

# TERRITORIAL PLANNING AND LA PLATA BASIN BORDERS



Antonio Paulo Cargnin  
Aldomar Arnaldo Rückert  
Bruno de Oliveira Lemos  
(Eds.)

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# Letra1

www.editoraleta1.com.br  
leta1@editoraleta1.com  
(+5551) 3372 9222  
Rua Lopo Gonçalves, 554  
Cidade Baixa 90050-350  
Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil  
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# III LA PLATA REGION TRIPOINTS: STATE OF THE MATTER AND DESCRIPTIVE COMPARISON

**Alejandro Benedetti**

## ABSTRACT

Where the Paraná and Iguazú rivers meet, the most important and studied trinational region of South America is located: the Triple Frontier. However, this is only one of the 13 tripartite points that were formed in that continental region from the process of interstate delimitation which occurred, centrally, between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Five out of these involve the countries of La Plata Basin, and will be called: Quareim (Argentina-Brazil-Uruguay); Iguazú (Argentina-Brazil-Paraguay); Esmeralda (Argentina-Bolivia-Paraguay); Zapaleri (Argentina-Bolivia-Chile); and Bahía Negra (Argentina-Bolivia-Brazil). This article aims to offer a description of each of the five tripoints that the countries of the del Plata area share, that is, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Besides, it seeks to establish some comparisons between its space-time dynamics. This article is part of a general investigation about South American interstate borders.

**KEYWORDS** South American interstate borders, space-time dynamics,  
La Plata region tripoints.

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## INTRODUCTION

At the confluence of Paraná and Iguazú rivers, the most studied transnational urban region of South America was formed, to the point that its geopolitical condition became its toponym: the Triple Frontier. There, a trilateral urban system was formed, composed by Puerto Iguazú-Foz do Iguaçu-Ciudad del Este, cities located, respectively, in Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. However, this is no more than one of the 13 triple frontiers or, as this article will define them, tripoints<sup>1</sup> that emerged in South America from the inter-state delimitation process which basically took place between the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Five of these tripartite points are shared by the countries that make up La Plata region (Figure 1):

- Tripoint between Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. It is located at the confluence of the Cuareim/Quaraí river (border between Brazil and Uruguay) with the Uruguay/Uruguay river (Argentina's border with the other two countries). It will be called trifold of Cuareim.
- Tripoint between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, already mentioned. It is located where the Iguazú/Iguaçu river (boundary between Argentina and Brazil) flows into the Paraná River (Paraguay's border with the other countries). It will be called tripoint of Iguazú.
- Tripoint between Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay. It is known as – and so will be named – Esmeralda landmark. It is located near the current course of the Pilcomayo River (which serves as the boundary of Argentina with both countries).
- Tripoint between Argentina, Bolivia and Chile. It is located at the top of Cerro Zapaleri. From that landmark, the boundaries were drawn with straight lines in all three directions. There are no water courses in the hill itself, but it is close to the sources of the Pilcomayo River. It will be referred to as tripoint Zapaleri.

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<sup>1</sup> The Spanish word is: *trifinio* or *punto tripartito*.



Figure 1. South American tripoints, differentiating those that were formed between the countries of the del Plata region.  
Source: author.

- Tripoint between Bolivia, Brazil and Paraguay. It is found in the meeting of the Negro River (used, in part, for the Bolivia-Paraguay border) with the Paraguay/Paraguay river (which in some sections serves as the boundary of Brazil with both countries). This area is known as Bahía Negra, so this tripoint will be referred to with that name.

The degree of interest and knowledge production regarding these tripoints, from the field of border studies in particular and from social studies in general, is uneven. While the Iguazú tripoint has numerous academic articles and doctoral theses that consider it (directly or indirectly), the Esmeralda and Bahía Negra tripoints (as a reflection of the general lack of interest in the Bolivia-Paraguay border) are barely referenced. Likewise, the spatiotemporal dynamics that are registered in each of these trilateral areas are dissimilar among them: while the Cuareim and Iguazú tripoints are intensely urbanized, the remaining three are almost permanently depopulated. On the other hand, while the Esmeralda tripoint area was historically populated by hunting and gathering populations – conquered by the national states only towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century–, the site where the tripoint Zapaleri is currently found had already been controlled by the Spanish Crown.

This article sets out two objectives. The first is to provide a description of each of the five tripoints shared by the countries of the del Plata region, namely Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. The second objective, which will be discussed first, is to establish some comparisons of their spatiotemporal dynamics. To do this, four axes of analysis will be considered: interstate relations and the delimitation processes that gave rise to them; existing urban centers and outgoing forms of territorial occupation; infrastructure and general forms of mobility of goods and people; notable sociocultural features (indigenous presence, immigrant minorities, etc.).

## THE STUDY OF SOUTH AMERICAN TRIPOINTS

Tripoint designates the point where the ends of three jurisdictions or any other type of discrete geographic scope converge. An equivalent expression is a tripartite point. A derivation of this definition is the triple border. Whenever the boundary is considered to be equivalent to the linear expression of the division between two geographical areas, the threefold border will designate the point of union of three

frontiers. However, in the use of this expression, the literature usually refers to the more or less articulated geographic area between three countries that is organized around a tripartite milestone.

When you *google* “triple border” in Google’s academic search engine (<https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&q=%22triple+frontera%22&btnG=&lr=>), the results show articles referring to the meeting area of the territories of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. Precisely, this area is known as “Triple Border”. Some authors choose to name it as tri-national trans-boundary space or region, Iguazú or the like (eg. Schweitzer, 2000). Generally, however, this region was institutionalized under the name Triple Border, sometimes mentioned in capital letters (eg. Cardín, 2013; Renoldi, 2015), in other cases with lower case letters (eg. Barvinsk, 2014). The bibliography on this tripoint is abundant and varied. The focus is on smuggling and small-scale trade, which is outside of what states consider to be legal (Cardin, 2013; Renoldi, 2013, 2015; Rabossi, 2004). Some authors have been interested in the geopolitical and security imagination (Dreyfus, 2007), religiosity (Giménez Béliveau, Montenegro and Setton, 2005), tourist dynamics (Ferreira Cury and Fraga, 2013) or processes of cooperation and physical integration (Rhi Sausi and Oddone, 2010).

Besides the works centered on the Iguazútripoint, Sergio González Miranda’s production stands out. This author has been interested in the tripoints which, in the Andean space, Chile shares with its neighbors. Thus, it analyzed the “triple frontera andina” (Bolivia, Chile and Peru) and the “triple frontera circumpuneña” (Argentina, Bolivia and Chile) (González Miranda, 2007, 2009), the latter based on a previous proposal (Benedetti, 2007). Particularly, the first has aroused the interest of this and other authors because it is a considerably successful experience of building a tri-national region, based on paradiplomatic relations. There, the commonwealth of municipalities “Aymara sin fronteras” (Cf. Aranda Bustamante and Salinas Cañas, 2017, González Miranda, Rouviere and Ovando, 2008, among others) emerged. The Zapaleri tripoint, however, does not have a large bibliography. Some papers are interested in emerging linkages between the three tourism-related countries (Amilhat Szary and Guyot, 2009, Porcaro and Benedetti, 2016) or pre-Hispanic populations (Nielsen, 2004).

Another South American tripoint that has generated some academic production is shared by Brazil, Colombia and Peru (Grisales, 2005). This is due, fundamentally,

to the formation of a binational city in the Amazon jungle: Tabatinga (Brazil) -Leticia (Colombia) (see Aponte Motta, 2011 or Vergel-Tova, 2008). Bolpebra (Bolivia), Assis (Brazil) and Iñapari (Peru) are three other small localities of the other Amazonian tripoint, located on a trans-Amazonian bi-oceanic road, whose study, together with the previous one, is found in a book on urbanizations on the Amazonian borders (Zárate Botía, 2012).

Finally, the Cuareim tripoint – the southernmost in South America – has also attracted some attention. There we can mention the works of Galantini and Oddone (2013), focusing on cross-border cooperation schemes and infrastructure development, those of Merenson (2007) and Hartmann (2005, 2011), interested in narrative and construction of cultural identities, in addition to Ríos' doctoral thesis (2012), which reviews issues related to regional development.

Except for the mentioned bibliography, the situation of the tripoints and their surrounding area is rarely mentioned or even problematic, let alone in a comparative way. This article intends to make an initial contribution in this direction.

## SOME GENERAL COMPARISONS

In the tables below, basic information about the five tripoints selected for this article was systematized. Table 1 shows the location (considering the physical environment and the geographic coordinates) and the year in which the location of each tripoint was determined (according to two countries, based on boundary treaties).

Unlike other regions of the world, such as Europe or Asia, where the cultural boundaries of the past (Foucher, 1988) were taken as criteria of national differentiation, in South America, where such a thing practically did not exist, hydrographic forms – mainly rivers – and orographic – fundamentally high summits and watersheds –, were favored, which in some cases should have been combined with straight lines. Thus, of the five tripoints selected, three are in confluences (Cuareim, Iguazú and Bahía Negra), one in the encounter of a river and a straight line (Esmeralda) and another on the top of a hill (Zapaleri).

The determination of a tripoint requires the concurrence of three delimitation processes, which supposes three different bilateral times. In all five cases, there was



Table 1

Tripoints of the countries of del Plata region. Location and year of its formal determination, according to bilateral documents.

Name	Previous warlike	Location		Year of their determination		
		Physical environment	Geographical coordinates	Pair of countries	Year	Documents
Cuareim	Provincias Unidas del Río de la Plata-Empire of Brazil (1825-1828)	Cuareim/ Uruguay river (Isla Brasileira) confluence	30°10'55.6"S 57°37'39.1"O	Argentina-Brazil	1898	Boundary Treaty, Art. 1
				Argentina-Uruguay	1961	Boundary Treaty, Art. 1
				Brazil-Uruguay	1851	Boundary Treaty, Art. 3
Iguazú	Argentina-Brazil and Uruguay against Paraguay (1864-1870)	Iguazú and Paraná river confluence	25°35'32.7"S 54°35'37.6"O	Argentina-Brazil-	1898	Boundary Treaty, Art. 3
				Argentina-Paraguay	1876	Boundary Treaty, Art. 1
				Brazil-Paraguay	1872	Boundary Treaty, Art. 1
Esmeralda	Conquest of Chaco (Argentina, 1884-approx. 1910) War of Chaco (1930-1936)	Pilcomayo river	22°13'31"S 62°38'11"O	Argentina-Bolivia	1925 1941	Boundary Treaty, Art. 1 Protocol, Art. 1
				Argentina-Paraguay	1939	Complementary Boundary Treaty, Art. 1 Ratification.
					1945	
				Bolivia-Paraguay	1938	Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Boundaries, Art. 2 Signature of the Treaty
					2009	
				Argentina-Bolivia	1925	Boundary Treaty, Art. 1
Zapaleri	War of Pacífico (1879-1884)	Cerro Zapaleri	22°48'51"S 67°10'49"O	Argentina- Chile	1904	Convention relating to the demarcation of Puna de Atacama
				Bolivia-Chile	1904	Treaty of Peace and Friendship, Art. 2
Bahía Negra	Triple Alliance (1860-1868) War of Chaco (1930-1936)	Negro and Paraguay river confluence	20°10'11.1"S 58°10'05.1"W	Bolivia-Brazil	1867	Treaty of Ayacucho, Art. 2
				Bolivia-Paraguay	1939	Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Boundaries, Art. 2 Signature of the Treaty
					2009	
				Brazil-Paraguay	1872 1927	Complementary Boundary Treaty, Art. 1

Source: own elaboration, based on international agreements of public access; Coordinates with Google Maps <<https://www.google.com.ar/maps/place>>

a warlike precedent that served to distribute areas between the states in formation and to promote subsequent diplomatic processes.

Considering the year of the last diplomatic document, the tripoint Cuareim was the last to be fixed: in 1961, with the signing of the Uruguay River Treaty between Argentina and Uruguay. However, it had begun to be established there in 1828, in fact, with the signing of the peace treaty between the United Provinces of Rio de la Plata and the Empire of Brazil, after the War of Brazil or *Guerra da Cisplatina*, pillar for the formation of Uruguay, and for the confirmation of the homonymous river as international, as it had happened in the colonial past, separating the Spanish possessions from the Portuguese ones.

The warlike episode called War of the Triple Alliance, War of Paraguay or Great War accelerated the delimitation between Paraguay and its two eastern neighbors and the confirmation of Iguazú as a tripartite point. The Esmeralda milestone was established after the conquest campaigns of a considerable part of the Gran Chaco Sudamericano, by Argentina (begun in 1884 and extended until the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and the Chaco War, which involved the two Mediterranean countries of South America. Although the two tripoints shared by Bolivia and Paraguay were established in 1938, they were not formalized until 2009.

Finally, we can mention the War of the Pacific or the Salitre, which between 1879 and 1884 confronted Chile with Bolivia and Peru, and which opened, collaterally, a diplomatic process involving the first two and Argentina, for the definition of the domain over an extensive area, since then known as Puna de Atacama. Two bilateral documents of 1904 – one between Argentina and Chile and the other between Bolivia and Chile – closed the cycle of war and of geopolitical tension between the three countries, and established the Zapaleri as a starting point for the delimitation, which was also finally assumed as such by the Treaty of limits between Argentina and Bolivia (1925).

Thus, although the definition of the tripoints in itself was not a cause for conflict, it can be noted that they are located inside areas that towards the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were disputed, at the same time, by two or more countries. These disputes took place on both the battlefields and in the diplomatic world. In addition to the wars mentioned above, arduous diplomatic negotiations and the mediation of foreign powers were necessary to decide which part of the Gran Chaco (where the Esmeralda and Bahía Negra tripoints are located), the Puna de Atacama

(Zapaleri tripoint), the Uruguay (Cuareim) and the Paranaan jungle (Iguazú) was entitled to each country.

Table 2 identified the populated centers located in the immediate vicinity of each tripoint, specifying the amount of population counted in the last round of national censuses (approximately in 2010). From there you can discern that the Cuareim and Iguazú tripoints are the two most populated. The first, with a locality in each of the countries involved, reaches 45,000 people concentrated in urbanizations. Iguazú has a population of more than half a million inhabitants, but only if it counts the population of the cities of Puerto Iguazú, Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este. In both Brazil and Paraguay there are other urban concentrations (some previously located, such as Hernandarias and Mingua Guazú in Paraguay) that make up an urban system close to one million inhabitants in a radius of 60 km around the tripoint.

**Table 2**

Tripoints of the countries of the del Plata region. Urban concentrations in your vicinity

Tripoint	Country	City	Distance to milestone approx. (km)	Population	Year
Cuareim	Argentina	Monte Caseros	8	35,922	2010
	Brazil	Barra do Quaraí	8	4,012	2010
	Uruguay	Bella Unión	9	3,873	2011
Iguazú	Argentina	Puerto Iguazú	0	42,849	2010
	Brazil	Foz do Iguaçu	0	256,088	2010
	Paraguay	Ciudad del Este	9	274,340	2010
Esmeralda	Argentina	Santa Victoria Este	6	1,809	2010
	Bolivia	Esmeralda	2	N/D	
	Paraguay	-		-	
Zapaleri	Argentina	-		-	
	Bolivia	-		-	
	Chile	-		-	
Bahía Negra	Bolivia	-		-	
	Brazil	-		-	
	Paraguay	Bahía Negra (Puerto Pacheco)	6	2,431	2010

**Source:** own elaboration with information published in <<http://www.montecaseros.gob.ar/>> Paraguay (2015), Province of Salta, General Direction of Statistics, <<http://estadisticas.salta.gov.ar/web/level3/2/111/101/null;>> Province of Misiones, Provincial Institute of Statistics and Censuses, <<http://www.ipcemisiones.org/censo-2010>>; <<http://www.ine.gub.uy/web/guest/censos-2011>>

Unlike the previous ones, the Esmeralda and Bahía Negra tripoints have very small settlements of less than five thousand inhabitants. The Zapaleri landmark, in an area with an altitude of more than 5 thousand meters above sea level, does not have stable population concentrations within a radius of 50 km, making it one of the most depopulated South American tripoints.

Finally, Table 3 groups information on transport infrastructure, considering land, river and air.

**Table 3**

Tripoints of the countries of del Plata region. Transportation Infrastructure

	<b>Land Infrastructure</b>	<b>Fluvial Infrastructure</b>	<b>Air Infrastructure</b>
Cuareim	Bella Unión-Barra do Quaraí road bridge (railway in disuse) (1976). Libres-Uruguayana bridge 70 km  Routes: RNA 14 30 km / RNU 3 / BR: BR-472	Monte Caseros pier (Argentina) and Bella Unión pier (Uruguay)	Monte Caseros airdrome
Iguazú	Road bridges: Tancredo Neves (Argentina-Brazil, 1985) and de la Amistad (Brazil-Paraguay, 1965)  Route: RNA 12 / BR-277 / RNP 7	Iguazú port (Argentina) - Tres Fronteras port (Paraguay)	Cataratas (Foz do Iguaçu) International Airport  Cataratas del Iguazú (Puerto Iguazú) International Airport  Guaraní (Ciudad del Este) International Airport
Esmeralda	Dirt road	Inexistent	Santa Victoria Este airdrome
Zapaleri	Dirt road	Inexistent	Inexistent
Bahía Negra	Rural road	Pacheco Port (old name) over Hidrovía Paraguay-Paraná	Dirt airdrome in Bahía Negra

**Source:** own elaboration based on Google Maps.

Considering the terrestrial infrastructure, the Iguazú tripoint stands out: two road bridges articulate the three cities. There, national routes have their starting points with connection to the greater metropolitan regions of the three countries: Buenos Aires (to 1,337 km); São Paulo (978 km); Asunción (310 km). In all three cases, these are asphalted roads which, by stretches, are motorways.

In a situation close to the previous one is the Cuareim tripoint, with a bridge between the starting points of Brazil and Uruguay. The tripoint has accessibility to

asphalted roads, which connect with the metropolitan regions of Buenos Aires (619 km), São Paulo (1,547 km) and Montevideo (616 km). However, Monte Caseros does not have a bridge that crosses the Uruguay River, so the interconnectivity between the localities of the tripoint is limited.

The remaining three tripoints are those with the worst land transport infrastructure. In all three cases they connect with their respective territories through dirt or gravel roads. In turn, they are at the greatest distance with respect to their capitals or important metropolitan regions.

River infrastructure is key in tripoints located on rivers, especially the Cuareim: as Monte Caseros and Bella Unión do not have a road bridge, mobility is made possible by a river crossing. The same happens in the tripoint Iguazú: between Puerto Iguazú and Ciudad del Este a road bridge has not been built and, in its replacement, as an alternative to the road connection through Foz do Iguaçu, boats are used.

With regard to air transport, the Iguazú tripoint stands out. Three international airports have been built there. This is an indicator of the strategic and commercial importance of the area. Much of the air movement is related to tourism and commercial activities there. In the vicinity of Zapaleri tripoint there are no runways for aircrafts and in the remaining two there is an aerodrome in each case.

## CUAREIM TRIPOINT

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The Cuareim tripoint was fixed in an area of former Guaraní and Charrúa occupation. During the colonial period the area was controlled by the Jesuits, in particular, within the *estancia* Yapeyú (Silva Sandes, 2015). This tripoint began to be established as a result of the delimitation between Brazil and Uruguay, formalized in the treaty of 1851 (Article 3). The demarcation was carried out between 1852 and 1862 (Dorfman, França and Assumpção, 2016) and thus it was registered in the cartography of the time. Between Argentina and Brazil, the settlement of the interstate boundary followed the Triple Alliance War and the United States diplomatic mediation for the definition of the domain in the area called Las Palmeras (in the Misiones area). Finally, the Treaty of Limits of 1898 established in its act 1 that the dividing line, which runs along the thalweg of the Uruguay River,

would begin in front of the mouth of the river Cuareim. This tripoint was formally completed a century later. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Argentina and Uruguay maintained for their territorial differentiation the *modus vivendi* that came from traditional use, based on the line marked along which boats of greater draft circulated (Benedetti, 2015). It was only in 1961 that they signed the Treaty of Boundaries of the Uruguay River: it established an approximately normal line to the two margins of the river, between the south-western point of the Brazilian island and the parallel of Punta Gorda.

One of the difficulties that the countries of the del Plata region had was the presence of islands on the course of the rivers taken as reference for the delimitation. This is the case of the Uruguay River, which became a controversy between Brazil and Uruguay. At the mouth of the Cuareim there is an island of approximately 1 km<sup>2</sup>, called Brazilian, currently within the Brazilian territory. This was due to the settlement of boundaries between Argentina and Brazil, without the participation of Uruguay, which led to that island being incorporated into Brazil. This situation was answered by Uruguay (Cf. Acuña, 2005), but it did not become a cause which hampered bilateral relations.

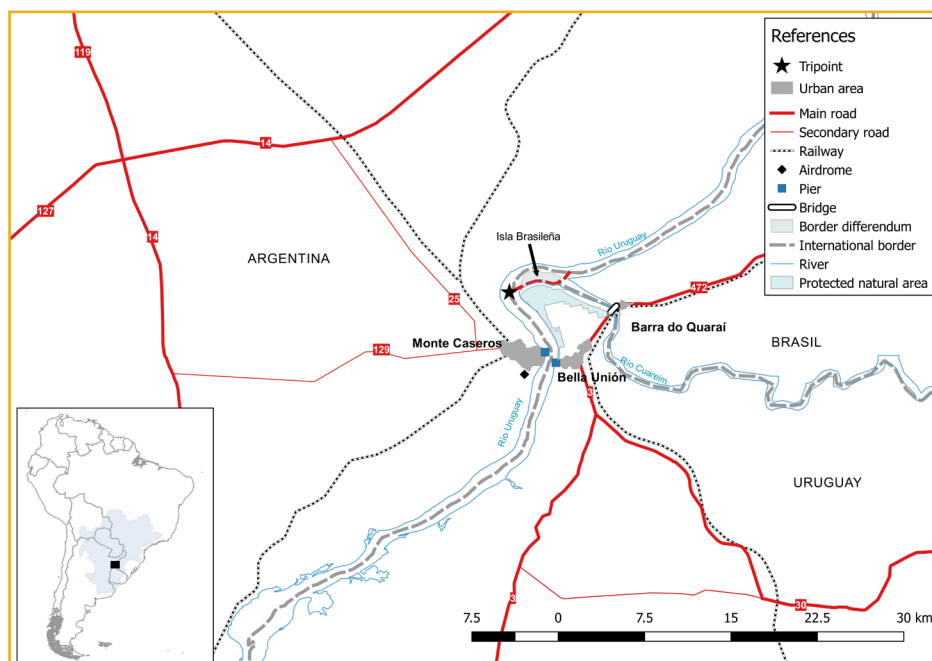


Figure 2. Tripoint Cuareim.

Source: author.

The area has been the subject of different bilateral actions focused on their cities. Between Argentina and Uruguay, in 1987, the Monte Caseros-Bella Unión Frontier Committee (now called the Integration) was formed, while between Barra do Quaraí and Bella Unión, Brazil and Uruguay established an integrated control area, in the framework of MERCOSUR.

It is an urbanized tripoint. On the Brazilian side is Barra do Quaraí, a population established in 1814 as part of the Portuguese advance towards the south. This advance was the origin of the war with the United Provinces of the Rio de la Plata, which preceded the creation of the State of Uruguay in 1828. Bella Unión emerged towards 1829, as part of the formation of Uruguay and the prolegomena to this demarcation with Brazil. It was founded in 1853 under the name of Santa Rosa (Mena Segarra 1969) and then adopted its current name. Meanwhile, the province of Corrientes, currently within Argentina, established at that time a guard in the area known as Paso de Higos, which was later named Monte Caseros (Ríos, 2012).

These three localities did not have a great population growth. Monte Caseros stands out with 35,922 inhabitants, similar to the size that other Argentine cities on the border with Brazil have. The growth of Monte Caseros is related to citrus and rice production, but also to the proximity (30 km) to the road corridor of the Uruguay River located on the Argentine side, structured by RN 14, part of the Chile-MERCOSUR integration axis. Compared with other cities in the rest of the borders of Brazil with Argentina and Uruguay and Uruguay with Argentina and Brazil, Bella Unión and Barra do Quaraí are far below their demographic size. They have concentrations close to 4,000 people, while Uruguayana exceeds 150 thousand inhabitants, Salto exceeds 100,000 and Artigas reaches 40,000, to mention the nearest cities.

Different research shows an important integration between the population of these three cities, especially between Monte Caseros and Bella Unión (vg. Galantini and Oddone, 2013). However, the interconnection between them is still incomplete. Bella Unión and Barra do Quaraí are linked by a railroad bridge (the latter in disuse), built in 1976. It connects RN3 (Uruguay, towards Montevideo) and BR-472 (Brazil, towards Uruguayana). Since the 1980's different actions have been carried out in favor of the construction of a bridge between Monte Caseros and Bella Unión, located opposite each other. Since 2010, after the meeting of the presidents of both countries, studies have begun to assess the economic and

environmental feasibility of the implementation of this project, which has not been executed yet. For mobility, meanwhile, the river mode is used, through the local piers.

Finally, it can be pointed out that, unlike the other tripoints, there is no indigenous presence or active ethnogenesis processes at present. As in the entire border of Brazil with Uruguay and Argentina, there is a culture based on the *Portuñol* as a mixed language.

## IGUAZÚ TRIPPOINT

The history of this tripartite landmark is linked to the control of the river Iguazú and its waterfalls, and the Paraná jungle. The area was discovered by the Spanish at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The natives were placed in reservations by Jesuit missionaries, but they suffered the pressure of the Portuguese *bandeirantes* in their slave-hunting expeditions, which is why these practices were soon deactivated. The area remained outside the territories occupied by the colonists and then by the emerging national states for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, until the end of the Triple Alliance War, around 1870 (Schweitzer, 2009). With that war, the process of interstate delimitation was also accelerated. The treaty of boundaries between Brazil and Paraguay dates back to 1872 and in its article 1 establishes the thalweg of the Paraná river, where Brazilian possessions begin in Iguazú. A treaty was signed between Argentina and Paraguay in 1876, which in article 1 declares that the east and south of Paraguay is divided from Argentina by half of the main channel of the Paraná River from its confluence with the Paraguay River, until finding the limits of the Empire of Brazil by its left margin. This boundary, between Argentina and Brazil, was traced following the Iguazu River as a dividing line. In the zone of the tripoint, the demarcation did not generate controversies, but it did upstream, in the area known as Palmeras, requiring the arbitration of the United States (Lima 2015). The treaty of limits dates from the year 1898, and article 3 mentions the mouth of the Iguazú River in the Parana as the end point of the boundary initiated, towards the south, in the Cuareim river.

As a way of consolidating its control in the area, the Argentine state created the National Territory of Misiones (1881). By the 1930s, on both the Brazilian and Argentine sides, the state presence on the border and the attempt to occupy border areas increased. This led to the creation of two national parks, which were devices



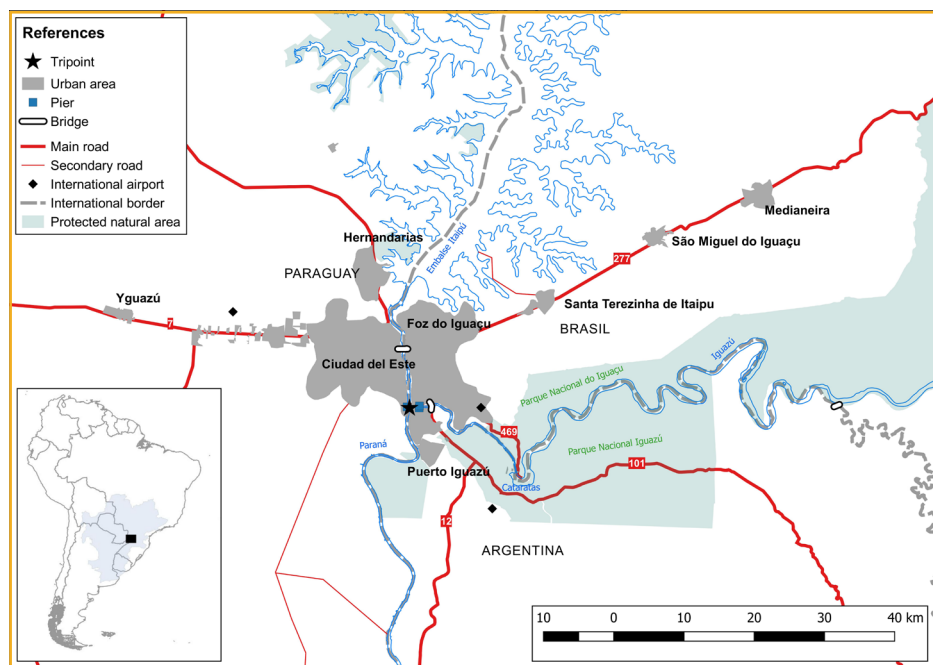


Figure 3. Tripoint Iguazú.

Source: author.

designed to ensure effective state presence in this region: the Argentine side of the Iguazú National Park in 1934 and the Brazilian side of the Iguaçu National Park in 1939 (Ferrero and Pyke, 2015; Ferreira Cury and Fraga, 2013). This happened in a context marked by the rivalry between Argentina and Brazil, with the parks acting as buffers between the two territories.

By the 1950s, in turn, Brazil tightened ties with Paraguay, for example, by transforming the Brazilian port of Paranaguá into a free zone for the latter. Thus, the Paraguayan foreign trade, which until then was practiced through the Rio de la Plata, was reoriented towards Brazil, reducing its dependence on Argentina since the Great War. In the tripoint, this approach resulted in the valorization of lands in the upper Paraná area, in the colonization of the Paraguayan riverbank of Paraná and in the construction, in 1965, of the first bridge (called de la Amistad). Besides, the Itaipú hydroelectric dam was built and there was an intense occupation of the Brazilian-Paraguayan border, in addition to the construction of the route BR-277 (from Lima 2015). The consolidation of the Paraguayan side of the tripoint was due to an active policy, led by the Paraguayan dictator Stroessner, who promoted

the “March to the East”, reorienting Paraguayan territory in that direction, instead of the historical link to the south, from Asunción towards the Rio de la Plata. That generated land colonization and population attraction, much of which came from the state of Rio Grande do Sul (Schweitzer 2009). In the long run, this led to a more intense transformation of the landscape on the Brazilian and Paraguayan sides of the Iguazú tripoint.

The three cities near the tripartite point were founded as a direct reflection of the process of intensifying the presence of the three national states. Brazil founded a military colony in 1897, initially called Vila Iguassu, later renamed Foz do Iguaçu. On the Argentine side, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a small settlement, which began to be called Puerto Aguirre and then changed to Puerto Iguazú. There the command of the national park was installed and still remains. The consolidation of both localities is related to the proximity to national parks and to the promotion of tourism. Later, around 1945, the colonies MingaGuazú, Presidente Franco and the village of Hernandarias, on the Paraguayan side, were created. With the “March to the East”, the Puerto Flor de Lis was founded (1957), renamed as Presidente Stroessner Port, in honor of the homonymous dictator, finally renamed in 1989 as Ciudad del Este. Because of the strategic importance of the area, and despite the considerable distance from the main metropolitan regions of the three countries (more than 1,000 in Buenos Aires, more than 300 in Asunción and about 830 in São Paulo), this tripoint has high accessibility, through national asphalted routes in the three directions.

Until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the economy in the area of the Iguazú tripoint was based on the exploitation of natural resources and on yerba and timber production (Fogel, 2008). The creation of the tax-free zone in Ciudad del Este towards the 1960s, the construction of the two bridges and, above all, the Itaipú dam in the 1970s and the continuous growth of tourism in the area caused a demographic explosion that transformed the tripoint definitely. To this, the progress of the soybean frontier was added, from Brazil to Paraguay, which led to an expulsion of small Paraguayan producers, mainly to Ciudad del Este. This population could not be absorbed by the formal market, which triggered the formation of networks of small traders (generally considered smugglers or fraudsters, since they introduce illicit products or do not pay customs tariffs), based in Ciudad del Este and fundamentally projected to different cities in Brazil. In this way, the networks of baggers arose. These workers are intermediaries between traders located

in Paraguay and other traders located in the neighboring country, or sometimes distribute on their own account. Other workers, known as “*laranjas*”, are hired informally to transport a certain amount of merchandise to Brazil in exchange for a predetermined payment (Cardin, 2013).

Since the 1970s, activities related to energy production (especially in Foz do Iguaçu), trade (especially in Ciudad del Este) and tourism (Iguazú Falls) have been highlighted. Ciudad del Este is a port of arrival for products mainly from Southeast Asia, through Chilean or Brazilian ports, which are then legally and illegally re-exported to Brazil and Argentina. It also functions as a destination for illicit products (stolen cars, drugs, weapons) that in many cases come from neighboring countries and then re-enter there through different maneuvers, or other products (such as soy or coffee) that come from Brazil and are re-exported from Paraguay. In comparison to its neighbors, Foz do Iguaçu presents a greater diversity of activities, including commercial, industrial and tourism-related services, while in Puerto Iguazú there is a predominance of tourism activity (Dreyfus, 2007).

Unlike other tripoints, this one acquires significant relevance in the domestic life of one of the countries, namely Paraguay. This is due to the strategic position of Ciudad del Este in relation to Brazil, having greater structural dependence in commercial and logistical matters, since it is through the ports of Brazil that a major part of the soy production is channeled.

These are lands of the Guaraní culture. After the failure of the Jesuit colonization, until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the area of the Iguazú tripoint had no notable presence of white population. The Mbyá Guaraní population has historically developed their socioeconomic practices in jungle areas, with high mobility and multi-locality (Pissolato 2004). Currently, this population is distributed in the southern and southeastern states of Brazil, Misiones in northeastern Argentina and eastern Paraguay. Mobility is fundamental to maintain the social relations of a dispersed population. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Guaraní communities moving through the Paraná forest were persistently pressured by the advance of monocultures, agricultural colonies and urban development. In the case of Paraguay, since the 1950s there was systematic persecution and eviction. In all three cases, many members of these communities were incorporated as cheap labor, in some cases seasonal. Thus, there was a progressive fragmentation of the Guaraní territories and the rupture of networks of interethnic exchange (Okulovich, 2013).

On the other hand, a large mass of workers who were unemployed at the end of the construction of the Itaipú dam and many others who came from Brazil as part of the agricultural process also gave rise to a human, linguistic and cultural group known as “Brasiguayos”. It is estimated that some 400,000 people (almost 7% of Paraguay’s population) live and work in the most informal way and without any legal protection (Dreyfus, 2007). Many of them integrate the social group known as *sacoleiros*, engaged in small-scale trade.

In addition to the people from the three countries and from Uruguay, there is also the presence of people from China, Taiwan and Korea, as well as people from Lebanese, Syrian and other Middle Eastern nationalities, who arrived in the area in the 1980s. This population is not so visible through their number, but through their symbolic repercussions. This is because the area was associated with Islamic terrorism and that gave it notoriety over other social characteristics. The Muslim population was stigmatized as terrorist activists (Renoldi, 2015).

All this, besides showing that it is the most populated tripoint in South America, accounts for its highly cosmopolitan character.

## ESMERALDA TRIPOINT

Located in the interior of the South American Great Chaco, the Esmeralda tripoint started to be set on the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After a long diplomatic process, in the treaty of 1925, Argentina and Bolivia agreed to set the boundary at the eastern end of the Pilcomayo River. Argentina and Paraguay, after the war of the Triple Alliance, signed the Treaty of Friendship, Trade and Navigation, which reestablished bilateral relations. At the same time, they signed the first boundary treaty between the two countries, establishing *de jure* the Paraná, Paraguay and Pilcomayo rivers as territorial boundaries. The difficulty arose with the third river. The treatment of the boundary in the section of the Pilcomayo River was submitted to the arbitration of the American president, who determined, in 1878, that the main arm of the Pilcomayo was to be taken as reference. But it is a plain river, which overflows, changes its course and at times dries up. This has hindered the demarcation in all its extension, and even the location of the milestone tripoint. In 1905 both countries signed an agreement creating a double commission to carry out hydrological studies, in order to determine the main arm of the river. Everything

was delayed, among other reasons, by the development of the war between Bolivia and Paraguay. The Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Boundaries between Bolivia and Paraguay of 1938 (with the mediation of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, the United States of America, Peru and Uruguay) established, with inaccuracies, the boundary (with Argentina in the south and Brazil in the north). Finally, in 1939, Argentina and Paraguay signed an agreement that established the definitive limit in the Pilcomayo, which had to be supplemented by another agreement in 1945. It was stipulated that a special commission should design a plan of works to obtain a definitive indictment of the river and give stability to the dividing line. This never happened, and at the same time there was a displacement of the course. The tripartite milestone could not be placed in the corresponding place until 2016. Finally, Argentina and Bolivia, with a Protocol of 1941, confirmed that the final limit in the section of the Pilcomayo River had the Esmeralda landmark as end point.

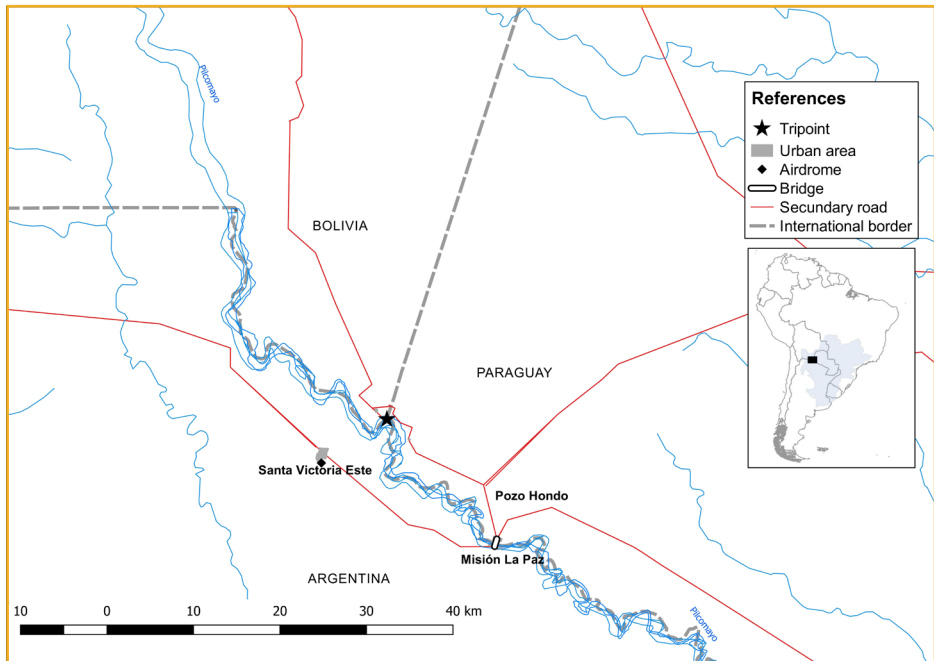


Figure 4. Esmeralda tripoint.

Source: author.

Apart from some measures linked to the security of the three countries, the area was not the object of any promotion of their productive development. Because it is a plain area with a river that dries for seasons, the crossing of the limit does not offer greater difficulties. There is no active civil society claiming the construction of infrastructure.

It is a sparsely populated area, with no large consolidated populations. The most important locality, which is on the Argentine side, is Santa Victoria Este with about 2 thousand inhabitants. On the Bolivian side there is a town called Esmeralda, whose population is still lower. The area is barely accessible via dirt roads. It is located at a great distance from the national capitals (in a straight line: 1,400 km from Buenos Aires, 800 km from La Paz and 600 km from Asunción), but also from important cities of lower hierarchy. Downstream the Pilcomayo are Mision La Paz (Argentina) and Pozo Hondo (Paraguay). The first one was created with the missionary objective of concentrating the indigenous Chaco population at around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Trinchero 2000). Between the two sites, a bridge was built in the 1990s as part of continental integration policies. However, this project was not completed, as the routes that originated there were not asphalted.

It is occupied by a very mobile population of Wichí, Chulupí and Chorote groups. These populations were intensely exploited from the expansion of the Argentine border towards the Great Chaco. Traditionally nomadic, associated with hunting, gathering and fishing, these groups were forced overtime to be included as seasonal labor for different agricultural plantations. There are also Creole populations devoted to the extensive breeding of animals.

## ZAPALERI TRIPOINT

The definition of this tripartite point located in the High Andean area was a derivation of two episodes. The first was the War of the Pacific (1879-1884), through which Bolivia lost control of the Atacama Desert and its departure to the sea by sovereign territory. The other relevant episode, subsequent to that war, was the diplomatic process developed between Argentina and Chile – in the general context for the definition of the boundary along the mountain range – to determine which country had the dominion of the area known as Puna de Atacama, located to the east of the homonymous desert. With the mediation of

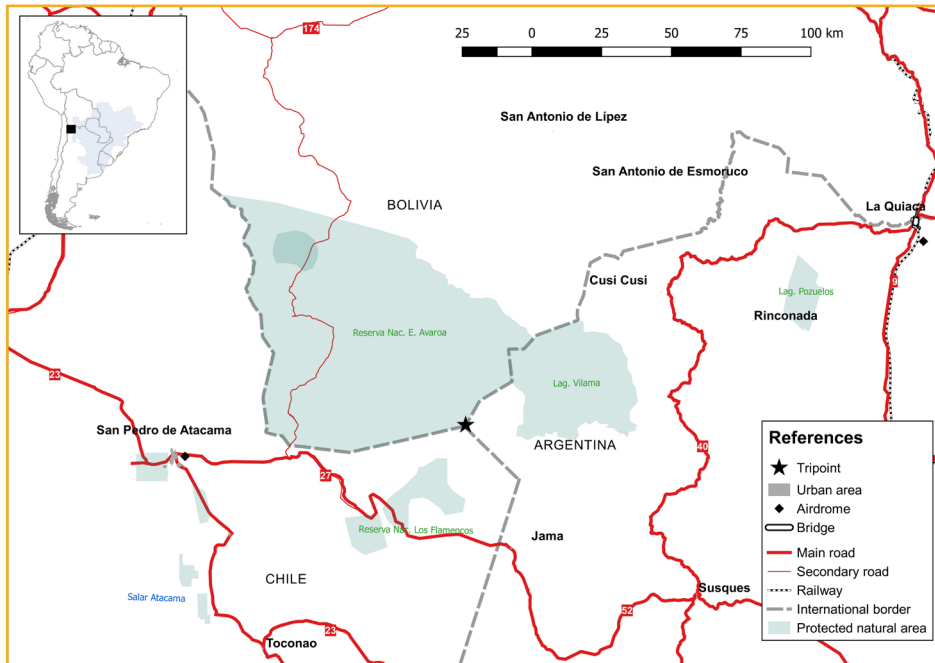


Figure 5. Tripoint Esmeralda.

Source: author.

the United States, it was accepted that much of that area should be integrated with Argentina (Benedetti, 2005). The determination of Zapaleri hill as tripoint was reached in 1904. This was made possible by the Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1904 between Bolivia and Chile, which closed the cycle of war: Bolivia ceded the area of Atacama to Chile in perpetuity. Likewise, Article 2 of that treaty stipulated that hill as a starting point for the binational boundary. On the other hand, the Convention concerning the Limitation Demarcation in the Puna de Atacama, also of 1904, signed between Argentina and Chile, located in that hill the starting point of the mutual delimitation. The Boundary Treaty of 1925, between Argentina and Bolivia, finally determined that the boundary began in the extreme west with a line from Cerro Zapaleri or Sapalegui (5,649m) in the north-northeast direction.

Of the five tripoints considered here, it is the only one located at the top of a hill, which has an altitude of over 5,600 meters above sea level. For that reason, no permanent location was established in its immediate vicinity. The nearest, all very small, are several tens of km away: Rinconada (110 km, 500 inhabitants) or Susques (105 km, 1,200 inhabitants) on the Argentine side; San Pedro de Atacama

on the Chilean side (103 km, 5,600 inhabitants, Quetena (71 km, 800 inhabitants) or San Antonio López (120 km, 200 inhabitants) on the Bolivian side, all equally distant and scattered.

The legal crossing points between the three countries are also distant from Zapaleri tripoint:

Bolivia-Chile: Cajón landmark, at 65 km, is a gravel road with bad roads; more to the north, about 200 km, is the road-rail passage of Ollagüe. It is a connection of some relevance for mining and commercial activity.

Argentina-Chile: Jama Pass, 55 km, is part of one of the South American integration axes, called Capricorn. It is a zone of transit of products entered through the ports of the north of Chile towards Paraguay. Next to the area a population of about 100 people arose, mostly officials linked to the border control. Further south, about 200 km in a straight line, there is the railway pass of Socompa (also known as Huaytiquina), currently in disuse.

Argentina-Bolivia: La Quiaca-Villazón pass at 180 km. It is a paved road that integrates the old corridor from Buenos Aires to Lima. Until the 1990s it was also a railway crossing.

The absence of roads in the vicinity should not be confused with absence of mobilities. Historically, the Andean footsteps of the outskirts were used by caravans of llamas, led by settlers of the high Andean lands, with the aim of making exchanges. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, different civil society groups from the cities of San Salvador de Jujuy (northwest of Argentina) and Calama (northern Chile) sought the opening of a mountain pass that communicated them. One of the alternatives considered was a gorge located in the vicinity of the landmark, used by caravans and muleteers. This was finally discarded due to the difficulties that it offered to the traffic, in front of which finally became the northernmost pass between Argentina and Chile, namely Jama (Tomasi and Benedetti, 2013). Still in the present, the closest passes to Zapaleri are used by llamas and sheep farmers, who move around the area in search of water and grassland, or to make other exchanges. Especially to the east, on the border between Argentina and Bolivia, about 40 km from the tripoint, there is an intense mobility of llama producers, who perform peasant trade fairs, in small towns such as CusiCusi (Argentina) or San Antonio de Esmoruco (Bolivia) (González, 2012).



Therefore, as González Miranda (2009) points out, Zapaleri tripoint has cartographic, diplomatic and geopolitical functions, but no singular sociological or cultural ones: it does not represent a particular symbol for its population. The greatest interactions are established between cities like Jujuy, Salta, La Quiaca, in Argentina; San Pedro de Atacama, Calama, Ollagüe, in Chile; Villazón, Uyuni, San Cristóbal, in Bolivia, all located at great distances from this tripoint.

The present inhabitants of this zone inherited part of the Andean cultural tradition. Many of them, especially in the Bolivian sector, speak the Quechua language or the Aymara language. From the Argentinean side they were historically known, and now are ascribed, as *coyas*. In addition to the breeding of llamas and sheep (the latter introduced by the Spanish), they grow potatoes and quinoa on small-scales. In addition, some perform some small-scale mining activities – gold washing, salt extraction (Nielsen, Calcina and Quispe, 2003). Likewise, the presence of mining activity, linked to the exploitation of borates or lithium, among other minerals, is notorious. In this area some areas of nature reserve have been created in the three countries (Reserva de Fauna Andina Eduardo Avaroa in Bolivia, Ramsar site Laguna Vilama in Argentina and Salar de Tara in Chile). These reserves are part of a complex of high Andean sites located around the Zapaleri which have generated a flow of tourists, in permanent growth, very notably from the Chilean side, with epicenter in San Pedro de Atacama (Porcaro and Benedetti, 2016).

## BAHÍA NEGRA TRIPOINT

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In the South American pantanal region, shared with Bolivia, Brazil (where the largest extension is found) and Paraguay, is the fifth tripoint studied in this article. Its location began with the so-called Treaty of Ayacucho of 1867, which delimited the territories of Bolivia and Brazil. Bolivia undertook a diplomatic battle to secure a sovereign exit on the western bank of the Paraguay River towards the Atlantic. This area is known as Triángulo Man Céspedes or Dionisio Foianini triangle. It is about 48 km of beach on the Paraguay River. This treaty was rectified by the Petrópolis Treaty of 1903 to resolve the issue in the Acre region at the northern end of the border. In the extreme south, however, the confluence of Paraguay with Bahía Negra was already fixed by article 2, as a starting point. The boundary treaty between Brazil and Paraguay of 1872 mentioned Paraguay as a divisor, but did not

specify the extreme point. This occurred in the Treaty of Complementary Limit: in its article 1, it identified the confluence of the Negro and Paraguay rivers as a point of completion for the delimitation. As in the case of the Esmeralda landmark, between Bolivia and Paraguay, it ended up being defined with the Treaty of Peace, of 1938.

In the area of the tripoint there are activities linked to commercial fishing and livestock; in recent times, iron mining has gained some relevance, as well as the agricultural advance, which represents a threat to the marsh ecosystem. In the vicinity of the tripoint the concentrated populations are scarce and dispersed.

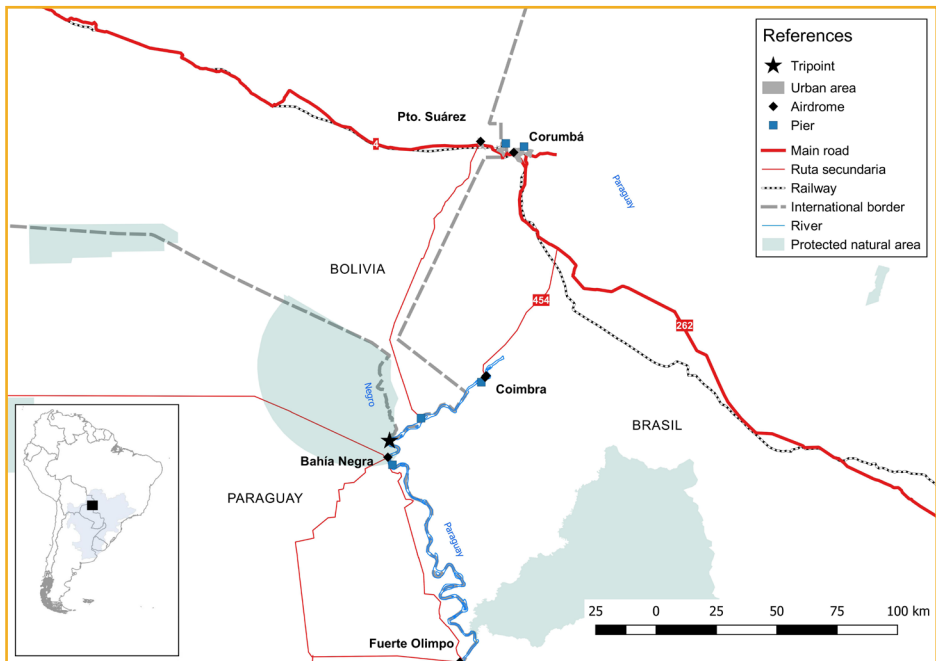


Figure 6. Esmeralda tripoint.

Source: author.

The most important, on the Paraguayan side, is Bahía Negra, with about 2,500 inhabitants, near which there are others, smaller, all on the Paraguay River, such as Puerto Leda, Puerto Nuevo and Puerto Voluntad. On the Brazilian side, about 50 km from the tripoint is Coimbra. Formerly known as Forte Coimbra, it is a village dating from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and linked to the Portuguese advance over Mato Grosso (Areces, 2004). It currently has less than one thousand inhabitants. The nearest Brazilian town of some importance is Corumbá, located 100 km to the north. On the Bolivian side stands Puerto Busch, also of military origin, and also on the Paraguay River. The construction of a commercial port was projected, but never materialized (El Diario, 1904/2015). The nearest Bolivian town is Puerto Suárez, in front of Corumbá, about 130 km. The connectivity of these small agglomerations is guaranteed by the Paraguay-Paraná Waterway system, in addition to some aerodromes, such as the one in Bahía Negra. The riverside population moves downstream to Forte Olimpo (the most important urban center of the Paraguayan Pantanal) or upstream to Corumbá or Puerto Suárez (Gonçalves and Isquierdo, 2011). The routes are dirt, mostly impassable.

The native population is mainly Chamacoco, located on the bank. Traditionally they exploited the marsh resources. The pressure of the capitalist advance led to generate different forms of family economy, which in many cases subsist on the use of fish resources. There are also Creole populations of Paraguayan and Brazilian origin, which reflects the progress of agricultural and livestock activities towards the area (Carrón, 2003).

## CONCLUSIONS

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A tripoint is a point where the boundaries shared by three states are initiated. Around them emerge singular areas in the international border system, of a high complexity, due to the presence and the multiple relations between three more or less differentiated cultural, economic and political organizations. Until now, references to this border typology were concentrated, almost exclusively, in the Iguazú tripoint. Very few academic papers account for the remaining 12 tripartite dynamics. This work sought to focus on five tripoints: Careim, Iguazú, Esmeralda, Zapaleri and Bahía Negra. They are those which were formed as a result of the process of territorial differentiation between the five countries of del Plata region,

that is, between Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, as well as Chile (in the case of tripoint Zapaleri).

The areas where the tripoints mentioned can be found were of little or no importance for the Iberian crowns in colonial times. One exception is the area where the Cuareim tripoint is located, which was most clearly incorporated into the colonial territorialities, in the Jesuit dominions. The area of the Iguazú, which was initially conquered, finally remained separated from the colonial centers. Although the area where the Zapaleri was located was also part of the colonial territorialities, its limited accessibility due to the topography kept it away from the main routes. The areas where the Esmeralda tripoint was established, in the South American Great Chaco, and the Bahía Negra in the Pantanal, were located outside the lands conquered by Spain and Portugal. All these areas, however, were inhabited by native populations of the continent, with unique productive and cultural developments in each case.

The first to be located was the Cuareim, at the beginning of the 1850s. The rest took place quite later. From the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the other areas, finally tripartite, were involved in war and diplomatic conflicts that revealed the interest of all states to expand and consolidate their territorial base. The areas where these other tripoints were found were the last corners of the del Plata region on which it was necessary to decide to which state each domain corresponded. This involved a multiplicity of treaties and protocols, field studies and changes in the final location of the tripoints. All this, too, expresses the complex set of regional power balances deployed in the process of formation and mutual differentiation of the territories of the South American national states.

The attention given to the tripoints by individual countries or in pairs or trios of countries re-differentiated them from the 1930s onwards. The greater relative development of the Argentine and Brazilian economies in comparison to the other countries of the region, their persistent rivalry and the change in influences on Uruguay and Paraguay, made Iguazú (especially) and Cuareim tripoints monopolize the greater attention in the development of public policies, the promotion of agricultural colonization and the deployment of mechanisms of state control (such as the creation of national parks). More recently, links with the growth of Islamic terrorist action, the importance of the area in terms of energy and commerce, and the visibility of the tourism promotion linked to the waterfalls have made the Iguazú a central place, transforming it into the tripoint or triple border by antonomasia.

The Esmeralda, Zapaleri and Bahía Negra tripoints maintained a confined and even almost forgotten position in terms of media and academic attention during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Only a few training projects for the construction of transport corridors of continental scale gave a certain visibility to these last three tripoints.

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