughts that last for months between May and October turning the landscape hot and dusty. During this long period, water can be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find. The rainy season, from November to April, brings heavy downpours that often leave large swaths of land under water and cover the entire region in mud. Nonetheless, between 1932 and

1935—at the depth of a global recession—Bolivia and Paraguay sent thousands of men into this wilderness to fight, suffer, and die.

The Gran Chaco, 1600s–1930s

When the Spanish encountered the Upper Plata in the 1600s, the natives of what is today eastern Paraguay (the Guaraní) considered the region to the west of the Paraguay River best avoided. The Guaraní regarded the natives of the Chaco as enemies and referred to all groups living on the west bank of the Paraguay River and beyond as Guayacurú. In 1854, however, a small community of French immigrants settled in the Chaco at the invitation of Paraguayan President Francisco Solano López. The Paraguayan claim to the region lay in legal titles rather than occupation and settlement. For the Paraguayans, because Spanish expeditions to the Chaco in the sixteenth century originated from Asunción, the Chaco was undoubtedly part of Paraguay. Polemicists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries repeated how Paraguay held titles to the land in question since the colonial era and, as a result, the Bolivians were wrong in attempting to claim the region.[2] In reality, the Paraguayans did not pay much attention to the region until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, after their recovery from devastating territorial and demographic losses during the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870) that pitted Paraguay against its much stronger neighbors of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.[3]

For the Bolivians, the lowlands and the Chaco represented two-thirds of their country but only a small minority of its population. Prior to European colonization, as documented by Erick D. Langer, the Chaco "was a frontier of the Inca Empire . . . the Incas [tried] to prevent the penetration of the Guaraní speakers into the Andean heartland."[4] Bolivian rhetoric also considered the Chaco part of the nation because of titles given to the Audiencia of Charcas in the colonial era demonstrating that "Bolivia had perfectly irrefutable and solid titles to show to any tribunal or arbitration in the world."[5] Like the Paraguayans, the Bolivians also took action to show that they were in control of the region, particularly after the War of the Pacific (1879–1883) and the later Acre War (1899–1903) in which Bolivia lost large tracts of lands to Chile and Brazil, respectively. In the late nineteenth century, Franciscan missionaries were invited into the region in an attempt by Bolivian officials to "civilize" the indigenous population of the lowlands, with the hope of incorporating them into the larger Bolivian nation both economically and culturally.[6]

Map 1 Map of the Grand Chaco.

Source: Paula Montenegro Gigante.

Neither nation paid much attention to the region until late in the nineteenth century as both began to recuperate from devastating territorial losses of the War of the Triple Alliance and the War of the Pacific. Attempts at a diplomatic solution to the sticky question of territorial boundaries between Bolivia and Paraguay were made on numerous occasions in the latter part of the nineteenth century, including three failed treaties: Decoud–Quijarro (1879), Aceval–Tamayo (1887), and Benítez–Ichazo (1894). As noted by historian Ricardo Scavone Yegros, "in reality, not only the question of borders, but also the relations between Paraguay–Bolivia in general is characterized during the nineteenth century by a series of lamentable disagreements and initiatives that never reached fruition."[7]

As diplomatic solutions failed, both nations attempted to assert authority over the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by encouraging immigration and establishing missions to convert Indians to Christianity in hope of acquiring their loyalty to the respective nation states. The Bolivians, as noted earlier, employed Franciscan missionaries to convert the native Chiriguano (today known as the Avá Guaraní) of the Chaco Boreal.[8] Later, the Bolivians secured the services of Catholic Oblate missionaries to work along the Pilcomayo River.[9] The Paraguayans turned to Anglicans and Catholic Salesian missionaries. Mennonite immigrants fleeing the Soviet Union via Canada made their way into the Chaco in 1926 to establish farming settlements with the support of the Paraguayan state.[10]

These attempts to assert authority through religious missions were also reinforced by both nations with the establishment of small *fortínes* (forts). These *fortínes*, usually manned with only a few poorly armed and provisioned men, proliferated during the decade leading to the conflict. In 1928, war appeared on the horizon as Paraguayan Major Rafael Franco, acting without orders from Asunción, attacked the Bolivian *fortín* Vanguardia. This act almost single-handedly started a war. Bolivians reacted by staging protests in La Paz. According to David Zook, "youths massed outside the offices of the General Staff screaming 'Viva Bolivia! Muera el Paraguay.'"[11] War was averted when the International Conference of American States on Conciliation and Arbitration (ICASCA) met in Washington and determined that Paraguay was the aggressor in the attack and ordered the Paraguayans to rebuild Vanguardia while the Bolivians agreed to return the captured *fortínes*.[12] It was becoming increasingly clear, however, that war was inevitable.

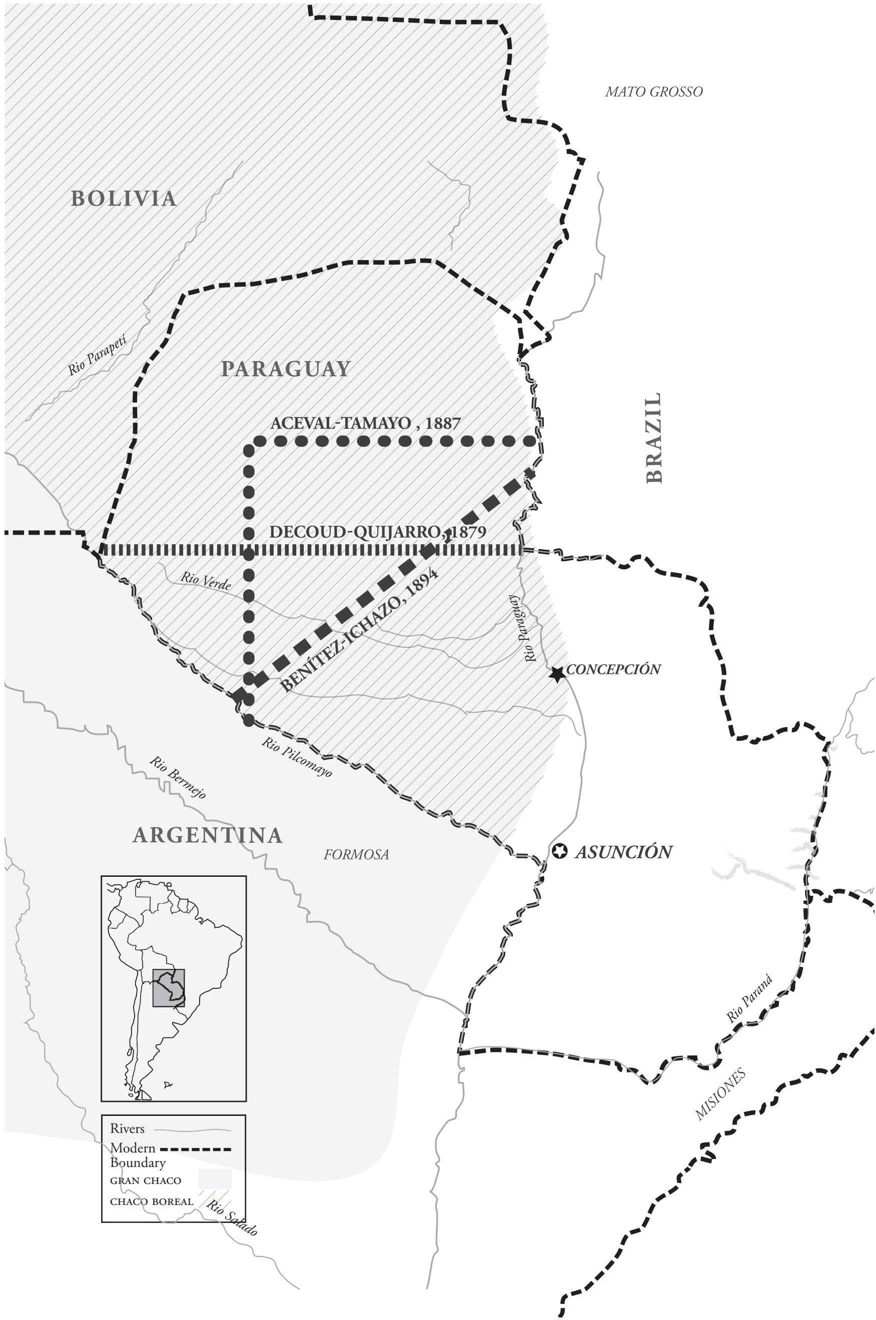
The Bolivians sincerely believed that they had the upper hand in any war with Paraguay. The reasons for this posture were that they had a large standing army,

superior aircraft, and overwhelming firepower.[13] The Bolivians were also in a much stronger economic position than the Paraguayans, with large amounts of mineral wealth available to fund the war. Moreover, the Bolivians believed that their victory was secured when they hired German General Hans Kundt to lead their armed forces; he had previously served as the Bolivian Chief of the General Staff from 1911 to 1914, 1921 to 1926, and 1929 to 1930. Kundt led the Bolivian military from 1932, the outbreak of hostilities, until December 1933.[14]

The Paraguayan military was considerably less prepared for war in the early twentieth century than their Andean adversary. Paraguay did not have a standing army and, unlike the Bolivians, the Paraguayan economy was not linked to the larger global trade through any essential primary commodities. The extent of Paraguayan exports included *yerba mate* (South American green tea) and tannin extracts from the *quebracho* (break-ax tree) that lined the left bank of the Paraguay River in the Chaco. The Paraguayans chose a native-born national to lead their armed forces, *Mariscal* (Marshal) José Felix Estigarribia. Although there were many foreign military advisors who worked as scouts and helped to train the Paraguayan armed forces, including a significant number of White Russians, the Paraguayans never promoted these men to high positions in order to give the impression that the Paraguayans themselves were in charge of military operations.[15] This self-aware military leadership meant that the Paraguayans were proud of their achievements in strategy and military tactics during the conflict.

The major engagements of the war, 1932–1935

War between Bolivia and Paraguay broke out after Bolivian troops encountered Paraguayan forces at what the Paraguayans called Lake Pitiantuta and the Bolivians referred to as Lake Chuquisaca. Both sides considered the lake a strategic location because of the year-round availability of water—a rare resource in the Chaco. Although the Bolivians were able to initially surprise the small Paraguayan garrison stationed there, within a matter of days the Paraguayans forced the Bolivians to flee. This was the blunder that inflamed war fever in Bolivia. Neither the Bolivian public nor its leadership was in the mood for negotiation, as they were after the 1928 Vanguardia incident.[16] The news that the Paraguayans held Lake Chuquisaca/Pitiantuta arrived in La Paz on July 17, 1932, coincidently a holiday in Bolivia and, according to historian Ange-François Casabianca, "massive and spontaneous patriotic protests and parades erupted



Map 2 Map of the failed Bolivian–Paraguay Treaties.

Source: Paula Montenegro Gigante.

which would intensify in the following days, [and all of the protests] demanded war."[17] For the Paraguayans, the Lake Chuquisaca/Pitiantuta incident directly led to mass mobilization of men between the ages of nineteen and fifty.[18] Although war was not declared until 1933, the reality is that after the events at Lake Chuquisaca/Pitiantuta the hopes of a peaceful settlement between the two land-locked nations had come to an end.[19]

After their humiliating defeat at Lake Chuquisaca/Pitiantuta, the Bolivian military focused their attention on the Paraguayan fortín at Boquerón. The Bolivians eventually overran Boquerón, only to have the Paraguayans retake the fortín in early September 1932. However, the victory for the Paraguayans was hard won. Estigarribia was able to secure a victory at Boquerón only by laying siege to the fortín, requiring the few Bolivian soldiers inside to survive "on mules and scanty air-dropped food."[20] The loss of Boquerón was both a military and psychosocial defeat for the Bolivians and a reassuring success for the Paraguayans. President Salamanca of Bolivia, believing that his fighting forces required professional leadership, invited General Hans Kundt to return to Bolivia and take control of the Bolivian military. For the Paraguayan troops, after their success at Boquerón, they gained confidence that the Bolivians could be pushed back into the Andes.

There was great hope that Kundt would turn the tide of the war in favor of the Bolivians, as he was quite popular with Bolivian troops and many believed that his return meant that success in the war was all but assured.[21] The homegrown Estigarribia, according to this naïve belief, was surely no match for the Prussian. Kundt, after a long trip from Germany to Bolivia via Peru, decided to go on the offensive in the eastern Chaco. Kundt, with great confidence, organized the Bolivian offensive on the Paraguayan fortín at Nanawa.[22] Although ultimately the Bolivian assaults at Nanawa failed, Kundt believed that it was fundamental to keep up the pressure on the Paraguayans and continued the offensive on their positions at Alihuatá and Toledo. His ideas proved correct and, under pressure from Bolivian forces, the Paraguayans retreated from Alihuatá. Although a win for Kundt, it turned out not to be much of a loss for the Paraguayans.[23]

Kundt noted in his memoirs that even though Alihuatá was not the major objective, the success did aid the Bolivians in terms of their immediate goal, the Paraguayan fortín of Arce.[24] The Bolivians were quite emboldened after the success at Alihautá, but they were at the end of their supply lines; they were over a thousand kilometers from their supply bases. The Paraguayans, on the other hand, were much closer to their supply bases on the Paraguay River. By May of

1933, after a disastrous defeat at Arce, it became increasingly clear that the Bolivians were having a great deal of difficulty continuing the offensive in the fighting. As noted by historian René de la Pedraja, however, "Kundt was just one step away from reaching the final and inevitable conclusion that the Bolivian army was incapable of any further offensive."[25] Even so, the Prussian general turned his attention to a second assault on Nanawa.

The Paraguayans were thoroughly motivated to defend Nanawa and the Paraguayan leadership proved patient in waiting to see where and when the full Bolivian assault would come. As a result, Estigarribia was able to hold his significant reserves until it was apparent that the Bolivians were going to attack from the north. Years later, General Kundt still expressed amazement that the second battle at Nanawa went to the Paraguayans: "it is honestly surprising that. . . . [all of our efforts] did not break the resistance of the enemy."[26] In the end, the second battle of Nanawa in July 1933 marked the end of the Bolivian advance in the eastern Chaco.

By mid-1933, the momentum was on the side of the Paraguayans, and Estigarribia went on the offensive. He focused his attention on Bolivian forces at Campo Grande, which was bombarded on August 30. On September 15, the surviving Bolivians at Campo Grande surrendered to Paraguayan forces. As a result of these failures, Kundt offered his resignation to President Saavedra, who refused it.[27] The reality, however, was that Kundt's days in charge of the Bolivian efforts in the Chaco were numbered.

At about the same time that the Paraguayans were putting pressure on Campo Grande, Estigarribia held a meeting of his top commanders, including the ambitious Rafael Franco, at fortín Rojas Silva. At this conference, Estigarribia gave the eager Franco permission to move forward with his planned assault on fortín Gondra. Franco's planning and execution of the drive toward Gondra made possible the continued Paraguayan offensive. Franco efficaciously broke the Bolivian defenses, opening a Paraguayan path all the way to Campo Vía, which he captured for the Paraguayans on December 1, 1933. As a direct result of the Bolivian failures at Campo Vía, President Salamanca replaced General Hans Kundt. General Enrique Peñaranda replaced him.

The Bolivians called for a truce from December 15–30 in order to regroup. They desperately needed the break as the top organization of the Bolivian military was disorganized after the departure of Kundt and their positions were not well defended. The Paraguayans agreed; but they broke the truce four days later and took the Bolivian headquarters of Muños. The truce was then extended to January 6, 1934.[28] While clearly the Bolivians needed to regroup after the

devastating defeat at Campo Vía, the Paraguayans needed the chance to figure out how to supply their troops. The Paraguayans were now faced with long supply lines from the Paraguay River. While both sides struggled throughout the war to supply their soldiers in the far reaches of the Chaco, the Bolivians had the disadvantage in the earlier years of the war, while the Paraguayans struggled in the latter years. Carlos Gomez Florentin and Stephen Cote explore these themes in later chapters.

At nine o'clock in the evening of January 6, 1933, the Paraguayans received their orders from Asunción to commence military operations at midnight.[29] They spent the next few days marching from one abandoned Bolivian fortín to the next, making it all the way to Camacho and Magariños.[30] Although the march into Bolivian-held territory was relatively easy, the Paraguayans were now in unfamiliar territory.[31] While the Paraguayans moved forward, the Bolivians began making preparations at Bavillián for a Paraguayan attack. With preparations underway at Bavillián, President Salamanca ordered his officers to attempt a last-ditch effort to secure a port on the Paraguay River by staging an invasion from the north to secure Ingavi. The Paraguayans, viewing this as a threat to national security because of the belief that any Bolivian port on the Paraguay River threatened Asunción, set up a defense at a crossroad named 27 of November that the Bolivians were never able to penetrate.

After their defeat at El Carmen, Bolivian troops withdrew from Ballivián. The end of the war came at Villa Montes, the heavily defended Bolivian headquarters. Although the Paraguayans were able to break through only the first line of defenses at Villa Montes before a permanent cease-fire was called on June 12, 1932, Paraguayan historians believe that it was quite likely that the Paraguayans, even with limited supplies, could have broken through the Bolivian fortifications.[32] Bolivian historians, on the other hand, unsurprisingly note that the war was shifting to a more favorable position for the Bolivians in that the Paraguayans were exhausted and too far from home to continue.[33]

Both the Bolivian and Paraguayan leadership after the war sought to explain their respective failure or success *vis-à-vis* the "other." In Estigarribia's memoirs, he portrays his successes against the German general as a battle of wits that Estigarribia clearly won. Estigarribia wrote:

> The sturdy personality of the German leader was not unknown to me. During my stay in Europe I studied in detail his record in the World War and the recognition he had merited from his immediate superiors, who presented him as a man who was exceedingly authoritative, self-confident, and tenacious, even to the point of stubbornness. His energy and activity were phenomenal.[34]

Kundt's defensive account concerning his losses in the Chaco War noted that:

> I will until the end of my days, which are probably not that far off, be grateful to the Bolivian nation for the confidence with which, without reserve was trusted to me, and I respond to all of my colleagues in the campaign [war] that I have not saved any effort nor sacrifice to maintain the cause of Bolivia before a well-prepared [Paraguayan] enemy.[35]

This "well-prepared" enemy that Kundt wrote about was clearly not the impression that most observers either before or after the war saw. The military historian Matthew Hughes states that before the war "the Paraguayans were the smaller, weaker power."[36]

Understanding the war

The Chaco's hostile environment left many Bolivians and Paraguayans dead from dehydration. Surviving memoirs document the horrors of men dying from thirst as water failed to reach them in the hot dusty environment of the Chaco. José L. Capriles, a Bolivian officer, recounts in his testimony of the war the horror of men dying of thirst in Campo Grande. Paraguayan memoirs often leave out the suffering of Paraguayans and focus on the suffering of the Bolivians in an effort to demonstrate the overall superiority of the Paraguayan logistics and glory. As recounted by Beatríz R. A. de González Oddone in her oral histories of the war, Paraguayan veterans remembered how "they made havoc of the enemy cavalry, and at last led to the surrender of 13,000 hallucinating Bolivians shouting 'a bit of water, a bit of water, please paraguayitos [little Paraguayans]. . .!'"[37] Nonetheless, Paraguayan fiction written about the Chaco War vividly recounts the horrors suffered by Paraguayan soldiers. The most famous of these was *Hijo de Hombre* (Son of Man), by Paraguayan novelist Augusto Roa Bastos, in which he wrote:

> Thirst, the White Death, walks among us arm in arm with the other, the Red Death, both of them cloaked with dust. Neither the stretcher-bearers nor the water-carriers give themselves any respite. But they cannot keep pace. There are not more than about ten trucks to bring the precious liquid to the men of the two divisions . . . In forty-eight hours we officers have received half a canteen [of water], and the troops scarcely half a mug, of almost boiling water per man. The tinned meat of our iron rations increases our thirst in the most exquisite fashion. Whole platoons, mad with thirst, desert the firing-line and fall on the water-trucks or on the valiant water-coolies.[38]