

PARAGUAY AT WAR

TRAGEDY OF PARAGUAY. By GILBERT PHELPS. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975. Pp. 288. \$16.95.)

The standard technique for writing a devastating review is to dip your pen in the blood of your assumed victim and excoriate his publication as an intellectual abomination. But those who live by the swordfish die by the swordfish, and more and more reviewers have discovered that denounced and embarrassed historians have friends who are quite willing and eager to retaliate. Thus, it has become a standard practice for historical reviewers to expostulate upon the weaknesses of a particular book, or to reprimand in scholarly terms an author's failure to consult some archival source, but to summarize by saying "Nevertheless, Professor _____ has produced a useful addition to the literature on the subject," or "Despite its faults, Professor _____'s analysis provides new insights into an extraordinarily complex problem."

Gilbert Phelps' *Tragedy of Paraguay* is a difficult work to write about partially because it cannot be dealt with in the fashion just described. As a study of nineteenth-century Paraguay through the 1864–70 War of the Triple Alliance, it presents neither startling discoveries nor earth-shaking interpretations. Phelps apparently consulted no works written after 1966, and it is exceedingly doubtful that he undertook any research in Paraguayan, Argentine, or Brazilian archives. There is, then, no reason why specialists in Paraguayan history (the gallant handful) should read this work, and graduate students interested in the 1864–70 bloodbath and its origins would be better advised to search out the studies written by Pelham Box and Charles Kolinski.¹

Having made these derogatory remarks, one might ask: Does the book have any positive attributes? The answer is yes, particularly if we consider the audience for whom it was intended. The price of the work, \$16.95, makes it relatively expensive except for the well-heeled and the exceptionally curious, but libraries which lack copies of Box or Kolinski can pay that price. In fact, they may be quite willing to do so, for the two books cited are long out-of-print, and specialized book dealers probably want a good deal more than \$16.95 for either of them.² Bruce H. Sussman, Promotion Manager of St. Martin's Press, Incorporated, wrote me that the Phelps work was intended to be "a broad survey for undergraduate library reference."³ He emphatically believes that there is a market for this book, and since several of my undergraduate students (all nonhistory majors) thought the work to be "super," I am inclined to believe that he has a point.

Tragedy of Paraguay will receive no accolades from the scholarly community, but the royalties received will soothe away any regrets Phelps may have on that score. On the other hand, the very appearance of this book emphasizes some of the deficiencies long prevalent in Paraguayan historiography. Cunningham-Grahame,⁴ and Barret,⁵ Box, Kolinski, and now Phelps have concentrated

their attentions primarily upon the events and personalities of the Carlos Antonio López and Francisco Solano López regimes. Admittedly the 1843–70 period is central to the study of Paraguayan history after independence; nevertheless, a critical biography of José Francia (*El Supremo* to Paraguayans, and *de facto* founder of the state) in English would certainly be welcomed.⁶

The most desperately needed study, however, is a socioeconomic history of Paraguay between 1870 and 1932. How this broken, ruined country managed to rehabilitate itself and reestablish a sense of national purpose in the midst of political chaos (there were at least 33–34 presidents and/or dictators during this half-century) is a story that needs to be told! Where is the bright young man or woman with the talent, the energy, and the inclination to undertake such a task?

I believe that instant publication awaits the completion of such a work; but the tragedy is that it would probably sell fewer copies than *Tragedy of Paraguay*.

LESLIE B. ROUT, JR.
Michigan State University

NOTES

1. Pelham H. Box, *The Origins of the Paraguayan War*, 2 vols. (Urbana, 1927). An aging work, but still the most comprehensive on the topic in English. See also Charles J. Kolinski, *Independence or Death: The Story of the Paraguayan War* (Gainesville, 1965). An excellent, well-written study.
2. An advertisement sent through the mail from a California book dealer offered the Kolinski work for \$25.00. I reserved my copy of this list of offerings in March 1977.
3. Letter to the author, 16 May 1977.
4. R. B. Cunninghame-Grahame, *Portrait of a Dictator* (London, 1933). This is essentially another biography of Francisco Solano López.
5. William E. Barrett, *Woman on Horseback: The Biography of Francisco López and Eliza Lynch* (London, 1938). Newer but not necessarily superior is Henry Lyon-Young's *Eliza Lynch, Regent of Paraguay* (London, 1966).
6. The only biographical effort on Francia in book form in English seems to be Edward White's *El Supremo, A Romance of the Great Dictator of Paraguay* (New York, 1916). There is little or nothing about this work to recommend it.