Francisco Solano López is one of the most problematic figures in Latin American history. Most historians see him as a dictator who led his country into a disastrous war, whereas, in his fatherland, he has come to be seen by many as the embodiment of all that is heroic in Paraguay’s past.

The so-called Paraguayan War, or War of the Triple Alliance, lasted from 1864 to 1870 and was one of the bloodiest in Latin American history. It led, as the title of the book indicates, to the ruination of Paraguay, demographically, economically, and politically. Paraguay lost about half of its population, the survivors being mostly women and children, and had to cede a great part of its territory to its neighbours. After the war, the allies imposed a liberal constitution in a country with no democratic tradition. This resulted in constant upheavals that hindered the country’s recovery from the devastations of war and, eventually, in military dictatorships. Nevertheless, the fact that Paraguay resisted the overwhelming force of its much more powerful neighbours for such a long time, in spite of a high death toll, has been a subject for polemics ever since the war. Right up to the present day, the motives of the statesmen involved have provoked impassioned discussion both in South American historiography and among the South American public. All agree that it was Francisco Solano López who made the first move, but whether this step was justified or reasonable from the Paraguayan point of view is still under debate.

In Francisco Solano López and the Ruination of Paraguay: Honor and Egocentrism, James Schofield Saeger takes a clear position on this topic by attributing most of López’s actions and motives to his egocentrism and exaggerated sense of honour. While this viewpoint is surely justified, it may not reveal the whole story.
Even if one accepts the idea that Francisco Solano López was a dictatorial president who turned into a tyrant by the end of the war, one should ask whether anything other than the character faults of the Paraguayan president contributed to the war’s outbreak. It might have been particularly valuable for readers unfamiliar with the history of the Southern Cone in this period if Saeger had addressed other possible explanations. In his discussion of the origins of the war, much room is given to the problem of honour, which was important not only to López, but also to the Brazilian Emperor, and Saeger does address the miscalculations and personal antipathies on both sides. He says little, however, about historical disputes and animosities between Paraguay and Brazil or Paraguay and Argentina that might explain why many Paraguayans followed López at the beginning of the war. Neither does he mention positions that question the role of the Argentine president Bartolomé Mitre, and he relies heavily instead on rather old literature that sees this statesman uncritically. It seems just too easy to blame everything on one man and his personality. Despite the disclaimer that the book is not mainly about the war, but is rather a biography of Francisco Solano López, its judgments about the Paraguayan president’s culpability are central.

For all that, such a biography is highly needed. Until now, there have been very few biographies of this controversial figure, and most of these have been written by Paraguayans who took part in the glorification of the marshal. Saeger now gives us a more disinterested and critical view of the Paraguayan dictator. His biography concentrates on the personal, political, and military shortcomings of the Paraguayan president that finally led to disaster for his country. Saeger attributes many of López’s mistakes to the fact that he was guided by an exaggerated sense of honour, a false image of himself, and a total lack of empathy for other persons. Some of these characteristics can be traced to his upbringing as the eldest son of former Paraguayan president Carlos Antonio López. Spoiled and unaccustomed to restrictions or contradictions, except from his father, he succeeded his authoritarian but more rational and experienced father.
at an early age. Before he had reached the age of twenty, and with no military experience at all, López was promoted by his father to the rank of General in the Paraguayan army. Military and diplomatic assignments followed, with López authorized to act in the name of his father, as he did during the mediation in the Argentine conflict and his mission to Europe. These precocious responsibilities reinforced the character traits that led to catastrophe when Francisco Solano López had himself proclaimed president after his father’s death. Two years later, he involved his country in the devastating war against Brazil, claiming that Paraguayan honour and independence were in danger because of Brazil’s invasion of Uruguay. Shortly afterwards, his imprudent conduct led to the entrance of Argentina and Uruguay into the war. The insistence on the part of the allies that peace could only be possible if López would resign the presidency, and López’s stubborn rejection of that proposal, even at the price of the total destruction of his people and country, led to the prolongation of the war even after it had become clear that it was lost for Paraguay.

Saeger describes the evolution of the war and the increasing cruelty and cynicism of the dictator in a convincing way. In addition to secondary scholarly literature, he relies on published documents, such as the letters of the president and accounts of the war written mostly by foreign eyewitnesses. The latter include those by the British apothecary George Frederick Masterman; the engineer George Thompson, who had worked for the Paraguayan army for years; and the American Diplomat Charles A. Washburn, who strongly disliked the president. A few additional archival sources round out the picture.

In a final chapter, Saeger describes the López legacy, that is, the myth surrounding his person and conduct that was made up by early twentieth-century politicians and non-professional historians. This historiographical chapter seems to be directed more towards a Paraguayan than a foreign public, since the rather lengthy description of the most important historians who helped to create or propagate the myths are interesting only for readers already familiar with these
authors and their role in post-war Paraguay. For other readers, it might have been more valuable to delve deeper into the question of why this myth has been so appealing to the Paraguayans and has proved so hard to overcome.

There are a few other minor shortcomings in what is generally a well-written book. Some sub-chapter titles are rather misleading. The one entitled “The Hopkins Affair,” (45) for example, treats the Hopkins affair only superficially. It concentrates instead on the failed military alliance with Corrientes, during which López held his first command and returned, without having fought a battle, convinced of his military talents. More annoying are the repetitions. That we constantly read about López’s lack of empathy is understandable, since it is one of the central themes of this biography, but we do not need to be told two times within fifteen pages that López’s knowledge of the English language was not as good as he or his glorifiers pretended, (50, 63) to read two times within five pages that he became addicted to French wines, (66, 70) or to see, on page 129, exactly the same quotation on Emperor Pedro’s sense of honour that we have already read on page 110.

The book is very helpful and important in understanding the personality of Francisco Solano López. Blaming the war entirely on him and his character will not, however, aid in achieving a fuller understanding and more balanced collective memory of the war in Paraguay itself. What we need is a new debate about the war and its causes that goes beyond Lopez’s egocentrism and tries to understand the other motives of the Paraguayan dictator and the Paraguayans who followed him.

Barbara Potthast
University of Cologne, Germany