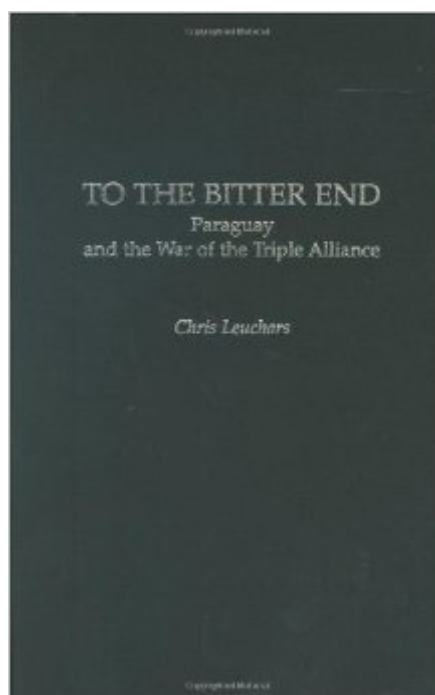


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To The Bitter End: Paraguay And The War Of The Triple Alliance (Contributions In Military Studies)



Synopsis

The War of the Triple Alliance was one of the longest, least remembered, and, for one of its participants, most catastrophic conflicts of the 19th century. The decision of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay to go to war against Paraguay in May 1865 has generally been regarded as a response to the raids by the headstrong and tyrannical dictator, Francisco Solano Lopez. While there is some truth to this view, as Lopez had attacked towns in Argentina and Brazil, the terms of the Triple Alliance signed that same month reveal that the motivation of these two nations, at least, was to redraw the map in their favor, at the expense of Paraguay. That the resulting conflict lasted five years before Lopez was defeated and his country fully at the mercy of its neighbors was a tribute to the heroic resistance of his people, as well as to the inadequacies of the allied command. The military campaigns, which took place on land and on the rivers, often in appalling conditions of both climate and terrain, are examined from a strategic perspective, as well as through the experiences of ordinary soldiers. Leuchars looks in detail at the political causes, the course of the conflict as viewed from both sides, and the tragic aftermath. He brings to light an episode that, for all its subsequent obscurity, marked a turning point in the development of South American international relations.

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Customer Reviews

I wanted this book to help me reconcile two very different interpretations of this disastrous war, which killed more than half of Paraguay's population. Eduardo Galeano's leftist polemic history, *Open Veins of Latin America*, calls it 'a war of extermination', funded by British commerce, to rid the continent of a 'dangerous example' of 'autarchic internal development'. Meanwhile, Robert Harvey's *Liberators*, a tale of 'larger-than-life heroes' puts the blame squarely on the 'megalomaniac' Paraguayan president, Francisco Lopez, for 'declaring war on Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay almost simultaneously'. Although Leuchars' book is self-declaredly a military history, it seems to be one of the few studies of the war in print in English, and does yield some insights into the social, economic and diplomatic processes behind the war. Simmering border disputes in the River Plate region came to a head with the Brazilian invasion of Uruguay in October 1864, which removed the Blanco government allied with Paraguay. In response, Paraguay declared war on Brazil, and later sent its forces into the strip of Argentina which separates it from Uruguay. Although Lopez doubtless played some of his cards badly, his fear that his larger neighbours would, at some point, try to dismember his country seems to have been borne out by the terms of Triple Alliance treaty between Brazil, Argentina, and (nominally) Uruguay. These hardly referred to the supposed causes of the war, but concentrated on how Paraguay's land was to be divided up between its two largest neighbours. The war lasted until the Paraguayan forces were obliterated, which took over four years.

A few weeks after the US Civil War ended in 1865, Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay formed the "Triple Alliance" to fight against Paraguay. The war was not nearly as one-sided as it might seem on first glance, for at the time, Paraguay's army was larger than its combined enemies. Paraguay struck first, invading Brazil and Argentina, but was ultimately beaten back and ground down. By war's end in 1870, Paraguay had lost huge tracts of territory, its President and its entire army, and an astonishing 60 percent of its population. Leuchars' account of the war is well-documented and readable. The opening chapters analyze the political climate in each country. Paraguay's erratic dictator, Francisco Solano Lopez, is generally blamed for the war. He had a large army (70,000 strong), a shrewd sense of military tactics, and he enjoyed a fanatical devotion from the public, yet his strategic aims were never clear --we simply do not know what Lopez hoped to get out of the war. Argentina's President Mitre was a modernizer who presided over an unstable country still gripped by conflict over whether to be a centralized or federated state. Brazilian Emperor Pedro II, also a

modernizer, similarly faced challenges from regional warlords, as well as slavery and a shockingly unequal distribution of land and income. Uruguay was in the throes of civil war between its modernizing Colorado and oligarchic Blanco parties. Against this backdrop, Paraguay's Lopez deserves most --but not all-- of the blame for the war. The conflict began when the various countries took different sides in Uruguay's civil war, but that was quickly subsumed by each country's territorial aspirations rooted in the region's still-unfixed borders.

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