

The Bloodiest American War Many Americans Have Never Heard Of

The title, which I selected myself, is a trick. Most citizens of the United States of America know their war history. There's even a [popular television brand](#) dedicated to educating US citizens about war, and their country's role in it. So while it may surprise some to learn that the greatest loss of life during a single battle occurred in World War I rather than the Civil War or World War II, it is not as though people are unaware of those three wars, or the basic context: North versus South, Allies versus Germany, Allies versus Nazi Germany.

But “American” refers to the Americas, as a whole. And there’s one war of which few outside South America have heard. A war that occurred during the modern era, and was unlike anything seen during recorded, post-enlightenment history, before or since. While the scope and scale differs from that of the first and second World Wars, the loss of life and culture is comparable in relative terms—even, perhaps, exceeds that inflicted on Germany at the end of that conflict.

This war shares something else in common with World War II—a type of dictator that one sees only occasionally in the world. A visionary tyrant, a leader inspired by some overarching idea that compels everyone around him (or her) to attempt a drastic overhaul of society along moral, ethical, or scientific lines.

The Paraguayan War (or "The War of the Triple Alliance") pitted Paraguay (substantially larger then than it is today) against Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. It was a battle of ideologies—on one side, a group of countries (the Triple Alliance) made up of what we would now call repressive authoriatrian regimes. On the other, Paraguay, which was run by an absolutist dictator. Something that all the participants had in common was that all had recently declared their independence from Spain or Portugal as a consequence of the Napoleonic Wars, and were coming into their own as nation-states.

Paraguay had a population of 525,000 at the war's outset. The combined population of the Triple Alliance was around 11,000,000. Paraguay was the aggressor, attacking Uruguay, Brazil, and then Argentina in succession until all three nations were united. The war lasted from 1864-1870, and by its end, Paraguay was completely defeated. 70% of the male population of Paraguay died, including its dictator. Paraguay lost large swaths of its territory to Brazil and Argentina, and its population decreased by over half. It took decades for the small country to recover.

This type of destruction is rare in modern warfare—a harrowing of one's enemies so deep that it creates generational disruption. It seems that quite apart from Paraguay's role of aggressor in the war, a source of hatred for Paraguay and unwillingness on the part of the Triple Alliance to negotiate with them was the nature of Paraguay's dictatorship, and its history. The Triple Alliance all had similar forms of government—authoritarian aristocracy-based systems, recently liberated from a similarly aristocratic Europe, run primarily by European elites drawn from the country that had originally colonized them (Spain in Argentina's case, Portugal in the

case of Brazil). They all condoned slavery to varying degrees.



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Paraguay was different—almost unique in world history. In the wake of its independence from Spain during the Napoleonic wars, Paraguay was ruled by a heavily centralized government that obeyed [the despotic but charismatic progressive leader](#) Jose Gaspar Rodriguez de Francia. De Francia closed Paraguay's borders and instituted a radical set of social and political reforms, ruling until his death in 1840. Following that, his [successor and acolyte \(a nephew\)](#) Carlos Antonio Lopez ruled from 1842 until he died in 1862. While slavery was not abolished until after the fall of the dictatorship in 1870, it operated somewhat differently than in neighboring countries, in that after 1842, children of slaves were automatically emancipated upon reaching the age of 25.

De Francia and his successor, Carlos Antonion Lopez, took long views of Paraguay's development. Under their harsh direction, Paraguay industrialized, fielded a series of schools that catapulted it to the highest level of education in South America at the time, achieved independence in terms of food production, organized their military along European (Prussian) lines, and created the country's first constitution. They also attempted to create in Paraguay a—wait for it—*real racial utopia* based on enlightenment (Rousseau, specifically) principles, wherein whites could not marry one another, but were compelled to marry darker-skinned people. Paraguay was run by nepotistic despots, but was less nation-state than an aspiration toward just and equal society. Its leadership seemed legitimately to desire a distinct, enlightened culture wherein elitism occurred only through a honest competition. When de Francia died, for example, he'd doubled Paraguay's wealth—furthermore, it was discovered that he had neglected to collect his full salary, several years' worth of which he returned to swell Paraguay's coffers. The nepotistic aspect of the Paraguayan state seemed more a product of access to education and ideological committment than any egotistical desire on the part of de Francia to perpetuate his blood in leadership roles.

When the dictator's nephew's [son](#) (Francisco Solano Lopez) took over in 1862, he opened the borders and began a serious attempt to organize the smaller South American nations into an alliance that would be capable of resisting larger neighbors like Argentina and Brazil. Lopez also fell in love with the [bad-ass Irish wife](#) of a French officer—this heroine subsequently moved to Paraguay and bore multiple children. The first country Lopez sought to influence was Paraguay's neighbor Uruguay—this country had (at the time) a government friendly to Paraguay's, and enthusiastic about creating a bulwark against South America's traditional

powerhouses. Uruguay also controlled access to the Atlantic Ocean, key to expanding trade.

Brazil had other ideas. They succeeded in replacing Uruguay's pro-Paraguay government with a pro-Brazil government, backed by a Brazilian invasion, and Lopez decided the time was right to push back. Despite its small population and relative lack of equipment, Paraguay's militarized society was able to mobilize large portions of its population quickly, and Lopez took the upper hand against its much larger but less-well organized northern neighbor and its Uruguayan puppet. Following a setback against Brazil's superior navy in 1865, and a rebuke from Argentina, Paraguay expanded the war to include its southern neighbor. After this year, the war became a series of catastrophes for Paraguay, punctuated by the occasional defensive victory.

For more details on Paraguay's earliest days of development as an independent nation (which itself offers several fascinating historical lessons and much intellectual food for thought), I recommend the Wikipedia articles that form the backbone of my own research, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Suffice it to say, Paraguay's racial and social utopian dream (or nightmare) was destroyed by Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay working in concert whose superior equipment and population told in the long run. Lopez led a guerilla war but was killed in 1870 in the jungle, his family's dream in ruins. Still, as with many such widespread and creatively ambitious social experiments, the legacy of Paraguay's innovations live on. Paraguay has one of the most homogenous populations in South America—in part a product of that early intermingling of Europeans with black, native, and mixed-race populations—and an unusually long life expectancy (especially given their poverty), along with relatively broad education and literacy rates.

I'm not sure what lesson to draw from the Triple War. On the one hand, I'd like to think that real dialogue between different ideologies and nations should be possible. On the other hand, that "dialogue" always seems to find its purest expression through warfare. And one cannot discount that it's always the purest, most radical believers in progress (the Hitlers, the Stalins, the Lopezs) that seem to initiate these struggles.

We live in a day and age when people casually employ terms like "fascist," "communist," and "dictator," (as I have to a certain extent in this essay), and extrapolate a great deal from those words' associations. Jose Gaspar Rodriguez de Francia lived a frugal life that he seemed unattached to, so much so that his substantial inheritance went to enriching Paraguay. Nevertheless, his nephew's son was a belligerent war-hawk who brought ruin to his neighbors, and, ultimately, to Paraguay itself. I wonder—countries, societies like that of newly-independent, 19th century Paraguay don't attempt to mask their intentions—they telegraph them to the outside world. The tyrant, the dictator, boldly and proudly tells all who will listen: "this is how society should be—this is how *all* society should be." Are there any nations today that can honestly claim to resemble tiny Paraguay, dreaming of dominion?