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THE CRISES AND TRANSFORMATIONS
OF INVADED SOCIETIES: THE LA
PLATA BASIN (1535–1650)

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This chapter concerns the early years of invasion in the southeastern part of South America, specifically the vast basin of the Río de la Plata (sometimes called River Plate). Its scope includes all of Paraguay, as well as Tucumán and Cuyo in modern Argentina. How can we capture the essential characteristics common to the histories of these three areas?

Here, as in most other areas of America, indigenous societies that did not build strong centralized power structures, and that consequently lacked tributary or semitributary systems for the production and circulation of surpluses, faced Europeans for whom such systems were the essence of politics. In these cases European conquest did not mean a state takeover of an existing state, as in the Andes or central Mexico, but rather a long and arduous campaign to “pacify the territory” and build a labor-exploiting system amid native societies of drastically unfamiliar constitution. It was the difficulty of this process, from the European viewpoint, which attached the label “marginal” to such areas. (To some degree the formerly Inka-ruled areas of Andean Argentina, with their more complex native polities, formed exceptions.)

In broad strokes these commonalities create a common history. First, the Spanish found it necessary to overcome nearly every group through armed struggle. Although the presence of a few “allies” made part of the job easier, military conquest was still a difficult road for the Europeans to travel.

Second, the colonists devised numerous ways to extract surplus by controlling indigenous peoples’ labor. All of these systems were variations on obligatory “personal service” – that is, labor levies which crown officials could assign to favored Spaniards or to local industries and other applications. Theoretically the crown tried to hedge personal service with rules distinguishing “tributary Indians” and “tributary age,” but regula-

tion did not work as planned; for example, forced labor obligations fell on multiple members of the same family. In Paraguay and Tucumán, this system survived until the end of the colonial era.

A third common element among these colonizations is that *mestizaje*, or miscegenation, began quite early. “Racial” mixing pervaded the entire area covered in this study. The reasons were numerous and complex. Political reasons included the fact that some of the conquerors felt obliged to join the family networks of ethnic leaders. In Paraguay an additional motive was to accumulate a labor force based on women. Along all the frontiers, the scarcity of European women inclined men to seek out native mates. Finally, general poverty made it necessary for many of the newly arrived or their children to become small producers and peasants right away, thus sharing the life, hardships, and even the language of indigenous peasants, especially in Paraguay.

One of the most noticeable cultural outcomes of *mestizaje* was the peculiar case of bilingualism in Paraguay. This was one of only two American societies (the other being Haiti) where bilingualism was not exclusively the consequence of discrimination forcing subordinates to learn a European tongue. Only a little more than a century after the arrival of the Europeans, poor peasants, powerful “feudal” *encomenderos* and artisan townsmen – all regarded as Spaniards by their contemporaries – spoke Guaraní as readily as Spanish. Nevertheless we must not forget that this was a colonial situation. Without a doubt Guaraní was used only in certain spheres of social life, while other spheres, considered more important, were reserved for Castilian.

Finally, a general observation about sources and the indigenous “word”: Only rarely do we hear the direct voice of the natives. Usually native voices are heard through many filters, so that the original is almost completely muffled by a complicated series of transcription and translations. For example, in Córdoba one interpreter translated from Castilian into Quechua and another from Quechua into Sanavirón. Thus we can get some idea of the hazards that await us in the few documents that purport to give a “true” image of indigenous opinion. The rarity of words written directly by natives has to do with the low level of stratification in the indigenous society the Europeans found. The state’s agents rarely found native elites who could be readily trained as agents of indirect rule, and they did not create an intra-indigenous civil apparatus that generated its own papers. Even the missionaries made little effort to foster bicultural elites of the sort that elsewhere produced literate spokes-

men. The picture was somewhat different in Jesuit missions, where missionaries formed councils that did write letters and petitions (see Chap. 1).

THE EUROPEAN INVASION OF THE RÍO DE LA PLATA REGION AND PARAGUAY

The Guaraní were part of the large group of peoples who spoke languages of the Tupí-Guaraní linguistic family, which, before the European invasion, stretched from Amazonia to the delta of the Río de la Plata. There were differences among the many groups, but the lack of serious archaeological studies makes it difficult for us to evaluate and compare these differences today. The Tupí inhabited the lower middle part of the Amazon Basin and much of the Atlantic coastal area from the Amazon to Cananea. From there to the present boundary of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, we find the Guaraní, who also occupied the great rivers of the inland plateau. The southern limit of Guaraní settlement was just below the Río de la Plata delta. Those groups who occupied this territory were called the “island Guaraní,” and their remains have been found as far south as present-day San Isidro, on the outskirts of the city of Buenos Aires.

The Prehispanic Guaraní

Thanks to their skill as canoe navigators, different Guaraní groups fanned out along the great waterways that wind through the tropical and subtropical forests of South America. Of special interest is the huge basin of the Paraná, which covers thousands of kilometers from the Chapadão dos Veadeiros to the Atlantic. The tributaries that create this giant river system run eastward from the flanks of the Andes; as we see later, these valleys formed important corridors for both native mobility and Spanish incursion. The semisedentary slash-and-burn type of agriculture, which allows cultivation to combine with travel, and the prophetically motivated quests influential in Guaraní indigenous culture, accentuated native movements across this landscape. The Chiriguanos, closely related to the Guaraní, went as far as the spurs of the Andes in the course of their westward migrations.

The Guaraní lived in the multifamily houses (*malocas*, actually *ocas*) typical of the Amazon, each housing several domestic units under the

leadership of a chief. Several of these *malocas* constituted a “village” (*taba*) led by a higher-ranking chief. These groups cemented their alliances through the marriages of their ethnic leaders (*mburuvichá*), thus knitting a network of political alliances that could become quite extensive.

As in many stateless South American societies, the leader was usually polygamous. This reinforced his capacity to establish political alliances and gain access to the labor force of his *tovajá* (brothers-in-law). During peacetime he was an arbitrator within his community. His power increased enormously during wartime and tended also to acquire a markedly religious or prophetic character. As among other peoples of the tropical forest, one of the central sources of leaders’ control lay in their generosity, which was based in turn on their ability to operate at the center of various circles of reciprocity and on their ability as public speakers.

We also frequently encounter shamans (*pajé*) – men knowledgeable about illness, medicine, and weather forecasting. A gifted *pajé* could rise to the status of *karai* – that is, a “great shaman” known beyond his community and licensed to lead major feasts. A *karai* could attract a political following and even threaten the political control that the ethnic leaders had over the village. Warfare and an elaborate ritual complex of revenge on captives, including cannibalism, were the essence of political conduct.

Subsistence was based on several varieties of corn (*Zea mays*), manioc (*Manihot utilissima*), beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*), and squash (*Lagenaria vulgaris*). Villagers also grew cotton, peanuts (*Arachis hypogea*), and *yerba mate* (*Ilex paraquariensis*). *Mate*, drunk as an infusion, was gathered during the prehispanic era and probably was a ritual item, as was one kind of tobacco. People domesticated the muscovy duck (*Cairina moschata*); early references to “chickens” (1519) probably refer to chickens introduced by the Europeans, even when they seem to refer to the “Araucanian hen” (*Gallus inauris*), but there are not many detailed studies.

Spaniards called the cultivation system *roza*. The men slashed and burned a section of forest, which women then planted. This system required settlements to move about in order to accommodate the long fallow periods needed for vegetation to regenerate. Hunting and fishing were complementary activities of primary importance. Agricultural productivity was fairly high; in Paraguay two annual crops of corn were the

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norm. Spaniards preferred to settle near Guaraní territory to take advantage of this abundance.

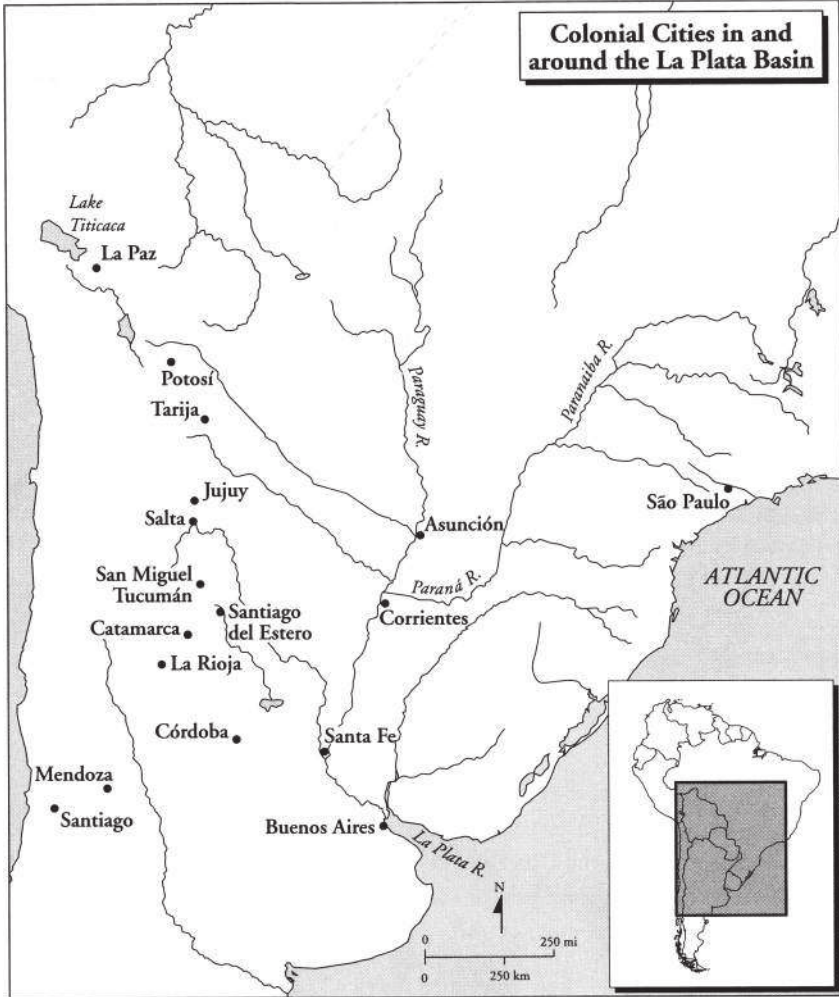
The European Invasion

Senior captain Juan Díaz de Solís was the first Spanish navigator to reach the banks of the Río de la Plata, and he gave it its misleading name ‘Silver River’. Díaz’ expedition sailed up the river to the mouth of the Uruguay and was defeated by natives in 1516. Among the survivors was Alejo García, who, pressing on inland with a Guaraní band of migrants, became the first European to see the Andes. Another, Francisco del Puerto, proved very useful to the next European navigator, the Venetian Sebastian Cabot. Cabot reached the Río de la Plata in 1527 and went as far as the Carcarañá River (now Santa Fe), where he established Fort Sancti Spiritus. Two years later the natives attacked and burned down the fort. The survivors immediately returned to Spain.

Fired up by fantasies aroused by Pizarro’s arrival in Seville in 1534, Don Pedro de Mendoza signed a crown pact to make a new attempt to conquer the Río de la Plata. His extravagant and motley expedition (apparently he had more than 1,200 men) included a man we may justly consider the first authentic chronicler of La Plata, the Bavarian Ulrich Schmidl (or Schmidel), author of a celebrated *Chronicle* that was published in German in 1567. Pedro Hernández, the chronicler of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, also sailed in Pedro de Mendoza’s fleet.

The first attempt to found Buenos Aires took place in 1536. A native siege forced some of the expeditioners to flee up the Paraná to the site of Cabot’s fort, where they set up camp. Juan de Ayolas and Domingo Martínez de Irala were in this party. This was the starting point for those who founded the city of Asunción del Paraguay, next to the hamlet of Lambaré, in the land of the Carios – a Guaraní group. Asunción was the first stable Spanish city in the region and the “mother of cities” from which all later expeditions would depart, both up the Paraná River and downstream, or south, to the point where it empties into the Río de la Plata (see Map 14.1).

Asunción spearheaded a quick growth of “cities” – actually small outposts – through the Guaraní lands. Early ones were Ciudad Real del Guayrá (today the site of the Itaipú Dam in Brazil) in 1557, and Villa Rica del Espiritu Santo, first founded in 1577 and again in 1589, at the confluence of the Ivai and Corumbati rivers, which cut through the



Map 14.1

Paraná plateau. Finally in 1593 Rui Díaz de Guzmán established the city of Santiago de Xerez on the Mbotetey River near Paraguay. About 80 leagues away lay Santa Cruz de la Sierra, founded in 1558 by Nufrio (or Ñuflo) de Chávez in the foothills of the Andes. This was part of an attempt, which failed, to find a direct route to the silver-mining hub of Potosí and thus end the isolation of the Spaniards in Asunción.

Bandeirante activities destroyed and depopulated most of these cities.

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Bandeirantes were Portuguese adventurers who led expeditions of mestizos and Tupí Indians looking for other Indians to capture and enslave. They were active from the beginning of the seventeenth century to the fall of the so-called province of Mbaracayú on the River Jejuy in 1676.

Downstream along the Paraná, or south of Asunción, Santa Fe de la Vera Cruz was established by Juan de Garay in 1573 near the remains of the old Cabot fort. Buenos Aires was founded again in 1580, Concepción del Bermejo in 1585 (in an effort to establish easier communication with the Peruvian Tucumán road), and San Juan de Vera de las Siete Corrientes in 1588. All these Spanish towns were creations of the restless “young men of the land,” the mestizos of Asunción, who were born of Cario-Spanish unions in the early years of colonization.

Early Interethnic Relationships (1537–1555)

A traditional theme of studies of Paraguay – which led to a triumphalist historical literature of dubious value – is the so-called alliance between the Spanish invaders and the Carios of Lambaré after a Spanish victory. This alliance undeniably existed, but it must be viewed in the light of the considerations outlined later in the chapter.

The Carios, accepting defeat at the hands of the Europeans, were obliged to ally themselves with the victors against the Guaycurú, a warring group of Chaqueño indigenes. It appeared at first that the Guaraní of Lambaré had gained a powerful ally, with whose help they defeated their Chaqueño enemies several times and took large numbers of prisoners. But, of course, they did not know that their new allies had come to stay and would keep on increasing their demands.

The local people handed over women as a sign of recognition of the alliance (as they had among themselves) and in exchange received Spanish gifts – mainly iron hatchets and fish hooks, extremely valuable tools in that setting. Some individuals came to possess more than seventy women, and the average number, so we read, was ten women per Spanish man. Women in fact constituted an accumulation of labor power. First, the woman worked for the Europeans – as they had for their Indian husbands, or so Spaniards reported – weaving, carrying burdens, or tilling the soil. In addition women also gave Spaniards access to the labor of their male relatives, as women’s fathers and brothers were traditionally obligated to “help” their sons-in-law and brothers-in-law. The Spanish claimed these women as theirs to profit by, as well as for sexual relations.

This resulted in the early, intense process of ethnic mixing that produced the mestizo “young men of the land.”

Europeans, aspiring to be “big men,” renowned for ability to collect and redistribute wealth, rapidly became involved in concentric webs of reciprocity with the Indians; but the difference from tradition lay in the attitude of these new and powerful relatives if an Indian should fail to fulfill his part of the bargain. The so-called Aracaré rebellion is the event that best illustrates the different expectations that the Spaniards and the Carios brought to the alliance. In 1542, a few years after the founding of Asunción, Spaniards went north in search of a direct route to Peru, which they were obsessed with finding. Aracaré was the chief of a group from the Jejuy River, north of Asunción. When Aracaré suddenly refused to continue serving the expedition and retreated without violence, the Spaniards had to return to Asunción. The governor, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, ordered his second in command, Domingo Martínez de Irala, to bring the Guaraní leader to justice for his “rebellion.” Martínez de Irala ordered him hanged, and this was soon done. The outcome was predictable: two “brothers” of the dead chief, Tabaré and Guacaní, led an attack against the Spaniards to avenge him and square accounts. Once defeated in battle, they made peace and Tabaré was pardoned.

What is the most plausible interpretation of these events, and what do they tell us about the Spanish-Guaraní “alliance”? First, one fact must be stressed: Aracaré did not rebel against the Spaniards; he simply refused to serve them. Why did he refuse? Because the Spaniards, bypassing the accepted practices of the indigenous people, were abusing their allies. They required men to serve during expeditions inland in jobs reserved for women, and they made them hand over provisions without giving them anything in return, sometimes acting forcibly. The Guaraní allies had ceased to be warriors and had become “slaves” or “women.” One Guaraní “brother-in-law” of a Spaniard, refusing to carry a burden for the Europeans, said on that occasion “that they shouldn’t give him that load because he did not use them so, and that if he had to carry something, then they should give him arms since he was going to war, and not clothes or things like that.”¹ Tabaré himself said, according to a witness, “you can see that we are already women of the Christians since

¹ This quotation and the one that follows are both taken from document number 49/945, fols. 245 and 248, from the Colección Gaspar García Viñas (copies of the Archivo General de Indias), located in the Biblioteca Nacional of Buenos Aires, Manuscript section.

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we carry burdens like women do.” That is, the Spaniards were no longer acting like allies but like “masters” of the Guaraní. Cabeza de Vaca’s violent response in sentencing the Guaraní leader for the “crime” of not wanting to help the invaders during an invasion had a clear objective: to put things in their “right” place, forcing the Indians to serve the Spaniards, one way or another. Thus it was no alliance, at least not a reciprocal or symmetrical one. Scarcely 3 years after these events, most of the Guaraní groups in the region were in open rebellion against the Spanish, and the latter managed to end the revolt only after considerable fighting.

In a word, there was in fact an “alliance” between the Carios of Asunción and the Europeans, but the new arrivals quickly violated the terms of alliance. Given the context we have just described, it could not have been otherwise. Spaniards converted the early reciprocal arrangement of gifts and counter-gifts into a sharply asymmetrical relationship. Indians slowly came to realize that the Spaniards did not share their ideas about the “alliance.” When this discrepancy produced reactions, even nonviolent ones, the Spanish response was brute force, thus opening the way to a more open, undisguised domination.

Toward the end of 1555, Governor Martínez de Irala put aside political fictions about alliance and decided to “share out the land,” giving the first *encomiendas* to “well-deserving” colonists in Paraguay.

The Era of the Encomiendas

Encomienda was a far-flung colonial institution under which whole native populations or villages were granted in trust to chosen colonists, along with the privileges of taxing and governing them, and the responsibility to defend and Christianize them. It took a royal decree to grant an *encomienda*, and it constituted the highest form of crown patronage. The first round of *encomiendas*, granted to 320 individual colonists, affected somewhere between 20,000 and 27,000 Indians, according to various documents. These Indians were forced to pay tribute to their new Spanish lords, and in May 1556 Martínez de Irala issued the first ordinances on the actual tribute administration of *encomiendas*.

Encomienda was a trusteeship over people rather than an entitlement to land. Paraguayan *encomiendas*, like those of Tucumán and Cuyo, were based exclusively on personal service – that is, they extracted rent in the form of labor, not in kind. In fact the crucial element that dis-

tinguishes this marginal region from the nuclear areas of central Mexico and the Andean empire (where tribute came to include payment in goods) was the dominance of personal service within the framework of the *encomienda*. It was a tax payable in sweat. This feature was also characteristic of nearly all the other marginal areas, from the Yucatán to Paraguay.

Right from the beginning of the institution we can distinguish two different types of *encomienda*: *encomiendas mitayas* (from the Quechua word *mit'a*, literally 'turn') and the *encomienda* with *yanacunas* or *originarios*. *Encomienda mitaya* entitled a Spanish colonist to "his" Indians' personal service by turns. The word *mitayo* mean 'a person subject to, or carrying out, a *mita* obligation.' *Mitayos* were to keep living in their own villages while serving in rotation on the Spaniard's lands or doing other tasks. Sometimes the products of their service were also called *mita*.

The terms *yanacuna* and *originario* applied to Indians who lived and worked on the lands of their Spanish lords, with or without their families. *Encomienda* uprooted them from their native communities, as in the *naborías* of the Antilles. The word *yanacuna* also comes from Quechua; in Inka-era usage it applied to all servitors separated from their communities, including high-status specialists, but in the colony it acquired a connotation not far from bondage.² The Paraguayan usage of the word *originario* differs sharply from its Andean homonym, which referred not to *encomienda* status but to standing within indigenous polities. The term *originario* was more common in Paraguay, while *yanacuna* was more often used in Tucumán and Cuyo.

Chronologically it seems likely that the use of *yanacunas* or *originarios* existed even before Martínez de Irala legalized the sharing-out of native labor (*repartimiento*) in 1555. Let us look at the sources of this special social condition.

One factor that led to the *originario* system arose as a consequence of the Spanish-Guaraní alliance. Relatives of the Spaniards' Guaraní women came, as was customary, to "help" their brothers- and fathers-in-law. They were often forced to stay on the Spanish farms and to live away from their native villages from then on. Another more obvious origin lay in raids. The Spanish were in the habit of going out to raid Indian

² *Yanacuna*, though a plural form in Quechua, was often treated as singular in Spanish. When the word is used in its colonial Spanish sense, we allow the Spanish plural *yanacunas*.