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Over 100 Years Ago Chilean and British Imperialism Cut Bolivia Off From the Sea. Today, Evo Morales Could Lead the Country Back to the Coast



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In 1879 began the disastrous ‘War of the Pacific’, the Chilean army invaded Bolivia’s ‘Litoral’ department, leaving the poorest nation in South America landlocked. It is thought up to 18,000 Bolivians died in the war. Chile’s war on Bolivia was at every step of the way backed and armed by the British Empire as English industrialists took control of the

vast natural resources of the Bolivian coastal region. These included guano, sodium, nitrate, copper where British interests established a monopoly on the export of these primary resources. Bolivia has never given up its demand to return to the coast, it still maintains a navy in preparation, the only landlocked country in the world to do so. Today the Bolivian government, under left-indigenous president Evo Morales is taking the biggest steps yet in securing a sovereign access to the sea as he takes the case to the International Court of Justice at the Hague who have already ruled against Chile's early objections to Bolivia's claims, a preliminary ruling is expected on April 28th. This is more than a territorial dispute, this is a political battle to roll back the hidden legacy of British imperialist interference in Latin America. It is inconceivable that Bolivia's previous neoliberal governments could have come this far, indeed they didn't, Bolivia's successes are precisely because Morales' left government is nation building for the first time, bringing natural resources under public ownership and incorporating the social movements into the structures of popular power. Those who preceded him were more interested in short sighted frenzies of privatisation than any long term state projects like this.

The war began when the Bolivian government raised taxes on the Chilean and British companies operating in Bolivia's Litoral department. Companies such as the "Antofagasta Nitrate & Railway Company" (CSFA) refused to pay so Bolivia moved to nationalise mining interests there. Chile then unleashed a brutal war that was to last 5 years and invade huge parts of Bolivia and even Peru. Territory they still hold to this day. Behind this was a vast network of British imperial interests that had built links to sections of the Chilean oligarchy. Ever since the fall of the Spanish Empire in the Americas, Britain was quick off the blocks in establishing informal control of Latin American natural resources. Chile's Banco Edwards was a subsidiary of the Bank of England^[1], and owned by the same family as Chile's foremost newspaper *El Mercurio* that became key in drumming up popular support for the invasion and framing it as a patriotic war rather than a war for British and Chilean mining capitalists. An English businessman with the CSFA articulated Britain's colonial approach to the conflict, "The Bolivians are getting very cocky, but with this action they'll realise that they can't interfere with a subject of the crown, and also, the Chileans will realise that it is in their interests to have the English at their side". From the start of the war began an aggressive media operation in London to portray Chile as advanced and civilised, and Bolivia as backward hordes, one newspaper labeled Bolivia a "Semi-barbarous country that doesn't know civilization"^[2]. This was a textbook divide and rule strategy that the British Empire was employing all over Africa. Britain was

rigidly against Simon Bolívar's vision of a united Latin America, ('Gran Colombia' as he called it), Eduardo Galeano summed it up thus, "For U.S. imperialism to be able to "integrate and rule" Latin America today, it was necessary for the British Empire to help divide and rule us yesterday. An archipelago of disconnected countries came into being as a result of the frustration of our national unity."^[3] British economic interests penetrated deep into every port city of the Americas and played off the new republics against each other whenever its interests were threatened. Britain proceeded to play a vital role in urging and sponsoring Chile's invasion, providing it with huge supplies of arms, financing, logistical support and the political support of its press. Bolivia's meagre forces never stood a chance.

The British back Chilean forces overwhelmed both Bolivia and Peru. Today it is estimated that lack of access to the sea deprives Bolivia of 1.5% in economic growth annually^[4], a huge amount for the region's poorest country. For British imperial interests the outcome was a everything they hoped and more, Yorkshire industrialist John Thomas North established a monopoly over the vast nitrate fields and the British linked Edwards family reaped huge rewards from the captured natural resources. These oligarchs formed a caste that wielded huge political power and plunged Chile into civil war in 1891 when the progressive president Balmaceda tried push through competition laws to break up their monopolies, the war ended in victory for the oligarchy. In some ways even Chile did not benefit from the war, they were left indebted to Britain to the tune of millions for the support they received and the natural resources fell into the hands of a tiny number of families who exported these primary materials on the cheap to the global north. Peruvian historian Enrique Amayo, in his book on British involvement in the war perhaps summed it up best in his final heading titled "Imperialist Great Britain helped Chile, but in the end Chile too became the loser"^[5].

This war nearly a 140 years ago is still an open wound for Bolivians and an obstacle to Latin American integration and unity. The sense of loss for Bolivia, a small nation against the might of the British Empire and Chilean sub-imperialism. Add to this, Chile's national chauvinism they gained after the war, that they are the 'advanced' of the region compared with their 'backward' and more indigenous neighbours Bolivia and Peru, the xenophobia and discrimination is still a defining experience of Andean migrants in Santiago.

What has changed since then is a transformation in Bolivian state and society since the left came to power in 2006. Bolivia's recent diplomatic success has its roots in the fact that the left has for the first time since the 1952 revolution, began popular nation building, so

therefore has the capacity for long term projects of state such as this. Since Morales was swept to power in 2006 by the wave of social movements that overthrew two neoliberal governments within two years, Bolivia has 'reclaimed' natural resources like Gas and some mining, as well as other industries that were privatised in the neoliberal period such as the national airline, telecommunications, airports and numerous manufacturing initiatives. Alongside this, the reconfiguring of the state as the 'Plurinational State' with a new popular constitution and the incorporation of indigenous movements and trade unions into decision making. All of this has created a cultural confidence and given Bolivia the growth and stability necessary to push on towards historic state projects like reclaiming the sea, which Morales has mobilised the social movements behind too^[6]. Morales' anti-imperialist politics also means there is real political will for the first time. Under the neoliberal administrations preceding Morales the maritime demands were mostly rhetoric, in reality attempts were made to privatise Bolivia's natural gas reserves to foreign multinationals and export them through the Chilean ports that were conquered by force. The neoliberal period was also one of economic and political chaos that gave Bolivia hyperinflation, mass unemployment and repression, the country was nowhere near strong enough to mobilise behind a historic demand like this. To take on, in a concerted manner, the historic legacy of British Imperialism and Chilean militarism, and against Chile's right wing billionaire president Sebastian Piñera takes political commitment that only the current government has been able to deliver. The prospects for Bolivia look their strongest ever since Salvador Allende openly supported Bolivia's right to return, though the coup put an end to Allende's vision, laid out in 1970, "In this plan of reparation for injustices, I've also resolved that our brother country Bolivia return to the sea. Ending the confinement they have face since 1879 due to the interference of english imperialism. We cannot condemn a people to a life sentence... a people that enslave another is not free"^[7]. The historical baton has been passed from Allende to Evo to finally find a solution, the Plurinational State has a fighting chance for the first time.