

Rocky Mountain Interdisciplinary History Conference 2019 Abstract  
*Conquest, Colonization and Environment in the Gran Chaco, 1870-1890*

South America's Gran Chaco forest is being cut down at an astonishing rate. As much as one-fifth of the continent's second-largest forest, which spans Paraguay, Bolivia, and Argentina, has been cleared since 1985.<sup>1</sup> Much of the forest is being replaced by cattle ranches and soy plantations. These changes pose serious challenges for the inhabitants of the region, especially the many indigenous groups that have been historically marginalized by the national governments. They also contribute to the global problem of anthropogenic climate change.

Although the rise of transgenic soy agriculture is a relatively new phenomenon in the Chaco, and global warming is of similarly recent origin, unsustainable resource extraction is not. The histories of logging, cattle-herding, and agriculture—and the concomitant story of violence and dispossession—that gave rise to climate change go back much further. So does the region's economic dependence on international agricultural exports. Studying the history of the Chaco during Latin America's Liberal Period, from ca. 1870 to 1930, can help us understand the continuities and differences in the economic, social, and environmental structures that have tied the Chaco forest to global markets and global debates about conservation. It was in this period that Bolivia and Argentina, emerging from the War of the Pacific and the War of the Triple Alliance, respectively, sought to expand and consolidate control over the Chaco, a region never conquered by the Iberian empires. With Paraguay's victory over Bolivia in the Chaco War in 1935, the Chaco was integrated at least nominally into the territories of the three nation-states.

Using travel accounts, government reports, and newspapers, this paper will discuss the exploration, conquest, and colonization of the Gran Chaco as part of larger nation-building projects in Argentina and Bolivia in the late-nineteenth century. Specifically, it will discuss the ways in which national intellectuals, statesmen, and explorers constructed the Chaco as a locus of potential resource extraction and conservation and a place that, though as yet unredeemed by civilization inspired utopian visions of a future of agrarian prosperity and national greatness.

The paper will explore the role that colonization of the Chaco played in Bolivian and Argentinian projects to “modernize” their nations through encouraging immigration, improving agricultural productivity, and carrying out land reform projects. The paper will look at military and scientific expeditions sponsored by Bolivia and Argentina to explore and colonize the Gran Chaco. These expeditions sought a riverine route across the Chaco and tried to establish military and agricultural colonies. All of these projects of agriculture, the civilizing mission, and colonization depended on not only specific conceptions of what the Chaco *was* but what it *could be*. Thus this paper will discuss the role of historical memory of the Chaco in shaping the understanding that explorers and colonizers had of the region, as well as their visions of the future Chaco as an agrarian paradise where crops from all over the world would flourish. Finally, the talk will trace the emergence of environmental conservationism and scientific racism in tandem with colonization of the Chaco.

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<sup>1</sup> Baumann, Matthias, Ignacio Gasparri, María Piquer-Rodríguez, Gregorio Gavier Pizarro, Patrick Griffiths, Patrick Hostert, and Tobias Kuemmerle. “Carbon Emissions from Agricultural Expansion and Intensification in the Chaco.” *Global Change Biology* 23 no. 5 (May 1, 2017): 1902–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.13521>.

