***Conquest and Colonization of the Gran Chaco, 1870-1890***

Chris McQuilkin

On September 21st, 1883, a Bolivian military expedition came upon a group of *Güisnaye* Indians in the Gran Chaco region in the south of the country. Having spent the night as guests of the cacique Sirome, the following morning they were presented with a young man. José Paz Guillen, who later authored an account of the expedition, took him to be a *Güisnaye* Indian, and was thus surprised to find that not only did he speak Spanish, but he was a fugitive from an Argentinian colony living among the Indians after having lost his boss’s horses. The explorers offered to take the man, Luis Oliva, on as guide and interpreter. When he refused, Guillen was left to ponder his motives. He asked rhetorically: “Was Oliva’s decision a protest against the defects of Civilization, that could not prevent the existence of victims and executioners in its midst, or rather, the result of his being persuaded that criminals could not and should not live in a society that castigated crimes?...” (ellipses in original).[[1]](#footnote-1) Was he to blame or was his civilization to blame? Guillen does not answer his own question. He trails off as though to say the question cannot be answered. But the Chaco had more in store for the author and his expedition: they themselves came to resemble Indians in his account, though not by choice. A little over a month after his encounter with Oliva, he wrote, “[h]unger, privation, and work, completely changed our appearance; little by little, we began to resemble the savages.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Near the end of their journey, wracked by hunger, thirst, and the sun, they had been physically transformed into “savages,” degraded, according to Paz Guillen, by an unforgiving environment.

Guillen’s disconcerting encounter was a telling part of a much larger history of the Chaco region. At the end of the nineteenth century, colonization of the Gran Chaco became a national project for Argentina and Bolivia, two nations with major claims to the region. The region straddles the present-day borders between Bolivia, Argentina, and Paraguay, but in the nineteenth century those borders had not yet been determined. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Bolivia and Argentina began concerted attempts to explore and colonize the region. Using travel accounts and government reports, 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. It should be noted that the accounts discussed here tell us little, at least directly, about the Mocovíes, Tobas, Chiriguanos, and other indigenous peoples of the Chaco. Women, indigenous or not, rarely figure in these accounts. What these accounts reveal to us is a picture of the Chaco as drawn by men with close ties to the governing elites of Argentina and Bolivia in the late nineteenth century, or who were themselves members of those elites.

Two major international conflicts re-shaped all three nations and their approaches to the Chaco in the late nineteenth century. Between 1864 and 1870, Paraguay fought and lost a war against the combined forces of Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina. The years following the war were important in shaping the four belligerent nations.[[3]](#footnote-3) Bolivia also found itself on the losing side of a war, in this case against Chile. Between 1879 and 1884, Chile successfully defeated both Bolivia and Peru, thus seizing significant amounts of territory, including Bolivia’s only coastal land. Following the loss of access to the Pacific in the conflict with Peru and Chile, Bolivia’s only hope for access to an ocean lay through the Rio de la Plata or Amazon river systems, and the northwestern branches of the former ran through the Chaco.[[4]](#footnote-4) As J. Valerie Fifer has pointed out, the major point of contention between Paraguay and Bolivia over the Chaco was access to the river Paraguay, not the Chaco itself.[[5]](#footnote-5) That conflict would only be resolved by a third war, the Chaco War between 1932 and 1935, in which Paraguay emerged victorious. Although Argentina resolved its border disputes with Paraguay and Bolivia more peaceably, the Chaco remained a focus of national attention. As this paper will show, moreover, even if Argentina did not go to war with the nations to its north, violence and the threat of violence against the indigenous people living in the Chaco was a regular feature of colonization of the Chaco for all three countries.

Argentina, emerging from the War of the Triple Alliance against Paraguay, was in the midst of a great transformation, part of which transformation was the 1876 Immigration and Colonization Law signed by President Nicolás Avellaneda. It was not a coincidence that the law addressed both immigration and colonization; both processes were understood to be part of the modernization of the country. In his message to congress, Avellaneda wrote that the country had theretofore relied on spontaneous immigration, with no policy of selecting the immigrant who would be a “useful worker who with his work would increase the production of the country.”[[6]](#footnote-6) As several scholars have noted, this call for “useful workers” was deeply racialized: Argentina’s governing elites specifically wanted to increase immigration from Europe.[[7]](#footnote-7) This emphasis on utility applied to both the human and the natural resources of the state.

Avellaneda was keenly aware of the importance of the Chaco, and the importance of exploring and colonizing the nation’s hinterland, or rather, expanding the territory of the nation before its international neighbors did so. In 1875, the year before passing the immigration and colonization law, his administration had authorized a short expedition up one of the region’s main waterways, the Pilcomayo River. The newly appointed governor of the Chaco Province in Argentina, Napoleon Uriburu, recounted the three-day journey up the Pilcomayo River in July 1875 in a memorandum to the Minister of State of the Interior Department. Uriburu, like other explorers of the region, described the flora and fauna of the Chaco, giving their Linnaean names as well as their Guaraní names. Uriburu saw in the Chaco a place whose full potential would be reached only in the future, and a place that would play a key role in the future of Argentina.[[8]](#footnote-8) It was so teeming with wild game, he wrote, that all one needed was a rifle to feast on the fat of the land.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Six years later, Uriburu’s secretary, Luís Jorge Fontana, embarked on his own exploration of the Chaco, and described the journey in his book, *El Gran Chaco*. Fontana, like the other Argentinian and Bolivian elites discussed here was not greatly concerned with the people already living in that land. However, his descriptions of native Chaqueños reveals a great deal about the ways in which nineteenth-century national elites constructed their own notions of indigeneity, and of history, and of violence.

According to Fontana, the Indians of the Chaco held dearly to their liberty. “Liberty,” he wrote, “is there only cult; it is their God.” As proof of this he recounted two stories. In the first, and Indian was brought to Colonia Rivadavia in 1873 for interrogation. When he refused to talk, the interrogator threatened to burn him alive. In response, the Indian defiantly placed his own foot upon a stove. Fontana admiringly compared the man to a great Roman citizen of classical antiquity**.[[10]](#footnote-10)** Fontana also writes of a military expedition into the Chaco in which he participated. On their return, the soldiers brought ten Toba women with them, each with two children. When the chief of the expedition ordered the soldiers to carry the children as they passed through a marsh, two of the women took off running, escaping and leaving their own children in the custody of the soldiers. “In this case, as well,” he wrote “the *love of liberty had more power than the care of children*.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This obsession with liberty that Fontana attributes to the Chaco Indians is perhaps a subtle critique of his own society. In a similar vein he describes the violence of the conquest and the atrocities which the Indians endured.

Fontana expresses doubt as to whether the first *conquistadores* accurately approximated the number of Indians in the Chaco. But even if it were true, he asked the reader rhetorically, would the amazement that such numbers caused be worse than “the horror that seizes us when we remember the killings ordered and carried out by them, one hundred times more barbaric than the savages themselves? We could not say; we just know that thousands of human beings, completely far from evil and disposed to be as much of a man as he who calls himself civilized would wish he were, died from the bloody blows of cruelty and fanaticism.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Here the traditional tropes are inverted: the conquistadores, not the “savages” are the barbarians, and the Indians are “civilized.” But tellingly, the definition of barbarism as characterized by extreme physical violence remains unchanged; it is just that the Spaniards are the ones so characterized. Fontana uses an idealized vision of the Indians as passive, helpless victims to make a critical point about his own Euro-American society.

Fontana also concerned himself with describing and classifying the groups of indigenous inhabitants of the Chaco, and comparing them with native people in other regions of Argentina. He wrote of the Pampas Indians as horse-mounted, warlike people who were so willful that they tried to subdue “even the elements” to their caprice. By the age of twelve, he argued, a child would know everything they needed to know to survive on their own. By contrast, a Chaco Indian, if left to themselves at that age, would die. Curiously, Fontana used these stereotypes to argue that chaqueño natives were more intelligent and more observant than those of the Pampas. The latter, he stated bluntly “could never be as intelligent and susceptible to learning as the chaqueño Indian.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Despite Fontana’s somewhat sympathetic account of the Chaco Indians, he also provides one of the most morbid descriptions of violence against Toba. He encloses a letter written by Governor Uriburu to the Interior Minister in early 1876, detailing a punitive expedition against Toba Indians who had allegedly ambushed two steamships. According to Uriburu, in the ensuing fight, Uriburu’s men killed several Toba warriors, and distributed their possessions among themselves. Many of those possessions were sent to a museum in Buenos Aires, and the heads of the Indians were dissected.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Bolivian and Argentine proponents of colonizing the Chaco were keenly aware of colonization efforts in other parts of the world. Santiago Vaca-Guzman, a Bolivian writer and intellectual, placed Bolivia in the context of other nation-states in America, arguing that they were all “making vigorous efforts to extirpate from their soil the last barbarian races.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Among those nations, he believed that the United States had had the most success.[[16]](#footnote-16) But in making his case for colonizing the Chaco, he also drew on Old-World precedents such as Malaysia, Australia, and the French colonization of Algeria.[[17]](#footnote-17) For Vaca-Guzman, colonization of the Chaco was a national imperative. He argued that Bolivia emerged from the Wars of Independence with two major incomplete tasks: the conquest of the remaining “savage” indigenous tribes in the eastern part of the country (of which the Chaco was a part), and the colonization of the eastern territory through land distribution and foreign immigration.[[18]](#footnote-18) Vaca-Guzman wrote that the Chaco region had remained essentially unchanged since the time of the Conquest. The “barbarians of the plains” continued to resist the advance of the “Caucasian race” as they had done for centuries, he wrote.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Guzman spoke the language of nineteenth-century liberalism. He embraced the dream that the Americas represented a more republican, egalitarian future than Europe, in which both slavery and indigenous barbarism were relics of the past. Guzman also understood agriculture as a commercial enterprise. For example, he emphasized planting cash crops like sugar, cotton, rice and coffee.[[20]](#footnote-20) Subsistence farming would not do; cash crops would connect Bolivia to world markets and thus facilitate her modernization. The Chaco, he wrote, was ideal for these pursuits because of its rivers, and its flatness would make it accessible to the as-yet unconstructed railroads.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Argentina’s Exploratory Commission, like Vaca-Guzman, saw the Chaco as a wilderness region beyond civilization and history. The commission, created in 1875 to explore the newly created Chaco Territory, concurred with Vaca-Guzman that the Chaco was full of vagabonds and fugitives, but these outlaws and rogues described here were not necessarily Indians; they may have been creole hunters who nonetheless had more or less good relations with the Indians, “even,” he wrote, “to the point of speaking their language.”[[22]](#footnote-22) The possibility that creoles, the descendants of Europeans, could adopt an “Indian” lifestyle reversed the course that civilization was supposed to take. In this passage, the Commission appears to romanticize such cultural *mestizaje.* But in another passage, the Exploratory Commission called for the extermination of a different group of people living on the boundaries between European and indigenous society, and argued that colonization was the way to do it: “with colonization” they wrote, “will disappear along with the Indians, another of the plagues of the Paraná: the island-dwellers [isleños]. Their perverse aspirations, described in another chapter, combined with the superiority which the memory of civilized life gives them, makes them much more fearsome than the Indians, whom they generally accompany in their misdeeds.”[[23]](#footnote-23) These isleños, in the eyes of the Commission, were the worst of both worlds, although in ways not entirely clear from the passage. Whatever their “perverse aspirations” and whatever “superiority” they gained from the memory of civilization, they were a plague of the river in which they thrived.

It is telling that in a letter appended to the report, the Governor Aurelio Diaz of the Chaco territory observed that the decree authorizing the expedition also mandated that their report be submitted to the Department of Immigration.[[24]](#footnote-24) In Argentina, immigration was a prominent component to colonization of the Chaco. By 1890, however, Nicasio Oroño, Argentina’s director of colonization, judged the effort settle immigrants on agricultural colonies largely a failure. Land speculation, the practice of buying up land just to sell it off later at a higher price, remained a serious impediment to actual cultivation of the land. Since the passage of the 1876 law, 6,252 leagues of public land had been sold off, and very little had been produced on that land. The problem, he wrote, was not with the law but its execution.[[25]](#footnote-25) If the law had been followed in practice, less land would have been sold in the short term, but the national policy would be more sustainable over the long run. But events had outrun him. He conceded that it would not be possible to invalidate all land sales that had been made under the law and start anew.

In his report the following year, Oroño reiterated his criticisms, adding that revenues from agriculture in the provinces of Argentina in 1890 had been about 300 million pesos, but the colonies had produced very little, compared to the 30 million pesos invested in them.[[26]](#footnote-26) He took an ambivalent attitude towards European immigration. On the one hand, he seemed to want more immigrants from Europe, but argued that the current policy was not enough to draw them. The current system of using recruitment agents was ineffective and counterproductive, according to Oroño, because the agents were motivated by self-interest to recruit the largest number possible, paying attention to “neither the moral conditions nor the industrial capacity” of the prospective immigrants.[[27]](#footnote-27) On the other hand, in the same document he criticized the current system that benefited primarily the immigrant, “leaving the son of the nation in the most complete obscurity, when he is not excluded explicitly from the enjoyment of those benefits [of the law]”.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In the last decades of the twentieth century, then, the Gran Chaco region, a region largely unconquered and unsettled throughout the colonial period and the first decades of independence, became the object of competing ambitions between Argentina and Bolivia. The accounts by Jorge Fontana, Santiago Vaca Guzmán, and the Exploratory Commission portray the Chaco as a place whose inhabitants may have appeared marginal or even antithetical to the nation-building project; but the region itself was central to that project. In Argentina, colonization of the Chaco, and other rural regions, went hand in hand with immigration policies. In land-locked Bolivia, despite the rhetoric that intellectuals like Santiago Guzman deployed, large-scale immigration to the country remained elusive in this period.[[29]](#footnote-29) Nevertheless, both nations sought to colonize the Chaco with non-indigenous settlers, and transform or destroy indigenous people and their ways of life in the process. Although this paper has not discussed Paraguay, that country also passed a law aimed at stimulating colonization of the Chaco region in 1885, though it had little success.[[30]](#footnote-30) The Bolivian José Paz Guillen, who extolled the potential of the Chaco, saw in Paraguay a kindred spirit, describing Bolivia and Paraguay as “two friendly nations equally disgraced by war” and wrote that the expedition he recounted would benefit both countries.[[31]](#footnote-31) That optimistic prediction would turn out to be wrong. In fact, half a century later, the two nations disgraced by war would resolve their territorial differences in yet a third war, the Chaco War, in which approximately 90,000 people died between 1932 and 1935.[[32]](#footnote-32)

1. José Paz Guillen, *A través del Gran Chaco: relación de viaje de la expedición militar boliviana en 1883 del departamento de Tarija a la capital del Paraguay explorando el río Pilcomayo* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta, Litografía, y Encuadernación de Jacobo Peuser, 1886), 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Paz Guillen, *A través del Gran Chaco*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Whigham, *The Paraguayan War Vol I: Causes and Early Conflict* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), xviii-xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. J. Valerie Fifer, *Bolivia: Land, Location, and Politics since 1825* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Fifer, *Bolivia: Land, Location, and Politics since 1825*, 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Juan A. Alsina, *La inmigración europea en la República Argentina* (Buenos Aires: n.p., 1898), 89-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. May E. Bletz, *Immigration and Acculturation in Brazil and Argentina: 1890-1929* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3; Nancy Leys Stepan, *“The Hour of Eugenics:” Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Uriburu, *Memoria del gobernador del Chaco*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Uriburu, *Memoria del gobernador del Chaco*, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Fontana, *El Gran Chaco*, 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Fontana, *El Gran Chaco*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Fontana, *El Gran Chaco*, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Fontana, *El Gran Chaco*, 157-158. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Fontana, *El Gran Chaco*, 136-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Santiago Vaca-Guzman, *El Chaco Oriental: Su Conquista y Civilización* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta de Pablo Coni e Hijos, 1887), 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Guzman, *El Chaco Oriental*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Guzman, *El Chaco Oriental*, 121-122, 147-148. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Guzman, *El Chaco Oriental*, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Guzman, *El Chaco Oriental*, 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Guzman, *El Chaco Oriental*, 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Guzman, *El Chaco Oriental*, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Informe de la Comisión Exploradora del Chaco*, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Informe de la Comisión Exploradora del Chaco*, *127.* [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Aurelio Diaz to Arturo Seelstrang, 4 April 1876, printed in *Informe de la Comisión Exploradora del Chaco*, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Nicasio Oroño, *Informe del director Nicasio Oroño sobre colonización de tierras nacionales* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta de Martín Biedma, 1890). Colección Enrique Solano López, BNPY, Asunción, Paraguay, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Nicasio Oroño, *Informe sobre los trabajos de la Dirección de la Oficina de Tierras y Colonias en el año 1891*. Buenos Aires: Imp. de la Dirección de Tierras, Inmigración y Agricultura, 1892. Colección Enrique Solano López, BNPY, Asunción, Paraguay, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Oroño, *Informe sobre los trabajos de la Dirección de la Oficina de Tierras y Colonias en el año 1891*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Oroño, *Informe sobre los trabajos de la Dirección de la Oficina de Tierras y Colonias en el año 1891*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Fifer, *Bolivia: Land, Location, and Politics since 1825*, 4, 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Jan M.G. Kleinpenning, *Rural Paraguay 1870-1963: A Geography of Progress, Plunder and Poverty Vol. 2* (Madrid: Bibliotheca Ibero-Americana, 2009), 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Paz Guillen, *A través del Gran Chaco*, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Bridget Maria Chesterton, *The Grandchildren of Solano Lopez: Frontier and Nation in Paraguay, 1904-1936* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 2; Ricardo Scavone Yegros, “Guerra internacional y confrontaciones políticas (1920-1954),” in *Historia del Paraguay*, ed. Ignacio Telesca (Asunción: Editorial Gráfica Mercurio), 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)