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The Grandchildren of Solano López: Frontier and Nation in Paraguay, 1904-1936 by Bridget María Chesterton

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After winning independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century, Paraguayans and Bolivians failed to agree over the boundary that separated them in the sparsely inhabited Chaco Boreal, a harsh wilderness of about 100,000 square miles between the Pilcomayo River and the Paraguay River. By the early twentieth century, interest in the Chaco Boreal increased. Defeated by Chile in the War of Pacific (1879-1883), Bolivia had lost control of disputed territory on the Pacific coast and hence access to the sea. Ravaged by Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay in the War of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870), Paraguay had lost most of its adult male population. The Paraguayan dictator Francisco Solano López lost his life during the War of the Triple Alliance and was widely believed to have led Paraguay into ruin. Ultimately, both Paraguay and Bolivia looked to expand into the Chaco Boreal.

In *The Grandchildren of Solano López*, historian Bridget María Chesterton tells the fascinating story of the role of the remote Chaco Boreal frontier in the development of Paraguayan nationalism. Chesterton begins her analysis in 1904, the year the Liberal Party took power in Paraguay. Comprised of Spanish-speaking urban intellectual elites, the Liberal Party “vilified Solano López as a man who had single-handedly destroyed the Paraguayan nation” (p. 119). Chesterton’s study culminates with the Chaco War, the Western Hemisphere’s bloodiest international conflict in the twentieth century, fought between Paraguay and Bolivia from 1932 to 1935. Chesterton makes a stimulating and convincing case that, in addition to fighting for land and natural resources, the rural Paraguayan Guaraní speaker who served as a soldier in the Chaco War was also struggling “to the redeem the honor of the nation—and Solano López—after the insulting defeat of the War of the Triple Alliance, while simultaneously proclaiming his proud Guaraní-speaking heritage” (p. 6). The Liberal Party maintained control of Paraguay until the end of the Chaco War, when Guaraní-speaking veterans and rural Paraguayans supported a military coup, ousting the Liberals in a short-lived revolution that nevertheless transformed the cultural and political composition of the nation.

Using a variety of public and private libraries and collections, literary and student magazines, scientific and agricultural journals, school textbooks, newspapers, songs, poems, plays, postcards, and missionary reports, Chesterton describes how nationalism fueled Paraguay’s ascent into conflict with Bolivia over the Chaco Boreal. Early twentieth-century Paraguayan scientists and naturalists made studies of the country’s western Chaco frontier in an effort to incorporate the region into eastern Paraguay. Their research bolstered attempts by assorted politicians, government bureaucrats, and newspaper editors to validate Paraguay’s legal claims to the Chaco Boreal. Various efforts were made to convey the notion that the western Chaco frontier was not a wasteland, but a region compatible with eastern Paraguay and full of economic potential. Over time, the enduring myth of Paraguayan nationalism that the country was a peaceable and congenial racial mix of native Guaraní and colonizing Spaniards was extended to the native people of the Chaco Boreal, “who had never imagined themselves as part of a larger modern nation-state” (p. 78). The Native people of the Chaco Boreal belonging to several linguistic families and many ethnic groups were thus rendered ethnically Paraguayan and open to Paraguay’s nationalistic program of agriculture and ranching.

Along with scientists and naturalists, religious groups entered the Chaco Boreal through the consent and support of the Paraguayan government. The Anglican mission in the Chaco

frontier began in 1888, followed by Roman Catholic Salesians in 1920, and Mennonite settlers in 1927. Chesterton explains how elite Paraguayans hoped these religious groups would convert the Chaco Boreal into a “civilized” region analogous to the eastern Paraguay. By the mid-1920s, Paraguay also began increasing its military presence in the Chaco Boreal. The Chaco War began when a Bolivian patrol attacked a Paraguayan garrison in the Chaco frontier in 1932. Bolivians were confident that their nation of 3 million could overwhelm Paraguay’s population of 800,000, but with their governments nearly bankrupt and their casualty rates high, neither country could maintain the war effort. Approximately 92,000 Bolivians and Paraguayans lost their lives in the war. In 1935, both countries agreed to an internationally mediated cease-fire. Paraguay happily retained most of the Chaco Boreal.

Chesterton does an exemplary job of demonstrating the importance of the Chaco frontier and the Chaco War in the creation of modern Paraguay. During and after the war, the Guaraní language was bolstered to the extent that Paraguay is the only country in the Western Hemisphere where a majority of the population speaks one indigenous language, Guaraní, which is enshrined in the Constitution, giving it official equality with the language of European colonization, Spanish. Additionally, Francisco Solano López has long been redeemed in Paraguayan historiography. What was believed to be his body was exhumed from its unmarked grave in northeastern Paraguay for reburial in the Pantheon of the Heroes in the nation’s capital of Asunción on the Día de la Raza on October 12th, 1936. Chesterton’s thought-provoking work will be of interest not only to those concerned with Paraguayan history, but also to those concerned with a broad range of issues in Latin American history, including the creation of racial and ethnic identity, the anthropology of Native peoples, the function of the frontier, and, most especially, the cultural construction of nationalism.

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