War dominates our common views of Latin America. Outsiders stereotype the region as a continent of perpetual military struggle, a place of inexperienced and unstable nation states in which elections are more often settled by coups and machine guns than by popular suffrage. In this picture, generals in dark glasses manage the destiny of the impoverished masses while sipping tequila amidst thick clouds of smoke, secret police torture dissidents, and soldiers head off in jeeps through the jungle to fight yet another war against their neighbors. Yet this image of political and military instability has been challenged by scholars in recent years. A new wave of historical research into the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has shown that violence was central to the operation of the political process but in ways much less disruptive to everyday life than has typically been imagined. Sociologist Miguel Angel Centeno has argued that the very reason for political instability—the fragility of the state—was itself the result of the relative absence of large-scale international warfare. Meanwhile, an emerging body of work on the military as a social institution has suggested that far from being solely an agent of repression, the military has provided an important outlet of social mobility for many subordinate groups and has served as a medium through which they might gain education and integration.

Certainly, people in Latin America have been fortunate in that none of the world wars were actively fought out on their continent. While Latin Americans have struggled over land and
resources, far fewer people there have lost their lives than in Asia, Africa, and Europe, and “total war” has been rare. Still, political changes, access to resources, and conflicts over borders have at times led to war. As elsewhere in the world at the time, violent conflicts in Latin America were intimately tied to the nation-building process during the years 1850-1950, the so-called Liberal Period. This was the time when new actors sought to dominate the political scene during the transition from the political chaos of independence to the relatively stable nation-states of the mid-twentieth century.

During this time frame Latin Americans fought in three major wars, the War of the Triple Alliance (also called the Paraguayan War) of 1865-1870, the War of the Pacific (1871-1883) and the Chaco War (1932-1935). The first of these conflicts was mainly due to the hubris of Paraguayan dictator Francisco Solano López, eager to continue the national military expansion begun by his father and frustrated by his neighbors’ hegemonic refusal to allow his nation to develop economically. Eager to start the conflict, Paraguay lost miserably, losing over a third of its male population in the ensuing rout and massacre of its poorly trained troops.

Broadly speaking, Chile and Peru fought the War of the Pacific over the nitrate deposits -sea gull shit- in the dry Atacama Desert that lay between them. The US desire for the dung to use as fertilizer created an important demand for the product. Economic interests were thus critical to this war. Chile had no boundary dispute per se with Peru, but its mining interests, pushed by British capital, had extended their operations north from the Bolivian province of Antofagasta into the Peruvian province of Tarapacá. By this time, after a difficult half century of nation building, the Peruvian government was almost bankrupt due to an expensive program of public works, huge loans from Europe and the depletion of its own guano resources. To service its debt, Peru tried then to expropriate the Chilean mining companies in Tarapacá and create a
monopoly over the production of the nitrates. Peru signed a secret treaty with Bolivia in 1874 that committed both countries to mutual assistance in the case that war with Chile should ensue. Expelled from their mines, the Anglo-Chilean business turned instead to the dry Antofagasta region, only to encounter heavier Bolivian taxes after their move. On April 5, 1879, Chile declared war on both northern nations and after a concerted struggle defeated them in 1884.

The conflict over nitrates between these two nations was part of the continent’s growing integration into the world economy late in the nineteenth century. Unable to industrialize due in part to political instability since independence, an infrastructure in shambles and a weak economic system, during the late nineteenth Latin American nations joined world markets by selling their raw materials to northern powers in return for industrial goods. Growing integration into markets as suppliers of raw materials brought income to the Latin Americans who produced these commodities. By 1890, Latin America’s foreign commerce exceeded US$ 1 billion per year, increasing by 43% between 1870 and 1884. During this same time, for instance, British trade rose only by 27.2%. Five principal Latin American countries, Brazil, Argentina, Cuba, Chile, Mexico, together accounted for 75% of Latin America’s trade, and only Argentina imported more than it exported. Nevertheless, Argentine exports rose by sevenfold between 1853 and 1873, and then doubled again by 1893. Bolivian shipments abroad, for instance, focused on tin, quadrupled from 1897-1900 and then tripled again by 1913. In Brazil, the value of foreign trade rose 6 to 7 times, based on the production of coffee as global demand for that beverage grew. From 1833-1889, Brazilian production rose from 190,000 sacks to 5,586,000 sacks of coffee beans. The ensuing scramble for raw materials brought nations into conflict and helps to explain the resulting military engagements discussed in this paper. The Pacific and Chaco wars especially were based on commercial interests and reinforce the dialectic between
wars and economic development throughout world history, the topic of this conference and especially in Latin America, this panel’s focus.

Prominent as soldiers and victims in this period’s conflicts were those often invisible groups, the Afro-Latin American and indigenous populations, who have too often been overlooked when studying significant military engagements. In country after country, time after time, peoples typically presumed to be powerless and marginal played a central role in the outcome of critical national events as they sought to improve their living conditions, access political power and change the course of their lives in ways that confound the stereotype that depicts them as passive victims. In recent decades there has been an outpouring of work on the histories of indigenous and Afro-Latin American peoples that has dramatically expanded our understanding of how economic development, political consolidation, and social transformations altered the lives of people outside the circles of power. War and violence have provided an important backdrop to many of these studies, yet few works have rigorously examined how black and indigenous groups experienced and influenced military conflicts. Certainly, no effort has been made to systematically examine within a comparative framework the extent to which war and military struggle permeated black and indigenous lives, and how this influence affected the process of race formation and the creation of national and community identities. Given the prevalence of such struggles and their importance to the nation-building process, this omission has impoverished Latin American history and perpetuated the exclusion of these people from our historical understanding of the continent. It has also deprived us of a valuable window into the intersection of race, community and nation.

This paper will focus on the third of these wars and show how economic interests, often misguided and overstated, led to the Chaco war between Paraguay and Bolivia. Both of these
small nations at the heart of Latin America had been hard-hit by the depression and sought to
overcome chronic political instability by rallying their populations behind a great patriotic cause.
The results show the way military forces, economic depression and rural native populations
helped change the outcome of a major Latin American war early in the twentieth century.

The Chaco War 1932-1935

Between 1932 and 1935, during those most difficult years of the Great Depression, Bolivia and Paraguay fought a brutal war for ownership of the sparsely-populated Chaco territory that lay between them. Having lost its outlet to the Pacific in the earlier War of the Pacific, 1879-1884, Bolivia sought fluvial access to the Atlantic via the Paraguay River. Both nations debated the possibility of Chaco oil reserves, although their southern neighbor Argentina at the time fueled the rumors of black wealth under the dry soil to tarnish Bolivia as a competitor to its own state oil company. Yet while Bolivia used Indian troops and the war took place largely on land occupied by indigenous people, until recently scholars have paid scant attention to its effects for the native groups in the area of conflict. This paper will contextualize the Chaco War within broader Latin American changes during the first part of the twentieth century and Great Depression. My focus, however, is on the indigenous peoples that lay in the Chaco between both countries, their involvement in the war, and how the conflict affected the native populations of both countries. My principal argument is that the Chaco War was fought over imaginary resources, national frontiers and a dry desert territory populated by thirteen native tribes and some European immigrants. Furthermore, the war sheds light on both growing
integration of Latin American products in world markets and conditions for some Latin American peoples during depression years.

The Chaco War had important results for indigenous people in both of the involved countries. Natives helped to shape the frontier and its exploration by both Bolivia and Paraguay. Fear of indigenous uprisings, despite critical dependencies on native skills and knowledge of the Chaco area, led the nations to carefully take native people into account while extending state hegemony. While only Bolivia used Indian soldiers, they were involved in some of the war’s most critical battles. Both armies relied on indigenous guides and native languages for communications and used natives as spies. Soldiers took advantage of indigenous resources and women for prostitution. When possible, both sides used massacres to clear natives off the frontier. For indigenous people, the war produced epidemics and demographic decline, gut-wrenching choices for women who protected families, cultural changes, and forced removals that altered group identity until the present. As I have explained elsewhere, the violent conflict also brought nationals and many Chaco indigenous people into contact for the first time and led to an indigenista movement in Paraguayan literature that helped integrate natives into national economic structures. In Bolivia the war led to peasant uprisings that culminated in the momentous MNR revolution of 1952.7

Indigenous perspectives contribute new insights to histories on both sides of the Chaco War. René de la Pedraja’s recent Wars of Latin America, 1899-1941, does not mention indigenous roles.8 Colonel David Zook included Indian people several times in his analysis of the war. It is vital to uncover in greater depth how indigenous people, the earlier users of the land, experienced the violence between the whites who occupied their territories. In her path-breaking Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru, Florencia Mallon
has shown that peasant actions, ideas and linguistic experiences in warfare are essential to explaining national politics and ideological debates in both 19th century Peru and Mexico.\(^9\) In *The Defense of Community in Peru’s Central Highlands*, Mallon found that peasants, when faced with a prolonged Chilean occupation in the War of the Pacific, organized *montonero* militias to harass Chilean patrols and invade collaborator haciendas. Armed peasants threatened authorities even more than an occupying army and ultimately took control of the countryside.\(^{10}\) So in some wars, native people have played decisive roles in shaping outcomes. Perhaps even more significantly for the grassroots level, all wars decisively influence the lives of peasants and indigenous people for years to come. Anthropologist Gastón Gordillo has shown that memories of the Chaco War continue to shape indigenous experiences in the area to this day.\(^{11}\)

One difficulty in research about native experiences is chronological documentation, because a lineal account of historical events does not fit within the hunter-gatherer mentality of cultures to which Chaco indigenous peoples belong. My own elderly informants were unable to attach dates to the events they described. Nivaclé families speak nostalgically of times when there were no *tucus* (Bolivians, literally meaning ‘ants’ because they were so numerous), nor *lhafcatas* (Argentines) in their lands, and even the *nuus* (Paraguayans) did not yet threaten their borders.\(^{12}\) These oral memories, however, illuminate the war in a new way, shedding light on different aspects of its history.

Indigenous Peoples of the Chaco before the war

Traditionally known as the Gran Chaco, the dry area of western Paraguay, northeastern Argentina, southeastern Bolivia and southwestern Brazil was by 1930 sparsely populated by native peoples from four linguistic families. The Ayoreode and Yîshîro were members of the
Zamuco languistic group in the northern Chaco, the first closer to Bolivia and the Yïshïro nearer the Paraguay River. The Enxet, Angaité, Sanapaná, Guan’a and Enenlhit, belonged to the Lengua-Maskoy linguistic group and lived in central and eastern lower areas of the Chaco. The Enlhit (western relatives to the Enxet), Yofuaxa, Nivaclé and Mak’a shared a Mataco-Mataguayo linguistic ancestry and lived in central and southern areas closer to the Pilcomayo River. Finally, the Toba-Qom, a Guaicurúan people, resided in the southeastern Chaco. In pre-Columbian times, some Tupí-Guaraní had migrated west across the Paraguay River and settled in the Chaco highlands. The Western-Guaraní and the Guaraní-Ñandeva, both Guaraní speakers, lived in the dry territory that became the western border with Bolivia.  

Paraguay had initially avoided contact with the tribes in the Chaco, who they regarded as fearsome and warlike. It was President Francisco Solano López who after 1862 first pushed to occupy and develop the area. The president forced the Evueví tribe to oversee state lumber barges along the Paraguay River until the tribe eventually became extinct. As Professor Costa’s chapter in this collection shows, López’ disastrous War of the Triple Alliance with Argentina and Brazil killed indigenous people in the Pantanal and later allowed foreigners to purchase much of the lower Chaco. The sale forced natives into the cash economy as cheap laborers for the Argentine and British ranchers, fragmented their societies, and opened the way for British missionaries to initiate proselytism to the Enxet. Focused on trying to occupy and develop its Chaco frontier, Paraguay virtually ignored the native people until the 1920s, when Bolivia also expressed interest in claiming Chaco land.  

Internal frontier expansion and the accompanying socioeconomic and cultural changes quickly altered the Chaco tribes in the 1920s. Native people experienced the most violence before the war, when exploration and settlement caused many conflicts. Here I use the term
‘frontier’ to determine an area between two or more previously distinct societies. Access to resources and inter-tribal warfare both contributed to the frontier struggles. By the 1920s, natives crossed the Pilcomayo River yearly to work at sugar mills in Argentina, where they experienced disease and alcoholism. Indigenous people recall conflicts with other tribes. The Enlhit fought with the Ayoreode to the north and, together with the Nivaclé, warred against the Toba, Pilagá and Wichí across the Pilcomayo River in Argentina. The native context for the war was thus already one of conflict. The aggressive Nivaclé, in whose matrifocal and matriarchal society women are called Nivacché, posed the most serious obstacle to Bolivian advances. Bolivians saw their “civilizing” and permanent settlement to be an urgent matter. Further west, the Guaraní Ñandeva and Western Guaraní struggled against Bolivians as they extended forts into native lands. According to José Seelwische, Salesian missionary in the Chaco,

The Chaco peoples maintain live memories of the times when there were not yet whites trespassing on their lands… The invasion of the Bolivian, Argentine and Paraguayan armies challenged them to an uncompromising fight to defend their independence. There are stories about their brave struggles and the variety of strategies they used against the overwhelming fire arms; successful battles that overran entire military units, and on the other hand massacres of entire Nivaclé communities.

Indigenous people blame the Bolivians for introducing coca and alcohol into the Chaco. “They would drink pure alcohol,” one Nivaclé had heard from a parent. Elders recall that in 1920, Bolivians offered to feed the Nivaclé if they would dig a large hole. Over the advice of their elders and in the presence of enticing barbecued meat, young men did the work and then got into line to receive the food. The Bolivians opened fire and killed over 100 natives, throwing them
into the hole. The Nivaclé in retaliation overran and slaughtered the entire troop, escalating the frontier violence.\textsuperscript{21}

Bolivians also employed natives to kill their own people. A Nivaclé named Lhancumeet guided a troop of 150 soldiers back from Bolivia to attack an indigenous village. At the last minute, however, he changed his mind and informed the chief. After accepting tobacco and clothing from the Bolivian soldiers, in a surprising turn the village men massacred them all.\textsuperscript{22}

Paraguayans, however, were just as violent as the Argentines or Bolivians. At Fort Isla Poí, following a discussion over the effectiveness of Paraguayan weapons, an officer lined up two dozen Nivaclé men and women in front of a bag of bread. The official then shot into the chest of the first indigenous person, killing many of the people with one shot, allegedly to show his rifle’s fine qualities.\textsuperscript{23} The rapid exploration and creation of forts led to violence between native people and all groups of outsiders on the frontier.

Missionaries entered the fray in 1925, when Catholic Oblates of Mary Immaculate order arrived at the invitation of the Bolivian government. Superior Enrique Breuer and the commander at San José de los Esteros visited the feared and highest Nivaclé chief Tofaai, who for the first time allowed them, as white persons, to leave his presence alive. Tofaai believed the missionaries might be useful, for he told a Nivaclé assembly, “it is good that they [the Oblates] have arrived; perhaps they will rescue [salvar] us.”\textsuperscript{24} Missionaries settled in Laguna Escalante and Esteros and pressured troops to stop the extermination. Bolivians, in turn, accused the priests of being Paraguayan spies.\textsuperscript{25}

Missionary accounts reveal that throughout the 1920s, Bolivia tried to exterminate indigenous people as it settled the Chaco. Bolivia moved forts eastward, but was unable to convince its’ highland Indians to migrate down into the area.\textsuperscript{26} Both countries relied on
indigenous guides. In August, 1925, Bolivians at Fortín Sorpresa captured a Paraguayan scouting team that included Second Lieutenant Adolfo Rojas Silva, three soldiers and their indigenous guide. A rise in Bolivian assassinations of any Guaraní speaker followed, Paraguayans reported. Indigenous people in retaliation pillaged white travelers, such as along the road between Santa Crúz and Puerto Suárez, where attacks and thefts by Tobas reportedly provoked a Bolivian military response. Travelers at the time reported that Indian people from Bolivia had spread all along the Pilcomayo River. To block Bolivian penetration, Paraguayans later built Fort General Aquino near that waterway.

The conflicts escalated as both sides struck back out of vengeance; Nivaclé warriors overran entire military units in the face of overwhelming white firepower, and Bolivians massacred complete Nivaclé towns. According to missionaries, “There is no theme that is repeated more in the accounts of the elderly Nivaclé than this one: the Bolivians were about to exterminate the Nivaclé people, it was a true war. The Bolivians were aggressive, the Bolivians made us suffer.” As one Nivacché recalled,

Our fear was tremendous. There was still fear, fear of the Bolivians; they were still at war with the Nivaclé. Ay! They arrived at Esteros; that way the Nivaclé came together… It was the Bolivians, only they were mean [malos]. They warred against the Nivaclé. Ay…, I was as old as my granddaughter (is now). They killed the Nivaclé. The people left their flocks of sheep, my grandmother left many sheep. That’s where the sun was when my people ran. They heard the Bolivians attacking…

As war loomed, the arrival of the Paraguayan army at first seemed to offer the Nivaclé an alliance against the Bolivians. Cross-cultural clashes, though, prevented such an arrangement. What followed for indigenous people was an all-out fight on three fronts against whites until the
end of the war. On July 5, 1927, “savage Indians,” according to a Paraguayan commander at Fort Toledo, surprised and killed two guards on patrol.\textsuperscript{34} The Bolivian colonel in charge of Fort Esteros, recall the Nivaclé, lured them to the fort with promises of free clothing and food. Surrounded by an electric fence, soldiers ordered to Nivaclé to dig a deep hole. Later soldiers barbecued cows and when the men were eating, shut the gate and opened fire, killing them all. Soldiers threw the bodies in the hole and then raped the women before releasing them.\textsuperscript{35} Such massacres may not be so surprising when viewed within fears generated by recent Indian uprisings in Southern Bolivia; in the Chayanta Rebellion of 1927, natives actually ate a rancher in a cannibalistic ritual out of revenge for unpaid labor.\textsuperscript{36} The extermination of Chaco natives continued until the war claimed precedence.\textsuperscript{37}

As Bolivians pushed eastward, Paraguay allowed Mennonite settlers from Russia and Canada to migrate to the Chaco as a way to populate and extend Paraguayan hegemony over the territory.\textsuperscript{38} In 1927 and 1930, settlers purchased land from the state in the central Chaco where the Northern Enlhit lived and began to clear it for farming. Early encounters between settlers and indigenous people were amicable, and native people guided Mennonites through the dry, thorny thickets.\textsuperscript{39}

Native scouts led explorers, troops and settlers through hostile territory, but bloody encounters followed.\textsuperscript{40} As in the colonization of the Americas, the promise of goods and food was a powerful incentive for indigenous workers, even when it meant growing white intrusions.\textsuperscript{41} Bolivian General Ovidio Quiroga Ochoa, sent to map the Chaco, used Enlhit guides and fed them with scraps from the fort. By this time many indigenous people had also fled from their homes into the forests, because hunting had declined due to white intrusions.\textsuperscript{42} Settler
accounts resemble reports by the first Europeans who found the American frontier depopulated, unaware that their own diseases had caused a demographic collapse.  

The dry, hostile climate posed problems for both armies, who struggled to maintain supply lines to the front. The Nivaclé recall that soldiers were so desperate for water and food that they traded weapons for either. “From then on,” an elder recalled, “the Nivaclé had rifles, because the Paraguayan soldiers traded them for watermelons. Then soldiers would not return to the front because they had lost their weapons.” Paraguayan soldiers frequently referred to the depressed “Collas”, as they called the Indians conscripted by Bolivia to the front and executed if caught trying to escape. Military requests to Argentines across the Pilcomayo included gunpowder, cloth, and necklaces to trade with the Indians for food.

While hostilities increased, four indigenous people died in the fighting when the Bolivian 8th Infantry overran Paraguayan Fort Boquerón on 14 December, 1927. A year later, in December 1928, Paraguayan major Rafael Franco destroyed a Bolivian fort in a surprise attack. As the confrontations and retaliations escalated, Czarist General Juan Belaieff, a Russian soldier that Paraguay contracted in October 1924 to explore the Chaco and direct its war strategy, used Mak’a and Yïshïro indigenous people as guides and porters. As the Mak’a later recounted,

> When we met [the whites], it was not their way of speaking or dressing that surprised us, but rather how they treated each other. We lived in what is called Boquerón, and we saw how they began to mistreat each other. It was very sad to see people kill each other and kill us. Thanks to the will of a Russian named Juan Belaieff we were not exterminated.

The nomadic Mak’a had long struggled against the Bolivians, and in 1928 four Mak’a men, led by their chief Cikinokou, also called Captain Francisco, perished as they helped to defend Paraguayan Fort Mariscal López against a Bolivian attack. Paraguayan Colonel Arturo Bray
reported friendly relations with the Mak’a who begged at his fort for food. Still, Bray complained about the natives’ terrible smell.\textsuperscript{50} Cultural differences complicated potential military alliances.

Given that the lands in conflict had until then been tribal territories, though, why do military accounts during the war so often overlook native people? Does this absence perhaps reflect racism, preoccupation with the military escalation, or were native people hiding and staying out of sight during the war?\textsuperscript{51}

Escape into the brush appears to have been the best survival strategy, as explained in this Nivaclé account:

In those days, the Bolivians arrived where we were and built forts. Their chiefs talked with ours and, since then, they accepted those who voluntarily offered to fight on their side. They armed and equipped our warriors and gave them good food. When they had learned to use the new weapons and felt satisfied, one day they went to the woods. Our mothers took their children, along with the most valuable things, and met the warriors. They traveled through the most secret and thorny paths in the Chaco. All of them, even the elderly, went from the village to that secret place. One day we passed close to a Bolivian patrol. Our chief passed along the word to be absolutely quiet. It is possible that they had already started to persecute us for what we had done. An infant began to cry. Its mother nursed it but it continued to cry. There was not way to quiet it. Its own father smothered it with his hand. That’s how we, the Nivaclé, are; ready to make any sacrifice for the good of our people. I think our parents made a mistake, because from that moment the Bolivians chased us day and night and hurt us very much.\textsuperscript{52}
This citation suggests that, as Adams has shown in Guatemala, “retreat, avoidance and humility were strategies of survival,” and a form of resistance during the war.\textsuperscript{53}

Some indigenous people saw their role as guides for the armies as active defense of their territories. Toba Qom leader Francisco Ramírez explained to me the role his uncle and chief Francisco Acazará had played as a guide during the Chaco War, as well as his resentment that the native contributions have so often been overlooked…

The only point I want to make is that… we are not mentioned in the histories, but we know that our people helped in the war… Our role as guides is not recognized… by any Paraguayan historians, they take us out… [and write] that only they did everything. Our warriors… our Chief Larroza, helped in the war [as a guide] but nobody recognized him; the indigenous people were never paid for their help in the war… During the war… we worked together to defend the land; [the whites] did not do this alone, but also with indigenous participation… We still believe that we are owners of the land… because our people defended it; we were not going to watch with folded arms while they fought over the land.

We have read the histories many times and indigenous people do not appear.”\textsuperscript{54}

Native people saw the war as a threat by both nations that sought to occupy their homelands. Ramírez’ testimony suggests that, beyond the annoyance of being ignored by historians, native people saw their participation and resistance as an active defense of their lands from both expanding states.

By 1930, encounters with natives had increased along with rising war tensions. Paraguayan Major Melgarejo, regiment commander at Puerto Pinasco, reported that “daring and irresponsible Tobas were rustling cattle and openly threatening ranchers and troops in the area.” In response, the Ministry of War instructed him to “protect the ranchers but under no conditions
fight or provoke the Indians so they do not rise up.” 55 The last thing authorities wanted as conflict with Bolivia loomed was an Indian war on their hands. Paraguayan soldiers at this time captured an Enlhit woman and forced her to show them the way to Fort Nanawa, so they continued using native guides. 56 Yet when soldiers shot indigenous people near forts, ranchers begged Asunción to stop them out of nervousness that natives would lose all fear of outsiders and hamper further frontier settlement. 57 Once outsiders had settled and no longer desired guides, natives were superfluous and needed to be removed as obstacles to frontier civilization.

In March 1931, with indigenous guides, Belaieff became the first white person to reach Pitiantuta, a five-by-two kilometer lake in a desert region, where Paraguay promptly built Fort Carlos Antonio López on the eastern shore. 58 Beholden to native guides, in his final report Belaieff recommended the creation of a troop of indigenous people on horseback to protect Chaco borders. 59 Paraguay, though, was far from ready to arm its native people, even those who did cooperate with national goals. His advice ignored, Belaieff abandoned his odyssey without even reporting to superiors, apparently a broken man. 60

Bolivians forcefully occupied Fort Carlos Antonio López in May 1932, to link the forts under their Fourth Division in the south with those at Roboré and Puerto Suarez in the north. With poor supply lines, as the war developed a common complaint by soldiers on both sides was constant thirst. Native guides were instrumental; not only did they know secret paths, but their knowledge of water sources and even how to extract moisture from cacti was critical to soldiers in the desert climate. 61

The Chaco War
Growing nationalist sentiment and further exploration by both nations, as well as the failure of international mediation, finally led to war in 1932. The odds at first seemed to favor Bolivia, because German General Hans Kundt had modernized its forces with obligatory military service and foreign supplies, and had based his forces in the Western Chaco at Arce. Strapped for cash, Paraguay on the other hand could at first hardly even arm its troops. President Ayala had commissioned Belaieff to explore the Chaco, but was unable to post even more than a few hundred soldiers to defend the territory.  

Elsewhere in the Americas, those difficult depression years of the mid-1930s also saw conflicts between states and indigenous communities. In Sutiaba, Nicaragua, natives armed with machetes, shovels, picks and stones defended their cultural and religious traditions. In Jinotega, also Nicaragua, natives rose up in 1934 and 1935 to oppose the construction of a chapel on the grounds that it would coerce their labor and threaten autonomous use of land. Bolivia also saw significant indigenous uprisings in the years immediately before and during the war, spreading out from La Paz into surrounding highlands.

In the Chaco, meanwhile, on 11 September 1932, Paraguayan forces overran and reclaimed the long-besieged Fort Boquerón, filled with Indian troops from “all parts of Bolivia” who had even eaten their mules to survive the long siege. Paraguayans reported that the Bolivian troops, or “collas”, as they pejoratively called them in reference to an Indian ancestry, were poor, wretched and in a depressed spirit. Despite poor conditions, soldiers on both sides were shot for fleeing the battlefields. Later, on 4 July 1933, Bolivia used Indian troops to charge the Paraguayan fort of Nanawa in the largest mass frontal attack of the war. Over 2,000 soldiers from the Altiplano lost their lives in the attack, scattering fragments of their bodies and, according to Marshall Estigarribia, leaving a “huge, rotting, putrefying mound of human flesh
and bones. Zook has attributed Bolivian losses to the “subordinate position of the Andean Indian, [not] integrated into the life of his country… incapable of the personal initiative which made the Paraguayan a brilliant and aggressive soldier.”

As the war escalated, Bolivia relied even more heavily on Indian soldiers. When the war first broke out, the Andean nation had initially exempted highland peasants from military service. After counting Indian farm workers and given a series of peasant uprisings, in April 1934 Bolivia imposed a quota system that mobilized thirty percent of its Indian peasant workers to the front and allowed the remainder to stay on farms to grow food for the troops in the Chaco.

By September, Paraguayans reported that Bolivian soldiers were deserting in large numbers and that their morale was low due to the lack of food, water, and poor treatment. When fleeing the forts, Bolivians stopped at indigenous communities and traded their clothing and blankets for fish. Native workers also dug pits to bury the dead, as for 180 Bolivian casualties at Platanillos in August of 1932.

By January 1933, following half a year of warfare, indigenous Chaco people had retreated into the brush to escape the violence. Both armies were left hard-pressed for guides. Paraguay’s Southern Command requested that superiors send trackers to direct the transport of ammunition boxes. Even as native people dropped out of official communiqués as the war escalated, forts depended more on their survival skills.

Both sides continued to use native guides. Bolivians also employed Indians to carry contraband supplies for its soldiers back across the Pilcomayo River from Argentina. When one indigenous tracker showed Bolivian Mayor Ayala a hidden Paraguayan trail, he refused to believe him, calling him “a liar who only wants to get food which is needed by our troops.”
guide, though, may have enjoyed the last laugh. Ninth Infantry regiments under Paraguayan Colonel Eugenio Garay later slipped around the Bolivian flank along that very trail in September, 1933. The same Paraguayans surrounded the Bolivian Second Cavalry and Fourth Infantry and their victory ended the myth of Bolivian General Kundt’s invincibility.\textsuperscript{73}

During the resulting siege of Fort Campo Grande in November, Paraguayans used Bolivian prisoners to plead with comrades in Quichua and Aymara to surrender, a strategy used throughout the war. Likewise, Bolivian turncoats translated their side’s intercepted messages and radio broadcasts, often in Aymara or Quichua, for Paraguayan intelligence. The Paraguayans also employed Guaraní for radio transmissions during the war, a strategy akin to the famous Navaho code talkers of World War II.\textsuperscript{74} Native tongues thus became useful tools to best opposing forces. General Franco, of Paraguay, also used the Guaraní language to unite and encourage his troops. As Paraguayan soldiers pushed into Bolivia during the second stage of the war, in late 1934 to early 1935, local indigenous people of Guaraní ancestry guided them through forests and advised them on Bolivian troop dispositions. Caught in the crossfire, native peoples between the forces functioned as “nocturnal eyes” that kept tabs on changing troop positions. Soldiers from both sides, though, also executed many Indian people so their opponents would not use them as informers and spies.\textsuperscript{75}

Demographic Results of Greater Contact

The Chaco War and new contact with outsiders gave many native peoples their first exposure to western diseases. As early as 1930, when a typhoid fever epidemic broke out in the Mennonite Colonies, authorities feared that natives who begged for food there would spread the
disease. The director of military health ordered assistance for the settlers and put an end to all
indigenous visits to quarantined Mennonite towns.\textsuperscript{76}

Over thirty-five per-cent of the Northern Enlhit in the forests perished from a chickenpox
epidemic that swept through their communities during the war.\textsuperscript{77} Tajingvoy, an elder of mixed
Nivacle and Enlhit ancestry, attributed a rise in disease among his people to the conflict:

Following the war an epidemic of mumps attacked our groups. It was a terrible time!

There were settlements where most of the people perished. My wife also contracted the
disease and died. In the terror of the situation I picked up my small son and fled to live
alone.\textsuperscript{78}

Anthropologist Walter Regeher has found that wartime dietary changes also contributed
to illnesses. As fighting limited mobility and the range of hunting and gathering declined, the
war led to monotonous nutrition for indigenous groups that had previously gathered and hunted
for diets rich in protein. The resulting weakness and epidemics were long-range results of the
war and military occupation of tribal territories.\textsuperscript{79} But if deadly for natives, life in the Chaco also
proved fatal for the soldiers, as evidenced by frequent and urgent requests from commanders in
the field for medical personnel and quinine to treat malaria.\textsuperscript{80}

Besides diseases, the use of natives as unofficial troops contributed to indigenous
mortality. An elderly Nivaché named Tii’i recalled that the Paraguayans had paid her people
for each Bolivian head they presented, as well as troop cattle, and even provided them with rifles
to kill enemy soldiers. The Bolivians also paid for Paraguayan heads, so the Nivaclé served both
sides, killing any troops they could ambush in the woods and then turning in the scalps for a
prize, often pieces of bread, to the appropriate authorities. A girl at the time, Tii’i emphasized
her memories of native deaths, such as occurred when a group of Argentines crossed the river,
prepared a barbecue for the Nivaclé and then massacred them all. Her father, one of the ill-fated group, was spared from death as he collected wood for the fire at the time.\textsuperscript{81} Impressions of chaos and death suggest the seriousness of the traumas.

Military forces terrorized the people they captured, including this Nivaclé:

When the combats between Bolivians and Paraguayans began our groups escaped to the woods… One day… suddenly we fell into an ambush placed by a contingent of Bolivian soldiers… The soldiers closed in a circle around us, all armed with rifles. In the middle was a table. There sat the leader. He was cleaning his pistol. He accused us of being Paraguayans. Finally he asked: How do you prefer to die, with a machete or with a pistol?\textsuperscript{82}

Testimonies show that while there had previously been conflicts between native peoples, because non-Indians brought firearms and new diseases the Chaco War proved a devastating experience.

Gendered Aspects of the War

Soldiers on both sides took advantage of the conflict to abuse indigenous women; violence against women is a well-documented result of wars.\textsuperscript{83} Even before the Chaco war, Argentine soldiers would cross the Pilcomayo and capture Nivacché to take home to use as forced servants. Félix Ramírez, a Nivaclé, lost his older sister in such a raid and has had no contact with her since she was stolen. “She must be 70 or 80 years of age now,” he painfully recalled.\textsuperscript{84} In some of the most tearful memories, women recall actually beating their infants to death when they would not stop crying because of their hunger, out of fear that the Paraguayan soldiers would hear them.\textsuperscript{85} The Nivacché also remember sexual abuse from both sides:
If it had not been for two or three cases we knew and for that bad custom the Paraguayans had with women, we would have joined their side… The Paraguayans could not stand to see our women. They would go crazy. Like dogs in heat they would fall on them. Poor women! For this reason we called them *palavái nuu*, (Paraguayan dogs). I don’t know how they could do that by force of paying with provisions. I could not [have had sex] in that way.  

Cultural misunderstandings and sexual abuse also must have complicated the conduct of the war. In his novel *Death in the Chaco*, author Homero Guglielmini has soldiers threaten each other for misbehavior with being cast out of the fort to the neighboring Mak’a people, whom they feared as cannibals. The main character finally escaped boredom at his fort for a night of pleasure in the Mak’a village. Toyedo paid four precious bullets to the Mak’a chief for sex with his daughter, and then, as he was about to leave, the chief offered the soldier news about Bolivian positions in exchange for his gold tooth. As Toyedo spit blood after a painful extraction, the chief explained exactly how many and where the Bolivians were situated. With this information the fort repelled three Bolivian attacks that night, while the delirious Toyedo writhed on his cot in horrible pain and fever. While a fictitious account, this book suggests that soldiers took advantage of both native information for strategy and native women for diversion.

By the close of 1934, Paraguay had managed to turn the tide of the war to its advantage. As the Bolivian army retreated into the highlands, it left the debris of its collapsed forces along the way. Marshall Estigarribia, Commander in Chief of Paraguay’s army, reported, “Those prisoners declared that a great number of their companions have perished, principally from thirst… the road covered by the enemy in his retreat is strewn with corpses, and some of them were burned—killed by their officers because they refused to continue the march.” Paraguay
believed the end was in sight. Still, their own supply lines were stretched, finances were very low and Bolivia had reorganized its army with more capable officers. Paraguay could not claim an overwhelming victory, but it finally defeated Bolivian forces.

Post-War Political Developments and Indigenismo

After their victory in June, 1935, as Paraguayan troops retreated from Bolivia into the Chaco, thousands of Western Guaraní and Guaraní Ñandeva returned with them to Paraguay. The Guaraní Indians feared that Bolivians would take revenge on them for having collaborated with Paraguayans, whom they had seen as countrymen. What is more, troops had promised to replace the native cattle they had slaughtered for food along the way. Paraguayans brought these people back in vehicles to Guachaia, later renamed Pedro de la Peña, traditional Nivaclé territory. Paraguayans transported others to the area of Fort Toledo, fifty kilometers west of Mariscal Estigarribia, and abandoned them without water or food, but General Andino later rescued and took them by truck to Mariscal. Oblate missionaries settled over one thousand of these returning Western Guaraní, who became known as Guarayos and finally received formal Paraguayan citizenship in 1955.

The Guaraní-Ñandeva, unlike the Western Guaraní, had fought for the Bolivian side. Paraguay therefore imprisoned them as traitors at Forts Camacho and Toledo. After being released following the armistice of June 1935, most of the Guaraní-Ñandeva migrated back home, though they suffered heavy losses. Out of 3,000 people in the tribe before the conflict, only half are said to have safely reached Bolivia. As many as 650 of the Ñandeva also stayed behind in the Paraguayan Chaco.
After the war had ended, Nivaclé chief Tofaai ordered an end to hostilities and symbolically gave up weapons and ammunition to Paraguayan forces, but there was still more work to do….  

The Nivaclé recall that after the war, …the Paraguayans… ordered them to collect the lost rifles and load them in trucks. Day to day they carried loads of weapons, because the war had finished. Twenty Nivaclé worked to collect rifles, hatchets, and machetes. Then the Paraguayan commander gave rifles and machetes to the Nivaclé, and that way the Nivaclé remained very friendly with that commander, he also gave them a guampa [gourd] with his bombilla [straw for drinking mate] and yerba [mate tea].

In Bolivia, the war and the high mortality it produced led to a national crisis, economic depression and peasant uprisings that shaped politics for years to come. The unexpected defeat produced a deep sense of loss over territorial dreams, a feeling of Bolivian inferiority, and anger at the old oligarchic liberal state that veterans and citizens blamed for having misled the nation throughout the war. More than during the conflict, in the years that followed peasant uprisings racked Bolivia due to poor living and working conditions. The middle classes withdrew their support from the military government. In 1945, after futile labor stoppages, tens of thousands of Indians marched on La Paz in an attempt to end the colonato labor peonage system. The resulting First National Indigenous Congress energized the peasantry and led to the Canchas uprising and later the Ayopaya Rebellion of February of 1947, when angry peasants attacked the Yayani hacienda with dynamite. The civil unrest ultimately contributed to the 1952 revolution, in which the National Revolutionary Movement led by Paz Estenssoro took power and finally enacted limited agrarian land reform and approved universal suffrage in Bolivia.
In Paraguay, likewise, the war experience and contact with indigenous people in the Chaco shaped national politics. In 1936, General Franco led conservatives to power and promised a national revolution marked by a new era of social justice. For recently-contacted indigenous peoples, the president created a National Indigenous Patronage that made them wards of the armed forces. Wartime nationalism had led to a resurgence of Guaraní and Franco officially made the tongue a second national language. Paraguay became the first and only nation in Latin America with a bilingual policy, a unifying political strategy.

Contact with native people also influenced cultural developments. Paraguayan literature during Franco’s rule mirrored state indigenismo and glorified what writers saw as the indigenous heritage and foundation of national society. At the same time, though, the authors’ “prejudice and denigration of native people also left its mark.” These indigenist writers influenced the first politicians to display an interest in the indigenous population. Out of gratitude for their service and fearful of their future prospects, in April of 1938 Belaieff brought seventy Mak’a dancers and musicians to perform an “Indian Fantasy” at the National Theater in Asunción. The drama’s climax was the heroic death of the Mak’a chief Cikinokou at Fort Mariscal López in 1928. In 1939, the Mak’a even traveled to Buenos Aires and presented their “Indian Fantasy” at the world-famous Colon Theater. The trip earned enough for the new Paraguayan Indigenista Association to resettle the Mak’a tribe behind the Botanical Gardens in the capital, from where they could wander the city to sell artwork and present dances. The Mak’a people still live near the capital today.

Memories of the war have remained alive in the consciousness of the Chaco indigenous people. Talking with the Toba, anthropologist Gastón Gordillo discovered that bones and material remains have seemingly “impregnated the Paraguayan bush with living echoes of the
Chaco War.” One informant, Tomás, explained that his friends often came across human bones and rusty weapons in the Paraguayan forest, in places haunted by souls. “In Paraguay, there are plenty of bullets, skulls, bones of the Bolivians. At night, you hear screams, people screaming over there… All the campo is full of arms, some in good shape: rifles, carbines, everything. Trucks, plenty of trucks, left out there in the bush.” Other men also relayed the way in which bones and material remains still “impregnate the Paraguayan bush with living echoes of the Chaco War.” Informants reported that while hunting iguanas they heard the noise of trucks, screams of men, shots, airplanes. “And the noise stopped. It wasn’t there anymore. Then, we heard the screams of men, shots. But it wasn’t true [real]. We only heard them. In those places, memory seems to be eternally inscribed in space, erasing historical time and making old battles linger indefinitely.”

The Chaco War changed the lives of indigenous Chaco peoples and the governments of Paraguay and Bolivia as it redrew national boundaries, brought nationals and natives into contact with each other for the first time and influenced the states’ treatment of the native peoples. Including indigenous perspectives on military conflicts helps uncover the history of the people that the war affected and displaced. This chapter has shown that both Paraguay and Bolivia tried to clear indigenous tribes out of the Chaco. Natives at first fought to defend their land as internal frontiers expanded. Later, indigenous people served both armies as guides, porters and informants. Military forces used their languages and knowledge to communicate and survive in the harsh desert environment. The war displaced entire tribes and led to greater contact with indigenous people and groups within both Bolivia and Paraguay.

All interviews are by the author unless specified.
Works Cited


Aguirre, René Danilo Arze, Guerra y Conflictos Sociales, El caso rural boliviano durante la campaña del chaco, La Paz, Ediciones CERES, 1987.


Chase Sardi, Miguel. ¿Palavai Nuu : Etnografía nivaclé!. 27


Fritz, Miguel. Los Nivaclé, Rasgos de una cultura paraguaya, Quito, Asunción and Quito, Instituto León Cadogan and Abya-Yala, 1994.

_____.


Hannes Kalisch, Yalve Sanga, Paraguay, cited in Chapter 38, unpublished and untitled manuscript.


*Notes Sent and Received, 1928-1930*, Archives of Ministry of Defense, Asunción.

*Notes Received from Puerto Guaraní. File Founded Forts, Fort Olimpo, 1921-1936*, Archives of Ministry of Defense, Asunción.


Ramírez, Francisco. Interview, Asunción, 29 May, 2005.


Stahl, Wilmar. *Escenario indígena chaqueño pasado y presente*. Filadelfia, Paraguay, Asociación de Servicios de

_____, Interview, Filadelfia, ASCIM, May 20, 2005.


_____. La conducción de la Guerra del Chaco, Buenos Aires, Policarpo Artaza, 1962.

___________________________________________

1 Earle, Rumours of War; Fowler, “Civil Conflict in Independent Mexico”; Safford, “Reflections on Internal Wars.”

2 Centeno, Blood and Debt.

3 Andrews, Afro-Latin America; Beattie, Tribute of Blood.

4 Andrews, Afro-Latin America; Applebaum, Muddied Waters; Appelbaum, Macpherson and Rosemblatt (eds.), Race and Nation; Becker and Clark (eds.) Highland Indians; de la Cadena, Indigenous Mestizos; de la Fuente, A Nation for All; Horst, The Stroessner Regime; Gould, To Die in This Way; Graham(ed.), The Idea of Race; Naro (ed.), Blacks, Coloureds and National
Identity; O’Connor, Gender, Indian, Nation; Radcliffe and Westwood (eds.) Remaking the Nation; Thurner and Guerrero (eds.) After Spanish Rule; Sanders, Contentious Republicans; Wade, Music, Race and Nation.

5 For exceptions which have deeply influenced this work see Mallon, Peasant and Nation; Brewster, Militarism, Ethnicity and Politics and Thomson, Patriotism, Politics and Popular Liberalism for Mexico; Helg, Our Rightful Share and Ferrer, Insurgent Cuba for Cuba, Kraay, Race, State and the Armed Forces for Brazil, Mendez, The Plebian Republic for Peru; Lasso, “Race War and Nation” for Colombia. See also special edition of ICONOS, “Populismo Milítar y Etnicidad.”

6 Mora and Cooney, Distant, 78.

7 Horst, Stroessner Regime, 19. See also Albó, “From MNRistas…,” in Stern, Resistance, 382.

8 Pedraja, Wars, 325-392.

9 Mallon, Peasant and Nation, 322 and 329.

10 Mallon, The Defense, 87, 88, 98.


13 Horst, Stroessner Regime, 10-11.

14 Ganson, “The Evueví…,” 461-488.

15 Horst, Stroessner Regime, 14-15.
I use the term “frontier” as defined by Lamar and Thompson, “not as a boundary or line, but as a territory or zone of interpenetration between two previously distinct societies.” Lamar and Thompson, The Frontier..., 7-8. See also Colin Colloway, New Worlds for All, Andrew Cayton and Fredrika Teute, eds., Contact Points, American Frontiers, 1750-1830, and Paul Otto, The Dutch-Munsee Encounter, 6-14.

Felipe Ramírez, Nivaclé, interview, 18 May, 2005.


Ramírez, Félix, interview, Mariscal Estigarribia, May 18, 2005.

Fritz, Miguel, interview, Mariscal Estigarribia, May 19, 2005.


Chase Sardi, ¡Palavai Nuu!..., 1, 180.

Fritz, Los Nivaclé, 43. See also Renshaw, Los Indígenas, 52.
Ministry of Foreign Relations to Eliseo DaRosa, Minister of War and Marine, November 28, 1927, in file Reserved Notes on Troop Movements, 1926-1928, AMD, Asunción.


Colonel Melgarejo Ledesma, Paraguayan spy, to Chief of Army, Embarcación, June 14, 1928, in file Reserved Notes on Troop Movements, 1926-1928, AMD, Asunción.

Casabianca, *Una Guerra Desconocida*, 41.

Ibid., 41-42.


Fritz, Miguel, interview, May 19, 2005.

Fritz, Miguel, *Nos Han Salvado*, 97.

José Campos, Commander of Fort Toledo to Ministry of War and Navy, Asunción, 7/31/1927, in file Reserved Notes on Troop Movements, 1926-1928, AMD, Asunción.

Seelwische, *Suí papi catsinôvot...*, 107, 109, 111.


Paraguayans reported constant arrival of Bolivian troops to the Chaco, half of them Guarayo Indians, in 1928. Juan Camerón
36


40 Bray, *Armas y Letras*, Tomo 1, 179.

41 In the Military Museum in Asunción, I found a picture of indigenous guides that Paraguay used as trackers. They stand in tattered rags behind a line of armed Paraguayan scouts; AMD, Asunción.

42 Casabianca, *op. Cit.*, 44.

43 See, for instance, Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America*.

44 Seelwische, *Sui papi catsinôvot p’alhaa*, 159.

45 Colonel Melgarejo Ledesma to Chief of the Armed Forces, Embarcación, June 14, 1928; Horacio Yosna to José Guggieri, President of Paraguay, Jujuy, June 5, 1929, in file Reserved Notes on Troop Movements, 1926-1928, AMD, Asunción.


50 Bray, *Armas y Letras*, Tomo 1, 184.

51 James Scott lists concealment as one of the arts of resistance; I would argue that in the Chaco case the strategy
could include staying hidden in the forest during the fighting.

*Domination...*, 50-52.


54 Francisco Ramírez, Toba Qom leader, interview, Asunción, 5/29/05.


56 Casabianca, *Una Guerra desconocida*, 41-42.

57 José Casado to Manlio Schenoni, Minister of War, Asunción, January 29, 1931, in file Reserved Notes on Troop Movements, 1926-1928, AMD, Asunción.

58 Zook, *op. cit.*, 69.


61 José Seelwische, *Suí papi catsinôvot...*, 159.


64 Aguirre, *Guerra y Conflictos*, 88.


Zook, 146–147.

Zook, 148.

Aguirre, *Guerra y Conflictos*, 41.

Julio Fiore, Chief of Ministerial Section, to Ministry of War, 3 September, 1932, Notes Received from Puerto Guaraní, Founded Forts, Fort Olimpo, 1921–1936, Archives of Ministry of Defense, Asunción.


Caledonio Melgarejo Ledesma, Minister of Foreign Relations, to Justo Pastor Benítez, Paraguayan Consulate in Corumbá, Office Note # 287, May 22, 1934, AMD.


Colonel León Díaz, Dirección Superior de Sanidad Militar, to Ministry of War and Marine, No. 604, Asunción, Nov. 18, 1930, AMD, Notes Sent and Received, 1928-1930.


Ibid., 27.

Klassen, The Mennonites, V. 2, 156.

Telegram from Villa Military, Chaco, to Ministry of War, No. 1538/49, May 4, 1933, File Telegrams Feb. 1931-June 1932, AMD.

Tii’i, Nivacché, interview, May 19, 2005.

Stahl, Escenario Indígena Chaqueño…, 65.


Félix Ramírez, interview, Mariscal Estigarribia, May 18, 2005

Anonymous Enlhet testimony recorded by Hannes Kalisch, Yalve Sanga, cited in his Chapter 38, unpublished manuscript. Translated from German by Gerhard Reimer. Courtesy of Kalisch. Infanticide was also documented by Klassen, The Mennonites…, 149.

Tii’i, Nivacché, interview, May, 2005; See also Nivacche testimony in Chase Sardi, Pequeño Decamerón Nivaclé, 205.

Guglielmini, Muerte en el Chaco, 21.

Ibid, 29.

Estigarribia, The Epic of the Chaco, 126.

Klassen, 76.

Fritz, interview by author, Mariscal Estigarribia, 18 May, 2005.


Klassen, 76.


Mercado, *La Formación*, 49.

Ergueta, *Las Grandes Masacres…*, 96; see also Dandler and Torrico, “From the National…,” 364.

Xavier Albó, “From MNRistas…” 382.


Turner and Turner, *op. cit.*, 146.


Wayne Robins, *op. cit.*, 78.

Galiano and Serna, 39.

Ibid., 40.

