



The Road to Armageddon: Paraguay versus the Triple Alliance, 1866–70

by Thomas L. Whigham.

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The twentieth century's two world wars took a terrible toll on the belligerent parties. The flower of British—and French and German—youth died in the trenches of the Western Front in World War I. And the Soviet Union's enormous losses in the Second World War (over 26 million) amounted to almost 15 percent of its population. Yet, as demographic catastrophes, neither compares to the War of the Triple Alliance, which cost Paraguay some 60 percent of its entire population, including ca. 90 percent of all males. But the conflict is little known or studied outside South America. A few English-speaking historians have written about it, led by historian Thomas Whigham (Univ. of Georgia). His massive new book¹ covers the second half of the war.²

By 1866, Paraguayan forces, led by dictator Francisco Solano López (the Marshal), were on the defensive, having lost control of the rivers downstream from Paraguay. They were facing a much larger and better fed and equipped joint Brazilian, Argentinian, and Uruguayan army. In loving detail, Whigham chronicles the relentless, but prolonged and poorly managed closing of the vise as massive enemy forces moved north and east against the Marshal's ever-fewer troops. He ends with alliance soldiers tracking down and killing López and a few dozen of his men. A short epilogue describes postwar events in Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, and summarizes the historiography of the war in Paraguay and overseas right up to the present.

Readers unfamiliar with Paraguayan history will find this chronicle problematic. In the first place, the book is much too long and bloated with florid prose. The following description of the Chaco, or the “outback” of Paraguay, is typical.

The Chaco is an intimidating place. To this day, travelers often comment on the inviting softness of the woods in eastern Paraguay, which seem to promise a tranquil respite from strenuous rambles. By contrast, the sun-besieged foliage of the Chaco offers a witch's brew of color and sound that continually assaults the senses. The proof of man's passing gets obscured in nature's excess, in which the struggle for existence seems to play itself out at a frenzied pace. Here the vegetation appears sinister or callous. Vines strangle the boughs of hardwood trees, which grasp desperately for sunlight. Jaguars creep silently through the brush, and pounce in a flash upon their prey. Millions of termites and leaf-cutting ants lay waste to every inch of exposed ground, and the air swarms with flying insects, whose buzzing signals a lustful or violent intention. Even the white or blue-gray herons, who against the verdant background appear so stately, are in fact the ruthless killers of fish.
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1. Comprising 429 pages of text, 151 of endnotes, 19 of illustrations, 8 maps, a glossary, and a bibliography.

2. Whigham's previous book—*The Paraguayan War*, vol. 1: *Causes and Early Conduct* [2002], 2nd ed. (Calgary: U Calgary Pr, 2018)—concerns the complex origins of the conflict and its initial battles.

His battle narratives, too, are overwritten and retarded by odd digressions, as in the following passage from his fourteen-page account of the battle of Tuyutí.

As the Brazilians advanced, they found Barrios's cavalry still cutting into the ranks of their retreating comrades, causing tremendous confusion among them. The Paraguayan horses were short-jointed and scrawny but gregarious. Individual animals would seek safety in flight whenever distressed. When in herds, however, instinct took over and wherever the first animal led, all would follow—even, as in this case, into the concentrated fire of the enemy's musketry. Whenever a horse took a hit, a thud would signal a ball entering some fleshy mass. He would jerk for a bare moment and then push on as if the wound were little more than a scratch. A horse hit in one leg usually went ahead on three, and even mortally wounded animals kept going until the loss of blood caused them to stumble, hesitate and drop. (61)

A more serious problem than the author's tediously baroque prose is his implicit sympathy for Francisco Solano López. Paraguay's unique history of dictatorships began with José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, who took power in 1813, and did not end definitively till 1989. Paraguay's people, politicians, novelists, and historians, both native and foreign, have long been ambivalent about these leaders' legacies. Each dictator had certain attractive traits. Francia, for instance, fostered national pride by destroying the Spanish-born colonial elite that was ruling Paraguay—and dominated most South American countries for many decades. The dictators share credit as well for Paraguay's unique national bilingualism: virtually all its citizens speak both Guaraní, the local indigenous language, and Spanish.

The Marshal, however, reduced the country to a wasteland where the vast majority of males over age twelve were killed. Whigham does not soft-pedal López's great cruelty. He especially targeted the elite of Asunción, the capital, ordering thousands of men and women to be tortured and killed. Moreover, the war that concluded with his death could have ended years earlier had he only been willing to negotiate a peace.

Thomas Whigham's subject, the War of the Triple Alliance, was and remains the great national epic of Paraguayan history. He has produced an inarguably comprehensive study of that war. But those who wish to avoid the book's stylistic vices should read instead James Saeger's recent (less favorable) biography³ of the Marshal and/or Christopher Leuchars's fine, succinct military history of the War of the Triple Alliance.⁴

3. *Francisco Solano López and the Ruination of Paraguay: Honor and Egocentrism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

4. *To the Bitter End: Paraguay and the War of the Triple Alliance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002).