

Uruguay, one of the smallest countries on the South American continent, was founded on the eastern bank of the River Plate as a buffer state between the emerging giants of Brazil and Argentina. Geographically it was a pleasant land, with cattle running wild over immense pasturelands, and its population lived modestly either as merchants, doctors and lawyers in the city of Montevideo or as proud and restless gauchos on the range.

The history of the Uruguayans in the nineteenth century is filled first with fierce battles for their independence against Argentina and Brazil and then with equally savage civil skirmishes between the Blanco and Colorado parties, the Conservatives from the interior and the Liberals from Montevideo. In 1904 the last Blanco uprising was defeated by the Colorado president, José Batlle Ordóñez, who then established a secular and democratic state which for many decades was regarded as the most advanced and enlightened in South America.

The economy of this welfare state depended upon the pastoral and agricultural products which Uruguay exported to Europe, and while world prices for wool, beef and hide remained high, Uruguay remained prosperous; but in the course of the 1950s the value of these commodities went down and Uruguay went into a decline. There was unemployment and inflation, which in turn gave rise to social discontent. The civil service was overstaffed and underpaid; lawyers, architects, and engineers – once the aristocracy of the nation – found themselves with little work and were paid too little for what there was. Many were compelled to choose secondary professions. Only those who owned land in the interior could be sure of their prosperity. The rest worked for what they could get in an atmosphere of economic stagnation and administrative corruption.