

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 289

“The War of Thirst”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Spanish American revolutions of the early 19th century led to independence for most Spanish-ruled territories in the Western Hemisphere. The newly independent republics of Latin America inherited a patrimony that included the Spanish language, the Catholic Church, liberal constitutions, and a certain, shall we say, imprecision regarding borders, particularly in inland South America.

This led to conflicts between the former Spanish colonies and Brazil, as well as two major 19th-century wars between Spanish-speaking nations, which set the stage for one final, bloody conflict in the twentieth century over the most remote and neglected region on the South American continent, the Chaco Boreal, triggered, you will not be surprised to hear, by the discovery of oil.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 289. The War of Thirst.

In south-central South America, just east of the Andes, lies a broad lowland plain known as the Gran Chaco. It is over half a million square kilometers in extent. The northern part of this plain, the Chaco Boreal, lies in what our time is the border region between Bolivia and Paraguay. From there it extends south, deep into Argentine territory, where it meets up with the Pampas, the Atlantic coastal lowland.

The Chaco is naturally dry, semi-arid on the western, Andean side, where cactus and thorny bushes are commonplace. In the east, where it approaches the Paraguay River and its tributaries, it can get swampy. It is home to a great number of plant and animal species. Rainfall is seasonal, and temperatures are extreme. In summer, they often reach 40 Celsius, or 100 Fahrenheit, making the Chaco one of the hottest places in South America.

During the period of Spanish rule, the Chaco was administered as a separate region. It had a population of indigenous people, but because of the region's remote and inhospitable character, few Europeans ventured there, and the native people lived their lives with little interference from the Spanish.

When Spanish South America revolted and established the South American republics as we know them today, the question of which nations had sovereignty over which parts of the Gran Chaco was left unresolved, as were the exact boundaries between Spanish South America and Portuguese Brazil. The situation was particularly confused in the region of the former Spanish Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata, which experienced decades of conflict culminating in the War of the Triple Alliance, fought from 1864 to 1870 between the Triple Alliance of Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina against Paraguay.

Little Paraguay lost that war, as I'm sure you could have guessed; the conflict devastated the country. Paraguay lost nearly half of its claimed territory and almost half of its population died during the conflict. It was this war that established the northern boundaries of Argentina as we know them today and left Uruguay and Paraguay as handy buffer states between Argentina and Brazil.

This war also established Argentine sovereignty over the central and southern Chaco. Sovereignty over the northern Chaco, running roughly from the Andes to the Paraguay River, remained unsettled. The region was claimed by both Paraguay and Bolivia, although in the aftermath of the war, Paraguay was in no position to assert its claim.

Not that Bolivia was doing all that much better. Bolivia had its own conflicts with Brazil that cost it a substantial portion of its claimed territory. There was also the War of the Pacific, fought from 1879 to 1883, in which Bolivia lost its Pacific coastal region—and the valuable resources of the Atacama Desert—to Chile. You may recall me mentioning this conflict back in episode 41.

The War of the Pacific left Bolivia as the only landlocked South American nation...except for its neighbor, Paraguay. And by the early years of the twentieth century, the region between them, the Gran Chaco, lying between the Pilcomayo and Paraguay Rivers, was claimed by both, ruled by neither, and was the last unsettled territorial question in South America.

The region itself remained largely unsettled and undisturbed by its rival claimants. It was home to perhaps 50,000 indigenous people. If anyone of this era asked them what they thought about this territorial dispute, I haven't found any record of it.

Access to the seas is important to a nation's economy. You'll remember for example the diplomatic effort exerted by the Allies at the Paris Peace Conference to ensure that the new nation of Poland had access to the Baltic Sea, episode 180. A nation that has access to the seas can trade with the whole world. A landlocked nation is limited to such trade as its neighbors will

permit. During the Belle Époque, when the economies of the neighboring nations of Brazil, Argentina, and Chile were experiencing prosperity comparable to that of Europe or North America, the war-ravaged economies of Bolivia and Paraguay lagged far behind.

Bolivia had a much larger population and economy than Paraguay had and it took the earliest steps toward establishing settlement and a military presence in the region of the Chaco Boreal, often in the face of official Paraguayan protests, which Bolivia mostly disregarded. One major concern for Bolivia was to establish a Bolivian river port of the Paraguay River, which is navigable all the way down to the Río de la Plata and the Atlantic Ocean. Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil all use the Paraguay River for shipping, and the Bolivians wanted to make use of it as well.

Unfortunately for Bolivia, the portion of the disputed Chaco adjacent to undisputed Bolivian territory is the driest and harshest part of the Chaco. It's also substantially lower in elevation than Bolivia proper, meaning travel between Bolivia and the Chaco involves lots of ups and downs. The Paraguayan side of the Chaco is the swampy part, which has some agricultural potential. Sugar cane, for instance.

Both nations were encouraging settlement of the region in order to reinforce their respective claims. Despite the greater obstacles facing the Bolivian side, the Bolivians had a head start and Bolivia's larger population and economy seemed to give that nation the edge in any competition. So in 1927, the Paraguayans played a wild card, by inviting a community of Canadian Mennonites to move into the Gran Chaco.

I guess I need to pause here and explain what a Mennonite is, for the benefit of those of you who don't already know. I live in Pennsylvania, where Mennonites are a fact of everyday life, but I suppose many of you don't have that experience, so here goes. Mennonites are a Christian religious community that is part of the larger community called Anabaptists, which emerged in central Europe during the Reformation. The word *Anabaptist* is derived from Greek and literally means something like "re-baptizer." This identifies one of the principal distinguishing characteristics of Anabaptists: they reject infant baptism, which is the norm among Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christian communities, and embrace instead believers' baptism; that is to say, they believe that baptism is a profession of faith and can and should only be made by a person old enough to understand its significance. This fact alone made them major theological dissenters from other Christian churches of the time.

They are not the same as "Baptists," which is a branch of Christianity that originated in Great Britain, although they share some theological affinities, including rejection of infant baptism. Because Anabaptists originated in Reformation Europe, you might be tempted to classify them as a kind of Protestant, like the Lutheran and Reformed churches, although I'd warn you that Anabaptists themselves reject this classification. They regard themselves as something distinct from both Catholic and Protestant. Mennonites are a branch of the Anabaptist movement that

follow the teachings of Menno Simons, a sixteenth-century Roman Catholic priest turned reformer from the Netherlands.

Anabaptist beliefs vary; Mennonite beliefs vary. Aside from a firm insistence on believer's baptism, Mennonites are pacifists, who eschew any form of violence or use of force. Within the community, the ultimate sanction for misbehavior is shunning: a form of excommunication in which the person is not only expelled from the church but shunned by the community in all areas of life.

With regard to the state, their pacifism is expressed in a refusal to serve in the military, and often by rejection of the authority of the state in general. Mennonites typically live in self-sufficient communities with limited contact with the larger society. Mennonites also embrace a plain life; this means rejection of fancy, colorful clothing, jewelry, modern machinery, and expensive luxuries, although the exact rules vary from one community to the next.

Because Mennonites reject both common Christian practices like infant baptism and the secular power of the state, the movement was frequently persecuted in Europe. Mennonites and other Anabaptists were frequently assaulted, imprisoned, tortured, or burned at the stake as heretics even as, in conformity to their religious ideals, they refused to raise a hand against their persecutors. These many tales of suffering inflicted on their peace-loving ancestors are an important part of their theological and communal identity.

A number of Dutch and German Mennonites fled this persecution by heading east to Poland and Russia, where their religious freedom was respected. Other Mennonites fled to North America in the 17th and 18th centuries, which is how some of their descendants ended up as my neighbors here in Pennsylvania. Wherever they went, they often chose to live in a closed, self-sufficient community. They also often retained their native German dialects for use among themselves, irrespective of the language of their host country.

One particular group of 16th-century Dutch Mennonites settled in Poland, in the Vistula River Delta, in and around the city of Danzig. This happens to be the same region the twentieth century knows as the Polish Corridor. I already mentioned how the Allies granted the Polish Corridor to the new state of Poland after the Great War, so that Poland would have access to the sea. It's funny how this region keeps coming up in our narrative, and those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century know to expect it to come up in the narrative again, around 1939.

Anyway, these Mennonites moved to the Vistula River Delta, which was then part of the first Poland, where they could enjoy Poland's traditional policy of religious freedom. However, after the First Partition of Poland, many of these Mennonites found themselves under Prussian rule. Thousands of them accepted an invitation from the Russian Empire to move to what is now Ukraine. That worked for them for another hundred years, until 1874, when the Russians introduced conscription. At that time, many of them moved to the United States or Canada.

The Canadian immigrants settled in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. When the Great War came, there was a strong anti-German sentiment in both the US and Canada, as we have already seen. In Canada, the year 1917 was particularly difficult, what with the Halifax explosion, a divisive conscription policy and a bitter general election. This was the election in which the Borden government permitted women to vote, but only if they had a close relative serving in the military. The government also took the right to vote away from conscientious objectors, which included our Mennonite friends, and also passed a bill mandating secular public education in English, which these Canadian Mennonite communities saw as a threat to their identity and way of life.

Was 1917 the worst year ever in Canadian history? Possibly.

The Canadian Mennonites sent out delegations to explore the possibility of migrating to some other country. They received a favorable response from the government of Paraguay, which saw the opportunity to settle these folks in the Chaco as a means to strengthen the Paraguayan claim over the region. The Paraguayan government passed special legislation to satisfy Mennonite requirements. This new law guaranteed the Mennonite community in Paraguay freedom to practice their religion, exemption from military service, and legal authority to farm and trade cooperatively, in the Mennonite fashion.

The Mennonites sold their land in Canada and purchased over 500 square kilometers of land in the Chaco from the wealthy Argentine family that owned it. Wealthy Argentines held title to much of the Paraguayan claim to the Chaco, and the Mennonites paid premium prices. The first settlers arrived in 1927, about 280 families, and they soon discovered the challenges of farming in the Chaco—the tropical weather, the sharply seasonal rainfall, and the hard soil, a problem especially for farmers like the Mennonites, who refuse to use twentieth-century farming machinery.

The Mennonites struggled to feed themselves under these conditions, and more than a hundred died of typhus in the early years. In 1930, the original settlers were joined by emigrants from the Soviet Union, cousins the Canadian Mennonites left behind in Ukraine, who were now escaping the famine and forced collectivization the USSR was experiencing, episode 235.

Soon this struggling pacifist Mennonite community in the Chaco could add to its list of woes that it sat in the middle of a battlefield.

[music: “National Anthem of Paraguay”]

Even as the Canadian emigrant Mennonites were settling the Chaco with the blessing of the Paraguayan government in Asunción, Bolivia and Paraguay were already on the road to war. Both nations had begun reinforcing their claims to the region by stationing small groups of soldiers in fortified positions in the Chaco. These fortified positions are known in Spanish as *fortines*. The singular is *fortín*. The word means “little fort,” but in this context is used to describe something similar to the blockhouses the British used in South Africa during the Boer

War, episode 11, and for the same purpose, to enforce control over a wide stretch of open countryside by stationing small groups of soldiers in a number of protected locations.

The Bolivian government was by this time feeling the need to strengthen its claim to the region. First of all, the Paraguayans were now making up for lost time in sending settlers to the region and establishing their own *fortines*. Second, in 1920, the Standard Oil Company in the United States had acquired a concession from the Bolivian government to explore for oil in the Andean foothills of southeast Bolivia. This is the part of Bolivia adjacent to the Gran Chaco, and if there was oil there, then there was reason to believe there was oil under the Gran Chaco, which suggested this neglected corner of South America just might turn out to be more valuable than anyone had previously thought.

On the Paraguayan side, the Anglo-Dutch oil conglomerate Royal Dutch Shell owned the oil exploration rights in Paraguayan territory. Said to have been backed by British and Argentine interests, Royal Dutch Shell supported Paraguay's claims to the Chaco in the hope of gaining the opportunity to exploit the region themselves.

Third, in 1929, the Treaty of Lima finally settled the outstanding disputes remaining from the War of the Pacific, settling the boundary between Chile and Peru and eliminating any last hope that Bolivia might be granted access to the Pacific Ocean. Now, Bolivian access to the Atlantic via the Paraguay River was more important than ever.

In 1928, the Bolivians constructed one of these *fortines*, which they called Fortín Vanguardia, along the Paraguay River. When this fortín was discovered by a Paraguayan cavalry patrol in December, the unit commander, a Major Rafael Franco, on his own authority, ordered an attack on the Bolivian fortín. The small Bolivian force was caught by surprise and the fortín was taken by the Paraguayans, who demolished it. Six Bolivian soldiers died in the incident.

The Bolivian side retaliated by moving against the Paraguayan Fortín Boquerón, on the opposite side of the frontier. Both nations mobilized their armies and prepared for war, but the League of Nations and the Pan American Union intervened diplomatically—Paraguay and Bolivia were both members of both organizations—and were able to negotiate a settlement. In exchange for the Bolivians' surrendering control of Fortín Boquerón, the Paraguayan government agreed to compensate Bolivia for the destruction of Fortín Vanguardia and to dismiss Major Franco from the Army.

These terms were widely regarded as humiliating in Paraguay, where the public saw Major Franco as a national hero for expelling a dastardly Bolivian incursion into sovereign Paraguayan territory, but the government in Asunción had good reason to swallow its pride and agree to these terms. The mobilization of the Paraguayan Army had proved to be a disaster, and it was clear that Paraguay's military was in no condition to take on the Bolivians.

Not that the Bolivian Army was in that much better shape, which is what induced the Bolivians to agree to peace. The militaries of both sides were underequipped, for lack of funds and also as a consequence of the fact that both nations are landlocked. Neither nation had any kind of domestic arms industry, so everything from bullets to artillery guns and fighter planes had to be imported, and those arms imports were dependent on the goodwill of their neighbors.

So both countries saw the ceasefire agreement as an opportunity to pause the conflict while they built up their militaries for the war that was sure to come. In particular, both sides purchased aircraft, the Bolivians from the United States, the Paraguayans from France. Also artillery, machine guns, and small arms. The Paraguayans purchased two modern river gunboats from Italy to patrol the Paraguay River, and Bolivia was able to import a handful of tanks from the UK. The two countries may have been landlocked, and indeed once the war broke out, the League of Nations imposed an arms embargo on both of them. Nevertheless, Chile was sympathetic to the Bolivians and Argentina to Paraguay, so the governments of those two nations were willing to look the other way when the arms shipments arrived.

War finally did come to the region in 1932. In April of that year, Bolivian aerial reconnaissance identified a substantial freshwater lake in the north-central Chaco, known as Lake Pitiantutá. The arid climate of the Chaco made a source of fresh water into a valuable military asset, and in June, soldiers from a Bolivian Army unit scouted the lake from the ground, but were annoyed to find that the Paraguayans had also discovered the lake, a year earlier than the Bolivians had, and the Paraguayans had already constructed Fortín López on its eastern shore. What followed was a replay of what happened four years earlier, with the sides reversed. The Bolivian commander on the scene ordered an attack on the Paraguayan fortín on his own authority, despite having been given orders to avoid engagement with the Paraguayans.

Bolivian and Paraguayan representatives were at that moment in Washington DC, engaged in talks meant to find a peaceful resolution to the conflicting claims over the Chaco, when the news came that the shooting had started. Paraguayan forces retaliated by attacking a Bolivian fortín, but that attack failed. This time, both nations sent more troops into the Chaco, mobilized their militaries, and prepared for all-out war.

By the end of July 1932, Bolivia had a force of 50,000 prepared to move into the Chaco, a force armed with modern weapons such as machine guns, aircraft, and those British tanks, and mobilization was still underway. Against them stood a force of about 40,000 more lightly armed Paraguayans.

On the face of it, Bolivia appeared to hold all the advantages, with a larger force, more heavily armed, and supported by a country with triple the population and GDP of Paraguay, not to mention commanded by an experienced German general, Hans Kundt, who had served previously as a military adviser to Bolivia and had commanded a German brigade on the Eastern Front during the Great War.

The initial Bolivian push was a success. In a matter of days, Fortín López had fallen to the Bolivians, as had Fortín Boquerón, the same Paraguayan fortín that Bolivia had captured four years ago.

Then, the fall of Fortín Boquerón had led to Paraguayan capitulation, but not this time. The Bolivian offensive was interrupted by unseasonal winter rains which turned the Chaco into mud for the month of August, buying the Paraguayans valuable time to reinforce their crumbling line. The Paraguayans assigned a new commander, Lieutenant Colonel José Félix Estigarribia, to defend the Boquerón sector, where it was obvious that the Bolivians planned to renew their offensive as soon as the rains let up. The Bolivians had reason to hope that once that happened, they could break the Paraguayan front line and end the war before the hot summer weather set in.

Knowing this, Estigarribia decided to strike first. The Paraguayan Army had more experience operating in the Chaco than had the Bolivians, and unlike the Bolivians, most of the soldiers in the Paraguayan Army were wholly or partly of Guaraní ancestry. This is the indigenous ethnic group to which most of the inhabitants of the Chaco belonged. Because the Paraguayans could speak to the Guaraní in their own language, it was easier for them to win their trust and their assistance with reconnaissance, which in turn made it easier for the Paraguayan military to move rapidly and stealthily through the Chaco. On September 9, Estigarribia ordered an attack on the Bolivian-held Fortín Boquerón.

Five thousand Paraguayan soldiers besieged a Bolivian garrison of barely 600. The Bolivians tried to relieve the garrison but failed. They took advantage of their air force to resupply the fortín by air, making this one of the first instances of supply by air in military history. Estigarribia ordered four frontal assaults on the fortín, but these all failed, probably because he wasn't paying attention during all the previous failures of frontal assaults against entrenched enemies armed with modern weapons that we've covered on this podcast. Hello? Isn't anyone listening to me?

Well, credit Estigarribia with this much: after four failed attempts, he switched tactics, which is more than you can say for some commanders, *cough* Conrad *cough* and took advantage of his Army's superior mobility to clear the area around the fortín and force the Bolivians to withdraw until the defenders of Boquerón, seeing their own increasing isolation, had no choice but to surrender. The Paraguayans then advanced on Fortín Arce, a front-line Bolivian fortification. There the Paraguayans outmaneuvered the Bolivians again and surrounded this position as well, forcing another surrender.

Farther south along the front, at the Pilcomayo River, the Bolivian defenses held. Still, Estigarribia's offensive was a big boost to Paraguayan morale and he was rewarded for his leadership with supreme command of the Paraguayan military.

The end of 1932 brought the summer rains and an end to campaigning for the season. In 1933, the Bolivians began another offensive, aimed at the Paraguayan position at Nanawa, which is an

indigenous word that means “carob tree forest.” Although the Bolivians captured some lesser positions, the Paraguayan fortifications at Nanawa held out despite two powerful frontal assaults ordered by General Kundt. Unfortunately for him, the Paraguayans had built their defenses well, including barbed wire and zig-zag trenches, the latest in Great War defensive tactics. They also had European advisors, two former White Russian military officers, who shared their expertise.

The Bolivians lost thousands of soldiers during each of these two assaults on Nanawa. I can almost half-understand what Kundt was up to here. His own forces were armed with aircraft and tanks and he probably believed his superior weapons would overwhelm the Paraguayans, but the carefully constructed Paraguayan defenses were more than a match for them. Remember that Kundt had gotten his own Great War experience on the Eastern Front, where superior arms and equipment usually won the day. We can only speculate how different his strategy choices might have been had his experience been on the Western Front.

Nanawa has been called the South American Verdun, because like Verdun, it held out against repeated Bolivian attacks and the Bolivian failure to capture it marks a turning point in the war. The Paraguayan commander, now General Estigarribia, went on the offensive late in the year and outmaneuvered the Bolivians yet again to isolate and capture the Bolivian Fortín Alihuatá, a key Bolivian defensive position. Paraguayan units advancing in a pincer maneuver followed up this success by encircling two Bolivian Army divisions in December, leading to the capture of over 7,000 Bolivian soldiers, plus a generous collection of rifles, machine guns, artillery pieces and a couple of tanks.

At this point, the Paraguayan military commanders wanted to push on, but the President of Paraguay, Eusebio Ayala, believed the war already won and agreed to an armistice to begin peace talks. This proved to be unwise. Negotiations went nowhere because the Bolivians were not ready to quit. They used the lull in combat to reorganize their defenses. General Kundt resigned.

By early 1934, the Bolivians had more soldiers in the Chaco than ever and had built a new defensive line, anchored at its southern point along the Pilcomayo River by a fortín called Ballivian. The 1934 Paraguayan campaign was aimed at taking this position. Some 40,000 Paraguayans were involved in this effort, so many that General Estigarribia had to build new roads through the Chaco west from the Paraguay River to deliver the supplies necessary to support such a large force in the dry and unforgiving region. Alas, when preparations were complete in April, he ordered a frontal assault on the Bolivian position, which accomplished nothing other than racking up thousands of Paraguayan casualties. Here we go again.

That having failed, he then came up with a much better strategy. Since the Bolivians were taking up defensive positions and showing no stomach for going on offense, he chose to merely screen the strong point at Ballivian and sent an infantry division under Colonel Franco—yep, he’s back in the Paraguayan military—north and east, past Ballivian to seize a series of Bolivian *fortines*

along the road that led to Santa Cruz de la Sierra, territory in Bolivia proper and in fact the location of those Bolivian oil fields that had led everyone to expect to find oil in the Chaco.

The offensive didn't make it that far, but it did surprise and capture two Bolivian divisions, costing the Bolivians thousands more soldiers taken prisoner and millions of dollars' worth of equipment captured. Then the Paraguayan offensive turned south, toward the Pilcomayo River, completing the encirclement of the defenders at Ballivian. Some 8,000 Bolivians were taken prisoner, while thousands more died or deserted across the border to Argentina.

In November 1934, the League of Nations made another attempt at brokering a peace deal. Both sides refused the offer. The Paraguayans were once burned and now twice shy; they refused to enter negotiations, fearing Bolivia would once again use the opportunity to rebuild their forces. On the other side of the line, though, the Bolivian military had had just about enough of this war. When the President, Daniel Salamanca, visited Army headquarters to consult on the war situation, the generals had him arrested. The Vice President, José Luís Tejada Sorzano, assumed the office. For those keeping score at home, this would be Bolivia's 34th *coup d'état* in 107 years of independence.

The new Bolivian government ordered a general mobilization, in a last-ditch attempt to take advantage of the country's larger population to overwhelm the Paraguayans. Bolivia also notified the League of Nations they were ready to negotiate. But Paraguay held firm control over most of the Chaco by this time, apart from a narrow strip adjacent to Bolivian territory, and still refused to participate in peace talks.

The war dragged on until June 1935. By then, a further Paraguayan offensive had brought Paraguayan troops into undisputed Bolivian territory, and by that time, both countries had had enough. The bloodshed and the hardships had become unbearable on both sides. The final peace treaty, signed in Buenos Aires in 1938, awarded Paraguay about three-quarters of the disputed Chaco region, more than doubling the land area of the country.

But this win came at a staggering cost. Paraguay held over 20,000 Bolivian POWs. That amounts to about 1% of the population of Bolivia. More than 50,000 Bolivians died in the conflict. Most of the Bolivian soldiers who died were killed by thirst, or died because they became too dehydrated to fight effectively. There are stories of Bolivian soldiers leaving their fortified positions and wandering the battlefield, driven to madness by their thirst. Bolivia's advantages in modern weapons such as aircraft, tanks, and artillery were negated by lack of water, which modern machines needed to keep operating, especially in the hot climate of the region. Hence the poetic name by which the Chaco War is sometimes known in the Spanish-speaking world, *La Guerra de la Sed*, the War of Thirst.

Those 50,000 Bolivians counted for about 2% of the population of their country. Paraguayan fatalities amounted to more than 35,000, a smaller absolute number, but a larger portion of the smaller country's population—about 3%.

Why did Paraguay prevail, despite Bolivia's obvious advantages? The Paraguayan people were always more enthusiastic about the war. Most Paraguayans are *mestizos*, of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage. Many are Guaraní, like the indigenous people of the Chaco. As I told you before, many Paraguayan soldiers could speak Guaraní and communicate with the Chaco natives, who provided them with valuable information. Paraguayan soldiers also communicated over the radio in Guaraní, a language the Bolivians had no knowledge of, just as the American Navajo code talkers would do a decade later to befuddle the Japanese. Paraguay had better road, rail, and river transportation into the Chaco. It was estimated that the Paraguayans could deliver reinforcements and supplies to the front lines in two days, while it took the Bolivian side two weeks.

Bolivia has a more stratified society than Paraguay's, with a *criollo* elite ruling over a population mostly indigenous or *mestizo*. Indigenous Bolivians are native to the Altiplano, the high plains of Bolivia. They are not ethnically related to the people of the Chaco, nor are the *altiplanos* accustomed to the hot and dry conditions of the Chaco lowlands. Most rank-and-file Bolivian soldiers were unfamiliar with the region, miserable while stationed there, and were not particularly enthusiastic about claiming it for their own country.

The territory awarded to Paraguay in the peace settlement amounted to about 50,000 square kilometers, or 20,000 square miles. If you crunch the numbers, it means that about three Bolivians and two Paraguayans died for every square mile in dispute.

Some modern historians, especially left-leaning ones, cast this conflict as a war between Standard Oil and Royal Dutch Shell over the presumed oil fields of the Chaco, fought through their proxies in the region, the governments of Bolivia and Paraguay. That is overstating it. The Bolivian and Paraguayan governments very much wanted the Chaco and were quite willing to fight over it, although suggestions of rich oil fields beneath the region were certainly a motivator. Ironically, it would turn out that the promises didn't pan out; there was no oil under there after all.

The Chaco War was the largest conflict in South America during the twentieth century. Coming as it did at the same time as the Manchuria crisis, the Chaco War underscored the point that after nearly 15 years, during which a shell-shocked world regarded war as now unthinkable and perhaps obsolete, war had become thinkable once again. Indeed, first Japan and now Paraguay and Bolivia, had demonstrated that war was not only thinkable but feasible, and the presumed power of the League of Nations to stop armed conflict with sanctions proved meaningless. The Great Powers could not, or would not, prevent armed conflict. Larger, more powerful nations than Paraguay or Bolivia would take note.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Richard for his kind donation, and thank you to Greg for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Richard and Greg help cover the costs of making this show, which in

turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, which is just how I like it, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to the United States. We saw Roosevelt's Hundred Days; now we'll investigate the Second New Deal, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I should round out the story of the Mennonites in the Chaco. Being Mennonites, they did not get involved in the war, although they did care for wounded soldiers of both sides. Those roads the Paraguayans built into the Chaco to support the war effort also helped to develop the Mennonite economy, making it possible for them to ship their surpluses to market and eventually move away from a subsistence economy.

The Mennonites are still there in our time, a much more prosperous community now numbering some 40,000, the largest Mennonite community in Latin America. The region of the Chaco they inhabit is populated almost entirely by the indigenous people of the Chaco alongside the descendants of those Mennonite immigrants. Only a small fraction of the inhabitants of the Chaco are Paraguayan *mestizos*, the people who make up the overwhelming majority in the rest of the country.

Mennonite farmers still tend the graves of Paraguayan and Bolivian soldiers who fell during the Chaco War. The Mennonite community and the indigenous people of the region have organized cooperative associations. And Mennonites proselytize the indigenous community, sometimes in competition with Roman Catholic Paraguayan missionary efforts. In recent years, the Mennonite community in Paraguay has come under criticism in their efforts to farm ever more land, for deforestation and for encroaching into the homes and lives of their indigenous neighbors. The Chaco is the only place in South America outside the Amazon region that is home to indigenous people who have no contact with the larger world, and the Mennonites have been accused of disturbing their isolation.

[music: Closing Theme]