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Roniger, Luis; Senkman, Leonardo

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# Fuel for Conspiracy: Suspected Imperialist Plots and the Chaco War

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Luis Roniger<sup>1</sup> and Leonardo Senkman<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Conspiracy discourse interprets the world as the object of sinister machinations, rife with opaque plots and covert actors. With this frame, the war between Bolivia and Paraguay over the Northern Chaco region (1932–1935) emerges as a paradigmatic conflict that many in the Americas interpreted as resulting from the conspiracy manoeuvres of foreign oil interests to grab land supposedly rich in oil. At the heart of such interpretation, projected by those critical of the fratricidal war, were partial and extrapolated facts, which sidelined the weight of long-term disputes between these South American countries traumatised by previous international wars resulting in humiliating defeats and territorial losses, and thus prone to welcome warfare to bolster national pride and overcome the memory of past debacles. The article reconstructs the transnational diffusion of the conspiracy narrative that tilted political and intellectual imagination towards attributing the war to imperialist economic interests, downplaying the political agency of those involved. Analysis suggests that such transnational reception highlights a broader trend in the twentieth-century Latin American conspiracy discourse, stemming from the theorization of geopolitical marginality and the belief that political decision-making was shaped by the plots of hegemonic powers.

## Resumen

Todo discurso conspirativo interpreta el mundo como sujeto a maquinaciones siniestras tramadas tras bambalinas. Desde esa perspectiva, la guerra entre Bolivia y Paraguay

<sup>1</sup> Department of Politics and International Studies, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC, USA

<sup>2</sup> Harry S Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Hebrew University, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, Israel

## Corresponding author:

Luis Roniger, Department of Politics and International Studies, Wake Forest University, Kirby Hall 314A, PO Box 7568, Winston-Salem, NC 27109, USA.

Email: [ronigerl@wfu.edu](mailto:ronigerl@wfu.edu)



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sobre el Chaco Boreal (1932–1935) es paradigmática de un conflicto que muchos en América Latina interpretaron como resultado de las maniobras conspirativas de intereses petroleros extranjeros que intentaban apoderarse de tierras supuestamente ricas en petróleo. Tal interpretación, proyectada por quienes lamentaron la guerra fratricida, se basó en hechos parciales y extrapolados, que ignoraron el peso de disputas de larga traza entre esos dos estados traumatizados por guerras internacionales anteriores que habían resultado en derrotas humillantes y pérdidas territoriales, y que, por lo tanto, eran propensos a lanzarse a una nueva guerra que podría reparar el mellado orgullo nacional y superar la memoria de debacles pasados. El artículo reconstruye la difusión de la narrativa conspirativa que atribuyó la guerra a los intereses económicos imperialistas, minimizando el rol y la agencia política de las partes beligerantes; y sugiere que tal recepción transnacional refleja una tendencia más amplia en el discurso conspirativo latinoamericano del siglo XX, tendencia derivada de teorizar la marginalidad geopolítica de la región y asumir que la toma de decisiones políticas ha sido producto de complots originados en los poderes hegemónicos globales.

**Keywords**

Conspiracy theories, international wars, historical trauma, transnational diffusion, collective memory

**Palabras clave**

Teorías conspirativas, guerras internacionales, traumas históricos, difusión transnacional, memoria colectiva

Conspiracy discourse interprets the world as the object of sinister machinations, rife with opaque plots and covert actors. Those who adopt a conspiracy worldview usually assume the existence of a disguised historical causality operated by sinister social forces and nefarious underground powers. They consider that internal and external enemies, including foreign powers and economic interests, secretly plot projects of domination or destruction. As “truth seekers,” they consider it a moral duty to unmask these plots, defy those malevolent forces, and thus safeguard the integrity of a collectivity, its spirit, and material resources (see among others the classic approaches by Hofstadter, 1963; Popper, 1963: 24–29, and later contributions by Al-Azm, 2011; Di Maggio, 2017; Eco, 2016; Fenster, 1999; González, 2004; McCaffrey, 2012; Piglia, 2007).

Conspiracy theories found fertile ground for their development under certain conditions. Latin American countries could not ignore being positioned at the periphery and semi-periphery of the world system, subject to the variable impact of geopolitical and economic forces beyond their control. Most elites were traditionally biased into adopting Western worldviews, both religious and secular, that predicated a continuous concern with development, while being at the margins of modernity (Eisenstadt, 1998; Roniger and Waisman, 2002; Whitehead, 2006). In politics and public life, repeatedly, conspiracy plots throughout the region aimed at removing power-holders or defeating opposition forces, some of which were successful (see e.g. Guerrero and Vale, 2012;

Santos Molano, 2011). As many heads of government were deposed, sent to prison, or forced into exile (Sznajder and Roniger, 2009), political actors in Central and South America developed a “sixth sense” about suspected intrigues, investing energies in finding out who could be plotting against them and the national interest, both domestically and at the international arena (Kelman, 2012; Pérez and Antonio, 2008).

More punctually, challenging events causing social anxiety, such as situations of war, institutional breakdown, or cultural fracture, may prompt conspiratorial thought. Faced with the disorientation that is generated, those who share a conspiratorial stance suggest the certainty that, once the forces of evil are unmasked and their designs are exposed, it will be possible to make sense of the crisis and move to defeat the internal and/or external enemies. Incorporating fragmented pieces of information and claiming their veracity as proof of subterranean plots planned by malevolent forces, these theories have been used both to delegitimise opposition forces as well as convince populations of the evil machinations of powerful interests or of the lack of awareness to an impending disaster requiring immediate action (Graf et al., 2011; Piglia, 2007). The lack of trust in institutions, in the authorities, the media, and even in science has added functionality to the mentality that explained in conspiracy terms the ineffectiveness and impotence of institutional frameworks to protect society and promote its well-being (see Barkun, 2003; Brotherton, 2015; Hofstadter, 1963; Parish, 2001; Pérez and Antonio, 2008).

From a decades-long perspective, the war between Bolivia and Paraguay over the Northern Chaco region (1932–1935) emerges as a paradigmatic case of a conflict that many in Latin America – and beyond – interpreted as resulting from the conspiracy manoeuvres of foreign oil interests. Without doubt, economic factors played a fundamental role in the outbreak of the war, the major war between South American nations in the twentieth century. Yet, what merits exploration at the centre of this article is how popular and intellectual imagination tilted towards attributing the war to a conspiracy driven by imperialist economic interests, downplaying the political agency of those involved throughout the region. This also implies understanding how such conspiracy narrative was swiftly and widely accredited as truthful, being ultimately diffused for decades on a transnational scale.

This article aims to decode the conspiracy theories built around the Chaco War, tracing their transference and reception, mainly through South American sources from Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil. After describing the issues at stake in the war and the widespread reception of a conspiratorial narrative attributing the war to foreign oil interests, the article reconstructs how the conception of the “War of the Standard Oil” developed transnationally, including beyond the boundaries of the nations at war. The conclusion suggests the dangers of relying on conspiracy discourse and theorization to claim victimhood, flattening historical complexities, and depleting actual decision makers of agency over the destinies of their society. While defeat in war and policy failure, along with a sense of geopolitical marginality, may explain why conspiracy theories have been so attractive in some international constellations – such as the case under analysis here – those tendencies may be detrimental to societies in need of a truthful assessment over long-lasting territorial disputes and historical claims.

## The Chaco War: Historical Animosities and Collective Traumas

In 1932–1935, Bolivia and Paraguay waged a dreadful war, with over 80,000 soldiers succumbing to bullets, thirst, malaria, and other diseases, as well as dozens of thousands more wounded or taken prisoners. For Paraguay, the outcome was a stimulating victory, an energizing push away from catastrophic defeat in the War of the Triple Alliance, another war fought in 1864–1870 against Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. Contrastingly, for Bolivia, the bloody defeat in the Chaco War continued the process of territorial loss that begun with the Pacific War against Chile (1879–1883) and the cession of territory to Brazil in 1867 and 1903.

In Bolivia, the impact was also profound, if otherwise, as the war took thousands of indigenous inhabitants from the highlands to the subtropical front, allowing them as well as the young conscripts from the cities to get to know each other and glimpse the character and problems of Bolivian society. Accordingly, the war was a catalyst for new processes, as it generated unease in both civilian and military circles, increasing popular bitterness towards the ruling elites and the inefficient and corrupt high command of the army. According to historian Herbert Klein, “the veterans who survived the Chaco would become the ferment from which a new political order would emerge in Bolivia” (Alexander, 1962: 199; Klein, 1993: 223). Indeed, the general disenchantment with the outcome of the war generated reformist trends among army officers and led to the rise of the *Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario* (MNR), resulting years later in the 1952 Bolivian Revolution.

The outbreak of the war was fundamentally fuelled by unresolved border disputes between the belligerents and historical dreams of renewed national grandeur. The confrontation between Bolivia and Paraguay started decades earlier, due to the lack of certainty about which right of colonial boundaries (*uti possidetis*) should prevail to set the border. Bolivia claimed rights over the territory that extended to the river Paraguay and the river Pilcomayo, based on titles of the Audiencia of Charcas, while Paraguay claimed rights based on ordinances of the Spanish Crown, dating back to sixteenth-century *Capitulaciones* and the Ordinances of the Intendance of 1782, sustained by their continued territorial possession even after 1810. Paraguayan politician and historian Efraím Cardozo offered the following appreciation of the situation on the eve of the war:

Discrepancies were fundamental. The two countries did not even agree on what was the subject of the litigation. According to Bolivia, it was mainly about the Chaco [in its entirety], yet according to Paraguay, only about its limits. But as things were in 1932, the problem was no longer a confrontation over territorial entitlements, but of contrasting policies phrased in terms not reducible to legal solutions. (Cardozo, 1965: 134)

From the 1880s to the 1920s, both countries held futile negotiations over the sovereignty of that territory. For Paraguay, the Pinilla-Soler protocol of 1907 – which had divided the Chaco between a Paraguayan zone and another to be arbitrated by Argentina, was considered binding. But while Paraguay ratified it, Bolivia delayed its acceptance until rejecting it in 1910, ignoring the status quo line and placing pillboxes in it to stop

any Paraguayan advance, be it for cattle grazing, *quebracho* extraction, or settlement by Mennonites. In the 1920s, nationalist fervour had spread in both countries, impeding diplomatic talks about the Chaco. Attempts at arbitration by the International Conference of American States on Conciliation and Arbitration and by Argentina, the United States, and the League of Nations did not produce any results, thus giving rise to the bloody confrontation (Mora and Cooney, 2007: 66–77).

The weight of collective historical trauma was all the time at work underneath the surface. As C. William Walldorf indicates while developing hindsight from Neil Smelser (1962) and Jeffrey Alexander et al. (2004),

master narratives emerge from a nation's experience of cultural trauma, the scars of which leave a lasting and powerful mark on collective thinking. [...] Events causing identity pain do far more than simply create space or a tabula rasa for a broader discussion among different groups. They also give specific *content* to the space in which agents operate and build stories. More specifically, events tilt the playing field, or bias the political opportunity structure, to privilege stories from some carrier groups more than others. (Walldorf, 2019: 5, 20)

Bolivia had, as President Salamanca stated, “a history of international disasters that we must counteract with a victorious war.” The trauma of the War of the Pacific, in which Bolivia lost its Antofagasta province, left profound scars in the collective memory of the country. After having been cut off from the Pacific five decades earlier, Salamanca trusted that a war over Chaco would open a fluvial way out to the sea, this time towards the Río de la Plata and the Atlantic Ocean, restoring national pride. Paraguayans had their own historical collective trauma to wrangle with. Having lost much of their territory and population in the disastrous War of the Triple Alliance, they would fiercely resist removal from the Chaco. For them, the area constituted more than half of their remaining national territory and an important base of their economy, over which the United States had recognised Paraguayan rule. Affected by heavy collective trauma, both countries engaged in ferocious attacks and counter-attacks with no definitive results. Only between June and July 1935, through the mediation of representatives of a group of American countries, a ceasefire was agreed, ending the hostilities based on the positions the belligerent countries had reached and on a peace conference that, by direct agreement or arbitration, was expected to end the litigation that led to the war.

Since the outbreak of the war, various explanations were advanced trying to make sense of it. One interpretation shared by many, especially on the Left, was that the war had been the product of a conspiracy laid out by big foreign oil corporations and their allies in the Bolivian oligarchy and government. According to that interpretation, the war had been an “imperialist adventure,” a “War of the Standard Oil” against the Royal Dutch Shell operating in Paraguay. While the war was ongoing, the Bolivian communist leader exiled in Argentina, Tristán Marof, expressed this conspiracy in his book *La tragedia del altiplano*:

Why was Bolivia fighting in the Chaco? For the national honor as avowed in the manifesto of the intellectuals of July 30, 1932? No. Bolivia fought to obtain a port and to defend the

four million hectares of domain against the interests of the English Royal Dutch Shell. (Marof, 1934: 206)

Similarly, in neighbouring Paraguay, Carlos R. Santos published a short book of essays and documents on the imminent Paraguayan-Bolivian conflict, suggesting that the Standard Oil Company

had verified the existence of very rich deposits in Bolivia, near the Chaco, and reached the conviction that it [the Chaco] also had them [such rich reservoirs]. Standard Oil realized that delivering the product by pipelines through the Pacific would involve unreturned expenses due to the crossing of the Cordillera and considered more practical the exploitation via the Paraguay River. This criterion encouraged Bolivia to launch its senseless campaign against our Chaco territory. [...] Very few can ignore, equally, that Bolivia is considered practically a factory of that opulent company [...] (Santos, 1932: 17, 29)

Marof's analysis was more sophisticated, even if still putting onus on the Standard Oil pressures. According to him, on the Bolivian side, the war had been the result of an oligarchic power structure allied to Western capitals:

[the war was the work of] half dozen Bolivians who have it all: millions, servants, the fatherland. And that's why they trample on the republic, they guide the massacre and enrich themselves even more, being allies of the American and British capitalists [...] With the Bolivian economy in ruins [...] the only way out for [president Daniel] Salamanca's government was the war in the Chaco, [where] a powerful company, owning more than four and a half millions of oil fields, pressed for that purpose. [...] The dreamed victory over Paraguay and the access to a port on the river of the same name on behalf of the Standard Oil and with the sacrifice of Bolivian weapons was the only possibility that men in the Bolivian government, that is the feudal lords allied to foreign imperialism, had to subsist, thriving and continue dominating over their servants [the citizens of Bolivia]. (Marof, 1934: 2–3).

Marof was forthright: "This is what Salamanca and his clique wanted, smelling the oil and ready to deliver Bolivia, unhindered, definitely to the Yankees, in an alliance to the neck for their loans and investments." According to him, if Bolivia had won the war, then the social question would have been completely diverted. Workers would have been dominated, a military dictatorship would have been established, and the aspirations of the masses would have been restrained, "forcing them by force and a paltry salary, to the rough work of the mines and oil wells, under the whip of the foreign foreman, owner of the wealth" (Marof, 1934: 3).

Such an analysis of the Bolivian political-economic elite known as "*la rosca*," which was conducted from exile by the leader of the Túpac Amaru organization, would be transformed into something slightly different due to the ideological Trotskyist bend of the Fourth International; namely, a conspiracy theory according to which the oil companies provoked the fratricidal confrontation of Bolivia with Paraguay:

On July 31, 1932, the armies of Bolivia and Paraguay began a war pulled by the Yankee oil company Standard Oil and the Anglo-Dutch Shell. It lasted three years, with between 90 and

150 thousand fallen combatants and both peoples bleeding to death. Oil was never found in that region. (Fourth International, 2017)

Many Latin Americans echoed the conspiratorial view, according to which the Standard Oil Company manoeuvred the Bolivian government into going to war. Thus, in his analysis of British policy in the Río de la Plata, Argentine nationalist essayist Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz echoed that argument about the genesis of the Chaco War:

On the other side are the reckless, aggressive and insolent US capitals of the Standard Oil and General Motors, to whom we owe September 6 [9-6-1930, the date of the military coup d'état of General José Félix Uriburu in Argentina], *the fratricidal Chaco War* [our emphasis], a separatist trend in the Province of Salta, and the shameful oil law currently in force. (Scalabrini Ortiz, 2001 [1940]: 138)

The long-lasting impact of such conspiracy interpretation could be traced for decades in the works and writings of respected Latin American intellectuals and political activists. Illustrative are the statements by Argentine investigative journalist Gregorio Selser and Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, who replicated such interpretation as late as the 1980s–1990s. In his book *Cronología de las intervenciones extranjeras en América Latina 1899–1945*, Gregorio Selser registered the date of 31 July 1932, as follows:

the War of El Chaco begins between Paraguay and Bolivia, lashed respectively by England and the United States or, what is the same, by the oil companies Shell and Standard Oil. (Selser, 2001 [1994]: 539)

Likewise, while describing with acuteness the suffering of those who were the cannon fodder of a ruthless war, Eduardo Galeano insinuated in *Memoria del fuego* that the interests of the foreign oil corporations were behind the war:

Bolivia and Paraguay are at war. The two poorest peoples of South America, those who have no sea, the most defeated and dispossessed, annihilate each other by a piece of the map. *Hidden between the folds of both flags stand the Standard Oil Company and the Royal Dutch Shell, which dispute the possible oil of the Chaco* [our emphasis]. Embedded in war, Paraguayans and Bolivians are bound to hate each other in the name of a land they do not love, that nobody loves. Chaco is a gray desert, inhabited by thorns and snakes, without a songbird or a people's footprint. Everything is thirsty in this world of terror. The butterflies huddle, desperate, over a few drops of water. The Bolivians arrive from the fridge to the oven: they have been uprooted from the peaks of the Andes and thrown into these scorched bushes. Here they die of bullets, but more die of thirst. Clouds of flies and mosquitoes chase the soldiers, who duck their heads and jog through the tangle, in forced marches, against the enemy lines. On one side and on the other, the barefoot people are the cannon fodder that pays the errors of their officers. The slaves of the feudal patron and the rural priest die in uniform, at the service of imperial greed. (Galeano, 1986: 94)

These quotes reflect the widespread belief of many intellectuals and political actors throughout Latin America that the machinations of the oil companies, which they



denounced, were behind the impulsive and ineffective war that would cost Bolivia part of that subequatorial desert zone known as Chaco Boreal, that is, the Northern Chaco.

### **Countering the Narrative of “the War of the Standard Oil”**

Given the superiority of the Bolivian army at the beginning of the confrontation and the nationalist discourse of President Salamanca, the outcome of the war came as a devastating surprise to those who intended to expand the Bolivian territorial hold and recover national pride. That national pride had been nicked historically after losing an exit to the sea in the War of the Pacific (1879–1883), in addition to territories ceded to Brazil in 1867 and 1903. The debacle required a review of consciousness, which contributed to the rise of conspiracy theories, a “weapon” of the weak as they tried to make sense of history. Relying on partial facts, which were extrapolated and given aggrandised significance, a “mythology of the war for oil” (to use historian Herbert Klein’s term) was shaped and given credence as a means of coming to terms with the national tragedy, now interwoven in a narrative of imperialist conspiracy.

While many unsubstantiated arguments in Bolivia and across Latin America attempt to spread the thesis that the antagonistic interests of foreign oil corporations motivated the Chaco War, professional historians discarded its veracity. Even nationalist historians who were militants of the Bolivian MNR recognised the complexity of the political and economic interests that led to the war and then to the military-civilian revolution of 1943. Thus, Manuel Frontaura Argandoña attributed the origin of the confrontation to the push forged by the competitive interests of the plutocracy of the tin barons and much less to the struggle between Shell and Standard Oil, although of course countries such as Argentina and Chile were also involved. This is how Frontaura Argandoña conceptualised the genesis of the war:

The War of the Chaco (1928–1935) [was] unleashed by the mercantile interests of the European-Argentine concessionaires in the Chaco and by nascent Latin American imperialisms. Its consequence: the military-civilian revolution of 1943 [ . . . ] In the drama of the Chaco, Salamanca was just an opaque character, an instrument of destiny. The conductors were Spruille Braden on the one hand and Carlos Saavedra Lamas on the other. The super-state kept silence and limited itself to making the most of it, avoiding taxes and making expensive the favors bestowed. In Paris Patiño told Don Ezequiel Romecín: ‘I shall remain poor, but we will win the war’. He came out richer as Bolivia lost the war and the peace. Hochschild took over the line of Villazón-Atocha to speculate and by means of a skillful operation of false accounting, he charged the State double passage for the contingents of soldiers that marched to Chaco. (Frontaura Argandoña, 2012 [1974]: 18)

Frontaura Argandoña’s analysis left no doubt about the distance between the historical evaluation of a nationalist who recognised that Bolivia had been affected by forces detrimental to the collective interest, on the one hand, and on the other, the simplistic conspiracy theory of a hypothetical “War of the Standard Oil.” Let us cite him at large:

That's how the stupid war started. Broad, serious and dark is the theme of the Chaco War. To begin with, Salamanca is not the principal factor. He may be the saddest and most dramatic protagonist, but in the light of historical research, he is not the author of the war. [...] Bolivia is an underdeveloped and poor country, a country that produces high-quality raw materials, and is thus subject to pressures and the game of outside interests, often arriving from afar like the simoun or the tornado [...] *Because of international intrigues, Bolivia has been in conflict since 1879, especially when its demands to have access to the sea increased. As a result, Bolivia has been clashing with Brazil, Peru, Argentina and finally Paraguay, being the complot so effective, that, as expected, Bolivia has always been on the losing side* [our emphasis]. In the case of the Chaco War, as the Paraguayan people, especially diplomat Rivarola, have scandalously revealed, the intervention of Chile and Argentina in favor of Paraguay has been shameless. How could Bolivia defend itself against so many aggressors? It is remarkable, by contrast, the amazing resistance of the Bolivian people, the sacrifice of its military cadres and the defense of its economy through skillful financial operations, thanks to Salamanca. Perhaps in another constellation of power, not the one of Salamanca, a mystic of honesty, Bolivia would have been involved in a financial catastrophe, because a war, especially when it is improvised as was that of the Chaco, lends itself to economic inequities, but that abuse was not fashionable then. Finally, *the Chaco was not an oil war, at least not for Bolivia, because the apparently contending English and American companies just agreed on doing harm to Bolivia* [our emphasis]. The pressure groups, assisted by political leaders and operetta diplomats, handled not only politics but also the press, which as a great power was assigned the task of stirring up the almost naive nationalism of the two peoples, receiving money from the two governments. A review of the press reveals it was bloodthirsty and cruel. Both financial and political groups armed a laborious and good country as is Paraguay. They advised it militarily and financially. They gave it assurance of victory, *a autrance* as one says. For those ferocious groups, the victimization of one hundred thousand men meant nothing. The main thing was the riveting of their interests. The war had to happen anyway. The methodical advance of Bolivia in the Chaco forced it. The foreign aggression – I do not say Paraguayan – would have happened anyway. (Frontaura Argandoña, 2012 [1974]: 18 and 38)

In a detailed history of his country, Bolivian writer and historian Porfirio Díaz Machicao indicated clearly how a context of partisanship and economic crisis of the landlocked country led to the conclusion that occupying Chaco would allow a way out of territorial confinement and trigger a certain bonanza; how, as of 1931 and perhaps even earlier, there were Bolivian plans of moving ahead and conquering Chaco, prompted by the fear that Paraguayans would take possession of that territory; how clashes between the patrols of both countries were interpreted as challenging “Bolivian dignity and decorum”; how tactical thought prevailed over strategic thinking; and how divergences of opinion and tensions between the executive branch and the General Staff of the Army affected the entire development and outcome of the War (Díaz Machicao, 1955, esp. 38–39, 57–58, and 83–85).

Díaz Machicao cites the evaluation of Demetrio Canelas, Minister of Finance in president Salamanca's administration, on the Northern Chaco and its role in shaping the decisions of those willing to wage war for its possession:

When [Salamanca] ascended to the presidency, the Chaco issue was already, for several years, a mine loaded with highly explosive materials, ready to explode at any unpremeditated accident. Repeated diplomatic efforts by most influential international mediations, such as those that came into play in Buenos Aires and Washington, had shown the irreconcilable divergence between the pretensions of one state or the other, as each contender was being fed in their positions by an ardent propaganda, which not only jeopardized the rights and interests of both nations, but also their feelings of honor and self-esteem. [...] Strange destiny of this mysterious Northern Chaco, that has never offered the goods that make land possession desirable yet seems to have had the mission of testing the vitality of two peoples and their right to persist over time. (Díaz Machicao, 1955: 57)

In a recent work, Argentine researcher Maximilano Zuccarino sums up the state of the art reassessing the thesis of the oil industry pushing for war, as he stresses its wide reception despite the feeble historical ground. Zuccarino suggests a more reliable appreciation of the role of oil in the plot that led Bolivia and Paraguay to face each other in the battlefields of the inhospitable Chaco:

Likewise, one should also consider the interests of the international oil companies that operated in the disputed area (Standard Oil and Royal Dutch-Shell), which would have promoted the armed conflict in an attempt to acquire a territory supposedly rich in oil, as suggested among others by Sergio Almaraz, Julio J. Chiavenato, Arturo Frondizi<sup>1</sup> or Alfredo Seiferheld. This position, recurrent in the tradition of the anti-imperialist left, has been challenged in recent works such as Stephen Cote's, who, while considering oil as a key factor in the outbreak of the Chaco War, does not focus his analysis on foreign interests but on the growing need on the part of Bolivia to increase its oil production to supply urban consumption and the mining industry and, at the same time, find a fluvial outlet to export the surplus through the Paraguay River until the Atlantic ocean. (Zuccarino, 2017, relying on the following works: Almaraz, 1958; Chiavenato, 2007; Frondizi, 1954; Seiferheld, 1983; Cote, 2016; and see also Zavaleta Mercado, 1967: 79)

Historical research has thus questioned the factual basis beneath the thesis of the "War of the Standard Oil." It calls to reason that we disentangle how nonetheless the conspiracy theory reached such a wide reception in Latin America. What were the factual evidence and discursive mechanisms that sustained that narrative? How were factually unconnected events interwoven into a conspiratorial worldview claiming to have disclosed how the belligerent countries had been played out by imperialist forces and interests?

### **Did the Standard Oil Finance the Bolivian Army?**

The conspiracy narrative of the "War of the Standard Oil" gained credibility as it seemed backed by Bolivia's huge contractual concessions to that company and the lack of an official agreement on the part of Paraguay and Argentina to allow Bolivian oil to exit through the Paraguay River. In addition, as an additional factual basis, those sustaining the conspiracy theory argued that Bolivian soldiers were transported from the Altiplano to the battlefield in Standard Oil trucks (Mariaca Bilbao, 1966: 43–65).

Such “factual” information could be easily challenged when considering that the Bolivian government maintained a conflictual relationship with Standard Oil for years, because the company did not produce at the levels it was supposed to, according to the terms of the territorial concession, and even resisted paying taxes as demanded. In addition, Salamanca’s government confiscated the trucks of the North American company, for their use in the transportation of soldiers from the Altiplano (Klein, 1969, esp. 194–197 and 217–218).

The narrative that Bolivia had been coerced or persuaded by the Standard Oil Co. into entering the war concealed the lack of cooperation and the tensions that prevailed between the Bolivian government and Standard Oil. Already in 1970, in a book on the policy of the peace conference on Chaco, based on archival documentation and secondary sources, researcher Leslie B. Rout Jr. had clearly indicated the series of factors that led to the unsolvable relations between Bolivia and the Company (Rout Jr., 1970). In the first place, the fact that Bolivia had granted vast monopolistic land concessions to Standard Oil aiming at making a huge profit by enlarging revenues for the public treasury; yet, until 1927, the oil company had concentrated oil production in only four wells (Bermejo, Sanandita, Camiri and Catamindi), out of which it produced only a small volume, given the lack of a clear outlet to the petroleum markets. In addition, between 1919 and 1928, Standard Oil conducted a legal battle against the Argentine province [state] of Salta over oil concessions, which generated in Argentina a wave of nationalist reactions, leading in 1922 to the creation of Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales, the national Argentine oil company, with Standard Oil moving part of its operations to Bolivia (Bunge, 1933: 72–93). In 1925, the Argentine government denied a request from Standard Oil to build an oil pipeline from Bolivia to a deepwater port on the Paraná River through which it could export oil, while in 1927 it raised the tax rates on Bolivian oil at exorbitant rates. Moreover, the popular belief that by taking possession of Chaco, the company would gain access to a deepwater port allowing the navigation of cargo ships did not have any real support, due to the nature of the fluvial basin and routes. In addition, the idea of transporting oil in small boats was equally unrealistic in practical terms. This, in turn, explains the decision of Standard Oil to reduce oil production in Bolivia to levels of domestic demand, withholding concessions, even if it contradicted the expectations of the Bolivian authorities.

Such confluence of factors undermined friendly relations between the Bolivian state and Standard Oil. It reached the point that in 1928, on learning that the company had covertly moved oil to Argentina in 1925, President Hernán Siles demanded the payment of taxes for undeclared profits, giving Standard Oil a deadline of 1 January 1930 to deliver the payments, a decision the company challenged in Bolivian courts. In addition, in 1928, Bolivian army officers had taken possession of Standard Oil trucks without compensation. Siles’ successor, Daniel Salamanca – already immersed in the war – tried to overcome the company’s policy of not producing oil in accordance with its maximum capacity by nationalizing the refineries until the cessation of hostilities (Rout Jr., 1970: 45–48).

After the war, in March 1937, the government of President Toro cancelled the concessions and seized possession of the company, nationalizing it without any

compensation, claiming that in 1925–1927 Standard Oil had secretly produced more oil than it declared and had exported it through private oil pipelines to Argentina (Muñoz Reyes, 1937, in Klein, 1969: 260–264). In other words, the relations between Bolivia and the oil company were already tense before the armed conflict, making it unlikely that there was a joint secret plan for the capture of the eastern part of El Chaco, whereby no oil deposits would be found. Nonetheless, this feeble factual support did not deter the formation of the conspiracy theory and its attributed credibility in political and intellectual circles in Bolivia and throughout Latin America.

## **Decoding the Transnational Diffusion of a Conspiracy Thread**

According to different analysts, in 1932, the Argentine and Paraguayan press – probably starting with the Argentine anti-imperialist publisher “Claridad” – argued that Standard Oil was financing the Bolivian aggressor and supplied the needs of that invading army in Chaco, so to gain territory for a pipeline to the Paraguay River (Chesterton, 2013; Mora and Cooney, 2007: 78).

Nationalists energised by the dispute between the Standard Oil Company and the province of Salta advanced these accusations and narrative in the Argentine press. Added to it, the conspiracy narrative served to convince Paraguayans that the hostilities had opened at the initiative of Bolivia, supported by the capitalist interests of Standard Oil and the apparatus of the United States. In that context, they argued, Paraguay had entered the war with the sole desire to defend its national territory.

On 26 January 1933, Standard Oil denied such accusations in the pages of *The New York Times*, declaring its neutrality in the conflict between Bolivia and Paraguay. The newspaper also reported that the company would initiate a legal suit against Bolivia for confiscating its automotive park and cargo animals, again highlighting the tensions and lack of cooperation between the oil company and Bolivia at war (Cote, 2013: 748; Mora and Cooney, 2007: 64).

In a second phase, US Senator Huey Long, who was preparing to launch his presidential campaign in 1936, echoed the conspiratorial argument. Long, a populist, used the conspiracy theory to attack Standard Oil, an emblematic capitalist corporation with which he had fought and been attacked by as governor of Louisiana (1928–1932). A few years later, when Long had been elected to the US Senate, he found the argument beneficial in denouncing the alleged dark manoeuvres of the Standard Oil Co. On 30 May 1934, Senator Long delivered an energetic speech denouncing Standard Oil for provoking the Chaco War and financing the Bolivian army to seize the Paraguayan Chaco, rich in oil, which would enable launching an oil pipeline from Bolivia to the Paraguay River (Cardozo, 1965: 136; Mora and Cooney, 2007: 79–81).

Given the political prominence of Long and the ongoing concern with policies of discretionary or impartial arms embargos to both countries, discussed for years by the three branches of US government (American Foreign Relations, 2018; Supreme Court, 1936), the press immediately registered the conspiracy argument. The US press projected it to national public opinion, from where it was refracted and gained credence in Paraguay. Even those who, like journalist Juan Stefanich, the future chancellor of

Paraguay, clearly attributed the war to “belligerent dreams, the cult of force, the chimera of Bolivia’s military potential,”<sup>2</sup> at the same time, echoed Long’s assertions about the interference of Standard Oil (Stefanich, 1934: 21–22, 28–29, 100, 113).

Once the Bolivian advance of military forces stalled and there were sharp defeats with around 65,000 soldiers fallen, captured, or deserting the ranks, in addition to tens of thousands of wounded, the conspiracy argument spread widely in Bolivia as well. In Bolivia, the claim was used by those who wanted to attack “reckless President Salamanca,” the oligarchy allied to Standard Oil, and the high military command responsible for the defeat and a likely loss of national territory (Klein, 1969: 187).

Serving in the US Senate, Long continued to have great power and influence in Louisiana, where he developed different projects. When Judge Henry Pavy opposed some of his initiatives for legal reasons, Long tried to dismiss him. Pavy’s son-in-law, a physician by the name of Carl Weiss, went to the Louisiana state legislature building in Baton Rouge in September 1935 during a visit by Long allegedly to ask him to reconsider the decision. When rejected by Long and his bodyguards, he opened fire, killing Long just days after he had announced his decision to run for the US presidency.<sup>3</sup> Long’s bodyguards then killed Weiss. For many in Latin America, however, Long’s death had been clearly orchestrated by the American oil company. According to Scalabrini Ortiz, Long’s “passionate attack on Standard Oil, for his intervention in the Chaco war, cost him his life,” when he was “killed a few weeks after voicing his complaint” (Scalabrini Ortiz, 1938: 8, and 2001 [1940]: 155–156).

In Latin America, Long’s assassination reaffirmed the narrative according to which Standard Oil and Shell, motivated by their competitive desires for the Chaco’s oil deposits, had coerced the two landlocked countries of South America to go into war. The theory convinced many in the region, even though geologically, the central Chaco had no oil reserve indicators and oil does not exist in that area (Cote, 2013). Even Spruille Braden, the American businessman who had strong interests in Standard Oil and would be sent by the Department of State to the Seventh Inter-American Conference of American States in Montevideo in 1933, doubted that there were important oil reserves in the disputed Chaco region (Braden, 1971: 25–27). Moreover, even those who attributed the War to the conspiracy of oil interests and the rivalry between the American oil company and the Anglo-Dutch oil company recognised that Standard Oil dominated the Bolivian deposits “with the purpose of keeping them as part of its world reserves.” For that reason, it developed more the work of exploration and drilling of wells than production, “as it lacked the intention of exploiting them until an eventuality arose that could prevent the supply of the Latin American and European markets from their ordinary sources of production” (Almaraz, 1958: 97–98).

## **The Epilogue of the War and Regional Geopolitical Interests**

The outbreak of the war originated in unresolved border disputes between the belligerent countries, projecting all the weight of historical trauma and the dreams of renewed national grandeur into policymaking decisions. During the war and especially after the cessation of hostilities, however, regional powers and the United States exerted great

pressure on the weakened parties according to their own geopolitical interests. Among others, Argentina worked diplomatically against Bolivia, and Brazil against Paraguay, both fed by geopolitical considerations and vested economic interests (landowning and fluvial transportation by Argentines in Paraguay), while still prevailing false ideas of access to the – non-existent – oil reserves in the subequatorial Chaco. The Chaco war had exacerbated conspiracy theories in Brazil against Argentina, its historical rival and potential enemy supposedly allied to Paraguay and the Royal Dutch Shell, fearing during the war a victorious advance of the Paraguayan army with Argentine support. From the Brazilian perspective, the most salient threat was the possibility that the Paraguayan army could achieve the old secessionist project of separating Santa Cruz de la Sierra from Bolivia, thus leaving the Amazon valley open to “Argentine infiltration.” In addition, Itamaraty feared that the Guaraní troops, when descending by the Mamoré river, would seize the region of Cochabamba, where – it was fantasised – there were also oil reserves (Barrero, 1979: 285; Moniz Bandeira, 1998, note 160). Unsurprisingly, at the peace negotiations, Brazil sided with Bolivia, while the latter became increasingly aware of the weight of Argentina in the negotiations (Escudé, 1992: 246–247). On 21 July 1938, Paraguay and Bolivia signed a definitive peace treaty of “Peace, Friendship and Boundaries” in Buenos Aires. Paraguay did not retain all the territory that its armies had occupied. It did not manage to set the border on the banks of the Parapití River, as was its maximalist aspiration, but there is no doubt that it retained most of the territory in dispute, also reaffirming its sovereignty over Bahia Negra on the Paraguay River. As for Bolivia, achieving a free port over the Paraguay River and possession of the entire Parapití river basin did not conceal the enormous territorial loss suffered. A new frustration was beating heavily over the nation of the Highlands (Hernández, 2017) that would prompt radical political changes in the following decades.

During the Second World War, other conspiracy theories and discourses emerged in South America. They would suggest that the MNR mass movement was supposedly an instrument of a global Fascist and Nazi plan, led by Paz Estenssoro and Siles Suazo, its leaders. Likewise, they denounced the threat that the arrival of Jewish refugees escaping from Nazi barbarism represented for Bolivia (Siles Suazo, 1942). In countries that increasingly grew suspicious of external interference and conspiracy plots, additional subsidiary conspiratorial discourses emerged in the context ideological polarization between the pro-Allies, anti-fascist fronts, and the Nazi-Fascist Axis, before and during World War II. Both in Bolivia and in Argentina, many started believing that the leaders of the Bolivian MNR were part of a Fascist and pro-Nazi plan, attuned to the GOU and Colonel Juan Domingo Perón, accusing them of being an instrument of a global plan pervading the Americas (Figallo, 1996; Zanatta, 2006, Zuccarino and Vilar, 2013). Conspiracy narratives changed focus after the war yet continued to prevail as a major way of interpreting world developments for many in Latin America.

## **Conclusions**

Conspiratorial narratives reflect a mode of analysis, a logic of interpreting and thinking reality in terms of subterranean threats and malevolent plots, the product of secret

nefarious deceit. They suggest an epistemic worldview that conditions and interprets the world as the object of sinister machinations. Following Geoffrey Cubitt (1993), historian Ernesto Bohoslavsky characterised such an episteme as “the propensity to consider that politics is dominated by malicious and secret machinations of a group with interests and values opposed to those of the bulk of society.” Such a perspective considers that

the true meaning of things hides behind appearances and that the relevance of politics actually takes place behind the scenes. In the logic of the plot, there is no place for chance and involuntary results, but the facts are always presented as the desired consequence of a secret intentionality. (Bohoslavsky, 2009: 17)

It is then rational for those who think and imagine reality in such a manner to be impelled to unmask, expose, and punish those who “in the darkness” planned to affect the integrity of a nation, a society, or the whole of humanity. The Chaco War highlights the likelihood of a more general trend that in twentieth-century Latin America conspiracy theories tilted analysis towards the disclosure of suspected schemes by British and Yankee imperialism. Such a view was conditioned by the very real impact of international forces in hemispheric affairs during the twentieth century, foremost the increasingly hegemonic role played by the United States and its policies aimed at controlling access to resources deemed strategic by the US’s investments in the Americas. US pre-eminence was reflected beginning with the results of the Spanish-American war of 1898. It continued with Panama’s independence; the “gunboat and dollar diplomacy” and invasions in Central America and the Caribbean in the late 1910s, 1920s, and early 1930 s; the alignment of most Latin American elites and armed forces with the United States in the late 1930s and 1940s; the multi-lateral and bilateral military cooperation since the 1940s; and the 1954 intervention in Guatemala. Following the strong reaction to the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the gates opened for counterinsurgency support fighting the guerrilla and revolutionary movements in many South and Central American countries and US-inspired military coups in countries such as Bolivia, Brazil, and Chile (Roniger, 2010; Smith, 2000). As historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto put it colourfully, by the early twentieth century and for many decades, “United States would not tolerate in the Americas any imperialism but its own” (2003: 165).

Still, US administrations had shifting policies in the Americas, something that often has been glossed over by Latin Americans denouncing exclusively US imperialism. Likewise, the agency of domestic political actors should not be underestimated, as clearly shown in the tensions between Latin American right-wing and military governments on the one hand, and on the other, the US administrations during the 1970s and 1980s. Ignoring such nuances, in the context of the Cold War, the hegemonic role of the United States in the Americas generated polarised alignments, with intellectuals elaborating cultural visions defying the hegemon, among them dependency theory (Cueva, 1976; Sáenz Carrete, 2014) and theories on the “development of underdevelopment” (Bambirra, 1974; Dos Santos, 1972, Galeano, 1971; Gunder Frank, 1970), which sustained countervailing political projects of decolonization and solidarity among Third World nations affected by corporate capitalism and hegemonic Western powers. Such



cultural confrontation was central to shaping the political perceptions of Latin America during the Cold War years, as increasingly recognised in contemporary historiography (Bloch and Rodríguez, 2014; Calandra and Franco, 2012).

Against such background, for many Latin Americans theorizing the geopolitical marginality of their nations it was thus only natural to embrace conspiracy theories of covert imperialist strategies of domination even when, as in the case of the Chaco War, geopolitics and regional disputes had operated in ways that were more complex. Equally worth of attention is the transnational path of reception of such conspiracy theories, as analysed in this article. What is certainly ironic, and perhaps tragic, is that many Latin Americans enmeshed in the confrontational logics of the Cold War period aggrandised their attribution of United States and United Kingdom might to the point of depleting and sidelining their own political agency. They turned themselves into just victims of external political and economic forces, exempt from any responsibility in the regional war, thus flattening historical complexities into narratives driven by the idea of a covert conspiracy.

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1. Soon-to-be Argentine president Arturo Frondizi's assessment that oil interests were behind the belligerent countries is still used today in the educational texts of Bolivia as proof of the veracity of the revealed conspiracy leading to the war. In the *Semanario Educativo – Bandera de Bolivia* we read the following paragraph: "The war was supported from abroad by oil multinationals that were disputing the exploitation of the deposits and their fluvial way out." In 1956 [two years before becoming Argentine president], Arturo Frondizi said: "In the front line are the republics of Bolivia and Paraguay, but behind them are: behind the former, the Standard Oil of New Jersey; and behind the latter, the general economic interests of the Anglo-Argentine capital invested in the Chaco and the special interests of the Royal Dutch-Shell." ([http://www.educabolivia.bo/files/textos/TX\\_Guerra\\_del\\_Chaco.pdf](http://www.educabolivia.bo/files/textos/TX_Guerra_del_Chaco.pdf)). See also Chiavenato 1979, 2007.
2. Stefanich (1934) argued that Bolivia had launched its aggression in the Chaco, "from a geography [sic] foreign to its history," in its eagerness to overcome internal problems and – citing Sucre's newspaper *La Prensa* – "to merge the spirit of a true national union in the battlefields."
3. Such official claim was disputed by those suggesting that Dr. Weiss had been also a victim in a wider conspiracy plot by "powers to be," whose identity remains a controversial issue to this

day. See, for example, [http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2010/09/controversy\\_mystery\\_still\\_surr.html](http://www.nola.com/politics/index.ssf/2010/09/controversy_mystery_still_surr.html)

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### Author Biographies

**Luis Roniger** is Reynolds professor of Latin American Studies at Wake Forest University, Kirby Hall 314A, NC 27109, USA. A comparative political sociologist, among his publications are *The Politics of Exile in Latin America* (OUP, 2009), *Transnational Politics in Central America* (Florida UP, 2012), *Destierro y exilio en América Latina* (UBA, 2014), *Exile, Diaspora and Return* (CUP, 2018), and *Historia mínima de los derechos humanos en América Latina* (COLMEX, 2018).  
E-mail: ronigerl@wfu.edu

**Leonardo Senkman** is research fellow at the Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel. A historian of ideas and social historian, among his publications are *El legado del autoritarismo* (GEL, 1995), *Fascismo y nazismo en las letras argentinas* (Lumière, 2009), *Pertenencia y alteridad. Judíos en/ de América Latina* (Iberoamericana, 2011). He is completing, together with Luis Roniger, a book manuscript on conspiracy theories in Latin America.  
E-mail: Leonardo.Senkman@mail.huji.ac.il