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## Paraguay As a Holy Land: From the Guarani Indians to Reverend Sun Myung Moon

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## Paraguay as a Holy Land: From the Guarani Indians to Reverend Sun Myung Moon

WRITTEN BY RONALD J. BROWN

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No country in the world better illustrates the fatal flaw of Christianity than Paraguay. Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam were founded to last for millenniums or for eternity. Their holy books stipulated who should rule society, what to eat and shun, what to wear, who should preach, what holidays to celebrate, where to go on pilgrimage, how to organize their economies, what law codes to follow, how to treat their spouses and children, who should take care of orphans, what rules should govern marriage and divorce, when and how to wage war, when to plant and harvest, and how to worship god. Their sacred books were elaborate and detailed blueprints for the construction of an earthly paradise.

But Christianity was fundamentally messianic. As Jesus so optimistically prophesied in Luke 21:32, “Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled.” But alas, when John, believed to be the last of the apostles to die, approached death, he realized that this prophecy had not come about, and Jesus had not returned. His successors, the bishops, patriarchs, popes, theologians, visionaries, heretics, reformers, and secularized utopians, were forced to invent out of whole-cloth the institutions, beliefs, traditions, hierarchies, rituals, and social structures of a Christian society.

Paraguay, one of the most forsaken, impoverished, and isolated countries on the face of the earth, has both hosted and welcomed a host of these visionaries seeking to establish a perfect human society. Inspired by the native Guarani Indian legend of a lost “Land Without Evil,” Jesuits founded autonomous Indian missions, a German migrant dictator founded an empire, English and Australian Marxists established their earthly paradise, German Nazis carved out a refuge, persecuted minority Ukrainian Orthodox, Bavarians, and French Basques sought refuge, Russian, Canadian, and American Mennonites found salvation, and Japanese Unificationists labor to build a New Garden of Eden. For some five centuries Paraguay has been viewed as an earthly *tabula rasa* where any utopian vision could be tried out. You can’t sit around waiting for the Second Coming forever. Sometimes you have to do something.

### The Land-Without-Evil Myth of the Guarani Indians

The Guarani Indians remain a prominent feature of Paraguay even if the country, like all its Latin American cousins, has been ruled by Europeans since the days of Columbus. But even while claiming to be a civilized Western country, imposing the Spanish language on the Guarani and other Indians, and encouraging the Catholic Church to stamp out paganism, and relegating the

Indians to rural slums or the northern deserts, the Guarani have deeply marked the history, identity, and the unique sense of *Paraguayidad* (Paraguayanness) as developed by a long line of Paraguayan historians and especially poets, story tellers, myth-makers, and musicians. Like most national identities, the origins of the Paraguayan identity lie in the world of myth.<sup>[1]</sup>

The roots of this Paraguayan national myth of *Paraguayidad* can be found among the native pre-Hispanic Guarani Indians who believed that somewhere in the lands of what became modern-day Paraguay there existed a Land-Without-Evil, *yvy marane'y* in the Guarani language. Their shamans were aware of where it lay but would only lead their people there in the end times. The thesis of this article is that this search for the mythical land of abundance and immortality shaped the rising sense of Paraguayan identity as an isolated land of refuge, attracted scores of idealistic immigrants in search of a utopia, and continues to inspire the Guarani, all Paraguayans, and new immigrants until today.

In her book, *The Land-Without-Evil: Tupi-Guarani Prophetism*, Helene Clastres described the Guarani search for the Land-Without-Evil as a religious search for an earthly paradise, an instrument for survival of a small tribe inhabiting a dangerous world, and a rallying cry in battles against other tribes and later the Spanish conquerors.<sup>[2]</sup>

Since the Guarani had not developed writing, what we know about the first inhabitants of the lands between the Paraguay and Parana Rivers comes from later Spanish explorers and missionaries. In addition to the central myth of the Land-Without-Evil, the Guarani had a central legend of a Great Flood, worshipped the Great Mother *Nandesyguazu* and the Great Father *Nanderuvusu*, respected the importance of shamans as intermediaries between the gods and humans, practiced a form of local democracy in tribal leadership, practiced ancestor worship, performed ritual dance, and practiced cannibalism. Most of them were still in the hunter-gatherer stage of development when the first Spanish penetrated their lands.

Early Spanish and Portuguese explorers, missionaries and administrators were especially struck by the ancient Guarani myth of the Land-Without-Evil and its influence on the native population. In 1549, soon after the arrival of the Spanish, an explorer recorded a mass migration of some 10–12,000 people to the Peruvian Andes. It was reported that only some 300 souls survived this great migration.<sup>[3]</sup> Colonial-era maps even included a place called Lago Xarayes at the head of the Paraguay River where this fabled paradise was allegedly located.

The geographic isolation of what eventually became Paraguay also played a role in fostering this myth among the Guarani. As the Spanish expanded their empire into the southern half of Latin America (Peru, Argentina and Bolivia), the Portuguese Empire likewise began expanding southward and westward from its seacoast enclaves along the Atlantic Ocean (Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and Salvador). The lands that are today Paraguay soon became recognized as a sort of neutral zone between the expanding empires. At times both empires attempted to seize them, but other than the local Indian population who were valuable as slaves, the area offered little of value, especially when compared to the rich silver mines of Bolivia, the fertile coastal cattle, wheat, and corn farmlands of Argentina, and the rich sugar lands of Brazil.

The Guarani have continued to play a formative role in the construction of a unique Paraguayan identity. Unlike Brazil, Venezuela and Argentina where the few Indians were exterminated, or Mexico and Peru where their large populations were ruthlessly assimilated into Spanish religion, language and culture, in Paraguay the *raza Guarani* figure prominently in the national narrative. The prevailing school of *Paraguayidad* elaborated by Helio Vera, Juan E. O'Leary, J. Natalicio Gonzales, Manuel Dominguez and others idealizes these Noble Savages as the true founders of the nation.

### The Jesuit Utopia among the Guarani

The first step in the merging of the Guarani Indians and the invading Spanish and Portuguese was taken by the utopian Jesuit missions along the Parana River. Following the Spanish and Portuguese conquests of South America in the early 1500s, Jesuit Catholic missionaries began to enter this neglected area to found missions. These missionaries were inspired by the Jesuit theologians Jose de Acosta and Roberto de Nobili, who insisted that the Indians had souls, were capable of understanding the saving message of the Church, and should be spared slavery. Pope Paul III also declared in 1537 that the Indians were capable of understanding the Catholic religion and therefore could not legally be enslaved. In Mexico, the great Dominican missionary Bartolome de Las Casas in his book *Memorial de Remedios para las Indias* (1516) also argued that the Indians should not be enslaved and should be protected in autonomous colonies.[\[4\]](#)

La Santísima Trinidad del Paraná Mission was famed as the largest and most successful of all the Jesuit missions. At its height in 1750 it contained over 5,000 residents, a herd of 5,000 cattle, thousands of horses, sheep, goats and oxen, and extensive fields. The massive central plaza in front of the church measured 656 x 426 feet and was equal in size to the plazas of most Spanish colonial cities. Twenty-one stone residential blocks housed 5,000 Guarani Indians representing some 30 different clans. Stone houses for the Indian chiefs, *caciques*, faced the square, and the houses of the residents were arranged in streets leading away from the square.



**Photo:** Author at the ruins of La Santísima Trinidad del Paraná Jesuit Mission

Today the ruins of the central church loom at the far end of the square. Its base, 278 x 141 feet in size, is three-fourths the size of New York City's St. Patrick's Cathedral. It was crowned by an 80-foot high central dome designed by Italian architect Giovanni Battista Primoli (1643–1747). On the right side of the church was housing for the 12 priests, and beyond that were workshops where carpenters, blacksmiths, wagon makers, musical instrument craftsmen, clockmakers, sculptors and other skilled workers labored. The mission had a philharmonic and a 200-child choir. The mission foundry produced many of the iron and bronze bells for South America. There was also a second smaller church as well as an orphanage and a house for widows. Surrounding the town were the fields and grazing lands that supported the settlement.<sup>[5]</sup>

Helene Clastres wrote in *The Land-Without-Evil* that the Jesuit missions were not brutal campaigns to stamp out the pagan worship of the Guaranis and force the teachings of the Catholic Church down their throats. Rather, she argues, the missions were a unique blending of the ancient Indian

myths, practices and beliefs with traditional Catholic teachings. The Jesuits believed that the Guarani myth of the Great Flood, the Great Mother and Great Father gods, the importance of shamans, the democratic character of tribal leadership, ancestor worship, ritual dance, and even the story of the Land-Without-Evil were firm roots upon which the teachings of the church could be grafted. The Great Father, for example, could be portrayed as the Christian God the Father, while The Great Mother could be developed into the Blessed Virgin Mary, much like the Mexican Aztec goddess Tonantzin evolved into Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Jesuits assumed many of the functions of the tribal shamans and even permitted them to preserve the bones of deceased missionaries in the same fashion as they preserved the remains of their dead shamans. And, Clastres argues, the Jesuits reinterpreted the Guarani myth of the Land-Without-Evil from a terrestrial paradise to be discovered into the Christian concept of an earthly paradise to be constructed. Gauvin Bailey wrote in *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America* that Jesuit missionary work was not a “conversion” from one faith to another, but a “conversation” between two faiths.<sup>[6]</sup>

This multi-national order of Spanish, Portuguese, Belgian, French, German, Italian, Bohemian, English and Polish Jesuits established 30 such missions in southern Paraguay, eastern Argentina and western Brazil. The local Indians used their language, preserved much of their tribal leadership, enjoyed a large degree of local autonomy, and received respect for their traditions. By 1767 there were 30 thriving missions with a population estimated at between 100,000 and 150,000 in a territory larger than the state of California. But there was a pressing need for Indian slaves, and the missions’ failure to force the Indians to use Spanish, the presence of armed Indian militias in the missions, and a rumored fear that the Jesuit Province of Paracuaria, which included most of the missions, was about to declare independence, alarmed the Spanish and Portuguese authorities. They pressed their respective kings, church authorities, and the Vatican for the abolition of the missions. This resulted in the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767, the suppression of the order in 1773, and the end to one of the most interesting New World experiments in transforming Paraguay into an earthly utopia.<sup>[7]</sup>

The founding, flourishing, and eventual destruction of the missions was noted by European observers and continued to infatuate Europeans. Richard O’Mara wrote in “The Jesuit Republic of South America,” “This strange evangelical crusade infatuated great minds during its century-and-a-half of existence, and ever since.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Already while this unique utopian experiment was under construction, observers closely followed its progress. Antonio Ruiz de Montoya (1585–1652), a Jesuit born in Lima, Peru, wrote extensively on the missions in Paraguay. He wrote books on the Gurani language and published a Gurani language catechism in 1640. Father Montoya was the Jesuit who led some 30,000 Guaranis on a great migration inland to escape Spanish and Portuguese slave traders in 1631.<sup>[9]</sup> This migration would later inspire the film “The Mission” starring Robert de Niro. Father Montoya travelled extensively in Spain and Europe garnering support for the missions.<sup>[10]</sup>

An Italian Jesuit Lodovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750) published *El Cristianismo Felice nelle Missioni de’padri della comp. de Giesu nel Paraguai* in 1754, and it was quickly translated into French, German, and English. The French Jesuit Pierre-Francois-Xavier de Charlevoix published

his monumental *Histoire de Paraguay* in 1756, and soon thereafter editions appeared in English under the title *A Relation of the Missions of Paraguay* (1759), as well as in Latin, German, and Spanish. He praised the missions as an ideal society, calling them “Christian republics, models of which the world has never seen, and which were founded in the midst of the most ferocious barbarity.” Charlevoix’s pupil Francois Marie Arouet de Voltaire, no friend of the Catholic Church, wrote in *Candide*, in 1759 when the debate over their continued existence was at its height, “they [the Indians] had arrived at what is perhaps the highest degree of civilization to which it is possible to lead a young people.” “Laws were there respected, morals were pure, a happy brotherhood bound men together, the useful arts and even some of the more pleasing sciences flourished: there was abundance everywhere.” The missions were “a triumph of humanity capable of expiating the crimes of the conquistadors.” Other writers who furthered the belief in the lost Indian paradise of Paraguay include the French philosophers Montesquieu, Buffon, Raynal, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

The destruction of the missions led to still more literature lamenting the demise of this paradise. Martin Dobrizhoffer (1717–1791), a German Jesuit missionary, returned to Germany after 18 years in Paraguay, where he wrote *An Account of the Abipones, an Equestrian People of Paraguay* in 1783. Another missionary, Florian Bauche (Pauche) (1719–1778) from Austria, wrote a lavishly illustrated, 1,144 page book titled *We Went There Full of Hope and Happiness and We Returned Saddened and Embittered* describing the lives, customs, dress, traditions, and lives of the Indians on the missions; but it was only published in full in 1944. The life and work of Father Baucke was the object of a book by Andreas Kobler in 1870 titled *Florian Bauke: ein Jesuit in Paraguay*. Another Jesuit priest who witnessed the destruction of his work was Jose Manuel Peramas, who wrote an article in 1793 titled, “The Republic of Plato and the Guarani” that drew an analogy between the missions and Plato’s ideal Republic.

These accounts of the missions contributed to the growing account of the lost paradise that once flourished in the wilds of Latin America. The explorer Aime Bonpland described the land between the Paraguay and Parana Rivers as “the Garden of South America.” Paraguay historian James Preston used as an epigraph for his history, *Latin America*, “Paraguay could have been a paradise.” Another who wrote glowingly of the Jesuit experiments was Franz Keller, whose highly illustrated *The Amazon and Madeira Rivers: Sketches and descriptions from the notebook of an explorer*, was published in London in 1874.

### The Imperial Dreams of President Francisco Solano Lopez

The very existence and survival of Paraguay was not obvious even under the Spanish. Asuncion, like its sister town of Montevideo in Uruguay, was founded to ensure a Spanish presence on the eastern bank of the Paraguay and La Plata Rivers as Portugal and later Brazil pushed ever more southward and even considered these two rivers as the natural border between the Portuguese and Spanish colonial empires. Following independence both Argentina and Brazil sought to add Uruguay and Paraguay to their respective nations.

Paraguay achieved its independence in 1811, and to avoid entanglements with either of its aggressive neighbors it withdrew into total isolationism. None of its neighbors recognized it as an independent nation, and dictator Jose Gaspar de Francia, who ruled from 1814 to 1840, did not have diplomatic relations with the nations of Europe or the USA. Poor, underdeveloped, backward, and fearful of its aggressive neighbors, Francia ruled with an iron fist and in total isolation.

With the death of Francia in 1840, president Carlos Antonio Lopez took power and ruled until 1862. Lopez ended Paraguay's isolation and sought and received recognition from England, France and the United States as well as other countries. He undertook an aggressive modernization campaign, and in 1853 dispatched his son Francisco, who was also his Minister of War, Vice-President and successor, to Europe to find investors, foreign aid, modern technology, advisors, and settlers.

Francisco received an especially warm welcome from French Emperor Napoleon III, who invited Paraguay to participate in the Exposition Universelle of 1855 as a sign of Paraguay's membership in the family of nations. Under the theme of *latinité*, the cultural unity of all the Latin-derived cultures of Spain, Portugal, Romania, Italy and Latin America, the French Empire sought to counteract the growing influence of England and the United States in Latin America. To expand France's influence on the continent, Napoleon supplied the Lopez regime with iron foundries, a navy, military advisors, engineers, and South America's first railroad. In pursuit of *latinité* France even installed Maximilian, a French puppet, as Emperor of Mexico while the United States was distracted by its Civil War. Emperor Maximilian was eventually overthrown and executed, but the term "Latin America" endures until today.<sup>[11]</sup>

Francisco was fascinated by France, Paris, Napoleon III, and especially the figure of Napoleon I, writes R. B. Cunningham Graham in *Portrait of a Dictator*.<sup>[12]</sup> Both Napoleon I and Francisco were upstarts, and at 5 feet 4 inches Francisco was also short. Both were from the fringes of the countries they came to dominate—Napoleon was from the island of Corsica and Francisco was of mixed Spanish, and Indian (some argue African as well) blood, and both were inspired by "a lust for power, but power with all the pomp of military rank, medals and crosses, gold sashes, silver helmets decked with plumes."<sup>[13]</sup> Graham writes that Francisco returned to Paraguay with "visions of military glory and a desire to copy the exploits of Napoleon."

When Francisco Solano Lopez followed his father to power in 1862, he set about to make Paraguay "the strongest State in South America," to make Asuncion a Paris on the Paraguay River, and to make himself the Emperor of South America, along with his Irish-born Parisian courtesan named Eliza Lynch who bore him five sons and a daughter but whom he never formally married.

As inspired as Francisco was with the image of Napoleon I, he also harbored a deep resentment against the Spanish elite who had ruled Paraguay for centuries and their descendants who still ruled the continent. In her delightful novel on the life of Eliza Lynch, *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch: A Novel*, Anne Enright wrote that that Francisco had a fierce hatred for "the old Spanish aristocrats, with more surnames trotting after them than they had horses." Lynch was snubbed by Asuncion's cultural and economic elite as well as the Catholic Church hierarchy.<sup>[14]</sup> Graham, who spent many years in Latin America at the turn of the 20th century, wrote that Indian and mixed-blood



resentment against the Spanish-blood elite was bitter. “In the blood of most mulatos, mestizos, or to whatever mixed blood Lopez belonged” there lurked “a lust for power,” a crusade to throw off the Spanish elite and return the continent to its Indian rulers. This explains the current immense popularity of President Evo Morales of Bolivia, who not only speaks the Kechua language but is a full blooded Inca Indian. Charles A. Washburn, the American Minister to Paraguay from 1861 to 1868, wrote that Francisco was not just some kind of mulato or mestizo but was in fact a full blooded Indian. He wrote that Francisco “was proud of his Indian descent, and used to boast of it. He conversed with fluency, and had a good command of the language.”[\[15\]](#)

Regardless of his Indian pride, Francisco realized that he needed European technology, aid, training, and even settlers to realize his vision of a restored Indian Empire in the heart of South America. He brought back with him some 800 to 900 French settlers to spearhead the modernization of agriculture. The first group of settlers arrived on April 1, 1855, were granted land, and named their colony some 19 miles north of Asuncion New-Bordeaux (Nueva Burdeos in Spanish) after the Basque and Béarn regions in south-east France where they were from. On July 29 of that year the president celebrated his birthday in the new colony, and on August 2, 1855 an article in *L'Eco del Paraguay* wrote that in only a short time the progress of the colony was nothing less than fabulous. “New Bordeaux is the land of the future,” it concluded.[\[16\]](#)

A few days later, on August 15, the city of Asuncion was lit by fireworks, a solemn high mass was celebrated at the cathedral, the city’s bells rung, and the French consul was honored with a banquet to celebrate the birthday of the great French emperor, Napoleon I in 1769.[\[17\]](#) Photos of these events depict Francisco seated on a throne, surrounded by officers wearing uniforms he designed to match those of the French Grand Armee, and wearing an exact replica of Napoleon’s crown. Karl Shaw argues in *Power Mad! A Book of Deranged Dictators* that Francisco’s Parisian courtesan, Eliza Lynch, stoked the ambitious schemes of her lover and entertained him with visions of sitting on an imperial throne and ruling a South American Empire.[\[18\]](#)

The French settlers soon recognized the growing megalomania of Francisco and began to flee the colony barely six months after its founding. Francisco arrested and tortured “deserters,” the French parish priest was expelled for “subversion,” and soon only a handful of settlers remained. The name of the town was changed to Villa Hayes, but it retains a strong link with its Basque heritage. One of their descendants, Alberto Sarramone, described the growth of the colony in his book titled, *Los abuelos Bearnese y Gascones (Our Grandparents from Béarn and Gascone)*. In the summer of 2005 Euskal kultura, the organization that promotes Basque culture in its diaspora, organized a celebration for the 150th anniversary of the founding of Nueva Burdos.[\[19\]](#)

Francisco Lopez determined that the time had come for Paraguay to set in motion its climb onto the world stage as a major power. He organized a powerful army and set out to add vast tracts of Argentina, Brazil and Bolivia to his “Empire.” There ensued the disastrous Triple Alliance War against Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay that lasted from 1864 to 1871. Lopez was killed on the field of battle, and legend has it that on the day before his death he said, “But my day will come, and I will rise from the abyss... to take my rightful place in history.”[\[20\]](#)

The remains of Lopez father and son are located inside the towering Pantheon in the Plaza of Heroes in central Asuncion, an exact replica of the Pantheon in Paris where the body of another upstart emperor and Lopez's role model, Napoleon I, lies. The memorial honors the great figures from Paraguayan history, and it also contains the remains of the only Paraguayan saint, Jesuit priest Rogue Gonzalez de Santa Cruz, who founded many of the missions. Visitors may view elaborate military band concerts that occur daily, the ceremonial changing of the guard that produces a hushed silence from all, bewildered tourist groups being ushered to the tomb, the silent school groups filled with visions of the glory that their country once aspired to, and limousines bringing foreign dignitaries to the pay their required respects to the tomb of "el Mariscal" (the Marshal).

The legend of the theft of the greatness that was destined for Paraguay by Argentina and Brazil was incorporated into the ideology of the single party state ruled by the Colorado party. Lopez's vision continued under a long string of dictator-presidents. Like the Guarani quest for the Land-Without-Evil and the Jesuit vision of an autonomous Catholic Guarani Kingdom, the defeated dream of a restored Indian Empire in the heart of South America has become part of the Paraguayan national identity. Historian Preston James well summarized the myth of Paraguay when he called the country "a little country that somehow missed being paradise."

The Colorado Party rulers that followed the Lopez dynasty, many who ruled no longer than months before being overthrown, acutely recognized that the Triple Alliance War had been a national disaster in many ways. The country lost vast lands to Argentina and Brazil and was reduced to its present boundaries (except in the northern Chaco region which was annexed later). Its industries and agriculture was devastated and even Asuncion was a virtual ruin. But most significantly, the country suffered the deaths of between half and two-thirds of its population, including an estimated 90% of its adult male population.

Immigration became the key to national survival if the country hoped to remain independent. Dictator Cirilo Antonio Rivarola who seized power following the disastrous Triple Alliance War launched a vigorous press campaign in London and elsewhere in Europe to recruit immigrants to his ravaged country and sought loans to rebuild its shattered infrastructure. The government portrayed the country as a land of refuge for the persecuted, a land of hope for the desperate, a land of promise for the hopeless, and a virtual Garden of Eden awaiting settlers.

### Land of Utopian Experiments in the Late 19th Century

Unlike the other destinations for European migrants at the time such as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Argentina, and Brazil, Paraguay placed almost no restrictions or demands on the newcomers. Desperate for manpower, the government was willing to tolerate almost any group of immigrants, no matter how bizarre or exotic. Immigrants could buy as much land as they wanted, enjoy exemption from the Paraguayan army, pay no taxes for years, maintain their own school system, preserve their language and choose their own leaders. In fact, they founded virtual states-within-the-state.

Harris Gaylord Warren wrote in “The Lincolnshire Farmers in Paraguay” (1965) that *The London Times* published articles in the 1870s describing “fantastic yields of maize, barley, wheat, potatoes, tobacco and sugar” on land so fertile that “it has been sown annually without any kind of manure, for 300 years.” Prospective settlers of this lush paradise were promised free passage to Paraguay, provisions for six months, agricultural implements, free medical attention for a year, a 40-acre plot of land plus 20 more for each child over the age of 14 near Asuncion, exemption from military service, and the possibility to purchase more land at a fair price. Advertisements claimed that the country abounded in iron, copper, lead, quicksilver, and sulfur “in extraordinary proportions of richness and quality” as well as great quantities of “coal and marble of finest quality.” “Few countries in the world are so healthy as the Republic of Paraguay,” concluded one advertisement.<sup>[21]</sup> On November 2, 1872, *The London Times* wrote Paraguay was destined to become “the entrepot of the commerce of the great Continent of South America.” Paraguay was truly a paradise on earth, according the Paraguayan publicity blitz.<sup>[22]</sup>

Paid recruiters spread from London across Europe preaching the good news of starting a new life in Latin America. In the English town of Lincolnshire, around the city of Lincoln on the east coast of England, the recruiters had success. During the Industrial Revolution Lincolnshire became known for its heavy industry; it attracted tens of thousands of dispossessed and poor farmers from the hinterland and Ireland as well as immigrants from Germany and Poland. The Paraguayan propaganda offered an alternative solution to the exploited preliterate of England—a return to the land. This vision of free men on free land, interacting with nature, not only inspired Paraguayan immigration propaganda; it formed the basis for American and Canadian immigration literature, the Zionist response to the decadent urban lifestyles of the Jews, and Leo Tolstoy’s ideal of the Russian peasant.

Recruiters gathered the first contingent of 888 men, women and children willing to settle in Paraguay, and 390 set sail on September 30, 1872, barely a year after the end of “The Great War” as the Paraguayans called it. The highly publicized “Lincolnshire Farmers” were in fact a mixed lot of urban poor and impoverished English, German, Jewish, Irish, Polish, and other immigrants; few had ever seen a cow let alone operated a farm. They were typical of the millions of peasants and landless tenant farmers that had flocked to the urban slums looking for work in places like London, New York and the industrializing cities of the German Rhineland. Charles Dickens, among others, described the disease, starvation and crime that was rife among them; in times of economic depression riots ravaged the workers’ neighborhoods. So dangerous were conditions that Karl Marx published *Das Kapital* in 1867 calling on world revolution as the only solution to the situation.

Many of them abandoned ship in Buenos Aires; others arrived in Paraguay but found that the promised land and supplies had been stolen by corrupt government officials, many died from disease, and some returned to Britain. The disaster of the Lincolnshire Farmers was well reported in England and elsewhere; nevertheless it did not deter other idealists and utopians who saw in Paraguay an opportunity to realize their utopian dreams.<sup>[23]</sup>

Another foreign utopian group that responded to this open invitation was a group of German Aryans who founded Nueva Germania in 1887.<sup>[24]</sup> Bernard Foerster and his wife Elisabeth

Nietzsche Foerster, the sister of the philosopher Frederich Nietzsche, dreamed of creating a racially pure Aryan paradise. Searching the globe for a location far from the racially and culturally polluting Jews, Slavs and Latins, they responded to the Colorado Party's invitation to resettle Paraguay.

Eighteen families (some accounts say 14) carefully screened for their racial purity arrived in 1888. They purchased 232 square miles of land some 150 miles east of Asuncion, began to till the land, constructed an elegant pseudo-medieval castle-like mansion called the Foersterhof for the Foerstes, built a Lutheran church, and set out to purify and reestablish the human race. "New Germany, in the midst of the Paraguayan wilderness, would be the nucleus for a glorious new Fatherland that would one day cover the entire continent" wrote Macintyre.<sup>[25]</sup> Following the dedication ceremony of the colony in March 1888, Elisabeth wrote to her mother that a long procession passed beneath a triumphal arch and an official reception was held in the town square. As if to contrast "our New Germans" with the old Germans back in Europe, she wrote that the settlers "had such open and honest German faces" and they were "very industrious and capable." The ceremony concluded with the singing of "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles."<sup>[26]</sup>

The colony rapidly declined into strife. Bernard soon committed suicide, Elizabeth returned to Germany in 1891 and dedicated her life caring for her brother and supervising the publication of his writings. Hitler gave her a state memorial service when she died in 1935. Today little remains of the colony except for a one-room museum, many residents who have German surnames, many blond haired descendants, and a fascinating book written by Ben MacIntyre entitled *Forgotten Fatherland* (1991).<sup>[27]</sup>

Nueva Germania was followed by a similar group of utopians from the other end of the globe, a group of Australian Communists, in 1893. The leader of the colony of New Australia, William Land, was possibly influenced by R.B. Cunninghame Graham's theories and eventual book that portrayed the Jesuit missions as socialist utopias. Helene Clastres wrote in *The Land-Without-Evil* that the notion of Paraguay as a utopia not only strongly shaped the character of the country but shaped perceptions of the nation abroad.<sup>[28]</sup> A founder of the Scottish Labor Party and member of the British Parliament, R.B. Cunninghame Graham traveled extensively in Paraguay and published *A Vanished Arcadia: Being Some Account of the Jesuits in Paraguay, 1607 to 1767* in 1900. Peter Lambert argues in his article "History, Identity, and *Paraguayidad*" that writers such as Graham contributed to the modern view of Paraguay as "A new Eden, an untouched paradise, the land of new beginnings."<sup>[29]</sup> In the case of Graham and the founders of New Australia, this paradise had a strongly Socialist coloring.

The rapid urbanization and industrialization of Europe and North America inevitably resulted in a cycle of rapid expansion followed by painful economic depressions. Labor unions were only slowly being legalized, the right to strike was not yet universal, and there were no safety nets, Social Security, or unemployment insurance schemes. Each depression resulted in a massive displacement of unemployed workers ready to hit the road or sea in search of work.

The economic depression of 1890 hit Australia especially hard. The English, Europeans and North Americans decided to wear last year's winter coat rather than buying a new one, resulting in the

collapse of the Australian wool industry. Queensland sheep shearers found themselves without reduced wages and went on strike. Government troops arrested many workers and their leaders, and wages were reduced. William Lane, an English journalist and communist, abandoned any hope of improving the lives of laborers in England and like many other utopians looked abroad for open land to found a worker's paradise. His first attempt in Australia failed, but his agents found a welcome and ample land in Paraguay for what Kate Granville-Jones described as the "world's first great communist city."[\[30\]](#)

The movement's newspaper *New Australia* featured an article that promised that Paraguay "is destined in the near future to be selected as the seat of central government for a federalist republic of the whole of the South American nations."[\[31\]](#) Once firmly established in the country the colony would spread Communism throughout the continent, and the Union of Latin American Socialist Republics would become the world's first communist nation. The government of Paraguay offered these 2,000 hardy men from the outback 185,000 acres some 250 miles south-east of Asuncion. They duly arrived on September 22, 1893 to found the world's first great communist city, New Australia.[\[32\]](#)

Reality struck the young settlement upon their arrival. Lane's constitution for the city included pledges of teetotalism, maintaining the "color line" against mixing with the local Guarani Indians, and communal ownership of land and goods. In a country famous for its sugarcane rum, where there were eight women for every available man, and with the Australians' sense of rugged individualism, opposition to Lane's dictatorial ways quickly emerged. In fact, approximately 74 percent of all immigrants to Paraguay were men who hoped to eventually bring women from their homelands at a later date. Nevertheless most of these lusty Australians quickly found local Indian women to cook, clean and perform more intimate duties, and the arrival of European women was indefinitely delayed. Lane was soon driven from the colony, and he founded a new one called Colonia Cosme nearby. Many settlers migrated to the more promising lands of Argentina, and by 1896 only 50 men, 20 women and 80 children remained. The following year the colony was declared an open colony to all. Today the town of Nueva Australia (also called Nueva Londres) has a population of around 2,000, and a banner announces "Bienvenido" to visitors to both Nueva Londres and Nueva Australia.[\[33\]](#)

In their article "Flights from Modernity: German and Australian utopian colonies in Paraguay 1886-1896" Williams, Kraus and Knowles argue that the vast untouched virgin lands of Paraguay offered both German Aryans and Australian communists the possibility to return humanity to the Garden of Eden. For the Aryans Paraguay was a land without the corrupting and degenerating influence of Jews, while for the communists it represented liberation from robber barons, industrialists and capitalists. From their respective utopias in Paraguay, they would lead humanity from their cold valleys of ignorance to the millennium when all humanity would be welcomed into their ideal worlds.[\[34\]](#)

These utopian idealists, whether German Aryans or Australian socialist internationalists, responded to the glowing portrayal of Paraguay as a vacant Garden of Eden where idealists could realize their dreams far from the corrupt and corrupting influences of the Old World. However,

another group of immigrants also responded to this invitation. They sought not a utopia in the jungle but mere survival.

### A Land of Refuge and Empire in the Early 20th Century

In spite of the Lincolnshire Farmers fiasco, other immigrants responded to the open welcome offered by the Paraguayan government. Many succeeded but many also failed. Germany was a latecomer to the great European global land grab called the age of colonialism that began with Columbus' discovery of the Americas. Spain grabbed and colonized everything from California to Argentina and the Philippines, Portugal seized Brazil and big chunks of Africa, France took Quebec, the Louisiana territory, Haiti, swaths of Africa and Indochina, England took the rest of Canada, the 13 colonies along the Atlantic coast, India, Pakistan, Australia and a third of Africa, Holland settled New Amsterdam and Indonesia, and Russia expanded through Siberia, into Eastern Europe and central Asia. By the time Germany united in 1871, most of the world was already occupied.

Even before the founding of the German Empire in 1871, many Germans, often with the support of the German or Austrian governments or religious groups, sought to found German colonies which would enjoy a large degree of autonomy and thus avoid the plague of assimilation. States in the American and Midwestern provinces in Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Russia, and Australia eagerly courted thrifty, hard-working and skilled German immigrants. However, following the unification of Germany this drive to found colonies and even establish a German Empire abroad went into overdrive. Germans joined in the massive migrations of peoples from Europe to the New World, Australia, South Africa, and elsewhere. After the English, Germans constitute the second largest ethnic group in the United States. The historian Heinrich von Treitschke noted that had the millions of Germans who went to the United States been directed to South America, they could have founded a new German Empire. The government of the newly founded German Empire set out to rectify this failure.

One of the consequences of the founding of the empire was that long-independent kingdoms like Bavaria found themselves literally forced to become Germans, or as the states of the Rhineland put it, "MussPreußen" (Prussians by force). For the nationalistic and Catholic Bavarians, submission to the Prussian Emperor and the Lutheran power structure in Berlin was painful. As a result many Bavarians began to immigrate to new lands, including Paraguay.

A wealthy German named Jacob Schaerer organized a group of Bavarians who arrived in Paraguay on June 14, 1881 and founded a colony named New Bavaria (Neu Bayern) on the shore of Lake Ypacarai some 25 miles east of Asuncion. The first 11 immigrants grew into over 300 within a year. They first purchased land and became farmers, but soon they recognized the lakeside potential of the colony. By 1887 the population reached 600, cultivating tobacco, coffee, bananas, sugar, vegetables and fruit on 800 acres. A local businessman constructed the Hotel del Lago, transforming the settlement into a prime summer resort for the Paraguayan elite. Large numbers of German-speakers joined the successful colony following the First World War. The name was

changed to San Bernardino several years later, but a steady stream of German immigrants and the success of the colony guaranteed its survival.[\[35\]](#)

One of the German colonies that managed to succeed is the town of Hohenau. A wide avenue descends from the highway that runs north-east of Encarnacion toward the Parana River. At the head of the boulevard a monument “In Honor of the Founders of the Colony” had been erected with pictures of a bearded Wilhelm (Guillermo in Spanish) Closs and his three companions who requested land from the government of Paraguay in the late 1890s. They were granted 40 acres fronting the Parana River and extending in a long narrow strip 25 miles into the hinterland. A grand boulevard was laid out leading up a hill overlooking the river (hence the origin of the name Hohenau, a high plain), and the settlers constructed homes on both sides. They built a German-language school, several churches, both Catholic and Protestant, a hotel, and a culture center (today the Edwin Krug Culture Center). A monument with a life-sized statue of an ax-wielding pioneer that was placed in the median of the boulevard celebrates the history of the colony. Today Hohenau has a population of about 12,000.

At the culture center many of the visitors and guides still speak fluent German, although this is not the case with many of their non-German spouses and less so among the children, even though most learn German in school. The German language seems to be dying out, and German ethnic identity and history do not appear to exert enough of a hold on the population to preserve the town as a German settlement.[\[36\]](#) Furthermore, there is no religious identity to separate the Germans from non-Germans, since the town has a Catholic, Lutheran, and several other Protestant churches. Its proximity to Encarnacion also militates against its survival. Well-to-do residents of Encarnacion are building homes in Hohenau, the prosperity of the town is attracting many non-Germans, and local young people attend college and clubs in Encarnacion where they easily mingle and eventually marry non-Germans. A resident confided to me that Josef Mengele, the infamous Nazi doctor, is said to have resided in Hohenau for several years under his own name.[\[37\]](#)

In addition to Germans, other European ethnic groups came to Paraguay and also sought to preserve their identity. Most observers celebrated the end of the First World War as the time when the last of the great European land empires—the Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian and Turkish—collapsed, and the multitude of smaller peoples—Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Fins, Bulgurs, Romanians, and others mounted the world stage as independent nation-states. But there were a host of peoples who were relegated to minorities within these new nations, and they were often subjected to brutal suppression and persecution: Orthodox Christians in Poland, Ukrainians in Russia and Poland, Germans in Czechoslovakia, Hungarians in Romania, and Gypsies and Jews everywhere.

According to the Treaty of Paris following the First World War, Ukraine was divided between the newly established Soviet Union and newly restored Poland. In proudly Roman Catholic Poland the Ukrainians were relegated to the status of a religious minority and subjected to a ruthless process of Polonization and colonization. In atheistic USSR religious people were persecuted and their languages, religions and cultures were suppressed. During the 1920s large numbers of Ukrainians fled both Poland and the USSR and found refuge in Canada, the United States, Australia, South Africa, Brazil, and Paraguay. The latter because of its desperate need for settlers

offered the largest degree of autonomy to the some 12,000 immigrants who arrived during the inter-war period. The founded several colonies, with the largest being Nueva Volyn (New Volhynia), also known as Capitain Miranda.[38]

The town is dominated by a pale blue Ukrainian Orthodox Church on the right side of the highway going from Honenau to Encarnacion. The church was dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel, and the five gold painted domes topped by the traditional three-armed Orthodox cross stands along the highway some 8 miles northeast of Encarnacion. Today there are seven Orthodox churches in nearby settlements and the cathedral of Saint George in Encarnacion. In a small park beside the church is a bust and memorial to the great Ukrainian nationalist poet Taras Shevchenko, who died in 1861. His presence is significant, because ever since the rise of Moscow as the center of Russian culture, politics, religion, and language in the 16th century, the Ukrainian language has been relegated to the status of a rustic peasant dialect of Russian. Likewise the ancient Ukrainian Patriarchate that dated from the 10th century was subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate. It was only in the diaspora that both language and church retained any degree of autonomy.

Attached to the base of the bust is an excerpt from one of his most famous poems in Ukrainian with a Spanish translation. Reflecting a time when the Ukrainians were subjected to Russian, Polish, and Austrian domination, and their language was preserved only by itinerant bards (*kobzary*), Shevchenko counseled the Ukrainians of the world to study, think for yourselves, read, and learn from the strangers who rule you and from amongst you live. “But also do not forget your heritage. For those who forget their Mother [Ukraine], God will cast out.”

The Ukrainian motherland would have to wait until the disintegration of the USSR before Ukrainian would be declared the national language of the Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church would regain its independence. An elderly Ukrainian woman who runs a small café just across the highway from the church still speaks Ukrainian, but most of her customers speak Spanish to her. A tattered paper copy of a Ukrainian icon was taped to the wall. Most Ukrainians consider Paraguay a virtual “Tierra Sagrada” (Spanish for holy land) because of the welcome it offered to the Ukrainians.[39]

Both German Hohenau and Ukrainian Capitain Miranda seem to be struggling to preserve their ethnic identities. In both cases the immigrant languages were declining, young people were marrying for love not for ethnic solidarity, and non-Germans and non-Ukrainians were being attracted to the prosperous towns. However, the Ukrainians seemed better destined to survive because of their religious difference. German Catholics and Protestants, even the Lutherans, easily blended into nearby Spanish-speaking congregations, but the Ukrainian Orthodox retained their uniqueness. Even if religious services had been translated into Spanish and few spoke Ukrainian, the church reinforced their separateness.

Several other ethnic groups also attempted to establish colonies in the region. A rather exotic group of Finnish vegetarians founded Villa Alborada in 1920 some 30 miles north-east of Encarnacion. Likke Laulaja and Manuel Holopainen led the colony, which had a population of 60 in 1940. Like all the colonies along the Parana River, the 173-acre colony fronted the river and extended some 25 miles into the interior. But with few newcomers from Finland the colony soon disappeared.[40]



Still another colony was established in 1927 by Peter Cristopershen (Cristophensen) from Norway. In 1927 he purchased 173,000 acres and laid out a town which he named Fram, which means “Ahead” in Norwegian. But few Norwegians responded to his call for settlers, and he seemed to have no particular ideology or religion to inspire them. A mixed community of Poles, Germans, Russians, Czechoslovaks, Ukrainians and Hungarians filled his town, and today Fram boasts a large and elegant Ukrainian Orthodox Church and a total population of around 4,000.

Unfortunately, in 1955, after General Alfredo Stroessner seized power he set about establishing his anti-communist credentials to garner American support and aid for his rule that would last until 1989. Since the majority of the residents of the town spoke Russian or Ukrainian, received mail and newspapers from the Soviet Union, and attended an Orthodox Church, Stroessner began a brutal campaign of arrest, imprisonment, torture, and murder that ravaged the town.<sup>[41]</sup> Graham Greene’s novel, *The Honorary Consul* (1973) was set among the Paraguayan exiles from Fram who lived in Corrientes, just across the river in Argentina.

Most of these colonies, whether French, German, Ukrainian or other, were inevitably drawn into Paraguayan life, language, and culture. Because of the often harsh climate and difficult living conditions, most colonies were founded largely by young men with the understanding that women would follow once the colony was established. However, all too often the young settlers took up with local Indian or European women and produced a generation of mixed-blood children. Foreign languages were rapidly forgotten and often even the founding names of the colonies were replaced with Spanish names. However, the colonies along the Parana River bordering Argentina and Brazil have managed to preserve their diverse immigrant cultures and to an extent their languages.

The German colony of Hohenau, like many of the German colonies in Paraguay, retained a deep loyalty to Germany, even to the point of offering refuge to Nazis following the war. Hohenau has also taken the lead in preserving the multi-ethnic, linguistic and religious heritage of the lands of southern Paraguay. The colony adopted the honor of the “Mother of the United Colonies (Madre de las Colonias Unidas)” and began hosting an annual National Festival of Colonies (Sede de la Fiesta Nacional de las Colectividades). Each year dancers, chefs, artisans and school groups, plus thousands of visitors, celebrate the unique heritage of the region. In addition to German, Ukrainian, Finnish and Norwegian delegations, the 2013 celebration included representatives of Belgian, Swiss, Italian, Polish, English, Spanish, Brazilian, and Japanese settlers in the area. Of course the October date of festival was scheduled to correspond with the annual Hohenau Oktoberfest beer festival.<sup>[42]</sup>

The high degree of autonomy that the immigrants enjoyed in Paraguay before and following the First World War firmly established the reputation of the country as a Promised Land not only for persecuted ethnic minorities but for religious groups as well. While the Germans, Ukrainians, Finns and others were carving out colonies in the south along the Parana River, Canadian Mennonites approached the Paraguayan government about establishing a colony of their own.

## Arrival of the Mennonites

A 12-hour overnight bus ride north from Asuncion takes the visitor to the “capital” of the Fernheim cluster of Mennonite colonies, Filadelfia. The rustic bus station is usually surrounded by local Indians looking for day jobs. The town is in the middle of the rather desolate, dry Chaco region that resembles western Texas, with brush, bushes, a few palm trees, and a permanent haze of red dust hanging over the place. Even the slightest breeze whips up clouds of dust, and a passing car or truck leaves a lingering cloud behind it. Only a few major streets are paved. The so called Trans-Chaco Highway continues north into Bolivia, but it seems to be constantly washed out by the torrential tropical floods that ravage the otherwise arid Chaco and is often nothing more than a dirt track that is often impassable.

The town was founded by Mennonite refugees from a very different part of the world. The Mennonites and their Amish cousins emerged from Protestant Reformation, as did the Baptists, Lutherans, Huguenots, Calvinists, Hussites and Anglicans. The Mennonites were followers of Menno Simons, and the Amish followed Jacob Ammann (1644–1730), who both were deeply inspired by the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531). They elaborated their own unique path to recapture the purity of the apostolic church. Adult baptism—as opposed to infant baptism; pacifism—as opposed to participation in Just Wars; total separation of Church and State—as opposed to established churches; and congregationalism—the absence of a ruling hierarchy became the pillars of their faith. Rather than two distinct groups, the Amish and Mennonites constitute a spectrum, with each congregation establishing its own mode of dress, customs, attitudes toward modern technology, and other matters. For example, many Old Order Mennonites are hardly distinguishable from horse and buggy, plain dressing, no electricity Amish, while many Amish have accepted certain elements of modern society.<sup>[43]</sup>

These Swiss, German and Dutch believers were hounded from one European country to another, finding temporary refuge wherever they could. This founding experience of persecution is commemorated in the Mennonite 1,290 page holy book the *Maertyrerspiegel, The Great Book of Martyrs* by Thieleman van Braght (1660) that chronicles the great persecutions they suffered in Europe.

A momentary respite came when Catherine the Great of Russia, who was a German princess by birth, invited German Mennonites, Lutherans, and Catholics to settle the sparsely and newly-conquered frontier lands during her long reign from 1762 to 1796. Skilled carpenters, blacksmiths, foresters, engineers, teachers, farmers, and miners arrived in large numbers and were granted vast tracts of land, internal autonomy, and religious freedom. The first Mennonite colony was Chortitza in eastern Ukraine in 1789. By 1917 their population in the Russian Empire was around 110,000. Frank H. Epp in his book *Mennonite Exodus* describes the period between the founding of the first Mennonite colony and the First World War as the “century of prosperity.”<sup>[44]</sup>



**Photo:** Mennonite Museum in Filadelfia

As early as 1786, Mennonites and their Amish cousins were also finding refuge in central Pennsylvania (the famous Pennsylvania Dutch). Later they established settlements in the Canadian province of Ontario, and by the early 1900s in central Canada. However the initial guarantees of internal autonomy in matters of religion, immigration, language, and culture that Canada offered were slowly whittled away by successive national and provincial governments.

In 1921 a delegation from Canada visited Paraguay and later announced that they had found “the promised land” in the arid and under-populated, semi-desert Chaco region of northern Paraguay. The first 266 families of German-speaking Mennonites, 1,753 people, left Canada in 1927 after they were permitted to purchase the land in the Chaco and guaranteed internal autonomy by the Paraguayan Law 514 of 1921. The first colony was named Menno after their founder. The first colonies consisted of 16 to 20 families; each was given 160 to 200 acres depending on family size.

It quickly became the largest of the Mennonite colonies with a population of around 10,000 today.[45]

Before the First World War an estimated 110,000 Mennonites had been established in the frontier regions of the Russian Empire, as well as two million Germans. During the war they were accused of questionable loyalty to Russia, and with the Soviet takeover they were subject to a campaign of resettlement in distant Siberia and religious persecution. On April 23, 1930 the first group of Mennonites from Russia arrived in the Chaco with the aid and intervention of the German president, Paul von Hindenburg. He is still fondly remembered by the colony of Filadelfia, which named its main street Hindenburg Strasse. Filadelfia is famous in the Chaco as the most German of all the colonies. The present population of the colony is around 5,000, with the colonies of Rio Verde and Nueva Durango also having populations over 2,000.[46] The curator of the local historical museum, Hans Boschmann, gives tours of the museum in German and Spanish. His family had been banished to the Amur River in eastern Siberia by Stalin, but had managed to flee across the border into China and thence by ship around South Africa to Europe, and then on to Paraguay.[47]

Other colonies were founded by Mennonites from the USSR, Canada, the United States, Brazil, and Mexico reaching a population of 16,000 by 1978.[48] Today the Chaco Mennonites own over one million hectares of land and enjoy a standard of living that is ten times higher than the average Paraguayan. Each colony elects its *schulze*, mayor, and *twozehntmaenner*, delegates, to the colony assembly. Today the total population of Mennonites in the Chaco and other colonies in Paraguay is estimated at around 30,000 out of the total world population of Mennonites of around 1.5 million.[49]

Life was difficult for these first settlers. Ninety-four settlers from the USSR died during a typhus epidemic in the spring (August to October) of 1939, and it was a year before thatched huts had replaced tents. They consoled each other by saying “Es war noch schlimmer in Siberien” (It was even worse in Siberia), according to the curator of the local museum. To confront the challenging conditions of the Chaco area, the Mennonites decided to abandon their former emphasis on private property and individual initiative and established a virtual “Mennonite socialist republic.”[50] From the Soviets, the very people who had so persecuted them, they borrowed the cooperative system of land ownership, marketing, and purchasing. Their slogan was “Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz” (Common use before individual use). The colonies established a collective for purchases and marketing of their products, and today the cooperative store is an elaborate and ultra-modern supermarket.

Of all the utopian settlements in Paraguay and across the border in Argentina, the Mennonite communities of the Chaco have endured the longest and seem destined to last the longest. They produce cotton, peanuts, milk, meat, and soybeans that they sell on the international market. Their survival against great odds is chronicled each twenty-five years on a public monument. Six factors determined the Mennonite survival:

1) *A strong sense of ethnic solidarity and loyalty to the German language.* Filadelfia was described as “the most German” of the Mennonite colonies by the curator of the local museum. The people

speak both Plattdeutsch and Hochdeutsch, although the curator, who was also the pastor of one of the churches, noted that the church had installed a system of headphones and translators for those who preferred Spanish or Guarani. There is a Guarani Mennonite Church in Filadelfia, but the Indian converts seem to remain marginal to the ethnic German members. The curator hinted that “converts” always seemed to be on the make, seeking material advantage through baptism. Still, in Asuncion there are well established Indian congregations.

2) *A common sense of persecution.* The *Maertyrerspiegel* is prominently displayed in the museum, and the curator repeated the odyssey of his own family from Germany to Prussian Poland, to the Ukraine, to eastern Siberia, to China, and finally to Paraguay. At each stage he recounted the persecutions his family had to endure for their faith. This persecution was provoked by governments because of the Mennonites’ refusal to serve in armies and, the curator confided, because Mennonites are hardworking and their prosperity rapidly aroused the envy of their neighbors.

3) *A strong sense of religious fervor.* Mennonite population statistics always distinguish between baptized members and unbaptized members since as Anabaptists they only practice adult, free-will baptisms. Yet even unbaptized adults consider themselves firm Mennonites. They remain firm pacifists, are proud of the Mennonite world witness to non-violence, and constantly refer to the long history of persecution for their faith.

4) *The tradition of permitting dissidents to form daughter churches.* Rather than engage in holy wars, inquisitions, massacres, or persecution when a difference of custom, belief, or traditions arises, the Mennonites simply split into two (or more) groups and each goes its own way. A visit to any of the many bus stations in Paraguay is instructive. Mennonites from Argentina and Paraguay come to the cities to shop, do business, and get medical care; hence almost every part of the station has a contingent of Mennonites. One group at the bus station permits its womenfolk to dispense with their black stockings, another group permits their youth to wear black baseball hats rather than the regulation black fedora and their more modern menfolk wear blue jean overalls and straw hats. Another group permits women to wear Miami Beach-style floppy felt hats with a bright ribbon around it although their dresses were traditional black Old Mother Hubbard style. This veritable Mennonite fashion show reflects the constant founding of daughter colonies due to the constant theological and cultural vitality within the Mennonite community. One observer even wrote that a distinctive form of Gaurani Mennonitism was evolving.

5) *Their geographic isolation.* No doubt the isolated world of the Chaco has contributed to the survival of the Mennonites. Although the non-ethnic Mennonite population is growing and some have converted, the Chaco is still isolated, thus reinforcing the sense of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and historic uniqueness. The curator of the museum opined that in Russia many Mennonites established urban factories, attended universities, and became professionals, which led to jealousy and under the Marxists outright persecution. For this reason he stated, the Mennonites to Paraguay chose to return to the land and create their own communities in isolation. An alternative approach to isolation can be found among the Orthodox Jews in the heart of Brooklyn.

6) *Economic viability.* The Mennonites well learned in Russia and relearned in the Chaco that economic success is a double-edged sword. On one hand successful Mennonite industries guarantee the survival of the colony, attract other Mennonites, provide jobs for the next generation, guarantee a decent standard of living for all, and permit the colony to aid other Mennonites in need. On the other hand, success breeds jealousy on the part of the locals and encourages non-Mennonite migration, which can endanger the colony.

As the old adage goes, “Nothing succeeds like success.” The Mennonite success in transforming one of the most formidable areas of the world into a thriving center of agriculture has attracted non-Mennonite immigrants, both ethnically European Paraguayan and native Gaurani Indians. Further, the taming of the Chaco attracted another movement of people to the area, but unlike earlier centuries these were not religious or social idealists from Europe, but rather pacifist refugees fleeing the Second World War.

### German and English Pacifists during World War II: The Land Without War

Mennonites and Amish are so deeply committed to non-violence and pacificism that when a group of settlers in the north of Paraguay objected to the monopoly exercised by the socialist producer-consumer cooperative which dominated the economy of the settlements, rather than fight it out in the ballot box, the dissidents simply moved elsewhere.

By 1937 some members of the increasingly prosperous northern colonies thought that the time had come to transition to a more capitalistic form of economic organization. When the majority chose to retain their socialist institutions, 144 families with 748 baptized adults and some non-baptized members left the Fernheim Colony in the north for a tract of 17,000 acres some 70 miles north-east of Asuncion. Nine villages were established with a total of 146 individual farms. The new colony was named Friesland, in memory the Dutch province of Friesland the homeland of Menno Simons. Eventually a school, two churches and a hospital were constructed, more land was purchased reaching a total of almost 60,000 acres by 1987, and the colonies gained fame as the breadbasket of Paraguay when the farmers introduced a strain of wheat that thrived in the local climate.<sup>[51]</sup>

Friesland was less isolated than their mother colonies of Fernheim, and as the world began to lurch toward still another world war various groups of European pacifists heard about the colony and were attracted to the area. The next war, the pacifists realized, would be equipped with not only poison gas and tanks, but airplanes, submarines, aircraft carriers and new and even more destructive armaments, and would be led by a new breed of ideologically driven ruthless leaders.

In Europe and the United States individuals began to organize anti-war and pacifist organizations. In Germany Eberhard Arnold (1883–1935) came under the influence of a Christian revival that swept the Lutheran Church following the First World War. He became convinced that the world was in fact hurling toward catastrophe and the end times were approaching. He called on fellow Christians to return to the faith of the early Christians and to prepare for the approaching kingdom of God. He eventually rejected the Lutheran concept of child baptism as unbiblical and identified

with the Anabaptists and their teachings.[52] In 1920 he initiated communal living for his followers, and in 1926 founded a religious community which he called a “Bruderhof” (Household of Brothers). He visited fellow Anabaptists—Mennonites in Holland, Quakers in England, Mennonites and Hutterites in the United States, and Hutterites in Canada, and was admitted to membership in a Hutterite community in Canada.

The Hutterites, a plain living, anti-technological, pacifist community like the Amish and Mennonites, were founded by the Austrian Tyrolian reformer Jakob Hutter (1500–1536). They fled persecution to temporary refuges in Moravia and Transylvania, then responded, along with the Mennonites and other Germans, to the open invitation to settle in Ukraine. There they thrived until the end of the 19th century. The first group of 1,265 arrived in the Dakota Territory and Alberta and Saskatchewan in Canada where their numbers increased to almost 50,000 today.

With the rise of Hitler, most of the members of Arnold’s community responded to the English Quaker invitation to move to England, where they founded the Cotswold and Oaksley Bruderhofs in 1936 and 1937. In England the community flourished “largely through the addition of young English members seeking an alternative to war,” writes Karen Christensen in the *Encyclopedia of Community*. [53] The presence of German, Swiss, and Dutch citizens, and the community’s fervent opposition to the upcoming war resulted in deep suspicions on the part of the government and economic boycotts on the part of “loyal” Brits. Both the United States and Canada refused to accept “a pacifist community of mixed nationalities.” However the American Mennonite Central Committee proposed resettlement in Paraguay, an offer the Bruderhofs had no choice but to accept. First in the Chaco and later in the newly-established Friesland Colony they founded the colony of Primavera (Sprintime) that contained three Bruderhofs: Isla Margarita in 1941, Loma Jhoby in 1942, and Ibate in 1946, with a population of 650 by 1951. Eventually Bruderhofs were founded in the United States, England, Canada, Germany, and Australia, and by the 1950s 18 different nationalities were represented and some 50% were of English origin. They still maintain tenuous ties with the Hutterites because of the Bruderhof participation in anti-war protest marches and other anti-war activities. Today the total world membership of the Bruderhof movement is around 2,600. [54]

There has been renewed fascination in the history of this multi-national antiwar movement. Following September 11, 2001 and President George W. Bush’s “crusade” against Islam, four books have appeared on the Bruderhof Movement: *Community in Paraguay: A Visit to the Bruderhof* by Bob Wagoner (1991), *No Lasting Home: A Year in the Paraguayan Wilderness* by Emma Barth (2009), *Foundations of Our Faith & Calling: The Bruderhof* (2012), and *The Witness of the Brothers: A History of the Bruderhof* by Oved Iacov (2012).

Mennonite colonies are now thriving in the isolated north of Paraguay, several new Mennonite colonies were founded in the 1960s and 1970s as well as a network of colleges and schools of theology. The Paraguayan, Argentinean and Brazilian governments restored the Jesuit missions, adding museums and turning them into tourist destinations. A host of new books were published on the country including the fore mentioned books on the Bruderhofs, Richard Gott’s *Land Without Evil: Utopian Journeys Across the South American Watershed*, William Burr’s *Fall From Grace: A Novel of the Jesuit Utopian Villages in Colonial Paraguay*, Matthew J. Pallamary’s *Land*

*Without Evil*, and of course the jewel in this crown, the 1986 Warner Brothers film *The Mission* starring Robert De Niro.

While historians objected to the many liberties Hollywood took in *The Mission*, the film reinforced the popular myth of Paraguay as a sacred land. The sight of De Niro climbing the cliff beside the waterfalls with his sword and armor on his back was a graphic portrayal of a former Indian slave trader and soldier seeking forgiveness for his crimes and a step toward to his own redemption and the salvation of the world in the mysterious and unexplored lands above the falls. This is the kernel of the Guarani myth of the eternal search for the Land-Without-Evil.

The great Paraguayan writer and storyteller Helio Vera (1946–2008) wrote in 1990 that it was not the historians who defined the national identity of Paraguay “but troubadours, emotional singers of epic tales, tear-jerking guitar-playing poets of the past” who mix myth and reality, history and fable.”<sup>[55]</sup> A common surprise for visitors to Paraguay is to see and hear people playing the Paraguayan harp at my airport departure gate at Asuncion Airport. While bugles, drums, tubas, and brass bands mark the national music of most countries, the languid, peaceful, almost mystical strains of the harp soothe souls of Paraguayans arriving and leaving their country. While foreign tourists and business men hustle to their seats or taxis, Paraguayans linger before the harpist.<sup>[56]</sup> Lambert writes, “The writing (and rewriting) of history by such ‘troubadours’ of national identity, and the confusion between myth and reality, history and fable, are a long established tradition.”<sup>[57]</sup> He might well have added “preachers, ministers, prophets and messiahs” to his list of those constantly rewriting the history of the country.

### The Unification Church: Puerto Leda as Holy Ground

Recently, Guarani shamans announced that they had received messages from the gods that their followers were to again undertake great migrations in their search of their Land-Without-Evil. According to Maria Crespo Arauco, “In the 60’s and 70’s there was a resurgence of religious prophets, claiming to know the exact location of the land, now known as the sacred Hill, and urging their villages to follow them once again.”<sup>[58]</sup> More such messages came in 1987 and 1991. The most recent incarnation of the ancient Guarani myth of a Land-Without-Evil was the colony in the wilds of Paraguay set up by the ecological idealistic followers of the founder of the Unification Movement, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon.

Rev. Moon founded the Unification movement in Korea in 1954 with himself as the divinely appointed Messiah and with the goal to reunite humanity as one human family as it had once existed in the biblical Garden of Eden. His famous mass marriage blessings sought to unite ancient enemy peoples such as Germans and Jews, Blacks and Whites, Koreans and Japanese, and Israelis and Palestinians, and through his ecumenical worship services he encouraged Christians to pray with Jews, Muslims to worship with Buddhists, and Shamans to share pulpits with Hindus.

An avid fisherman, Rev. Moon first discovered the land of his future colony in the 1990s during a fishing expedition on the Paraguay River. In May 1995 he was received by President Juan Carlos Wasmosy, and one of the activities of the visit was a fishing trip on the Paraguay River in the



presidential yacht. *Today's World*, a Unificationist publication, wrote, "This was the first time in the history of our True Parents that they were received at the national level by one country." The article continues, "This event set the victorious foundation for our True Parents to visit neighboring countries later."<sup>[59]</sup> Later that year Rev. and Mrs. Moon undertook a 22-nation 43-day speaking tour of Latin America. Following his return to Korea, he delivered a series of addresses that detailed the results of his tour. He described the land as "a rich and peaceful paradise of grand mountains and unspoiled nature. The mountains and jungles harken back to the original state of creation, the Garden of Eden." He stated that "God has a will for Latin America" and "glory-filled days" lie ahead in the 21st century.

Rev. Moon stressed two themes in his speeches: first, the humanity was approaching its last days and second, the state of the environment was deplorable. "In religious terms, we can say that we have reached 'the Last Days' of humankind." The old world of selfishness and sin was ending but "darkness and destruction" would not follow, he insisted. Rather the end of the old world "will be followed immediately by the founding of the correct and true world—the original world of God's creation." His marriage blessings and worship services were part of this historic healing of millennia of ethnic and religious hostilities. Moreover, in these Last Days Paraguay would play a central role.

The second theme that Rev. Moon stressed in his report back to Unification headquarters after his historic trip was ecological. The human race must be returned to its original harmony with the planet Earth. "Obsession for material wealth" has led to the abuse and damage to the water and air, and the depletion of the ozone layer. "If this trend continues, we will reach a stage where the earth cannot avoid self-destruction because of the so-called benefits from materialistic civilization." In Latin America the Unification Movement would spearhead "restoration of the environment" and the building of "the correct and true world—the original world of God's creation."<sup>[60]</sup>

Like all the utopian visionaries that preceded him, Rev. Moon insisted that it was more than his visit that had pointed out Paraguay as the location for this restoration, the hand of God was also involved. Just as God had promised the Land of Canaan to the Hebrews, led the Aztecs to the site of Mexico City, brought the Pilgrims to Massachusetts, and directed the early Mormons to Salt Lake City, so God himself indicated that Paraguay was the Unificationist Promised Land.

Already on his 1995 tour of Latin America, Rev. Moon had noticed that the two greatest watersheds of South America, the Paraguay–La Plata and the Amazon River systems, have their sources only 2.5 miles apart. This area of geographic "encounter" was also a "place of encounter where God, people and all things meet," including a meeting place for all the races and religions of the world.<sup>[61]</sup> In another context he noted that Paraguay lie exactly on the opposite side of the planet from Korea which also marked the sight as significant in his eyes.<sup>[62]</sup> As if to consecrate the site, in the summer of 1997 Rev. Moon and his staff set out by boat on the Paraguay and later the Amazon Rivers to place sign markers every 30 miles (50 km) along the rivers. He announced, "This is where we can build the Garden of Eden."<sup>[63]</sup>



**Photo:** The Unification Settlement Puerto Leda

In 1999, four years after his seminal speech outlining his vision for Latin America, he organized a 40-day spiritual retreat in Paraguay for some of his most devout Japanese followers. Piranha fish infested the waters, mosquitoes plagued the air and ants dominated the land, but according to Monte Reel, Rev. Moon just said “Ah, the purity of nature.” He entrusted his followers with the task of building an ecologically sustainable city that could serve as a model for the whole world.<sup>[64]</sup>

On October 1, 1999 Reverend Moon declared the colony a Holy Ground, and he dedicated it shortly after on November 30, 1999 on one of his visits there. According to *The Tradition* by Rev. Chung Hwan Kwak, Rev. Moon officially began to declare Holy Grounds in 1965. He describes the complex ceremony by which holy grounds were established. Unification theology teaches that originally all land belonged to Heavenly Father, but after the fall of Adam and Eve “God lost everything.” But following Rev. Moon’s Holy Wedding in 1960 “it became possible to regain land for God through establishing Holy Grounds.”<sup>[65]</sup> The first land so dedicated was the Meiji Shrine in Japan; it was followed by trees, rocks, hills, ponds, structures, and other landmarks around the world.

In 2000 he purchased 1.5 million acres (approximately the size of the state of Delaware) including an entire 6,000-inhabitant town of Puerto Casado fronting the Paraguay River in the far north of Paraguay and a large tract just across the river in Brazil.[66] He reflected the popular image of the country as an untouched paradise and described his vast land holding as “the least developed place on earth, and, hence, closest to original creation.” Rev. Moon named the proposed settlement “The Victorious Holy Place” and entrusted his vision to a group of Japanese Unificationists. Reflecting the messianic underpinning of all utopian visions, he prophesied that this Holy Place would launch the “glory-filled days that await Latin America in the 21st century.”[67]

The first group of fourteen Japanese Unificationists arrived under the leadership of four founding Japanese National Messiahs. They began building dormitory buildings, guesthouses, a kitchen, sheds for mechanical repairs, manicured gardens of hibiscus and bougainvillea, fields of lemongrass, asparagus, sugarcane and other experimental crops, orchards of orange, mango and grapefruit trees, thousands of jatropha trees to make biodiesel fuel, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a small landing strip, a water purification plant, a water tower, orchards, and man-made fishponds for food. The goal of the colony was to “make headway towards solving global food shortage, environmental problems and educational needs” wrote Michihito Sano and Kunihiko Shibamura in “The Saints of Puerto Leda.” “If a way were found to produce food on that land,” Mr. Shibamura wrote, “this could be expanded to similar types of area around the world” such as the semi-desert regions of Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and the American south-west. The project was given the official name, the Association for Sustainable Development in North and South America.[68]

Reverend Moon’s son Hyun Jin articulated the Unificationist “vision for the Americas” at international leadership conferences held in six Central and South American countries in April 2008 and later that year organized a Global Peace Festival in Asuncion, Paraguay that attracted an estimated 25,000 attendees and included an audience with President Nicanor Duarte. On March 3, 2013 Paraguayan Federico Franco and other government officials visited the colony. In the presence of the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, young fish were “released into the wild” as part of the labors of the settlers “to build a New Garden of Eden in one of the most forbidding environments on Earth.”[69]

The Unificationist ecological utopia added still another dimension to the constantly evolving mystique of Paraguay as a New Eden, where humans could liberate themselves from the past and begin anew. The Guarani legend of the Land-Without-Evil and the Mennonite dream of a religious refuge were deeply religious while the New Australia and New Germany colonies were ideological. The Ukrainian and other German colonies, on the other hand, were nationalistic refuges where persecuted peoples could celebrate their own history, language, and culture. The Unification chapter in this centuries-old quest for the Land-Without-Evil was ecological. The Unification Movement not only sought to heal the bitterly divided human family and reunite the divided religious traditions of the earth, but to bring humans into harmony with their home planet.

## Conclusion

The silent ruins of the desolate Jesuit missions along the Parana River and the three monuments marking the survival of Chaco Mennonites for still another quarter-century, the urn containing the ashes of Francisco Lopez in Asuncion and the vague memories of New-Bordeaux on the Paraguay River, the elderly Ukrainian woman lamenting the assimilation of her grandchildren in Capitain Miranda and the ten solitary Unification pioneers laboring to build a new Garden Of Eden in the north Chaco, all give eloquent expression to what historian George Pendle described as “The Arcadian Tragedy.”<sup>[70]</sup> Preston E. James in his book *Latin America*, echoes this tragic sentiment: “Paraguay could have been a paradise.”<sup>[71]</sup> R. B. Cunninghame Graham adopted the phrase “A Vanished Arcadia,” Ben MacIntyre used the term *Forgotten Fatherland* for the title of his book, Jorge Rubiani described the history of the Fram colony as a “tragedy,” and Monte Reel already refers to the Unification settlement as “Sun Myung Moon’s Lost Eco-Utopia.”

Yet the dream of an earthly utopia, whether it be a terrestrial Garden of Eden, a concrete Eco-Utopia or a Land-Without-Evil, springs eternal in the human spirit. This eternal search for an earthly paradise has inspired humans ever since they first achieved consciousness. Jews, Christians, and Muslims cherish the legend of the Garden of Eden, Marxists were inspired by a vision of a classless society, Confucianists hearken back to the ancient Zhou Dynasty, Mormons followed God’s guidance to the Great Salt Lake, Zionists Jews conquered Palestine and established a Third Empire, Catholic monks founded monasteries in distant lands, and Muslims struggle to restore the long-lost unity of the Islamic *Ummah*.

Inevitably, these utopias are somewhere else, lost in the mists of an ancient past or only faintly visible in the far future, buried under millenniums of mundane history or lost in some far distant land beyond seas or deserts. In short, it is not the finding that inspires this eternal human quest but the searching, the eternal quest.

No bit of land better illustrates the never quenched human search for paradise than the small land of Paraguay. The Spanish found the ancient Guarani Indian legend of the Land-Without-Evil, and the Jesuits simply grafted their vision of a Christian Republic onto this quest. President Francisco Lopez labored to establish his version of a Paraguayan Republic dominating the continent, and a host of religious and ethnic groups saw in Paraguay what the Rev. Sun Myung Moon called “the least developed place on earth, and, hence, closest to original creation.”

Like all utopias, promised lands and earthly paradises, each of these Paraguayan experiments failed. Even the carefully celebrated Mennonite twenty-five year monuments seem merely expressions of “another quarter century and we are still here, but for how long,” rather than a declaration of permanent victory. Paraguay is the land littered with the ruins of failed utopias, but these ruins are eloquent memorials to the eternal human quest for an earthly paradise.

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