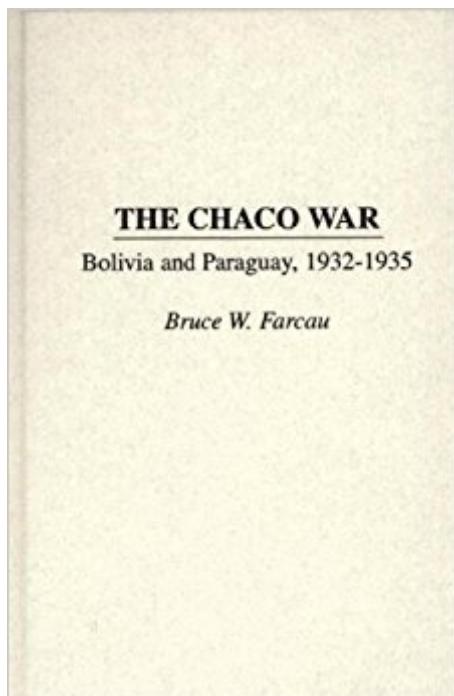


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# The Chaco War: Bolivia And Paraguay, 1932-1935



## **Synopsis**

Nearly 100,000 men died during the course of the tragic three-year war between two of the world's poorest nations, Bolivia and Paraguay, in the 1930s. The Chaco War was fought over a worthless stretch of desert scrubland for the pride of political leaders and the ambition of a few military officers. While thousands of illiterate, barefoot, undernourished peasant soldiers fought and died with incredible bravery, their commanders and national leaders fussed and fumed over imagined slights and avoided the peace which was so easily within their reach. The Bolivian military, in particular, performed abysmally. Few wars have been as unnecessary or as costly as the Chaco War.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

?Farcau provides a balanced perspective, often weighing the interpretations of the classic works on the war and concluding with confirming or disconfirming evidence and logic....Personal interviews with Chaco War veterans contributed valuable eye-witness accounts and varied perspectives to his research and effectively translated cold military strategy into painful human experience.? -South Eastern Latin Americanist

BRUCE FARCAU has been an officer in the U.S. Foreign Service for nearly 20 years and has served at posts throughout Latin America and Western Europe.

In 1932, Bolivia and Paraguay went to war over a large, flat, sparsely watered plateau called the

Gran Chaco. Over the course of three years, the two armies, exhibiting constant bravery and periodic stupidity, dueled, generating at least 90,000 deaths. In this book, Bruce Farcau does a masterful job of educating the reader on what happened during those three unhappy years. Sadly, this book (I read the 1996 edition) misses being the masterpiece it should have been. First of all, as with too many recent works, it is riddled with typographical errors. (For example, the very first page of the preface (the first page of the book) says, "In this book I have tried to pain [sic] a human face on a decidedly inhuman war.") Secondly, this book contains only one map, a map reprinted from a magazine, and its color-coded illustrations sink into near meaninglessness in the black-and-white reproduction. That said, though, this is a great book, and well worth reading for anyone interested in learning about the Chaco War. With a quick proofreading, some better maps, and maybe a few pictures, a second edition of this book could be a masterpiece in fact. So, I give this book an only somewhat qualified recommendation.

Potential buyers should keep in mind that this book can be had in both the original printing (used) or as an electronic reprinting (new). From the cataloging page, "In order to keep this title in print and available to the academic community, this edition was produced using digital reprint technology in a relatively short print run. ... Although the cover has been changed from its original appearance, the text remains the same and all materials and methods used still conform to the highest book-making standards." Keep this in mind if you are looking for a used copy of the original printing. Overall, this is a very informative book that brings a lot of good information to English readers interested in the Chaco War. Readers should keep two things in mind: 1. This book is derived mainly from Bolivian sources and Farcau does a far better job presenting the Bolivian civilian and military leaders than he does for the Paraguayans, who remain mainly in the shadows. Farcau's father-in-law was a member of the Bolivian Army in the War and he goes out of his way to ensure the reader understands who was responsible for what in Bolivia. He makes clear that Pres. Salamanca, Gen. Kundt, Gen. Penaranda, and Gen. Toro were their primary "villians", ultimately responsible for losing the war through their terrible decisions. The Paraguayan's remain veiled, mainly with just Gen. Estigarribia being mentioned; I wonder if Farcau relied heavily on his memoir, which refuses to name the Paraguayan subordinates and only covers his relationship with Pres. Ayala (see my review of the 2011 reissue). 2. The book does a far better job covering the first 12 months of the war than it does the last 12 months, esp. the important final 6 months in 1935. Chpt 5, starting at page 29, starts with May 1932. Chpt 12, Nanawa II, ends on p. 139 in July 1933. So the first 14 months are covered in 110 pages, but the critical final 6 months of the war are entirely rushed. Chpt 22, Villa Montes, starts

on p. 223 in January 1935, with the war ending in June 1935 on p. 229. So all of 1935 gets a hurried 7 pages, even though some of the most important fighting occurred and the armies finally achieved parity in the field! For example, Farcau briefly discusses the Paraguayan attempts to take Villa Montes in Feb., but then leaves the area to never return, so the reader has no idea what the Paraguayans ended up doing there (i.e., withdrawing unexpectedly to reinforce their ongoing offensive in Bolivia proper elsewhere). Farcau appears to have gotten tired of doing the research and writing and essentially decided to skip over the entire end of the war. Picture reading about the European Theatre of WW II with an author glossing over 1945! Farcau does an outstanding job helping the reading understand the terrible privations and hardship faced by the soldiers and their commanders. One feels the oppressive heat, unending rains, pestering insects, and perpetual thirst, hunger, lack of medicine, and tiredness due to unending marching or fighting that was the daily life of the soldiers. As Farcau points out, this really was a war won and lost due to the Quartermaster Corps, supply lines, and transportation: if the Paraguayans had had the necessary transport, water, and supplies, they likely could have destroyed the Bolivian Army in the 2nd half of 1933 and ended the war. The book has very good chapter end notes; however, I did find it odd that he would end the chapters with some interesting anecdote or human interest story but then not cite the source for the information. Unfortunately, there are some serious flaws in the book: 1. There is only a single one-page b&w map at the front of the book, that was originally done in color. It really is designed to cover the entire war in one map, so lots of places and battles are entirely missing. Oddly while it is shown as coming from Command Magazine (1991), the article for which it was drawn is not shown in the bibliography. This is yet another good book that is seriously undermined by a lack of adequate maps. There are just far, far too many times in the book where places are named and battles fought that are not on the map. Anyone reading this absolutely needs to have another book that has better maps in order to make sense of where events were taking place. 2. Farcau doesn't have much discussion about the respective air forces, the Paraguayan Navy (used to transport troops to the front), or the specific equipment used (e.g., Bolivia's tankettes and the artillery & mortars used). 3. There are far too many typos! This should've been proofread better. Given that there are only 3 major works in English about the Chaco War (Zook, 1960; Farcau, 1996; and English, 2009), this is an important work. It is much easier to read and far more interesting than English's rather mundane and boring work. But it could be so much better. All Farcau needs are a few good maps and a willingness to actually cover all of the war, esp. the last 6 months, and not just the first 30 months. I can only imagine how much better this work would be if he had covered all parts of the war equally. So it gets only a 4. It is a truncated work that ends too abruptly and left me in the dark as to

the location of places and events.

I like Farcau as an author because he brings to light the little known conflicts of South America. Obviously he has a special link to this area as his wife and father in law are Bolivian. Of his two works, The War of the Pacific is by far the better. In the Chaco War, he details the military and political battles that led to Bolivia and Paraguay going to war over worthless semi arid land. This war resulted in 100,000 deaths and pointed to the incapacity of the League of Nations in controlling conflict. Farcau does a good job in showing why the Bolivians lost even though they had more money and people. The Bolivians fought between themselves. The military fought the politicians. The generals fought other generals. Paraguay had a unified system where the politicians supported the generals. The result was a win by Paraguay of huge tracks of worthless land. As a previous reader has already noted, this book is riddled with typos. Also the one map did not help the reader in understanding how the military forces were moved. There should have been ten maps in this book, detailing the moves of the various campaigns. I felt lost reading of the movements without having a map to consult. Otherwise a fairly decent read.

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