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The Ten Cents War: Chile, Peru, And Bolivia In The War Of The Pacific, 1879-1884

The Ten Cents War

Chile, Peru, and Bolivia in the
War of the Pacific, 1879-1884

Bruce W. Farcau



Synopsis

The Atacama Desert, a coastal area where the borders of Chile, Peru, and Bolivia meet, was a region of little interest in the late nineteenth century until European research on the use of nitrates in fertilizers and explosives rendered the droppings of millions of sea birds a valuable commodity. In a move that echoed the California Gold Rush, the three neighboring countries soon battled for control of the region. In 1879, a comparatively modern and powerful Chile seized Bolivia's coastal province, and a secret alliance between Peru and Bolivia soon led to a full-scale war, one which saw the employment of much new military technology. Using such new weapons as the breech-loading rifle, rapid-fire cannon, ironclad warships, torpedoes, and electronic mines, Chile quickly crushed the allied armies, but a guerrilla war would drag on for years. While the three armies fought over some of the most inhospitable terrain imaginable, from burning, waterless deserts to snow-clogged mountain passes at 15,000 feet, their governments bumbled and wrangled. In the end, the lure of easy wealth undermined the economies of all three nations and served no good purpose when the market for nitrates soon evaporated, leaving all three much poorer for the experience.

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Customer Reviews

"[i]n the works discussed herein. As a corpus these works are significant because they raise questions for future students of military-civilian relations...Such contrasts and comparisons make this body of work historiographically noteworthy as well...Each is a refreshing corrective to national versions that extolled the virtues of things martial, made nationalistic claims, and doted on the technicalities of military history, all the while ignoring the ugly side of war and its

aftermath...Smallman's *Fear and Memory* confirms this on a case-study level. Centeno's and Smallman's works complement each other neatly, as do Vale's, Whigham's, and Farcau's; and Brahm's, Rauch's, Arancibia's, and Sater's and Herwig's. _"-Latin American Review..."a valuable addition to the study of nineteenth century Latin American history."-South Eastern Latin Americanist..."interesting and well-written...the book provides a good introduction to the War of the Pacific, covering the political and economic aspects quite well...a good starting point for those interested in the war and Chile's nineteenth-century domination of the west coast of South America."-The Journal of Military History..."a very welcome work for anyone interested in the military history of the nineteenth century, as well as relations among Latin American states, on which the conflict continues to have an impact....does a very good job of examining strategic planning, campaigns, and a number of individual actions."-The NYMAS Newsletter"

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BRUCE W. FARCAU is a twenty-year veteran of the Foreign Service with numerous assignments in Latin America and Europe. He has published extensively on Latin American Military History and Politics.

Finally, a book about this conflict by an American author who combines modern scholarly methods with readable style! Bruce Farcau writes with knowledge, flair and compassion about his subject, sustaining remarkable objectivity throughout the book. Money, deceit, gallantry, violence, tactical and strategic brilliance and folly --- The War of the Pacific is a splendid microcosm of all the elements of military, economic, and political strategy, and Farcau does it justice. His analysis of the causes of the war is impeccable, without the cant found in many South American and European authors, or the dry didactic tone of academic dissertations. His humane and balanced treatment of the conduct of a war that includes the first combat on the high seas between ironclads, a major amphibious invasion, set-piece battles using modern weapons, and a protracted guerrilla war, is admirable. I recommend it most highly to any library, whether personal, academic or professional, that deals with South American issues. Farcau also discusses in some detail the relationship of U.S. and European internal politics and finance to this war, which may make it of interest to readers in other fields. Students of political science in a fractured world should read his discussion of the advantages --- and hindrances --- in war of an ordered democracy fighting against dictatorships and failing states. This is the only book (of several dozen) on the War of the Pacific over whose conclusions our Chilean and Peruvian officers have not quarreled. The price is somewhat daunting, but it is worth it.

I think this was a fairly good book from an impartial author. I can have some objections about

certain comments or the brief mention of some important aspects or the lack of a map but yet, I think this book makes a very engaging narrative of the history of this war. The motives of this war are controversial, but in order to really understand it, it is important to have a good background of the circumstances that triggered the war, so in this way we can see that it was not an aggression from Chile but a defensive position againsts treaties violations. The scenario was of mostly three recently independent countries, with their economies in bad shape but with Chile having the most robust economy, with Chile having the more stable political situation and with its neighbours sunk in corruption or in the case of Bolivia, with a situation near to disastrous, but more importantly, a territory in the boundaries of Bolivia and Chile that suddenly became very important, not only for the Guano but for its minerals. Added to this panorama, we must not forget the bombshell that was the secret treaty between Peru and Bolivia, which dragged Peru into the War, an utterly bad choice for Peru. There were notorious differences in military aspect as well, with the Allies having more troops but with Chile having the more prepared and skilful army. You can grasp how this war would develop just by reading the first naval engagements, when the Huascar (Peru's Ironclad) was attacking the elderly Esmeralda (Wooden Frigate) in the city of Iquique and with Arturo Prat as Captain. The Huascar shots, dozen of them, didn't hit the target forcing the Huascar to ram the Esmeralda. It was here, one of the dramatic moments of this war, that Captain Arturo Prat and Sergeant Juan de Dios Aldea leap aboard the Huascar, a heroic action that cost him his life. Prat is one of the greatest heroes we have, a young man who in an adverse situation like this never had the intention to surrender, and it was here by reading the book that you can truly appreciate this Captain's courage, totally inspiring and also emotional. Grau, the captain of the Huascar, took the time to send a letter to the Prat's Widows, a lofty gesture. To finish this war was another story. Despite Chile's advance, despite of having taken Arica, Tacna and even Lima, the Peruvians never accepted the terms of surrender, worsening their position of negotiation everytime Chile had to advance North to shut down the resistance. The problem with going to war, besides the pity of it, is that you can lose more than your pride in the process. Thousands of soldiers gave their life for the cause, and we only have gratitude for their effort. Chile is a peaceful country, with all its limits (including maritime boundaries) properly defined by treaties, whose only mission is to progress and grow, away from utopian dreams that have ravaged Latin American countries. This book is highly recommended, It would be ideal to have a Spanish edition as well. There is an excellent book about this war, included in the bibliography, from Gonzalo Bulnes, which is a three volumes book. I really hope to have time to read it but I also want to say that here in Latin America, we badly need something like Penguin Classics, which reprint old books and sometimes in an abridged version ---

that would be ideal for Bulnes book, so more people feel attracted to read about this important part of my country's History.

The book was excellent, but lacked any maps which are sorely needed or photographs which would have helped. The \$103 cost was not justified.

One of the little heralded wars of South America is the War of the Pacific. This war pitted Chile against the combined Armies of Bolivia and Peru. Chile (the Prussia of South America) defeated both nations in the first year of war and took the nitrate lands of both Peru and Bolivia. Then Chile invaded Peru and captured the capital. Why is Bolivia land locked? She lost her coastland to Chile in this war. Farcau does a good job detailing how Chile was organized better in finance and the military to defeat her neighbors who had a larger population. Control of the seas by the modern Chile Navy also had a drastic effect on the Allies (Bolivia and Peru). As detailed in a previous review, the author does a great job of relating the history of this war in a scholarly and readable format. One thing missing in this book is maps, which would have lent the reader an understanding of the geography of the war. I cannot understand why maps were left out. The book is a good read about a long forgotten war.

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