



# THE CHACO WAR

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Paraguay, it turns out, owes much to Russia. Thanks largely to a few dozen Russian officers, the country emerged victorious in an almost unwinnable war, and doubled its territory in the process.

The Chaco War (1932-1935) between Bolivia and Paraguay was the bloodiest conflict in Latin America, in which well-over 100,000 lives were lost. It was also the first air-war fought in South America. It is a war little remembered now. A key role in the hostilities was played by Russian and German émigré officers on the two warring sides. It was, in effect, a continuation of WWI on another continent.

For decades, Paraguay and Bolivia had bickered over the vast region of Gran Chaco. Both considered it as its own, yet neither risked an open confrontation. That was until 1928, when geologists claimed that this sparsely populated, impassable territory could be a source of oil.

Asuncion and La Paz (the administrative capital of Bolivia) were soon at each other's throats. And oil companies added literal fuel to the metaphorical fire. The sworn enemies Standard Oil (a U.S. company supporting Bolivia) and Royal-Dutch Shell (an Anglo-Dutch company backing Paraguay) saw great prospects in Gran Chaco.

The first clash occurred between a Paraguayan cavalry detachment and Bolivian police in August 1928. All-out war was prevented only through the intervention of the League of Nations. Four years later, however, the organization was powerless to do anything. On June 15, 1932, the Bolivian army launched a surprise attack on Paraguayan outposts in the disputed territory.

Tiny Paraguay seemed to have little hope against the far mightier Bolivia. Not only was the latter's manpower 3.5 times larger, but just 60 years previously Paraguay had endured a brutal war against Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina, which claimed the lives of up to 70% of its male population.

Moreover, the Bolivian armed forces had three times as much air power and an overwhelming advantage in terms of armored vehicles. The Paraguayans could not field a single armored vehicle against the Vickers Mk E light tanks and Carden Lloyd VI tankettes of Bolivia. Only in respect of artillery guns was a certain parity maintained.

In this dire situation, only a miracle could save the country, and one duly arrived in the form of several

dozen Russian officers who had left their homeland after the [Russian Civil War](#) and found a new home across the ocean.

One of the émigré officers, Lieutenant General [Nikolai Stogov](#), wrote: "There seems not to be a single area of military affairs that our Russian émigré officers in Paraguay have not contributed to in terms of know-how and experience."

Even before the conflict began, realizing the invaluable experience of the Russian officers, Paraguay's leadership actively engaged them in modernizing both the armed forces and the country as a whole. "Russian émigrés were a boon to Paraguay, which needed to restore its shaky economy. Bridges, roads, administrative buildings, barracks, etc. all started to be built. The country gradually came to life thanks to the help of Russian technical personnel," [said Russian](#) architect [Georges Benois](#), who visited Asuncion in the 1920s.

It was Russian advisers who insisted on adopting the Danish [Madsen machine gun](#), which the Tsarist cavalry had used in WWI. It was far more effective and reliable than the [Chauchat machine gun](#), which the French military mission gave the Paraguayans.

Thanks to the Russians, in 1932, Paraguay created its first cavalry division. In this regard, it outpaced Bolivia, where such a formation appeared only two years later. The Paraguayan cavalry was trained to carry out blitz raids on the enemy rear, and Major [Nikolai Korsakov](#) even translated Russian cavalry songs into Spanish to instill military spirit.

Meanwhile, 120 German officers had settled in Bolivia and were now serving in the national army, which had been remodeled along German lines and dressed in the uniform of the [Reichswehr](#). WWI veteran officer [Hans Kundt](#) was appointed commander-in-chief, arrogantly asserting that he would easily deal with the Russians (meaning the Paraguayan army).

At that time, 86 Russian émigrés were serving in the ranks of the Paraguayan armed forces. Despite their small number, most were officers with invaluable combat experience, and almost all proved their considerable worth in their respective area of expertise.

Having completed 13 reconnaissance trips to Gran Chaco, General [Ivan Belyaev](#) had vast experience as

both a cartographer of the region and an artilleryman. And as the head of the cartographic unit of the General Staff and adviser to the Paraguayan president, he was heavily involved in planning the offensive and defensive operations of the Paraguayan army.

Thanks to the deciphering of the Bolivian military codes at the very start of the war by the head of Paraguay's military intelligence, [Nikolai Ern](#), and Captain [Sergei Kern](#), the Paraguayan military secured an invaluable advantage. They often knew about the enemy's intentions before the Bolivian troops had even received their orders.

A major role in the organization of the Paraguayan air defenses was played by aviator Captain [Sergei Schetinin](#). Through his efforts, Bolivian aviation became far more potent. On his advice, the Paraguayans created dummy artillery, which the Bolivian planes wastefully bombarded.

The culmination of the Bolivian-Paraguayan (as well as Russian-German) Chaco War was the [second battle of Nanawa](#) (a suburb of Asuncion) in July 1933. In this operation, Kundt concentrated 6,000 of his Bolivian men against 3,600 Paraguayans.

Under the cover of German-crewed tanks, led by a detachment of flamethrowers, the Bolivians advanced on the Paraguayan army's positions. Thanks to the solid defenses set up by the Russian military experts (fortified areas equipped with mortars and machine guns, surrounded by minefields and barbed wire), eight enemy attacks were repelled, followed by a successful counterattack. The Bolivian army lost several tanks and around 2,000 men, against Paraguayan losses of just 448. Shortly after the failed operation, Kundt was removed from his post.

The following year, after several major victories, Paraguay finally gained the strategic upper hand. When its armed forces entered Bolivia, the latter turned to the League of Nations for assistance in concluding a peace.

Under the 1935 peace treaty, Paraguay received most of Gran Chaco, which almost doubled its territory. In an evil twist of irony, oil was discovered in the valley only 77 years later, in 2012.

The Paraguayans praised the Russian officers for their vital role in the Chaco War. The future president of Paraguay, [Alfredo Stroessner](#), who had served under General [Stepan Vysokolyan](#), had deep respect for both his commander and the entire Russian officer corps, calling them "people of honor."

After the war, many of these Russian émigrés received all kinds of awards, were proclaimed national heroes, and occupied high positions in the country. To this day, six streets in Asuncion are named after the six Russian officers who were killed in the Chaco War.

### **How Ivan Belyaev Became Juan Belaieff (1875–1957)**

Belyaev lost everything in his homeland after the Bolshevik revolution, so he moved to Latin America, chasing his childhood dreams – and became [Juan Belaieff](#), Paraguay's national hero.

Imagine your country just had a terrible civil war and the side you fought for lost. Your land is occupied by communists who killed your friends; you have nothing and are forced out to foreign lands. What would you do?

That's the question all the officers and soldiers of the anti-Bolshevik White Army had to answer in the 1920s, after losing in the Russian Civil War of 1918–1922. Some settled down in Europe or the U.S., becoming successful bourgeois. Those less successful had to work as butlers or taxi drivers; some succumbed to alcoholism or committed suicide.

But General Ivan Timofeevich Belyaev (better known as Juan Belaieff), a hero of World War I and old-school Russian imperial officer, had a far more impressive and adventurous fate than any other emigre. He [moved to Paraguay](#) and tried to build a second home for Russian émigrés there, at the same time studying the South American Indians and becoming their hero. How so?

"My fate was decided by a completely minor event," Belyaev wrote in his autobiography, *Notes of a Russian Exile*. "As a child, having a stroll with my aunt in St. Petersburg, I noticed a small book at a book market, with a picture of an Indian, named [\*The Last of the Mohicans\*](#)."

After reading that adventure novel and many other, far more serious, stories, touching upon customs and civilization of American Indians, little Belyaev completely fell in love with this theme, becoming interested in Indians for the rest of his life. "Each night I was praying for my Indians," he recalled of his childhood. Yet, it would take several decades and Russia's national disaster to make Belyaev actually meet Indians.

He had another career ahead of him – born to a family where all men were in military service, Belyaev

became an artillerist and devotedly served Russia.

By the time World War I began in 1914, Belyaev held a rank of colonel. When hearing the news that Russia had declared war on Austro-Hungary and Germany, he reacted simply: "Long live Russia, death to her enemies!" and headed to the front to fight.

"Artillery is a mother of a child who got sick," he used to say. "We are to watch our infantry close, listen to its pulse, being always ready to help it." Loved by his soldiers, Belyaev was a classic Russian officer of his time, conservative and brave.

At war, the colonel survived many dangers, but once – only by chance. A bullet came through his chest but didn't reach his spine or guts. Wounded Belyaev was transferred to a hospital near Petrograd, where he met [Empress Alexandra Fedorovna](#) and was promoted to general. After recovery, Belyaev headed back to the front-line.

In his memoirs, Belyaev admitted that despite the bravery and efforts of the Russian army, by 1917, Russia was too exhausted with the war, losing its best sons. "The last of the decent drowned in a sea of blood, the last impulse to fight burned out," he wrote. The chaos of revolutions made Russian people turn their weapons against each other – at first Belyaev refused to fight against Russians but then his monarchist views prevail.

The [White Army](#) lost the war. In the 1920s, Belyaev, as well as many other soldiers and officers, sailed away from the shores of Russia. Along with his family, he moved to Europe, but didn't stay there either. He decided to find a new home in Latin America.

In the 1920s, Russian émigrés in Paris could find a strange Russian-language newspaper called Paraguay, published in France by Belyaev. Each issue read on the front page: "Europe failed the Russian hope. Paraguay is a country to build a future in." The general called on his compatriots to go to Paraguay and help him to, basically, build a new small Russia there. As for him, he had already been living in Paraguay since 1924, and was known as, Juan Belaieff.

Why Paraguay? Even by Latin America's standards, that poor and underpopulated country was hardly a popular destination – but that's why the local authorities welcomed immigration. Ever since losing the

[Paraguayan War](#) of 1864-1870 to the alliance of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, Paraguay remained weak and lacked military force – and inviting some Russian officers was a good option for the government.

Belaieff, along with 12 other White Army officers, entered Paraguayan military service in 1924, joining the General Staff. His interests, however, lied beyond just military – in Paraguay he became a scientist.

Belaieff led 13 expeditions to the [Gran Chaco](#), a vast area in West Paraguay populated by indigenous [Maká](#) people. "They spoke their own languages and hardly communicated with the other Paraguayans," historian Boris Martynov, author of [Russian Paraguay](#), notes. Belaieff, fascinated by Indians since his childhood, immediately established close ties with them, helping with supplies and clothes, studying their ancient culture, opening schools and even theaters.

Paradoxically, the Russian officer became a bridge uniting the Maká with their more-Westernized compatriots. The Indians adored Belaieff, calling him the 'White Father'.

Even though he enjoyed his communication with the Maká, Belaieff had bigger plans. "I'd like to find a corner where everything sacred that created eternal holy Russia could be preserved, as Noah's Ark did during the flood until better times," he recalled. With his help, several Russian settlements were founded in Paraguay, but Russian migration to the country didn't become widespread, and internal conflicts condemned the idea of some kind of "new Russia" in Latin America.

Though disappointed, Belaieff considered Paraguay his second home and, along with many Russian officers, gladly supported it in the Chaco war of 1932-1935, when neighboring Bolivia attacked Paraguay. Wounded and infected with malaria, Belaieff could have died a dozen times – but he survived and his side, though outnumbered, prevailed, with the help of the Maká, who were loyal to Belaieff.

He never returned to Russia, living out the rest of his long life in Paraguay. When he died, the Maká transported his body to their area and kept it in a mausoleum, worshipping the spirit of the White Father as a deity. A fellow Russian émigré officer in Paraguay said to a friend about Belaieff: "We, perhaps, will be forgotten after we die, but not him."

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The [\*image\*](#) shows a colored drawing of a military telephone depot, by Juan Belaieff, dated 1935.



