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Borders in Blood: Wars and Boundary Making

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Continent of Edges: From Frontier to Boundary in South America
- **Chapter 2** Uti Possidetis and the Making of Territorial Claims
- **Chapter 3** Cartographers, Surveys, and the Lines That Matter
- **Chapter 4** War of the Pacific I: Causes and Nitrate Capitalism
- **Chapter 5** War of the Pacific II: Command of the Sea
- **Chapter 6** War of the Pacific III: Desert Campaigns and Occupations
- **Chapter 7** War of the Pacific IV: Diplomacy, Plebiscites, and Treaties
- **Chapter 8** The Chaco War I: Oil, Ecology, and the “Green Hell”
- **Chapter 9** The Chaco War II: Armies, Airpower, and Logistics
- **Chapter 10** The Chaco War III: Battles, Attrition, and Command
- **Chapter 11** The Chaco War IV: Mediation and the 1938 Peace
- **Chapter 12** The Acre Question: Rubber, Revolt, and the Treaty of Petrópolis
- **Chapter 13** The Leticia Incident: Amazonian Borderlands between Colombia and Peru
- **Chapter 14** Argentina and Chile: From Patagonia to the Beagle Channel
- **Chapter 15** Ecuador and Peru: From the 1941 War to the 1998 Brasília Accord
- **Chapter 16** Guyana, Venezuela, and the Essequibo Dispute
- **Chapter 17** Bolivia’s Enclosure: The Long Quest for a Maritime Corridor
- **Chapter 18** Local Lives: Indigenous Nations, Settlers, and Militarized Margins
- **Chapter 19** Building States at the Edge: Garrisons, Roads, and Customs Posts
- **Chapter 20** National Identity and Memory: Textbooks, Monuments, and Martyrs
- **Chapter 21** Intelligence, Technology, and Terrain: Practicing Border Warfare
- **Chapter 22** International Law and Arbitration: From Uti Possidetis to the OAS
- **Chapter 23** Economic Corridors and Resource Frontiers: Nitrates, Oil, Rubber, Lithium
- **Chapter 24** Integration and Friction: Mercosur, Infrastructure, and New Disputes
- **Chapter 25** Drawing the Next Line: Lessons on War, Diplomacy, and Territory

Introduction

Maps are not merely illustrations of geography; they are archives of conflict, compromise, and memory. In South America, lines that now appear fixed and inevitable were once elastic frontiers patrolled by militias, traversed by traders, and claimed by states whose reach often outpaced their means. This book examines how warfare—understood broadly to include armed campaigns, mobilizations, and the coercive threat that frames negotiation—shaped the boundaries that define the modern republics of the continent. It argues that territorial formation was neither a purely diplomatic act nor a strictly military achievement, but a dynamic process where strategy, law, and local experience converged.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were decisive. Independence fractured imperial jurisdictions and elevated the principle of *uti possidetis* into a guiding doctrine, transforming colonial-era administrative lines into the basis for national claims. Yet doctrine alone could not settle where rivers shifted, deserts expanded, or forests concealed uncertain frontiers. Surveyors and cartographers brought instruments and authority to the field, while railways, telegraphs, and steamships extended the logistical reach of states. Economic frontiers—of nitrates, rubber, oil, and, later, hydrocarbons and lithium—overlapped with political ones, inviting competition and, at times, war.

The War of the Pacific (1879–1884) epitomized this fusion of resources, strategy, and nation-building. A conflict triggered by taxation disputes and nitrate wealth became a test of naval power, desert logistics, and national resolve. Its outcomes—Chile's consolidation on the Pacific littoral, Peru's territorial losses, and Bolivia's enclosure from the sea—reverberated through subsequent decades of diplomacy and identity-making. The treaties and plebiscites that followed reveal how battlefield success required legal codification and international recognition before lines could be made to last.

Half a century later, the Chaco War (1932–1935) unfolded in a very different environment yet raised similar questions. In the thorny scrublands between Bolivia and Paraguay, rumors of oil and the realities of terrain made logistics the decisive arm. Airpower, motor transport, and modern staff work coexisted with shortages, disease, and extraordinary human endurance. The settlement that emerged through mediation did more than apportion territory; it recast national narratives, reshaped military institutions, and altered the internal geographies of both states.

Between and beyond these wars lay a constellation of border disputes and crises—Acre, Leticia, Patagonia and the Beagle Channel, the long arc of Ecuador–Peru,

and enduring claims such as the Essequibo. Some were resolved by arbitration, others by negotiation under international or ecclesiastical auspices, and a few by the implicit deterrence of mobilized forces that never fired. Each case illuminates the repertoire of tools—legal argument, cartographic evidence, plebiscites, and shows of force—through which lines were argued, drawn, and defended.

This book balances high politics and ground-level experience. Alongside campaign plans and diplomatic cables, it foregrounds the lives of indigenous communities, migrants, and soldiers who inhabited and patrolled frontier spaces. Forts and customs posts, schools and monuments, textbooks and maps—all became instruments for transforming elastic frontiers into bounded homelands. In tracing these processes, we attend to how national identities were made at the edge as much as in the capital.

The chapters that follow pair narrative history with thematic analysis. Early chapters map the legal and technological foundations of boundary making; the central sections revisit the War of the Pacific and the Chaco War in depth, integrating operations with diplomacy; later chapters widen the lens to comparative disputes, the social textures of militarized margins, and the institutional afterlives of conflict. The conclusion reflects on contemporary legacies—from integration initiatives and cross-border infrastructure to renewed frictions in resource frontiers—and on what South America's experience suggests about the global making of borders.

Borders in Blood is therefore not only a history of wars and treaties; it is a study of how states learned to convert victory into geography, and how peoples learned to live with the lines that resulted. By examining the interplay of strategy, law, and local life, the book invites readers to see the map of South America as the contingent, contested product of centuries of political and military struggle—an artifact still open to interpretation, and, sometimes, to change.

Chapter One: The Continent of Edges: From Frontier to Boundary in South America

South America, a continent of colossal proportions and stunning diversity, presents a geographical tapestry that has profoundly influenced its historical development, particularly the evolution of its borders. Roughly triangular in shape, broad in the north and tapering to a point at Cape Horn in the south, it is the fourth-largest continent, bordered by the Caribbean Sea to the northwest, the Atlantic Ocean to the northeast, east, and southeast, and the Pacific Ocean to the west. This vast landmass is a realm of dramatic contrasts, from the soaring peaks of the Andes to the immense lowlands of the Amazon.

The Andes Mountains form the continent's colossal backbone, stretching approximately 7,500 kilometers along the entire western edge, from Venezuela to southern Chile. These majestic mountains are a result of the Nazca Plate subducting beneath the South American continental plate, a process that has been ongoing for millions of years and continues to cause seismic activity and volcanic eruptions. This immense cordillera creates a formidable natural barrier, influencing climate, isolating populations, and historically channeling human movement and settlement. Within the Andes, one finds high-altitude plateaus, deep valleys, and some of the highest peaks in the Western Hemisphere, such as Mount Aconcagua in Argentina.

East of the Andes, the continent unfurls into vast lowlands and highland regions, primarily shaped by mighty river systems. The Amazon Basin, the world's largest drainage basin, dominates the northern part of the continent, covering about 40% of South America. The Amazon River, the largest river by volume globally, and its countless tributaries, irrigate nearly half of the continent. This immense rainforest, a region of unparalleled biodiversity, historically presented a dense, often impenetrable frontier, challenging both indigenous empires and later European colonial powers with its difficult terrain and disease.

Further south, the landscape transforms into other significant geographical features. The Gran Chaco, a vast semi-arid lowland region, spans across eastern Bolivia, western Paraguay, northern Argentina, and parts of Brazil. Known for its mix of tropical and subtropical dry broadleaf forests, thorn scrub, and savannas, the Chaco is a challenging environment, experiencing extreme temperatures and distinct wet and dry seasons. Its sparsely populated nature and difficult accessibility made it a classic frontier zone, often contested and ill-defined.

Adjacent to the Gran Chaco to the south are the Pampas, fertile low grasslands

covering more than 1,200,000 square kilometers across Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil's southernmost state. These vast plains, largely uninterrupted by significant hills, are characterized by a temperate climate and fertile soils, making them ideal for agriculture. The Pampas, while seemingly open, also presented their own form of frontier, marked by the fluid movements of indigenous groups and, later, the iconic gauchos, before being more formally integrated into national territories.

In the far south lies Patagonia, a geographical region spanning parts of Argentina and Chile. This dramatic landscape includes the southern portion of the Andes, featuring lakes, fjords, temperate rainforests, and glaciers in the west, and deserts, tablelands, and steppes toward the east. Patagonia's remote and rugged nature, with its cool and dry climate, has historically made it a sparsely populated "final frontier" in many respects.

Along the Pacific coast, particularly in northern Chile, lies the Atacama Desert, one of the driest nonpolar deserts on Earth. This plateau, wedged between the coastal Cordillera de la Costa and the Andes, is characterized by stony terrain, salt lakes, and a distinct lack of vegetation in its interior. The extreme aridity and harsh conditions of the Atacama have long posed significant challenges to human settlement and defined a stark, often resource-rich, frontier.

Before the arrival of Europeans, these diverse geographical features often defined the limits and interactions of indigenous societies. The Inca Empire, for example, at its greatest extent, stretched along the Pacific coast and Andean highlands from modern-day Ecuador to central Chile, and into parts of Bolivia and northwest Argentina. While the Inca were adept at integrating diverse cultures within their mountain-centric empire, their eastern expansion into the Amazon Basin was often halted by the dense rainforest and the resistance of indigenous groups who could retreat into its depths. The Inca's impressive road network, primarily focused on linking their Andean domains, underscored their mastery of mountain terrain but also the inherent difficulties of projecting power across vastly different ecological zones.

The arrival of Europeans in the late 15th century introduced a new, often arbitrary, layer to the continent's territorial understanding. The Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, brokered by Pope Alexander VI, famously divided the newly "discovered" lands outside Europe between Portugal and Spain. This imaginary line, drawn 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands, granted Spain rights to lands west of the line and Portugal rights to lands east. This seemingly simple solution profoundly impacted the future political map of South America, with the eastern bulge of Brazil falling into the Portuguese sphere, while the vast majority of the continent became Spanish.

However, drawing a line on a map in Europe was a far cry from establishing effective control on the ground in South America. The vastness of the continent, the formidable natural barriers, and the resistance of indigenous populations meant that colonial

"borders" were often more theoretical frontiers than precisely defined boundaries. These frontiers were fluid zones of interaction, conflict, and often incomplete Spanish or Portuguese authority.

Spanish colonial administration, primarily centered in the viceroyalties of Peru and New Granada, and later Río de la Plata, struggled to exert consistent control over vast and often inhospitable territories. Similarly, Portuguese expansion from the Atlantic coast of Brazil pushed gradually inland, often overlapping with Spanish claims in areas like the Amazon and the Gran Chaco. The notion of a "frontier" in South America, much like in North America, often referred to sparsely populated regions, largely inhabited by indigenous peoples, where the control of the colonial power was more claimed than truly effective.

In northern South America, the Amazon basin largely remained an untamed frontier, seen by colonial powers as a disease-ridden land to be claimed for resources and evangelization rather than extensive settlement. Missionaries, often accompanied by soldiers and settlers, made arduous journeys into the interior, establishing isolated outposts. Yet, the dense jungle and hostile indigenous groups frequently limited their reach, creating pockets of de facto indigenous autonomy or contested zones.

In the south, regions like Patagonia and the Gran Chaco also served as frontiers, albeit with different characteristics. While the Pampas were gradually settled and transformed into agricultural heartlands, the remote and often harsh conditions of Patagonia made it a slower, more challenging process of colonization. These frontier regions were not simply empty spaces awaiting European control; they were dynamic zones where indigenous societies continued to thrive, adapt, and resist, shaping the pace and nature of colonial expansion.

The colonial period, therefore, left a legacy of vaguely defined claims and often overlapping jurisdictions, particularly in the interior of the continent. The administrative divisions created by Spain and Portugal, though intended to demarcate spheres of influence, were frequently based on incomplete geographical knowledge and strategic ambitions rather than clear natural features or existing human settlements. This "fuzziness" of boundaries would become a recurring theme, laying the groundwork for many of the border conflicts that would plague the newly independent South American nations in the 19th and 20th centuries.

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