

Everyday Life and Politics under the Stroessner Regime in Paraguay (1954-1989)

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This introduction explains the reasons for presenting a dossier on unexplored aspects of life during the Stroessner dictatorship in Paraguay. It outlines the diverse research approaches in the selected articles.

Keywords: Paraguay, Stroessner, consensus, legitimacy, dictatorship

Esta introducción explica las razones por presentar el dossier sobre aspectos inexplorados de la vida bajo la dictadura de Stroessner en Paraguay. Describe las diversas metodologías investigativas de los artículos seleccionados.

Palabras clave: Paraguay, Stroessner, consenso, legitimidad, dictadura

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Introduction

2025 marks 36 years since Paraguay returned to democracy in 1989, which is roughly the same amount of time Alfredo Stroessner ruled in that nation: 35 years (1954–1989). The time period is significant because only now have Paraguayans born during the first year of the Stroessner dictatorship, new septuagenarians, lived more than half their lives under a democratic government. This is a momentous change. In recognition of this new reality, we have put together a special collection of articles about the significance of everyday life and politics under Stroessner.

While political scientists such as Andrew R. Nickson (1988), Carlos Miranda (1990), and Paul H. Lewis (1980) had begun trying to explain the long-lasting nature of the Stroessner regime by the 1980s, his heavy-handed rule in Paraguay only recently has come to the fore as a field of historical study in Paraguay and in the larger English-language literature. The lack of study of the dictatorship is due partly to the outsized place that the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870) and the Chaco War (1932–1935) has had on the nation’s historiography.

Now, however, historians have begun to make strides into the study of the Stroessner era, such as Bernardo Neri Farina (2003), René Harder Horst (2007), and Kirk Tyvela (2019). The newspaper *ABC Color* also published a series of fourteen historical books called *Colección 60 años de Stroessner* (2014). Significantly, in the past few years, an informal WhatsApp group dedicated to the study of the dictatorship has given space to research and writing about the regime. Several doctoral dissertations consider the role of Stroessner’s rule in the mid-twentieth century, for example, those by Jazmín Duarte Sckell (2023) at the University of Cologne and Ignacio González Bozzolasco (2020) at the University of Buenos Aires. In addition is the ongoing doctoral research by Alejandra Torrents (University of Barcelona) and Eduardo Tamayo-Belda (Autonomous University of Madrid). Other studies examine the dictatorship through an innovative historical lens, including my work on consumerism and Kevin Chambers’s social history of the dictatorship. As a result, we are on the creative threshold of a great deal of new scholarship on the Stroessner dictatorship, as mirrored in this dossier.

The severe regime—infamous for its use of terror and disappearance—shaped the lives of Paraguayans in many ways. Meticulously documented in the 2008 Final Report of the Truth and Justice Commission (Comisión de Verdad y Justicia 2008), the brutal acts and horrors inflicted on thousands of Paraguayans are well known. What is less understood is how Paraguayans lived—making a living, keeping their identity, and simply going about their daily lives—in the context of coercion, repression, and institutional violence.

This dossier on the history of Paraguay focuses on the apparent normalcy of life under the dictatorship. Four of the five essays examine that question in depth: those of Carolina Alegre Benítez and Antonio Tudela Sancho, Bridget María Chesterton, René Harder Horst, and Eduardo Tamayo-Belda. The fifth essay, by Ricardo Pérez Haristoy, specifies how the dictatorship’s diplomatic relationships with Chile functioned to normalize dictatorial regimes in the Southern Cone.

Overall, the dossier reflects on the notion of how dictatorship can become ordinary. The articles do not ignore the trauma and horror experienced by many, as highlighted by Harder Horst and Tamayo-Belda specifically, but rather scrutinize how some people made hard choices and accommodations to survive. This dossier also ponders how “unexceptional” life can be under dictatorship, if it involves simply cooking (Chesterton), educating (Chesterton, Alegre Benítez and Tudela Sancho), or creating the appearance of consensus (Chesterton, Tamayo-Belda, Alegre Benítez and Tudela Sancho).

All the articles contribute to the idea that the Stroessner regime sought legitimacy, as analyzed in policies designed to reinforce ideas about state formation (Pérez Haristoy, Alegre Benítez and Tudela Sancho, Harder Horst) and cultural norms (Alegre Benítez and Tudela Sancho, Chesterton, Tamayo-Belda). Overall, the articles give us a clearer picture of how the state and definitions of identity came to uphold and normalize dictatorship.

Three of the articles also draw on newly created data sets that broaden our understanding of the recent past in Paraguay. Relying on oral histories (Harder-Horst, Chesterton) and questionnaires (Tamayo-Belda), these articles provide new material available to future researchers for a deeper consideration and engagement with the Paraguayan past. Hopefully, these exciting methodological contributions will inspire rising historians to look beyond the archive in Paraguay.

“Everyday Life and Politics under the Stroessner Regime in Paraguay (1954–1989)” gives a platform to one of the least-studied and least-understood dictatorships in Latin America. This regime, while one of the region’s longest, has been understudied for too long. With the publication of the dossier in the online, open access platform of *MARLAS*, the authors and editors hope to lead research in a different direction. We imagine that

future historians and scholars will inform their own work with these articles, which will become foundational studies for the understanding of Paraguay's dictatorial decades.

Bridget María Chesterton is professor of History at Buffalo State University. She earned her PhD at SUNY Stony Brook in 2007. Her publications include *The Grandchildren of Solano López: Frontier and Nation in Paraguay, 1904–1936* (University of New Mexico Press, 2013) and articles in *Journal of Women's History*, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, *Journal of World History*, and *Journal of Social History*. Her current project on consumerism during dictatorship, under contract with the University of Pittsburgh Press, is *Hotel Guaraní: The Brazilianization of Paraguay's Middle-Class during the Stroessner Years*.

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