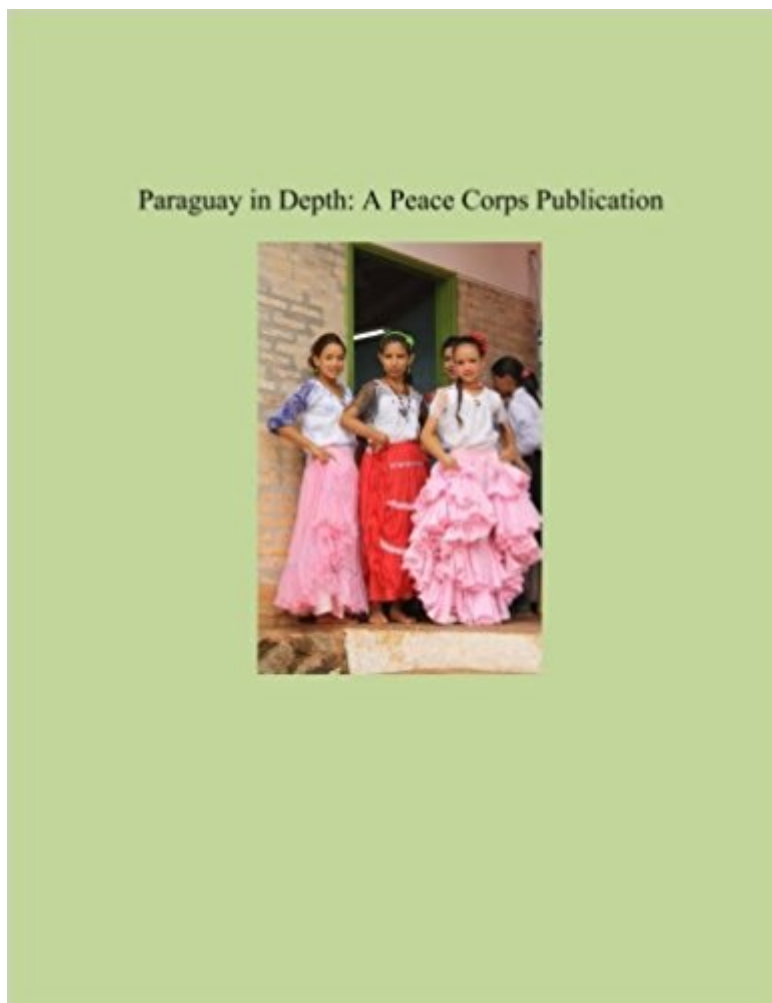


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Paraguay In Depth: A Peace Corps Publication



Synopsis

Almost no archaeological research has been done in Paraguay, and the pre-Columbian history of the country is poorly documented. What is certain is that the eastern part of the country was occupied by Guaraní-Indians for at least 1,000 years before the Spanish conquest. Evidence indicates that those indigenous inhabitants developed a fairly sophisticated level of political autonomy, with quasi-sedentary, multi-village chiefdoms. The first Spaniards settled in the territory in the 16th century. They were predominantly young men, as few women followed them to the relatively unpromising region. Following the Spaniards' assumption of power, a mixed, or mestizo, population developed that spoke the language of their indigenous mothers but adopted many of the cultural norms of their Spanish fathers. The country's colonial history was one of general calm punctuated by turbulent political events. The colony was economically unimportant to the Spanish crown, and the distance of its capital from other new cities on the continent virtually ensured the territory's isolation. Paraguay declared its independence from Spain in 1811. From independence onward, the country has had a fascinating history of dictatorial governments, from the utopian regime of José Gaspar de Francia (El Supremo) to the suicidal reign of Francisco Solano López, who nearly devastated the country in warfare against the combined forces of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay from 1865 through 1870. The so-called War of the Triple Alliance ended in the near annihilation of Paraguay and set the stage for the formation of a two-party (Colorado vs. Liberal) political system that continues today. Following political turmoil during the first three decades of the 20th century, Paraguay went to war again, this time with Bolivia. From 1932 to 1935, approximately 30,000 Paraguayans and 65,000 Bolivians died while fighting over possession of the Chaco region. Modern-day Paraguayans look with pride on their history of surviving devastating wars and rebuilding their country in the face of great odds. On the other hand, initiative and creativity were stifled for many years during the rule of a series of dictators. From 1870 to 1954, Paraguay was ruled by 44 different men, 24 of whom were forced from office. In 1954, General Alfredo Stroessner took advantage of the strong link between the armed forces and the Colorado Party to overthrow the government; he ruled until 1989. Although there is little ethnic strife to impede social and economic progress, there is social conflict caused by underemployment and the enormous gap between the rich and the poor. Positive steps to correct these inequities have occurred since the 1989 ousting of the last dictator, and the country is moving toward a fully functioning democracy. However, the tradition of hierarchical organizational structures and generous rewarding of political favors prevails.

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