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Paraguayan National Identity

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[–] Summary and Keywords

Paraguay is a pluriethnic, plurilingual, and multicultural society, influenced by migration from the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa, which contains many conflicting identities. Despite its heterogeneity, there are certain characteristics which have been seen by Paraguayan and foreign writers as having significant influence on national identity. These are primarily related to three factors: Paraguay's geographical position as a landlocked country, between two regional superpowers, and the resulting historical isolation; the prevalence of Guaraní as the favored language of the vast majority of Paraguayans, and its relationship with Spanish; and the impact of international war and defense of its frontiers, primarily the Triple Alliance War (1864–1870), on Paraguay's economic, cultural, and political development, as well as on its self-perception.

However, Paraguay is also unusual in that following the catastrophe of the Triple Alliance War, there was a concerted effort by a group of intellectuals to challenge the liberal consensus and reinterpret the past to create a national history. This revisionist approach became increasingly influential until, after the Chaco War (1932–1936) and the end of the liberal period, it became the dominant "official" version. Here it subsequently remained through civil war, dictatorship, and finally transition to democracy. While many observers believed this hegemonic revisionist version would disappear with the end of the Stroessner regime in 1989, it has proved more resilient, flexible, and durable than expected, reflecting a high level of internalization of national identity. This in turn suggests that the official discourse was not purely an invention of tradition but was constructed on deeply held ideas of geographical, cultural, historical, and linguistic difference.

Keywords: Isolation, Guaraní, authoritarian, international conflict, Colorado, revisionism, Stroessner, identity, nationalism

Paraguay is a multiethnic and multicultural society containing a rich variety of parallel and sometimes competing identities, but within its complex interplay of competing and complementary subcultures and identities based on issues of ethnicity, gender, class, age, language, and rural and urban culture, there are a number of overarching influences that have shaped national consciousness and identity. First, Paraguay's geographical isolation and its landlocked position between two regional superpowers have long been cited as having a defining influence on politics, economics, culture, and identity. Second, although Paraguay only has a very small and marginalized indigenous population, Guaraní and not Spanish remains the language of the majority of the population. And third, the experience of conflict, in particular international conflict, has had a significant impact in shaping its politics, culture, development, and identity. These interrelated factors have provided a strong sense of difference from regional neighbors, both in terms of internal national identity (who we are) and external perception (who they are). They have formed part of "the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions" that compose national identity.¹ Paraguay is unusual in the efforts and degree of success of revisionist historicism in creating a hegemonic and highly politicized nationalist identity, based on restorative myths, which over time evolved into a nationalist doctrine or ideology of the nation. This revisionist writing was also fundamentally linked to the struggle for political power in the 20th century and played a crucial role in the political hegemony of the Colorado Party, which has held power since the 1947 civil war, save for a brief interlude (2008–2013). As nationalism became a hegemonic discourse from the 1930s onwards, as well as a central mechanism of political power, it subsumed within it all competing forms of nationalism as well as the multiplicity of identities within Paraguay. Such was the depth of internationalization of this model that it retained much of

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its strength even after the fall of the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner (1954–1989), through Paraguay's stuttering democratic transition and into the new millennium. This is in part due to the dominance of the Colorado Party, but also in part because the discourse was not purely the invention of tradition; instead it was constructed upon deeply held, widely shared ideas of historical, linguistic, and cultural difference.

An Island Surrounded by Land: Isolation and Frontiers

The colonial experience of Paraguay was, to a far greater degree than those of other colonies in the New World, key to the formation of a sense of national identity. From early colonial times, Paraguay found itself isolated from Spain and the centers of power and decision-making in the Spanish empire in Latin America. Despite its position in the first half of the 16th century as the capital of the vast *Provincia Gigante de las Indias* and a base for colonial expansion, the lack of mineral wealth, especially gold and silver, the inhospitable environment, and the lack of accessibility turned it rapidly into a buffer province, "a poor, godforsaken place at the ends of the earth."² Landlocked, hemmed in by the vast inhospitable Chaco semidesert to the west and Brazil to the north and east, and cut off from international trade routes, "Asunción languished in its ostracism"³ from the mid-16th century onward. Writing at the time, the Spanish observer Juan Francisco Aguirre observed that by the end of the 17th century there was a collective perception among Paraguayans that they were invisible to the Spanish authorities and that Paraguay was considered nothing more than an isolated and cut-off outpost of the viceroyalty, which in itself gave the colony a collective sense of self and identity.⁴ Indeed, the term "Paraguayan" appears in the late 18th century, before the independence of Paraguay.⁵ Meanwhile, isolation was exacerbated in 1776, when the Spanish crown created the Viceroyalty of Río de la Plata, within which Paraguay was clearly seen as a peripheral part of the empire, subservient to and dependent on Buenos Aires, which controlled its only trade route, the River Paraná.

At the same time, Paraguay found its borders with Brazil under constant threat, with regular incursions by Brazilian slave traders, known as *mamelucos* or *bandeirantes*, who were keen to capture indigenous people for the Brazilian slave market. The lack of Spanish troops to effectively defend the borders was a reflection of the isolation of Paraguay and the perception in Spain of its lack of importance as a frontier outpost. Instead, the settlement and defense of the frontier regions were through Franciscan and Jesuit missions, which from 1639 were allowed to organize, arm, and train militias of indigenous people to defend the frontier. However, by then, much of the eastern border region of Guairá had already been lost to Brazilian expansion.

In a cut-off country with very little Spanish immigration, relations with the indigenous populations out of necessity were based not just on force and subjugation (although they were employed) but more effectively on reciprocity, pacts, and intermarriage.⁶ This resulted in the construction of a unique and relatively homogenous mestizo ethnic identity in contrast to the racially based hierarchical caste system dominated by a white ruling class that prevailed in most parts of the Spanish Empire. This partially explains the frequency of mestizo revolts against the Spanish Crown from as early as 1545, most notably the *Comunero* revolt of 1729–1735. Furthermore, the prevalence of *mestizaje* arising from isolation and colonialism has been depicted as the defining feature of Paraguayan ethnicity⁷ and a central reason behind the stronger and earlier development of national identity even in colonial times.⁸

The ethnic, linguistic, and physical isolation, combined with the lack of circulation of news and ideas, led to political and cultural isolation, which was intensified under the rule of the first postindependence leader, Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (1811–1840). Under threat of annexation from both Argentina and Brazil, Francia followed a strict policy of nonintervention in regional affairs and strict controls on international trade and external contact, effectively cordoning off Paraguay from the political conflicts of the region. Although trade was opened during the regime of his successor Carlos Antonio López (1840–1862), the autarkic model of state development further contributed to the perception of Paraguay as an isolated oddity which remained outside the dominant liberal development model prevalent in the region. This was exacerbated by almost constant fear of conflict with both Argentina (which did not recognize Paraguayan independence until 1852) and Brazil (which was perceived as a constant threat to Paraguayan territorial integrity).

The War of the Triple Alliance against the combined forces of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay ended Paraguay's independent development model and opened up the economy for foreign investment and trade. Nevertheless, isolation continued to be a recurrent theme in Paraguayan history, politics, and culture, exaggerating concepts of difference and at times used for political convenience, throughout the 20th century. This was not just due to geography but also, as under Francia, to politics. The dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner sought to maintain a low international profile to

avoid censure, while maintaining good relations with a few key partners (most notably the United States and Brazil). This “benign isolation”⁹ allowed Paraguay to exploit its historical invisibility, keep out of the international limelight, and avoid political condemnation for human rights abuses. On a cultural level, continued isolation under Stroessner further cemented a more inward-looking society with a stronger sense of shared cultural norms and identity. Even after the end of the dictatorship, Paraguay’s geographical position between regional superpowers has continued to shape a certain shared perception of the world and Paraguay’s place within it.

Writing in the 1960s, Rafael Velázquez commented on the idea of the “Mediterranean” nature of Paraguayan culture, arguing that its position as a landlocked nation has been a key feature of culture, politics, economy, and identity.¹⁰ This concept has been echoed almost constantly, with Paraguay portrayed as “the island surrounded by land,” “the island without sea,” and the “China of South America” in reference to the cultural, geographic, linguistic, historical, economic, and political isolation, present over centuries and deeply ingrained in Paraguay’s sense of self and its place in the world.¹¹

One Nation, Two Cultures: Guaraní

Historical isolation also played a major role in the predominance of Guaraní as the common, shared language and more importantly as part of a shared culture and identity, “the main, distinctive feature of the nation itself.”¹² Paraguay is the only country in the western hemisphere in which an indigenous language is spoken more widely than a European one, and one of the few in which this language is one of two official languages. It is also striking that while Guaraní is spoken by the majority, Paraguay’s indigenous population represents less than 3 percent of the total. As Bartomeu Melià has argued, the history of Paraguay, involving immigration and the fusion of many different ethnicities, means that while Paraguay is a multicultural society, Guaraní is a purely linguistic and cultural phenomenon rather than a reference to ethnicity. The concept of Paraguayan “race” is thus meaningless and “the so-called *raza guaraní* is not in any way a defining element of the national being.”¹³

The origins of the prevalence of the Guaraní language are rooted in the colonial period. The lack of Spanish immigration in the colonial period and Paraguay’s political and cultural isolation from the empire meant that while Spanish remained the official language, Guaraní was the language of the mestizo population that dominated colonial life. The settlement of Paraguay’s southern and eastern frontier regions by principally Jesuit missions reinforced this phenomenon, since the Catholic missions used Guaraní rather than Spanish as the language of religious instruction, indoctrination, and general education. Indeed, the first standardized form of written and oral Guaraní was promoted by the Jesuit missions, which used printing presses to publish books, catechisms, dictionaries, sermons, and other texts in Guaraní rather than Spanish. Efforts by the Spanish crown to impose its own language were belated (Spain did not attempt to impose the Spanish language in mission schools until 1743) and ineffective—often simply rejected by the local population as the imposition of a foreign language.¹⁴

As a result, after 300 years of Spanish colonial rule, Paraguay was almost entirely monolingual and Guaraní-speaking at the time of independence. Indeed, in 1811 it is estimated that 99 percent of the population spoke Guaraní, while only 10 percent spoke Spanish.¹⁵ During the regime of José Gaspar de Francia, the founding father and first president of Paraguay, Guaraní was in official favor. His isolationist policies and strict controls over trade kept Paraguay isolated from its neighbors, while his repression of the Spanish elites and his prohibition of marriage between Spanish citizens effectively put an end to the concept of a small racial governing elite. Guaraní was the official language, the language of the national anthem, and the language of presidential communications. The legacy of this was that for most of the 19th century, Paraguay was almost completely monolingual in Guaraní.

The promotion of Guaraní was reversed under Carlos Antonio López (1840–1862) and brutally repressed after the allied victory over Paraguay in the Triple Alliance War. In the ensuing liberal period (1870–1936), Guaraní was treated with official disdain and prohibited in state schools, portrayed as the language of backwardness and underdevelopment. But a process of official acceptance of Guaraní began in the 1920s, most notably in the Colorado Party, which sought to differentiate itself from the Liberal Party in power and increasingly projected a socially inclusive, one-nation discourse which included a celebration of Guaraní as the language of the people. This was heightened by the key role of Guaraní in military communications during the Chaco War with Bolivia (1932–1936), which led to an increased pride in the national language as an element that distinguished Paraguay from its regional neighbors and a central component of national identity.¹⁶

The Stroessner dictatorship (1954–1989) adopted an instrumental attitude towards Guaraní as an important symbol of

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national unity, recognizing and embracing the advantages of promoting Guaraní in political discourse. The 1967 constitution recognized Paraguay as a bilingual country, but Spanish remained the designated language for official business, in what has been seen as a pragmatic approach designed to gain political legitimacy rather than any concern to promote Guaraní.¹⁷

Despite historical efforts to repress, manipulate, and destroy Guaraní, it stubbornly remains “the majority and identifying language,” “the language which represents Paraguayan identity.”¹⁸ Even today, Spanish may be the language of the political system, the mass media, the legal system, and the public administration, but Guaraní is the preferred language of the majority.¹⁹ Interestingly, although Paraguay has two official languages and is widely seen as bilingual or at least an example of diglossia, statistics from the 2002 census confirm the persistence of monolingualism in Guaraní rather than the prevalence of bilingualism. According to the census, 38.4 percent of Paraguayans were purely Guaraní-speaking, 49.6 percent spoke Spanish and Guaraní, and just 6.5 percent spoke only Spanish.²⁰ In rural areas, 83 percent of the population spoke only Guaraní. Put another way, 88 percent of the country speak Guaraní but only 56 percent speak Spanish. As Rona argued over fifty years ago, “Paraguay is not really a bilingual nation, but a Guaraní-speaking country where, on the higher levels of administration, education and wholesale trade, Spanish is used out of necessity ... Only a small elite uses it even in everyday private life.”²¹ In a complex and confusing relationship, Spanish is clearly the “language of power” (public administration, commerce, media, politics, etc.), but Guaraní is the “language of the people,” spoken by the majority.

This is not simply a linguistic phenomenon. Most Paraguayans think in Guaraní rather than in Spanish, which in turn affects their ways of seeing and expressing the world around them and their place within it.²² Added to this, for those who are bilingual, linguistic duality in Spanish (modern) and Guaraní (pre-Columbian) would suggest that Paraguayans are tied to both indigenous and modern roots, subject not just to linguistic but also cultural duality, or different ways of expression and interaction.²³ It is this cultural dimension of Guaraní as a way not only of expressing themselves but also of thinking and conceptualizing which contributes to a sense of uniqueness, unity, and difference—and thus a fundamental expression of national identity.

War, Identity, and the Authoritarian Tradition

The third defining factor of national identity may be seen as the influence of international and domestic war. Indeed, Paraguayan history has been shaped by sporadic, but particularly brutal, political conflict. During colonial times, Paraguay was plagued by wars with native peoples, especially the Mbaya Guaikuru, and incessant raids by Portuguese slave traders, as well as frequent revolts against the Spanish crown. Since independence, Paraguay may have avoided the violent intraelite civil wars that plagued much of the continent during the 19th century, but it has suffered sporadic political violence, outstanding for its destructiveness and ferocity, which has been central to the creation of Paraguay as a nation and to Paraguayan national identity.

The most obvious forms of such violence have been the essentially defensive international wars with all of its neighbors. The war of 1811, resulting in the defeat of the invading “army of liberation” from Buenos Aires under General Belgrano, was a “typical unifying war”²⁴ which led to Paraguay’s declaration of independence from Spain and the creation of Latin America’s first independent, centralized, pacified, and efficient (highly authoritarian) government under José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia. Indeed, Francia’s iron rule and isolationist policies—which arguably allowed Paraguay to achieve a rare degree of national unity; establish an independent, state-led economic development model; and avoid the political violence that plagued so much of the region—were in response to the constant threat of invasion posed by Brazil and Argentina.

The Triple Alliance War, which put an end to the Paraguayan development model, was the bloodiest and most destructive of South America’s internecine wars, a rare case in Latin American history of total warfare involving the militarization of all economic, political, and social life, as the very real fear of imminent destruction and possible elimination as a sovereign people led Paraguayans to fight to the bitter end.²⁵ The result was disastrous for Paraguay, which lost almost over 300,000 people, equating to 60 percent of its prewar population, including almost 90 percent of its male population, as well as over 25 percent of its national territory.²⁶ The nature of the defeat, the sacking of the country, the decimation of the population, and the destruction of the economy not only had important social, economic, and political consequences but became a defining element in Paraguayan national identity. The shared suffering and the collective sense of irreparable injustice proved fertile ground for a strong sense of solidarity and difference, and it developed into one of the

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founding blocks and key debates in Paraguayan history and identity.²⁷

Sixty years later, Paraguay was drawn into the Chaco War (1932–1935), the bloodiest and most prolonged international war in 20th-century Latin American history, against what it saw as a creeping Bolivian invasion of disputed territory. The scale of casualties (Paraguay is estimated to have lost approximately 30,000 people) and the brutal nature of both the conflict and the terrain again left a deep impression on Paraguayan consciousness and led to a surge in nationalist sentiment in the 1930s which was to fundamentally alter the nationalist discourse.

Without doubt, the threat and reality of international warfare (and especially foreign invasion) are central in explaining the context, passion, and power of national identity. The collective memory and imagining of these experiences of invasion and loss are woven into the national story, alongside isolation and difference, as the key constituents of Paraguayan identity.²⁸ Indeed, it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that the “the most important collective historical experience of all Paraguayans is the experience of international wars.”²⁹

However, internal conflict also played a key role. The Chaco War was followed just eleven years later by the brutal civil war of 1947.³⁰ The resulting triumph of the Colorado Party as the hegemonic political force in Paraguay and the subsequent dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner provided the opportunity for the transformation of national values, mythology, and identity into a hegemonic form of nationalism that came to represent an integral component of Colorado Party vision and identity and an important mechanism of political control. In this sense, the civil war indelibly altered the path of politics, society, and identity in the 20th century.

The experience of external invasion, combined with historical isolation, led to a conservative and defensive cultural attitude toward external influences.³¹ Moreover, Paraguay’s particular history, especially the threat of war and political conflict, gave rise not only to a “praetorian tradition”³² and the central role of the armed forces as the backbone of society but to an authoritarian tradition of highly centralized and militarized government, combined with strong personalist leadership, which has dominated Paraguayan history since independence.³³ Indeed, the lack of democratic tradition is extraordinary; it was not until 2008, after almost 200 years of independence, that there was a peaceful handover of power following an election.

Political instability under pseudodemocratic regimes of course played into the discourse of authoritarianism. After the three dictatorships of the Nationalist Period (1811–1870), from 1870 until 1954 there were forty-four presidents in eighty-five years, twenty-four of whom were forced from office, during a period in which “local chiefs, military warlords, and tyrants succeeded each other without fail in the 100-year struggle between the two political parties.”³⁴ Instability fed into a discourse that eulogized the authoritarianism of the 19th century and allowed the development of the myth of the traditional authoritarian order as an integral part of Paraguayan history and development. The result is a tendency to glorify strong leaders, associate authoritarianism with times of strength, and, more importantly, view the authoritarian tradition as an integral part of the national identity.³⁵

Nationalism and the “Generation of 900”

Factors such as cultural, political, and geographical isolation; high levels of *mestizaje*; the predominant use of Guaraní; and a sense of unity derived from the constant threat of external invasion may have established the firm roots of Paraguayan national identity during the colonial period in terms of ideas of both difference and community.³⁶ However, such consciousness of Paraguayan distinctiveness was based more on what Ernest Gellner termed a fragmented, uncodified majority folk culture³⁷ than on a coherent, written interpretation of history and identity. Paraguay could claim to be a “near nation,” but by the end of the 19th century it had not developed a clear sense of national identity.³⁸

It was the catastrophic defeat in the Triple Alliance War, the scale of destruction, and the resulting shared collective trauma that led to the creation of a strong national identity. In the years after the war, the victorious allies and new emerging elites in Paraguay expounded a liberal positivist interpretation of Paraguayan 19th-century history and of the war itself. According to this prevailing interpretation, championed by Cecilio Báez, among others, the nationalist period was one of despotic authoritarianism, characterized by a marked lack of political, social, or economic progress, and three tyrannical postindependence governments which had kept Paraguay isolated from civilization. The war, provoked by Paraguayan tyranny, had led to the liberation of the nation in 1870 and the birth of a new process of enlightenment. This had included a progressive constitution in 1870 (guaranteeing elections and civil rights and political freedoms, including the abolition of slavery), economic liberalization, and a new openness to international cooperation and cultural

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influences.³⁹ Influenced by the ideas of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, the prevailing discourse saw the defeat of López as the victory of civilization over barbarism and liberal positivism replacing tyranny, isolation, and underdevelopment.⁴⁰

At the beginning of the 20th century, a young group of writers, among the so-called Generation of 900, began to challenge this dominant liberal discourse.⁴¹ Instead, they sought to elaborate what they termed an authentic Paraguayan interpretation of events and to reassess and redefine a sense of national values and identity following the catastrophe of the Triple Alliance War. In his public debates with Cecilio Báez beginning in 1902, Juan O'Leary not only challenged the prevailing condemnation of the tyranny of the Nationalist Period and the role of Francisco Solano López in leading Paraguay into a catastrophic war, but sought to reconstruct the narrative of the Paraguayan nation. Often written in a style that some would argue was "more akin to poetry than historical investigation,"⁴² the writings of O'Leary, as well as those of others from the Group of 900 and their immediate successors, were less concerned with historical accuracy than the construction of a coherent, collective "nationalist" historical narrative of the nation, complete with myths, heroes, foundational myth, landscapes, ethnic community, and future trajectory—an integral nationalism of which Paraguayans could be proud. Paraguayan history would henceforth be portrayed as one of nostalgia and heroism, based on national greatness and resistance to external aggression. The memory of catastrophic defeat would be transformed into a coherent narrative which would give meaning and direction to the past, present, and future.

First, the Nationalist Period was presented not as one of tyranny, ignominy, and poverty but as one of independent national development, which had brought peace, progress, culture, and industrial growth to the country. Politically, the period was portrayed not as one of suffocating tyranny and authoritarianism, as the liberal interpretation portrayed it, but of national autonomy, development, and harmony, a golden age of Paraguayan greatness, when "the nation attained a level of prosperity unprecedented in its history and an intellectual blossoming unrepeated to the present."⁴³ As an extension of this, defeat in the Triple Alliance War was rescued from national catastrophe and transformed into heroic defense and inevitable but glorious defeat against a powerful international conspiracy; the Paraguayan people were portrayed as the heroic defenders of national sovereignty, a defeated but unvanquished people, in the epic history of the nation.⁴⁴

Second, the three rulers of the nationalist period were rescued and elevated to the position of symbols of the nation. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (1814–1840) was portrayed as the father of the nation, who had saved Paraguay from enforced incorporation into Argentina or Brazil and laid the basis for Paraguay's independent state-led development, "a revolutionary dictatorship whose primordial aim was the creation of a world in which the American man was sovereign, with effective control over his destiny."⁴⁵ Likewise, Carlos Antonio López (1840–1862) was portrayed as "the true builder of the nation,"⁴⁶ who consolidated Paraguayan independence and developed the young nation into a strong regional power. Finally, the figure of Francisco Solano López (1862–1870) was rescued from almost universal vilification for his alleged tyrannical and brutal excesses before and during the war, becoming a figure who embodied the codes, beliefs, and core values of the Paraguayan nation. In the words of Juan O'Leary, "he is a man and a people. He is a cause. He is, in a word, the personification of Paraguay."⁴⁷

Third, fundamental to this discourse was the rediscovery or invention of the foundational myth and the Paraguayan ethnic community. With no shared common ethnic descent (Paraguay is renowned as a cultural melting pot), the idea of the *raza guaraní* offered a myth of common ancestry, a common ethnic community with shared historical memories, traditions, and culture. Reflecting ideas clearly borrowed from José Vasconcelos of racial fusion and the Mexican *raza cósmica*, Paraguay's Guaraní roots were presented as the foundation stone of the nation rather than a reflection of barbarism or backwardness. The Paraguayan campesino, the mix of European and Guaraní, was portrayed as the personification of the race and hence the essence of the nation. Finally, as an extension of this, and intrinsic to this new nationalist discourse, was the exclusivity of the narrative in the form of the ongoing conflict between the *autóctono* (the intrinsic values of the nation) and the *exótico*, the foreign—whether European or liberal—and the externally imposed.⁴⁸ Paraguay, it was argued, was not only unique, but in constant defense of its core values, characteristics, and qualities of race, history, land, and language.

Within this, the Paraguayan woman was held as central to nationalist myth, the very symbol of the nation. She was the mother of the nation, the founder of the *raza guaraní*, the mother of Paraguayan warriors (*la madre de leones*), the symbol of self-sacrifice (*la residenta*), and, after the Triple Alliance War, the *kuña guapa* (hardworking woman) and *kuña vale* (valiant woman) who rebuilt the nation.⁴⁹ In this way, the heroic resistance of both men (in battle) and women (in war and reconstruction) was portrayed not just as historical fact but also as a national quality and an intrinsic part of national identity.

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The aim of the rediscovery of nationalism was twofold: to give a sense of meaning, direction, and place to a people devastated by war, and to challenge the prevailing liberal political order. It was therefore the Colorado Party in opposition that rapidly adopted this romanticized nationalism, assuming the role of the party of the marginalized peasantry, of the Guaraní race, and of the nation itself.

The Chaco War represented a watershed in terms of national identity and the political use of nationalism.⁵⁰ Increasing Bolivian incursions into what was seen as Paraguayan territory revived historical memory of Brazilian incursions and expansion and Paraguay's failure to defend its borders. The combination in the 1920s of the Bolivian threat; migration into the Chaco region, principally by Mennonites; and increasing missionary presence in the region led to a growing belief that the Chaco was a vital Paraguayan frontier. The war was therefore, once again, waged in defense of the nation against foreign designs, with nationalism providing the key motivation behind the Paraguayan cause. The passion and sacrifice involved in the successful defense of the frontier Chaco region rapidly, profoundly, and permanently reshaped Paraguayan perceptions of national identity and the nation.

The rise of nationalism, victory on the battlefield, and the perception of poor negotiating by the government during the peace talks led to the coup d'état of the war hero Coronel Rafael Franco in 1936, which put an end to the liberal period (1904–1936). The new coalition government was bound more by a shared passionate commitment to nationalism than by any political unity and was swift to rescue and glorify the figures, symbols, and events of the nationalist past. Central to this was the rescuing of the image (and even the physical remains) of Francisco Solano López, developing a cult of *lopizmo* (adulation of López) which was to remain at the core of Paraguayan nationalism. The previously dissident nationalist discourse rapidly rose to the status of official discourse based on national unity and the myth of shared race, land, and history, as liberal positivism was swept away. Henceforth, nationalism would be a central discourse and key political tool in government.

The civil war of 1947 between the government of Nicolás Morínigo and the Colorado Party on one side and the “revolutionary” alliance of Liberals, Communists, and Febreristas on the other resolved the political struggle for the ownership of nationalism. The Colorado Party successfully portrayed the conflict not as a civil war but as a struggle to defend the nation against elitist, foreign-inspired, *exótico* forces, a discourse that appealed especially to the peasantry. Victory in the civil war left the Colorado Party in a position to assume sole ownership of the nationalist discourse. Once in power, the Colorados sought to fuse nationalism with the identity of the party, developing the myth of not only a natural affinity but an indissoluble link between the Colorado Party and the people, claiming that “the Colorado Party is the Paraguayan people.”⁵¹

The longevity of the dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner was based to a great extent on an appropriate and culturally correct reading of historical and cultural traditions, discourse, and national identity. Stroessner built on the nationalist base that he inherited to convert it into not only a central ideological pillar of the regime but also a powerful mechanism of social and political control.⁵² Nationalism became the hegemonic political discourse of the regime, the party, and the state as he adapted and manipulated the narrative of the nation. Moreover, he astutely converted both the armed forces and the Colorado Party (the two central pillars of his regime) into central components of the nationalist narrative, raising them to the position of symbols and embodiments of the nation. Significantly, references to democracy, rule of law, national political reconciliation, and social reform that had previously been important elements in nationalist writings were dropped from this “authoritarian version” of nationalism.⁵³ Most importantly, Stroessner appointed himself not only as the “imperishable heir to the founding fathers”⁵⁴ but also as “interpreter of the heart of the soul of the nation,”⁵⁵ which enabled him not only to promote himself as the continuation of the historical line of (authoritarian) nationalist heroes, but also to select and promote history, myth, and identity according to political necessity.

Under Stroessner, history served the function of offering an idyllic and heroic version of the past, which was linked unbreakably to the present, reinforcing what Brezzo has termed “historiographical isolation” in which only nationalist history was promoted and other currents, exchanges, and ideas were limited.⁵⁶ Stroessner was therefore able to promote an exclusionary form of nationalism that legitimated any action, policy, or instrument—from repression to censorship—in the name of the defense of the national interest.⁵⁷ It was a discourse, reinforced through effective control of public education and the media, designed to inculcate continuity, tradition, unity, and national identity while masking a highly conservative and repressive regime.

Stroessner did not invent the nationalist discourse, but in mastering it so adroitly he managed to change it into a narrative that legitimized and celebrated both himself and the regime. In contrast, the opposition to the dictatorship was unable to

produce a discourse to successfully challenge Colorado nationalist hegemony. Instead it sought to create a more inclusive and progressive interpretation of the dominant narrative—emphasizing the role of state-led development, greater equality, and national sovereignty—which failed to find widespread popular support or seriously challenge the effects or content of the official hegemonic version.⁵⁸

The Transition from Authoritarian Rule

The overthrow of Alfredo Stroessner in 1989 by his erstwhile ally General Andrés Rodríguez led to a cautious transition to democracy: civil liberties and political freedoms were gradually introduced, a presidential election was held in May 1989, municipal elections were organized in 1990, and a new constitution was written in 1992. Furthermore, in 1991 Paraguay joined Mercosur, with its promise of breaking down trade barriers and above all ending Paraguay's regional isolation. Regional integration, the end of political isolation, and open politics should have led to challenges to the dominant discourse. Increasing globalization, especially in terms of culture and communications, modernization, and urbanization, undermined shared forms of community and made aspects of Paraguayan national identity based on tradition, defensive isolationism, and an organic link with the 19th century difficult to maintain. All of this suggested an imminent decline in the relevance, power, and resonance of official narratives of national identity.

Indeed, the final years of the dictatorship witnessed a growth in literature that contested official versions of history and identity in different ways and sought to analyze a complex and difficult rather than heroic and glorified past. Writers such as Miguel Chase Sardi, Branislava Susnik, and Helene Castres⁵⁹ challenged both the concept of the founding myth and the invisibility of indigenous history and identity in history and contemporary society, while Josefina Pla focused on Paraguay's forgotten black slave population.⁶⁰ Francisco Gaona, Domingo Rivarola, and Carlos Pastore published groundbreaking studies of the struggles for union rights, social movements, and land rights, respectively.⁶¹ Line Bareiro and Clyde Soto were among a growing number of women intellectuals who challenged official versions of the role of gender, while Benjamin Arditi and Jose Carlos Rodríguez analyzed the discourse, practices, and structures of the dictatorship.⁶² Guido Rodríguez Alcalá sought to challenge the nationalist myth by arguing that it created and replicated an authoritarian tradition,⁶³ while Helio Vera used humor to deconstruct the key arguments of the official versions of national identity, race, and history, most notably in *En busca del hueso perdido*. As the dictatorship weakened, historical analysis that challenged the official narrative began to thrive.

These themes were further developed after the fall of the dictatorship, with the emergence of an increasing body of work based on a more rigorous academic approach to issues related to national identity. Liliana Brezzo has very much led the field in re-evaluating the nationalist discourse, based on a historicist approach.⁶⁴ Likewise, Ignacio Telesca has undertaken groundbreaking research on colonial history, while Thomas Whigham has emerged as the leading authority on reassessing the causes and ramifications of the Triple Alliance War.⁶⁵ The role of education in sustaining the official discourse on national identity has been challenged by the comprehensive educational reform in 1994, which questioned the concept of homogeneity in identity and recognized and celebrated multicultural identities and the ethnic and cultural diversity of Paraguay.⁶⁶ Similarly, there has been an increased recognition of the contribution of previously ignored and marginalized indigenous groups and other minorities to cultural and ethnic diversity and identity.⁶⁷

Despite such developments, in general the political transition did not lead to any significant challenge, revision, or rejection of the nationalist discourse. Some of its elements were dropped by the Colorado Party as unwelcome reminders of past authoritarianism (especially Stroessner), but there has been strikingly little change in terms of the basic interpretation of Paraguay's glorious (authoritarian) past or widespread reassessment of the basic tenets of the revisionist historicism.

This is due to a number of issues. First, the Colorado Party has continued to dominate Paraguayan politics since the fall of the dictatorship. Indeed its sixty-year hold on power was not broken until the 2008 elections, and it then returned to power five years later in 2013. It still portrays itself as the party of the nation, as an authentic representation of the essence of national identity, as captured in its famous campaign slogan of 1996: "We are all Colorados." Far from being dead or irrelevant, nationalism remains a driving force behind Colorado discourse and identity.

Second, the discourse has not been challenged by opposition parties or movements, which have been largely incapable of offering a distinct, democratic, and nonauthoritarian alternative to the hegemonic discourse, unwilling to criticize the figures of the nationalist period, and unable to establish an alternative, more progressive interpretation of nationalism to challenge the romanticized, militaristic, and authoritarian discourse of the Colorado Party. The electoral program of

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President Fernando Lugo (2008–2012), who briefly broke the hold of the Colorado Party on political power, promoted policies of defense of national sovereignty, state-led development, welfare, and land reform, eulogizing certain aspects of the authoritarian leaders of the nationalist period. That the nationalist discourse has been adopted and adapted by the left, from Lugo to grassroots social movements, reflects the fact that nationalism remains an underestimated but key political characteristic of Paraguayan politics across the political spectrum. As Guido Rodríguez Alcalá wrote in 1987, “liberals, Christian Democrats, socialists, and the right in general all join in the choir that sings eulogies to authoritarianism.”⁶⁸

Third, the official discourse on national identity both sprang from and penetrated the Paraguayan subconscious collective memory. On a mundane, daily level this was perpetuated, especially under Stroessner, through the reproduction of what Michael Billig has termed “banal” or “spectacle” nationalism.⁶⁹ reflected in the plethora of plazas, street names, songs, sports teams, public holidays, statues, ceremonies, and memorials (and even shopping centers), which celebrate and integrate the (often violent) past and its heroes with the daily experience of the present. Over sixty years of distortion and mythification of history and the repression (at least until 1989) of deviant interpretations have led to a deep internalization of the discourse. The successful transformation of aspects of the public and official national identity to the private sphere goes far in explaining the durability of the national myth and narrative.

Fourth, nationalist discourse has shown a remarkable tendency to re-emerge in times of crisis. Between 1995 and his death in 2013, ex-general Lino Oviedo used persistent bouts of political instability and economic crisis to refashion the official version of nationalism into a more populist discourse, placing himself as the new “flag bearer of the poor,” the continuation of Paraguay’s great authoritarian leaders of the past.⁷⁰ This was no political outlier but a man who came extremely close to winning the Colorado Party candidature and national presidency in 1998 and made a significant impact on Paraguayan politics throughout the period with a vehemently nationalist discourse.

Perhaps the clearest example of the strength of latent nationalist sentiment came during the political crisis of 2012. In June, President Lugo was impeached by parliament in a process that was widely criticized both in Paraguay and abroad as highly questionable.⁷¹ The reaction in Latin America clearly caught the newly installed government of Lugo’s former vice president, Federico Franco, by surprise. Within a week, Paraguay had been criticized for its “constitutional coup” by almost every Latin American nation from across the political spectrum, and in an unprecedented move, led by Argentina, had been temporarily expelled from both UNASUR and then Mercosur. Instead of the desired effect of pushing those behind the impeachment towards compromise, the punitive action of Paraguay’s neighbors created an extraordinary nationalist backlash, as the press, the Colorado Party, and even the Liberal government united in a wave of defensive, nationalist outpourings against what was portrayed as foreign aggression and intervention against Paraguay. When a motion was proposed at the Organization of American States to expel Paraguay, the Paraguayan ambassador, Hugo Sagüier, retorted: “If you want to form a new Triple Alliance, go ahead. It won’t be the first time,”⁷² to the applause of many in Paraguay. The vehemence of the re-emergent nationalist rhetoric reflects that despite significant challenges to the nationalist discourse since the fall of the authoritarian regime, as well as the celebration of diversity, pluriethnicity, and inclusivity, the politicized version of national identity remains just beneath the surface and highly responsive to political manipulation during times of crisis.

Discussion of the Literature

The narrative of the Paraguayan nation was refashioned and redesigned over the course of the 20th century, complete with historical events, images, symbols, and landscapes. Retaining its roots in a romanticized discourse, it gradually evolved from a minority concern, a dissident discourse in the early 20th century, into an articulate and coherent narrative by the 1930s, complete with myths and storylines, national values and codes, icons, imagery, and landscapes. Constantly refined, adapted, and manipulated in accordance with political aims and imperatives, by midcentury it had become the dominant, hegemonic political discourse, providing the ideological foundations of Colorado supremacy and the regime of Alfredo Stroessner.

This would suggest that to a great degree the discourse is an invented discourse, selected, constructed, and fashioned by elites to create a common hegemonic system of signs, images, symbols, and values to unite the nation. It was a political instrument of control, which provided a high degree of legitimacy to (mainly Colorado) authoritarian governments—or as Eric Hobsbawm has argued, a conscious and deliberate exercise in ideological manipulation and social engineering for political gain.⁷³

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Nevertheless, since the transition to democracy, it has shown itself to be surprisingly resilient and flexible, and to a great degree able to withstand the pressures of regionalization, globalization, and democratization. The repressive apparatus of the dictatorship which imposed a unitary form of national identity has disappeared, and yet key elements of the narrative are still deeply held by many if not most Paraguayans. Such endurance and resilience would suggest that it is more complex than simply social engineering; discourse cannot be constructed from a historical and cultural void, nor simply imposed. Instead, as Anthony Smith has argued, “tradition, myths, history and symbols must all grow out of the existing, living memories and beliefs of the people”⁷⁴ and must resonate with shared historical memories, meanings, and culture in order to succeed. The Generation of 900 acted as what Anthony Smith has termed “political archaeologists rediscovering and reinterpreting the communal past in order to regenerate the community”;⁷⁵ they did not entirely invent the past, but embroidered, developed, and molded shared ideas in order to produce a coherent narrative of the nation that resonated among the majority of the people. This was then taken up by political elites to use for their own purposes, and reinforced especially under Stroessner to the extent that it became not only a hegemonic discourse but also a shared and widely internalized narrative which gave a sense of unity to the nation and legitimacy to the regime.

The shared memories and culture that such “archaeologists” rediscovered and that formed the basis of the subsequent historical revisionism were the shared experiences of the past: geographical and political isolation, the sense of cultural and ethnic difference exemplified in the prevalence of Guaraní, and above all the history of defense of the nation against foreign intervention and the catastrophe of the Triple Alliance War. It was these collective memories that combined to shape the development of national culture and society and create a strong sense of national identity. The hegemonic discourse of the 20th century was manipulated for political gain, but the fact that it clearly resonated among many Paraguayans indicates that it emerged from shared experience.

Paraguayans, like most populations, may be divided along many competing and complementary identities and cultures, which makes the concept of a single national identity complex. This does not mean, however, that the multiple identities and ways of being are not bound together by shared experience and by memory, narratives, and references that together are uniquely Paraguayan. It is the convergence of these shared national experiences of historical events, alongside an official, top-down, but also widely internalized narrative, that has created not only a sense of difference but also a deeply rooted idea of cultural identity and community.

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