

# Fortín Boquerón: a conflict landscape past and present

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## **Abstract**

Similarly to the First World War, the lesser known Chaco War, fought between Paraguay and Bolivia (1932-1935), is a conflict characterised by the excesses of twentieth century 'supermodernity'. The physical and emotional traces of the Chaco War are numerous, yet academic studies have previously concentrated on the latter's military history as the centre of their attention. It is the aim of this paper to introduce the potential for an archaeological and anthropological analysis of the Chaco War, thereby using Fortín Boquerón as a means of exemplification. Many of the *fortines* or military posts, which during the years of conflict constituted crucial focal points in the Chaco landscape, have survived into the present day. Fortín Boquerón represented the setting for one of the most legendary and gruelling battles of the war in question. Partially restored and turned into a tourist attraction throughout the course of the past twenty years, it has now evolved into an invaluable site of interest for the multi-disciplinary investigation techniques of modern conflict archaeology.

**Keywords:** Archaeology. Chaco War. Conflict landscape.

'Supermodernity' in the form of industrialised warfare during the First World War has shaped the twentieth century. With horror man had to realise that he was no longer in control of himself or the machines he had created. All of a sudden 'the dream of reason' had produced monsters (González-Ruibal 2006: 179) and had turned into a global nightmare of 'excesses' and 'supermodern exaggeration' (González-Ruibal 2008: 247). Never before had humans created and destroyed on such a scale. Whereas at the beginning officers proudly posed on top of enormous piles of empty shell cases, reality soon hit home. Industrial warfare and the abominable conditions of the battlefield of the First World War stripped the soldiers of their humanity and turned them into instruments for killing and maiming. The quest to dominate science failed miserably and shattered illusions of a glorious super-modern mechanised world.

González-Ruibal notes that 'supermodernity', as well as modernity is characterised by destruction as much as production but that the former is often overlooked (González-Ruibal 2008: 248). He furthermore states that 'modernity is an inherently destructive process (González-Ruibal 2006: 195). Yet, in its most destructive form supermodernity also creates. This is particularly true in situations of modern industrialised conflict. Both local and foreign industrial production is intensified to supply the armies of the countries engaged in armed conflict. Modernity in the shape of industrial conflict results in the creation of a material culture of war, which includes obvious objects such as uniforms, weapons and ammunition. It also makes up a material record of less transparent war related objects including personal diaries, photographs, war memorabilia, tourist souvenirs, and trench art. Industrialised conflict furthermore creates physical places (museums, monuments, towns), social events (commemoration practices) and mental realities (personal and collective memories). All of these are set within a variety of landscapes, which themselves are 'cultural artefacts' of modern conflict (Saunders and Cornish 2009: 4).

Whereas armed confrontation prior to 1914 undoubtedly had an effect on the landscape, damage was generally limited to the

geographical boundaries of the battlefields. The technological advances in industrial warfare employed during the First World War took the impact armed conflict had on the landscape to a new level, and in this sense reveals that 'War is the transformation of matter through the agency of destruction, and industrialized conflict creates and destroys on a larger scale than at any time in human history' (Saunders 2002: 175). Before the outbreak of the First World War the landscape of northern France and Belgium was dominated by picturesque villages and fertile farmland. By 1918 the annihilative force of total war had turned the pastoral idyll into a landscape of devastation and human tragedy (Saunders 2010: 65). Humans had lost control over their own technological creations and the calamitous effects of supermodernity were visible everywhere: in the vermin and disease infected trenches, the barbed wire entanglements, the millions of shells mercilessly piercing earth, trees, and human flesh, and the countless body parts scattered in a sea of relentless mud. In less than five years the war had completely destroyed and re-shaped social realities and sensibilities, generating an enormous and lasting impact on the world.

'The war to end all wars' merely set the stage for a century marked by the 'failures of supermodernity' (González-Ruibal 2006: 256). From 1932-1935 the Gran Chaco in the centre of South America became the setting for one of the most bloody and obscure wars of the twentieth century and South America's first 'modern' conflict (de Quesada and Jowett 2011: 3). Although Paraguay eventually claimed the disputed territory, there was no real winner on either side. With around 100,000 fatalities in total (excluding the indigenous victims), the war had left the two already poor nations in an even more critical financial condition.

Opinions remain divided regarding the reasons for going to war over the Chaco Boreal or central Chaco, a vast and semi-arid lowland plain covered in impenetrable bush and grassland covering the north of modern day Paraguay. Whereas Bolivia based its legal rights over the area on territorial regulations dating back to the Spanish colonial rule, Paraguay claimed ownership over the territory through its

current occupation and exploitation of the area. During the 1920s, tensions were fuelled between Paraguay and Bolivia by international parties due to speculations (that were later refuted) over possible oil sources in the Chaco. For both landlocked countries (Bolivia having lost its coastal province to Chile in the War of the Pacific, 1879-1883), possession of the Chaco and the Paraguay River constituted the only access to the Atlantic Ocean. During this time the Paraguayan government invited Canadian and later Russian Mennonites to settle and farm the central Chaco in an effort to reinforce its human presence in the disputed area (Ratzlaff 2009: 20). The Mennonites are an evangelical free church that originated in the Low Countries of northern Europe during the sixteenth-century Reformation. Throughout the previous centuries persecution and restriction of religious freedom forced them to emigrate continually. The seclusion of the Chaco, and the privileges promised to the incoming Mennonites by the Paraguayan government sounded encouraging to the hard-working religious people. Thus, a small delegation of Mennonites travelled to the Chaco to inspect the area for its crop production potential. As the expedition took place during the rainy season, the rich green grasslands and shimmering water of the lagoons looked very promising. Unaware of both the devastating months of drought that would challenge their survival in the Chaco to the extreme and the territorial disputes between Paraguay and Bolivia, the Mennonites finally moved from Soviet Russia into the heart of another conflict zone.

When war finally broke out in 1932, Paraguay and Bolivia were both largely pre-industrial and 'pre-modern' nations, in the Western understanding of the term. Paraguay was an agricultural nation primarily made up of Guaraní-Spanish mestizo farmers. The country's economy was weak and its infrastructure limited. At the start of the war Paraguay's army counted roughly 4,000 men equipped with outdated weaponry. The Bolivian soldiers, who were predominantly Quechua and Aymara indigenous people from the Altipano who generally worked on large estates or in mines. Bolivia's military forces were three times the size of that of its enemy and, with its German trained officers, far better prepared for war. In preparation

for conflict, Bolivia had signed a deal worth £3,000,000 with British arms manufacturer Armstrong-Vickers, which, due to the former's financial restrictions, was eventually reduced to £1,250,000. With Chile and Argentina eventually denying Bolivia passage through their ports, the land-locked nation had to turn to the port of Mollendo in Southern Peru. A third of the military equipment ordered never arrived in sufficient quantity or quality and a substantial part of the freight simply 'vanished' upon arrival in Peru (Hughes 2005: 318). Most weapons that did arrive in Bolivia consisted of old and often dubious leftover matériel from the First World War (Pendle 1967: 26). The same weapons and horrors of industrialised warfare, which had already claimed countless lives on the battlefields of the First World War almost two decades earlier, were now about to be unleashed on indigenous and Spanish-Mestizo Amerindians thousands of miles away in the remoteness of the Chaco.

The Chaco itself was predominantly inhabited by native groups, who suddenly found themselves in the middle of an industrial conflict that brought them alcohol, disease and serious mistreatment at the hands of the Paraguayan and Bolivian military (Harder Horst 2010: 288-289). Yet, the indigenous people of the area proved indispensable in the conduct of the war. They were used as guides in the unknown territory, and as workforces for digging trenches; many men, women and children were murdered for fear of espionage (Capdevila et al. 2010; Harder Horst 2010; Richard 2008). Although the majority of Bolivian soldiers were of indigenous origin as well, they and the Paraguayan army considered the native people of the Chaco 'creatures without a soul' that could be shot without hesitation (Heinz Wiebe pers. comm.). Furthermore, many indigenous groups were uprooted by the intrusion of the Paraguayan and Bolivian armies into their native territories (Capdevila et al. 2010; Harder Horst 2010; Richard 2008). Although the indigenous landscape had by no means been a peaceful idyll before the arrival of the soldiers (with frequent warfare between different indigenous groups), what had primarily been a hunter-gatherer landscape was suddenly turned into a contested landscape of conflict not only between two opposing

armies but also between colonisers (Paraguayan and Bolivian state), the colonised (indigenous people) and the Mennonites, colonisers themselves whose newly acquired territory was suddenly being invaded by the militaries. In the eyes of the Bolivian and Paraguayan armies, as well as the Mennonites, nature had to be dominated, resulting in the creation of a landscape of occupation. In the case of the military, this landscape of occupation was furthermore a landscape of conflict and destruction. Just as the agricultural fields of Belgium and France were turned into muddy battlefields during the First World War, 'the insect-infested trenches, the din of artillery bombardment, lack of water, the cries of the wounded, and the smell of rotting bodies offered a 1930s South American parallel to the Western Front between 1914-18' (Breithoff 2012: 152; for the Western Front see also Eksteins 1990:146, 150-1; Saunders 2003:128-29; Winterton 2012: 229-24). Together with the Mennonite introduction of Christian faith and fenced pastures, the militaries imposed themselves onto a landscape that had up until then been mainly lived in by indigenous people. The result was a hybridisation of the Chaco that is still evident in the landscape, material culture, language and cultural practices of its present-day inhabitants (Breithoff 2012: 148). Similar to the First World War's better-known Western Front, the multi-faceted nature of Chaco War has produced 'highly sensitive multilayered landscapes that require a robust, multidisciplinary approach' (Saunders 2010:45-46).

Nonetheless, academic research has primarily focused on the military history of the war and personal accounts (English 2007; Farcau 1996; Verón 2003; Querejazu Calvo 1975; Seiferheld 2007; Ynsfran 1950; Zook 1960, to only list the most obvious ones). Only recently have scholars addressed the indigenous and Mennonite experience of the conflict and its consequences (Capdevila et al. 2010; Harder Horst 2006, 2010; Klassen 1993; Ratzlaff 2009; Richard 2008). However, the incredible wealth of material culture generated by the industrial forces at play and the war's physical imprint on the landscape seem to have been ignored until now. Yet, the complexities of 'supermodern' landscapes need to be studied employing a theoretical framework and investigative techniques derived from archaeology, anthropology, material culture studies, art history, museum studies, cultural

geography, art history, tourism studies, and military history. modern conflict archaeology does not only focus on excavating sites and on revealing what is hidden in the soil as it is equally interested in what survives above the ground. Although an archaeology of places of recent conflict can involve actual excavations, which frequently deal with human remains, digging is only a part and often impossible due to local political concerns.

In Paraguay, where access to military records is restricted, multidisciplinary modern conflict archaeology allows to move beyond the mere collecting of artefacts, listing of battles, weapon types, war logistics, and the collecting of empty shell cases to reveal the physical traces of conflict and to disclose the human experience of warfare (Saunders 2004, 2007, 2012; Schofield 2005; Schofield et al. 2002). As a detailed study of the material and cultural impact of the Chaco War on landscape and people would surpass the scope of this article, I will provide a brief overview of one very particular and highly important type of conflict landscape that survives in the Chaco today: the *fortín*.

*Fortines* are military posts, which were generally reinforced with trenches and bunkers and often served as battlefields. During the 1920s both Bolivia and Paraguay began building *fortines*, which soon became central focal points in the Chaco landscape. In a conflict where the two protagonists were subjected to serious economic restrictions and the supply of any available material was hindered by the lack of infrastructure, local natural resources, and especially trees, played a key role in the construction of *fortines*. The different types of Quebracho trees were extensively used in the fortification of bunkers and trenches throughout the war. Snipers were furthermore surprising the enemy by firing from wooden platforms positioned in tree tops (Farcau 1996: 61, Sarmiento 1979: 69). Trees, and most notably their trunks, also provided a natural protection from enemy artillery fire (Sarmiento 1979: 73). The most precious natural resource, however, was water. The serious shortage of the latter meant that the progression of the war was ultimately dictated by the respective armies' access to and control of water sources in the Chaco. In a landscape where months pass without a single drop of rain and temperatures rise to 50°C, finding a potable water source is vital. Similar to the

situation in the Italian Alps during the First World War it was not the enemy rifle or grenade that posed the biggest threat to a soldier but the natural environment. Yet, whereas the men stationed in the mountains had to endure freezing temperatures and snowstorms at extremely high altitudes (Balbi 2009: 281), the Paraguayan and Bolivian troops had to face the hostile bush and heat of the Chaco. The Bolivian indigenous soldier was used to the colder conditions of the Altiplano, and struggled in the desert-like temperatures. Military historian Adrian J. English labeled the central Chaco as ‘one of the most unattractive places on earth’ and a ‘waterless hellhole’ (English 2007: 17). To the soldiers the latter was a monotone ‘green labyrinth’ of thorns and vermin, in the monotony of which they were at constant risk of getting lost (Sarmiento 1979: 71). It was an alien and evil place in which the lack of water claimed more lives than enemy artillery. In the face of nature man was powerless and his rifles and grenades became worthless. It was thus the presence of lagoons and potable water reached by digging wells that dictated the location of the various *fortines* and the survival of the soldiers.

*Fortín Boquerón* is arguably the most famous and best preserved military post comprising a lagoon that still survives in the Chaco landscape today. Founded by the Paraguayans and then briefly captured by the Bolivians, the military post was finally taken back by the Paraguayans on 29 September 1932. After a twenty-one day long battle and more than 7,000 casualties, war was officially declared between the two nations. In his detailed study on the military operations of the Chaco War Bruce Farcau describes the make-up and strategic position of *Fortín Boquerón* as follows:

Boqueron comprised a handful of adobe huts located in the heart of an isla of heavy woods surrounded by open grassland with a few gnarled trees. The fortin was constructed in the shape of a blunt arrowhead pointing southwest toward the Bolivian outpost of Yucra, and with its forked tail aligned roughly north and east, measuring approximately five hundred meters in length. The place was fortified by Jordan and Santanella with a line of trenches reinforced with barbed wire entanglements and clusters of sharpened stakes around the perimeter. Lanes had been cut through



the surrounding bush to the north and to provide interlocking fields of fire for automatic weapons. Machine guns had been set up in platforms in the trees to give them improved observation, and chapapas (bunkers reinforced with earthworks and quebracho log walls) housed key strongpoints. The jugular of the fortin was the well left by the Paraguayans and two others dug by the Bolivians, as there was no other source of water for miles in any direction [...] The heart of the fortin was composed of the few Paraguayan pahuichis (mud and thatch huts), which had been turned into officers' quarters, aid stations, and supply bunkers' (Farcau 1996: 46)

FIGURE 1: Map of Paraguay with location of Fortín Boquerón (©author)



Reaching *fortines* was not an easy endeavour during the war. The long foot marches to the different military posts often took their toll on the soldiers. Countless men never reached their destination as they got lost in the bush where they died of thirst and disease. The

few roads that had been hacked through the dense vegetation often became impassable during heavy rainfall and the mules and *aguateros* (water trucks) used for the transportation of equipment and water risked getting stuck in a sea of mud.

Although a lot has changed since the 1930s, getting to the *fortines* still poses a small challenge today. The Chaco landscape is dotted with historical sites that date back to the war but visiting them depends largely on local weather and road conditions. The *Ruta Transchaco*, the motorway connecting Asunción to the Bolivian border via the Chaco, remains the only paved road in the region. Despite the lack of funds and the isolated location of a large majority of *fortines* tourism, and especially 'battlefield tourism', is on the rise in the Chaco. Local Mennonite guides take both national and international visitors to the various war sites, providing the tourists an experience similar to that on the battlefield tours along the Western Front in Belgium and France (Saunders 2004). Opening up old battlefields to the public both raises questions about cultural heritage and conservation, and constitutes challenges as to how to deal with sites that have witnessed recent human atrocities (Olivier 2006; Harrison and Schofield 2010).

Unlike other less well known military posts, *Fortín Boquerón* is located at a close distance to the Mennonite colony of Neuland. Large parts of the site are now situated within a thorn forest consisting of dense bush, shrubs, cacti, and scattered trees surrounded by large patches of open grasslands. Trails have been hacked to allow access to major places of interest. The centre of the site has been cleared and is now a large open space. The lagoon, which served as a vital life line to the fighting soldiers lies hidden in the mosquito infested bush. It acts as a silent reminder of the horrors of industrial warfare, disease and thirst that both armies had to endure during the Battle of Boquerón.

Entrenched for three weeks on end, the Bolivian soldiers gradually ran out of supplies and most crucially water. Rotting bodies contaminated the little water available to those who were still alive inside the military post (Sarmiento 1979: 71). The nearby wells used by the Paraguayans were also running dry and the soldiers were

exhausted. The Bolivians finally surrendered on 29 September and the victorious Paraguayans stormed the fortification that had so long resisted their attacks. Inside the *fortín* they were met by the excruciating sight and smell of rotting bodies covered with maggots and filth. Injured soldiers looked up to them with 'eyes too dry to tear' and the Paraguayans could not believe that these 'scarecrows' were operating the weapons that killed so many of their comrades (Farcau 1996: 60-61). 'These poor animals', Farcau states, 'were not the monsters the Paraguayans had pictured crouching behind their machine guns. He continues:

The defender's pitiful appearance brought home to the Paraguayans that the Bolivians, their enemies had actually been facing the same enemies all along: thirst, hunger, and the fear of a sudden death, or worse yet, a slow lingering one. One by one the Paraguayan soldiers offered a packet of cigarettes, a canteen of water, or a crust of bread, which the Bolivians accepted with hands trembling with fear, humiliation, and hunger. Then, one by one, they all fell to crying, Bolivians and Paraguayans alike. They cried for the men they had killed, the friends they had lost, and for themselves, helpless pawns torn from their comfortable little lives and hurled by titanic forces into this hell. For a moment the war stopped' (Farcau 1996: 61).

Today, a lone grave located inside the old military post, stands as reminder of human compassion and friendship in a war between brothers. Marked with a little commemorative plaque inscribed with the names of two army generals, the grave holds the remains of a Paraguayan and a Bolivian soldier who became friends during the war and requested to be buried next to each other. The names on the plaque and the story associated with them give not merely a face to the deceased but they also represent a human side to the destructive nature of industrial war. Two ribbons in the national colours of the two enemy countries are tied together around the memorial plaque, emphasizing the fact that during the war the soldiers were not always enemies. They were human beings, brothers from neighbouring countries, who were forced to fight each other in the most

inhumane way and inhospitable territory in a war whose purpose must have often escaped their full understanding. With their gaunt faces and haggard frames both the Paraguayan and Bolivian soldier resembled the gnarled trees under which they desperately tried to find some shade and make sense of their situation as Céspedes recalls: 'We lived, emaciated, miserable, the trees prematurely aged, with more branches than leaves, and the men, with more thirst than hatred' (Céspedes 1973: 18).

In stark contrast to the lone grave stand two military cemeteries located at a considerable distance from each other. Local Mennonites assert that one cemetery holds the unknown number of bodies of Paraguayan soldiers while the other one serves as the final resting place for an unidentified number of Bolivian men. Rows of a symbolic number of white crosses commemorate the nameless bodies with the Paraguayan crosses being slightly more decorated than the Bolivian ones. Thus, by maintaining two separate cemeteries and a clear distinction in the appearance of the commemorative crosses, Paraguay is making a strong political statement: 'even in death Bolivian soldiers remain enemies' (Breithoff 2012: 153).

FIGURE 2: Paraguayan Cemetery (©author)



Unlike most surviving *fortines*, *Fortín Boquerón* has undergone major conservation efforts (ABC Digital 2002). As a result, some of the stronghold's original features, such as the military bread oven, the military officials' 'casino' or mess hall, and the command headquarters hut have been rebuilt. A bunker has been restored to its former glory and a tree locally known as *samu'u*, or bottle tree due to its bottle like shape, has been hollowed out to show the visitor a reconstruction of a sniper's hideout. An original *aguatero*, an old Ford 4 automobile, which was used to transport water, is placed outside a small museum housing mostly weapons and other military equipment.

FIGURE 3: Reconstructed command headquarters hut (©author)



Outside the museum, wooden signposts marking places of interest are situated along a trail which takes the visitor around the site. Despite all human efforts the remains of the old military post is slowly being reclaimed by nature. The surviving trench system has been reduced to mere shallow ditches, overgrown with thorny bush and crawling with insects. Alongside the dust paths running

through the fortín, the occasional wooden post pokes through the shrub. Mennonite guide Heinz Wiebe explains that after the war local Mennonites dismantled the wooden military huts to use in the construction of their own houses (pers. comm).

FIGURE 4: Overgrown trenches at Fortín Boquerón (©author)



Over the past decades *Fortín Boquerón* has also received extensive attention from the Paraguayan authorities, the military, and the national media. September 29 has been declared a national holiday in celebration of Paraguay's victory over Bolivia at the Battle of Boquerón. Various memorials have been erected around the site's central space, honouring almost exclusively the brave Paraguayan soldier while the Bolivian men lie largely forgotten and the countless indigenous victims are completely ignored. This added commemorative layer to the site evokes the selective process of commemorative practices in the aftermath of armed conflict, and their political and social implications on society and the landscape (Kidd and Murdoch 2004, Nora 1989)

At a short distance from the wooden cross small circles of burned wood are reminders of picnics that people have inside the old *fortín*

on family days out, recalling the picnic sites along the old Western Front (Saunders 2001: 47). An unexploded shell that is sticking out of the ground nearby has been covered by a protective case. On a site that has become a place of commemoration and leisure, this corroding piece of modernity acts as a silent reminder of the misery and destruction caused by industrial war.

Finally, *Fortín Boquerón* and military posts in general form only one type of ever-changing conflict landscape that was generated by the forces of 'supermodernity'. The conflict landscapes of the Chaco are thus never inert and, like all landscapes, represent 'something political, dynamic, and contested, something constantly open to renegotiation' (Bender 1993: 276). Nevertheless, academic research seems to have been limited to a military history of military posts, focusing merely on military operations that occurred on site and ignoring the fortín's fate in the aftermath of the conflict. *Fortín Boquerón* thus serves as a striking example of a multi-layered conflict landscape, which shows the richness and diversity of the archaeological and anthropological potential of such places. Finally, the precarious and undocumented status of sites such as *Fortín Boquerón*, which once were the settings for South America's bloodiest war, make a recording of the latter both a necessity and a unique contribution to the field of Modern Conflict Archaeology.

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## Note

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## Resumo

Da mesma forma que a Primeira Guerra Mundial, a menos conhecida Guerra do Chaco, travada entre o Paraguai e a Bolívia (1932-1935), é um conflito caracterizado pelos excessos do século XX e sua 'supermodernidade'. Os traços físicos e emocionais da Guerra do Chaco são numerosos, no entanto, estudos acadêmicos apenas concentraram suas análises na história militar da guerra. O objetivo deste artigo é para introduzir o potencial de uma análise arqueológica e antropológica da Guerra do Chaco, baseando-se no exemplo do Fortín Boquerón. Muitos dos *fortines* ou postos militares, que durante os anos de conflito constituíram pontos importantes na paisagem do Chaco, sobreviveram até os dias atuais. Fortín Boquerón representou o cenário de uma das batalhas mais lendárias e extenuantes da Guerra do Chaco. Parcialmente restaurado e transformado em uma atração turística ao longo dos últimos vinte anos, Fortín Boquerón agora tornou-se um sítio valioso para as técnicas de pesquisa multidisciplinar da moderna arqueologia do conflito.

**Palavras-chave:** Arqueologia. Guerra do Chaco. Paisagem do conflito.