

Chesterton, Bridget M (ed.) 2016 *The Chaco War, 1932–1935*. London: Bloomsbury.

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The Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay is certainly among the four most important international conflicts in modern Latin American history (along with the Mexican-American War, the Triple Alliance or Paraguayan War, and the War of the Pacific). Nevertheless, it has received relatively little attention from historians. Bridget María Chesterton's edited volume *The Chaco War, 1932–1935: Environment, Ethnicity and Nationalism* aims to fill some of the gaps in the historiography and to stimulate further interest in the conflict, and Latin American specialists will welcome its publication.

Although the book is framed around a war, only one of its nine chapters concentrates on military actions. This is in accordance with a broader shift in the historical analysis of wars, away from purely military aspects to a broader consideration of society during wartime. As one common question in the historiography of wars is why they are won or lost, some of the book's chapters present theories to explain Paraguay's ultimate victory in the war.

As an edited volume, *The Chaco War* succeeds because it is well balanced in several respects. Although Chesterton herself is a Paraguayan specialist, she has assembled a good mix of contributions from both the Paraguayan and Bolivian perspectives on the war. The contributors include both emerging and well-established scholars of Paraguay and Bolivia. The volume also gives a well-rounded view of issues large and small in the Chaco War period, with chapters ranging from major subjects like oil nationalism to minor ones like an unrealized proposal to improve Bolivian access to the Chaco by constructing a canal.

Chapter One is Chesterton's Introduction, which provides a good overview of the causes and conduct of the Chaco War, and in which the only thing that could be improved are the accompanying maps. Chesterton reviews some of the limited historiography on the war and makes a good case for the war's importance in stimulating revolutionary change in both countries, noting that "the war profoundly shaped the histories of both Bolivia and Paraguay ever since" (21). She points out the flaws of some of the earlier historiography, which either takes the Bolivian or Paraguayan side or blames outside imperialists for the war. In the latter case, Chesterton debunks earlier theories that the conflict was a proxy war between Standard Oil and Shell for control of petroleum resources. She highlights recent studies that examine the effect of the war on national cultures and on the Chaco's indigenous people. This volume builds on these tendencies to move beyond a historiography of battles and military and political leaders to include class, nationalism, indigenous people, the environment, and memory.

Chapter Two, Elizabeth Shesko's "'Same as Here, Same as Everywhere:' Social Difference among Bolivian Prisoners in Paraguay," is arguably the best chapter in the volume. Her analysis of Bolivian prisoners of war in Paraguay, which makes use of many very good archival sources and recorded oral testimonies, investigates how ideas about race and class affected the treatment of these prisoners. She finds that prisoners were treated neither uniformly well nor harshly, that nationalistic accounts of prisoner treatment are inaccurate, and that "differences of class, education, ethnicity, and region trumped those of nationality in determining prisoners' living and laboring conditions" (32).

Chapter Three, Luis M. Sierra's "Union Activism in La Paz before and after the Chaco War, 1920–1947," investigates continuity and change in the lives of working-class residents of La Paz through the lenses of race and class. Overall, it is a good analysis of political activism by indigenous neighborhood residents in the Chaco War era, with especially interesting information on

the intersection of class and ethnicity. According to the author, “The Chaco War empowered social class identities as a means of organization for urban and rural residents of Bolivia, but it did not mean erasure of indigenous identities or structures” (57).

In Chapter Four, “Channeling Modernity: Nature, Patriotic Engineering, and the Chaco War,” Ben Nobbs-Thiessen examines the petitions of Bolivian engineer Miguel Rodríguez to President Daniel Salamanca. Rodríguez urged the government to dig a canal that would link the city of Santa Cruz to the Paraguay River and the Atlantic Ocean by diverting the course of an Amazon tributary. Although the project never became reality, the chapter highlights how the Chaco War brought Bolivia’s weaknesses in transportation to the fore. The author also puts the canal proposal in the context of other Cruceño petitions to strengthen Bolivia by connecting Santa Cruz to the outside world through railroads.

Chapter Five, by Chesterton and Thilo Papacek is “Paraguay *Guazú*: Big Paraguay, Carlos Fiebrig, and the Botanical Garden as a Launching Point for Paraguayan Nationalism.” The authors show how Paraguay used a botanical garden to represent the Paraguayan nation, claim the Chaco, and house Bolivian prisoners of war. They also show how Paraguay planned the breakaway of the Bolivian lowlands by promoting the independence of Santa Cruz among Cruceño prisoners at the garden, making this contribution especially valuable for students of modern Bolivian regionalism.

In Chapter Six, “Indigenous Peoples and the Chaco War: Power and Acquiescence in Bolivia, Paraguay, and Argentina,” senior scholar Erick Langer compares the history of the three states’ interactions with Chacoan Indians in the 1780s–1932 period. While Bolivia pursued a policy of conquest and coercive labor and Argentina used a combination of coercion and attraction to wage labor on sugar plantations, Paraguay came later to the Chaco and took a less forceful

approach to indigenous people. This, according to Langer, caused Chacoan Indians to aid the Paraguayan army and ultimately helped deliver the Chaco Boreal to Paraguay.

Chapter Seven, Carlos Gómez Florentín's "Energy and the Environment in the Chaco War," is the only one to deal specifically with military issues. He examines how the Paraguayan army adapted to the difficult Chaco environment and overcame national deficiencies in petroleum and other supplies by becoming an "organic army" that relied on human and animal power and seasonal water flows, and that ultimately defeated a Bolivian army with access to domestic petroleum.

Chapter Eight, Stephen Cote's "Bolivian Oil Nationalism and the Chaco War," is another of the best chapters in the book. Covering the 1896–1939 period, it demonstrates how petroleum moved from being a secondary to a primary factor in the construction of Bolivian nationalism, with the Chaco War being the turning point. The resulting nationalization of Standard Oil holdings in 1937 was truly revolutionary, as "No Latin American country had ever nationalized a foreign oil company before, or any major foreign company" (171).

Esther Breithoff's Chapter Nine, "Engraving Conflict: The Chaco War in a Shell Case," is an important chapter in that it considers the Chaco War from the vantage point of conflict archaeology rather than history. Using the example of engraved shell cases, she shows how people interact with these mementoes of the war.

*The Chaco War* is a well-rounded contribution that will be of interest to scholars of Latin American history, political science, culture, and literature. Bolivian and Paraguayan specialists will find it especially fascinating, but it will be useful to students of modern Latin America, nationalism, warfare, frontiers, and indigenous history as well.