



The Ten Cents War: Chile, Peru, and Bolivia in the War of the Pacific, 1879-1884

Bruce W. Farcau

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The Atacama Desert, a coastal area where the borders of Chile, Peru, and Bolivia meet, was a region of little interest in the late nineteenth century until European research on the use of nitrates in fertilizers and explosives rendered the droppings of millions of sea birds a valuable commodity. In a move that echoed the California Gold Rush, the three neighboring countries soon battled for control of the region. In 1879, a comparatively modern and powerful Chile seized Bolivia's coastal province, and a secret alliance between Peru and Bolivia soon led to a full-scale war, one which saw the employment of much new military technology.

Using such new weapons as the breech-loading rifle, rapid-fire cannon, ironclad warships, torpedoes, and electronic mines, Chile quickly crushed the allied armies, but a guerrilla war would drag on for years. While the three armies fought over some of the most inhospitable terrain imaginable, from burning, waterless deserts to snow-clogged mountain passes at 15,000 feet, their governments bumbled and wrangled. In the end, the lure of easy wealth undermined the economies of all three nations and served no good purpose when the market for nitrates soon evaporated, leaving all three much poorer for the experience.

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