

Latin America

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Summary

When the First World War broke out in Europe, Latin Americans of all social strata soon felt that the conflict would plunge the world into a crisis of hitherto unknown dimensions. Due to its globally entangled structures, the continent experienced the severe effects of the economic, maritime and propaganda war in many different contexts. Contemporaries recognized that the war meant a harsh rupture in development and that it would be impossible to simply remain observers. By the end of the war, many in Latin America had begun to turn away from the European social and cultural model which had been so tarnished during the conflict.

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Introduction

Today, there is little doubt that the outbreak of the Great War marked a turning point in Latin American history.¹ However, the study of how global events and local developments were linked between 1914 and 1918 has gone almost unconsidered in the [historiography of Latin America](#).² For many years, scholars have ignored the First World War as a significant event in which Latin America took part. Instead, the vast majority of textbooks distinguish between the developments in the “long” 19th century and the transformation into modern mass societies in the 1930s, focusing on the Great Depression as turning point. Consequently, the war itself is hardly ever discussed in scholarship on Latin American history.³

However, already at the end of the First World War and throughout the 20th century, some studies were published which concentrated on the diplomatic sphere and national histories.⁴ Moreover, Bill Albert set standards for the study of the economic and social repercussions of the war in Latin America.⁵

Only in the last few years, in the context of increasing attention to cultural topics and global history, scholars placed Latin America into a broader picture of the war. Recently, several important studies have been published that analyze the global dimension of the war in relation to local mobilization of economic, social, military and cultural resources. These provide new insights into the transnational entanglements in Latin America during this period and question the established periodization of Latin American history.⁶

This article aims to illustrate the connections between local developments in different Latin American regions and broader global contexts during the war years. The purpose of the article is not to establish direct causal explanations or links, but rather to demonstrate several aspects of the thus far hidden dimensions of a global war in which Latin America participated.

How did Latin Americans perceive the war? How did they react to it? What conclusions did they draw for the future of their region? In order to discuss these topics, the article will concentrate on different approaches to global and cultural history. First, it will provide a short introduction to the political and socio-economic context in the Americas before the outbreak of war. It will then consider how Latin American states maneuvered between [neutrality](#) and [maritime](#), economic and [propaganda war](#) as well as the increasing influence of the [United States of America](#). The third section will deal with the entry of some Latin American countries into the group of belligerents and their contributions to war. Finally, the article will

demonstrate how Latin Americans reacted to developments between 1914 and 1918 as well as during the post-war period.

Latin America in Global Contexts before 1914

Political and Socio-Economic Developments

With few exceptions, the former colonies of the Spanish and Portuguese [empires](#) gained their independence in the first decades of the 19th century during the period of Atlantic revolutions. The new republics remained rooted in the Atlantic context, which offered far-reaching possibilities but also brought new dependencies. Difficulties of state formation can be derived from the absence of stable institutions, internal power struggles and the unanswered question of who constitutes the nation. Although many politically influential persons emphasized general values of liberty and equality, wide swathes of the heterogeneous Latin American population were discriminated against and excluded from participation during the formative years of the new states. Furthermore, fear of European intervention and reconquest remained vivid even into the early decades of independence.

The long and violent wars of independence had unpleasant consequences due to the heavy economic burdens the new republics inherited. Sectors gradually orientated toward the export of [raw materials](#) and agricultural products ultimately profited from the liberalization of the global markets. However, the distant hinterland was integrated to a lesser extent into the world market. In addition, independence left a legacy of political instability and violence which led to border and state conflicts – albeit far less than in Europe – and to civil wars which in some countries became endemic. Furthermore, the international economic involvement came with rising indebtedness. European powers such as [Great Britain](#), in particular, and later the United States offered loans and direct investments. The interest in Latin America was notably high in the United States. By the turn of the century, U.S. Americans tried to expand the [Pan-American system](#) in political, economic and cultural terms.

During the three decades before the outbreak of the First World War, the vast majority of Latin American countries experienced a significant growth in their export economies. Nevertheless, the diversification of products was limited. Therefore, external crises in the United States and European customer countries, which at the same time supplied all kinds of imports, and internal problems such as civil wars or natural catastrophes, disturbed and restricted economic development and gave rise to new dependencies.

Even if the 19th century was especially shaped by the search for Latin American identities, Europe still remained an important point of reference. France and Britain served as models

because of their highly developed civilizations, liberal values and progressive institutions. Thanks to integration into newly modernizing global communications networks, Latin Americans in [urban centers](#) were well informed about the events in Europe and other parts of the worlds. Politicians and intellectuals from the southern states in particular tried to imitate certain aspects of the admired European countries. They wanted to “improve” their populations and replace the indigenous, mestizo and Afro-American elements by attracting immigrants from the “Old World”. In the following years, millions of people, especially from [Italy](#), [Spain](#) and [Portugal](#) but also from the [German Empire](#), migrated to Latin America. Thus, they hoped to form “modern nations” based on European models. Yet, around the turn of the 20th century there were also some voices that criticized uncritical attempts at Europeanization. They demanded the inclusion of ethnic heterogeneity as an integral part of Latin America’s identity.⁷

Mexican Revolution

Without a doubt, the First World War was a major watershed in European history. Nevertheless, looking at the event from a Latin American point of view, one is able to understand that for this continent global violence had erupted on a major scale four years prior to the war in Europe. The [Mexican Revolution](#), which coincided with the wars in Europe and elsewhere in the 1910s, and the conflict with the United States proved to be significant examples of a hitherto unknown level of brutality before and during the First World War.

The Revolution wreaked havoc in Mexico for almost two decades. In view of the ensuing World War, an aim of the [German Reich](#) was to ensure that Washington remained preoccupied on the American continent. Berlin tried to divert U.S. President [Woodrow Wilson’s \(1856-1924\)](#) attention from the burgeoning conflict in Europe and to focus on Latin America instead. A secret war developed which involved diplomats and agents as well as citizens of several European countries and the United States. The historian [Friedrich Katz \(1927-2010\)](#) pointed out that it was a priority of the [German government](#) to aggravate the already-present tensions between the Americas. For this purpose, German officials increased their military engagement in Mexico while later trying to reduce the risk that the United States would join the war against the Central Powers.⁸

Mexico can be considered the focal point of the German strategy in Latin America for various reasons: first, its geographical proximity to the United States; second, Mexican oil wells were strategically important; and, third, the country was confronted with an uncertain internal political situation because of the revolutionary civil war.

Between Neutrality and Warfare, 1914-1917

Outbreak of the War

At the beginning of the war in August 1914, [Latin American newspapers](#) referred to the metaphor of a thunderstorm and lightning to describe the meaning of the event. The leading press regularly commented on and informed their readership of the developments. On 2 August, the editor of the important newspaper *La Nación* from Buenos Aires already called the war “a drama of humanity at large”.⁹ In early August 1914, the unexpected and severe effects of war were felt around the world due to the globally entangled structures that connected distant regions. From the very beginning, Latin American observers had the impression that this war would unavoidably reach far beyond the European borders. Contemporaries anticipated that it would be a deep cut and a world conflict that nobody could evade.

Directly after the outbreak of war and in reaction to the news from the “Old World”, all American governments declared their neutrality. In doing so, Latin America followed the course of the United States and tried to stay away from the conflagration. In particular, countries with a high proportion of European immigrants hoped to prevent [ethnic disturbances](#).¹⁰ Latin American states had no particular political obligations to or connections with the Central Powers or the Allies. For this reason, there was neither the necessity nor desire to intervene. Furthermore, Latin American governments tried to uphold vital economic ties with all European belligerents as long as possible. In general, Latin Americans followed their traditional diplomatic policy of steering clear of European entanglements.¹¹

Global Maritime War

The war had put Latin America in a difficult situation due to the fact that the interests of the combatant powers were not just limited to Europe, but rather had global scope. From the very beginning, this global war was fought on the [high seas](#) which caused severe problems.

Already in the first months of the conflict, naval war carried the hostilities to South American waters. For instance, the Central Powers tried to break through the Allied naval blockade in the southern Atlantic. Most Latin American countries like [Brazil](#) and Chile were overwhelmed with the task of effectively policing their long coastlines.

The sovereignty of the neutral Latin American states was frequently violated by the warring parties. Unrestricted German [submarine warfare](#) posed a particular threat for Latin American shipping. Many Latin American governments protested the situation, but to no avail. In

addition, public protest demonstrated that the expansion of submarine warfare had an emotional impact that could endanger Latin American neutrality.¹²

Moreover, the debate over the use of the interned ships in Latin American ports became a new source of conflict in the beginning of 1916.¹³ The [sinking of the British passenger ship Lusitania](#) on 7 May 1915 by a German submarine also sparked intense public outrage.¹⁴ In the context of re-intensified submarine warfare, a year later, on 2 May 1916, the ostensibly Brazilian ship *Rio Branco* fell prey to German U-boats.¹⁵

Economic War

In general, the economic effects of the war were severe throughout the whole region. In the months after the outbreak of the conflict, panic spread in the financial sector. The stream of European investment capital, which had been crucial for Latin American development in the years prior to the war, came to an abrupt end. The *malaise* of the Latin American export sectors aggravated this problems. At the same time, imports shrank dramatically. There was hardly any possibility of preventing a major crisis of supply.

However, the situation changed over the course of war. Already in 1915, several countries started to profit from the demand for their export products: tin from Bolivia, [nitrate](#) from Chile, copper from Peru or meat from Argentina and Uruguay. Offering raw materials for rising prices, these countries benefited from a positive trade balance and some experienced stimulated industrialization.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the war caused direct problems for the labor market. The general population, especially the workers, suffered from inflation. Social tensions rose everywhere because of sinking real wages and mass unemployment. The governments were forced to take countermeasures and to subdue the enraged populations, sometimes by force.¹⁷

Without a doubt, the strongest challenges to the neutral Latin American states remained in the economic realm. The intensified blockade of the seas and of commerce was an important weapon in the war. In fact, it meant the rupture of free commercial relations between Latin America and Europe and the interruption of the strong influx of immigrants.¹⁸ Moreover, the Allies introduced so-called blacklists to enforce the boycott of trading with German or allegedly German companies in neutral countries.¹⁹

During the war years, the United States turned into the most important trade partner. New York was the last source of capital still accessible to Latin America. In turn, U.S. American

influence increased in the whole region and the daily press in Buenos Aires discussed the “commercial conquest” of Latin America as early as 1914.^{[20](#)}

Propaganda Offensives

The influence of the war was not only limited to the economy or politics. Especially in the capital and port cities, the war came quickly to Latin America in the guise of [propaganda](#). The subcontinent boasted a vast number of neutral states and the Allies wanted them to enter the war on their side, whereas Berlin hoped to keep Latin America neutral.

In view of this delicate situation, the region became a major battlefield for worldwide propaganda activities. In general, Latin American newspapers were dependent on international agencies like Havas and Reuters. Consequently, it became even more difficult to remain neutral. Moreover, both warring parties used all kinds of media messages and even new forms, like [cinema](#), to exert influence on Latin Americans.

Besides the *neutralistas*, one can easily separate public opinion in two basic groups. On the one hand, the so-called *aliadófilos* in Argentina and Brazil adhered to the Allies' cause. The pro-Allied voices clearly remained the majority and retained the upper hand because of their larger financial resources and the traditional sympathy for [France](#) in several Latin American regions. The *aliadófilos* increased the circulation of images of the “ugly German” and spread aggressively anti-German propaganda. On the other hand, the *germanófilos* supported the Central Powers. Germans and citizens of German descent in particular tried to refute the pro-Allied campaigns but their success was limited. Well-known personalities from the social elites and intellectuals of Latin American countries supported one or the other side. Debates increased over the course of the war and sometimes led to violent fights in the streets. The war mobilized many people and shook the Latin American public to unknown dimensions.^{[21](#)}

Rise of U.S. American Influence

The rise of U.S. American influence in the region can be understood as a more or less general characteristic of the war for Latin America. Well-prepared to take over the business that the Germans had to abandon in the subcontinent, a large amount of U.S. companies started to turn their economic activities southward on a major scale.^{[22](#)} In November 1915, the U.S. Department of State talked about a unique opportunity to expand in Latin America. Because of the absence of European involvement, South American governments feared that they were vulnerable to becoming U.S. “war booty”.^{[23](#)}

The influence of the U.S. was not only limited to the economy. Several Latin American

governments had anticipated the United States' entrance into the war in April 1917. Previously, the relations between the Americas and Germany had already reached a low-point in the context of the Mexican Revolution and Germany's secret war there.

Washington and Berlin had been on the brink of war in 1915/1916. U.S. relations with Mexico had also reached a low point. However, President Wilson's concern about developments in Europe led him to shy away from declaring war against Mexico. Berlin nevertheless was still hoping to keep the United States out of the conflict in Europe. In February 1917, the so-called [Zimmermann Telegram](#), which the German minister of foreign affairs, [Arthur Zimmermann \(1864-1940\)](#), sent to the German ambassador in Mexico, aggravated the already existing diplomatic tensions and favored the United States' entry into the war.^{[24](#)}

The dispute between Mexico, the United States and Germany was also crucial for other Latin American countries. On 25 May 1915, a new form of international cooperation was formalized within a sub-regional framework. Argentina, Brazil, and Chile signed the so-called [ABC Pact](#) and intended to solve the conflict by means of neutral mediation. However, the Pact was little more than a short-lived episode.^{[25](#)}

The clash of interests between the Europeans, the United States and the countries caught in between not only provoked trouble in Mexico. Already before the war, Washington had firmly established itself as a protective and policing force in the Americas. In political and military terms, the United States had been especially active in Central America and [the Caribbean](#), which, according to Washington's point of view, was located directly in the sphere of U.S. influence.

During the war years, various U.S. interventions took place in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Nicaragua. [Panama](#) represented another trouble spot of considerable importance. With the opening of the inter-oceanic canal on 15 August 1914, just as the conflict broke out in Europe, U.S. strategic interest in its so-called "backyard" increased even more. The canal was a symbol of the United States' claim to supremacy in the Americas both in technological and in political terms.^{[26](#)}

War Participation and Contributions

War Experiences

Before several Latin American countries entered the war in 1917, passions erupted in the streets. Just after the outbreak of war, large segments of the population started protest marches notably in the capital and port cities of South American countries. Crowds expressed

their sympathy for one of the warring powers and sang the *Marseillaise* or the German national anthem in Chile's Santiago as well as in Brazil's São Paulo and Porto Alegre. Fights between adherents of the Allies and the Central Powers were frequently seen.²⁷

Even though the Latin American states declared their neutrality immediately after receiving news about the start of the war, many young men, mainly of European descent, returned to their home countries. European countries like France called up potential conscripts to military service and made urgent local appeals for citizens to register. Many reservists left Latin America in order to take part in battles across the Atlantic.²⁸ German diplomats tried to do the same. They were especially active in the central areas of German settlements in Argentina, southern Brazil, Chile and Paraguay. The conscripts of the German Reich and volunteers of German descent who wanted to go to front, often met conscripts of the enemy countries on their way to Europe. Hostilities, verbal assaults and violence were not exceptional.²⁹

In addition, the war played a role in Latin America at a time when the public had already become more or less accustomed to the brutal conflict in the "Old World". On national holidays such as 14 July (France) or [Otto von Bismarck's \(1815-1898\)](#) birthday (Germany), some parts of the population assembled for patriotic parades, raised flags, sang the national anthem and expanded fundraising activities in public. In fact, in some Latin American cities the war seemed omnipresent in the everyday life of many in the middle class. However, the euphoria was limited to these events except for Italy's entry into the war in early 1915 and Portugal's entry in March 1916, which also reverberated in the Argentine and Brazilian public sphere.³⁰ Just as the activities of the national minorities threatened to jeopardize the neutrality of Latin American states, so did the large number of Latin Americans residing in different parts of Europe. After the outbreak of war, Latin American nationals wanted to return to their home countries as soon as possible. In view of the advances of the German army in August 1914, panic was widespread and many did indeed leave Europe and especially Paris. Fewer stayed in the city and served as eye witnesses or war reporters,³¹ even sacrificing their lives in defending France. In the end, the initially very high total number of Latin Americans in Paris greatly declined during the war.³²

Belligerents and Neutrals

Latin American governments maneuvered between neutrality and entry into war between 1914 and 1918. In the milestone year of 1917, numerous Latin American governments followed the United States when Washington entered the war in April. This was especially

true for the countries in the Caribbean that had experienced a direct U.S. influence in the previous years. Panama and Cuba, for instance, declared war against the Central Powers on 7 April 1917. Other Central American states like Costa Rica, [Nicaragua](#), Haiti and Honduras followed in May and July, with U.S. political influence being a decisive factor.

The most important countries that joined the Allies in declaring war against the Central Powers was Brazil. The destructive effects of German submarine warfare influenced this decision made on 26 October 1917. Economic pressure was also a major factor in entering the war.³³ By the end of the war, eight countries had followed the Allies in declaring war against the Central Powers. In Latin America, the warring countries were, at least in their own opinion, equal to the Allied great powers in their fight against the Central Powers.

Between April and December 1917, Bolivia, Peru, Uruguay and Ecuador severed relations with Germany. However, seven states remained neutral including Argentina, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico, Paraguay and Venezuela.³⁴ In the end, Latin America's contribution to the fighting was not at all decisive. However, the direct experience with the war paved the way for a new dimension in the relations between the continent and Europe and the United States.

South America	Neutral	Severing of Relationships with Germany	Entry into war
Argentina	X		
Bolivia		13 April 1917	
Brazil		11 April 1917	26 October 1917
Chile	X		
Ecuador		7 December 1917	
Colombia	X		
Paraguay	X		
Peru		6 October 1917	
Uruguay		7 October 1917	
Venezuela	X		
Northern Latin America	Neutral	Severing of Relationships with Germany	Entry into war

Costa Rica		21 September 1917	23 May 1918
El Salvador	X		
Guatemala		27 April 1917	23 April 1918
Haiti		17 June 1917	12 July 1918
Honduras		17 May 1917	19 July 1918
Cuba		7 April 1917	7 April 1917
Mexico	X		
Nicaragua		18 May 1917	7 May 1918
Panama		7 April 1917	7 April 1917

Table 1: The stance of Latin American countries in the First World War³⁵

Violence Against German Minorities

Heterogeneous German groups in all countries in the American hemisphere were confronted with a completely new and unexpected situation. The scale of violence against them was unprecedented. Because of rising anti-German sentiment among the public and an Entente-friendly press, circumstances for German communities abroad became notably more precarious.

The United States' entry into the war had a considerable impact on the attitude of many Latin American governments regarding not only their external but also their internal politics. As in the United States, this marked a turning point for German minorities. Immigrant communities were affected most significantly in Argentina and Brazil. Particularly from April 1917 on, confrontations rose to a significant dimension. The mobilization, especially of the urban masses in South America, reached a new and hitherto unknown extent. Violent assaults against German institutions became ever more frequent in different parts of the region. In many cases, German citizens were interned and their properties confiscated in the months after war was declared. The press frequently reported on violent assaults against German institutions and the confiscation of German properties. Reactions in southern Brazil were especially severe.

Because of the sinking of Brazilian ships by German U-boats and other diplomatic incidents detailed in the pro-Allied press, tensions were already running high in the first years of the war. Particularly in the southern federal states, for instance in Rio Grande do Sul, but also in

the capital city Rio de Janeiro, [xenophobia](#) was expressed through conspicuous public ransacking. The authorities tolerated – or even supported – the activities. The attacks frequently originated as spontaneous protest movement for the defense of national pride and sovereignty and moved towards violent assaults on German minority institutions. A few days after the sinking of the national ship *Paraná* by German submarines in April 1917, Brazil broke off diplomatic relations with Germany. The day after the suspension of relations, anti-German riots began. In the city of Porto Alegre, around 300 houses were looted and destroyed.

In October 1917, Rio de Janeiro declared war against the German Empire after the ongoing torpedoing of national ships. As a consequence, a second wave of disturbances against German-Brazilians broke out at the end of that month. The anti-German press campaign undoubtedly favored these outbursts of violence. The Brazilian government tried to manage the situation. However, it was not in the position to control the disorder effectively. Finally, a state of emergency was proclaimed in some locations. This step led to the internment of several hundred Germans, the closing of German schools and the suspension of associational activities.^{[36](#)}

In neutral Argentina, the situation was, to a certain extent, comparable and pressure increased considerably for the German minority in the La Plata region. Entente-friendly organizations and newspapers intensified their campaigns to break with the German Reich after the United States and Brazil had drifted toward war. For the majority of the Argentine population, the sinking of national ships by German U-boats was a provocation and massive anti-German rallies took place in April and June 1917.

The [xenophobic](#) riots reached their climax a few months later in the context of a diplomatic incident known as the [Luxburg Affair](#).^{[37](#)} After the United States had revealed compromising dispatches, in which [Karl von Luxburg \(1872-1956\)](#), the German chargé d'affaires in Buenos Aires, "...demanded the sinking of Argentine ships 'without a trace'...",^{[38](#)} 13 September 1917 was a "black day" for Buenos Aires. The local German minority was exposed to severe acts of violence as pro-Allied interest groups destroyed and looted German institutions.^{[39](#)} No riots occurred against the German minority in Chile.^{[40](#)} Across South America, the escalation of violence against German minorities was forgotten quickly after the end of war.^{[41](#)}

Latin American Reactions

New Perceptions of Europe

During the war years, a great number of educated Latin Americans, above all the adherents of national movements, adopted a negative perception of Europe. There is no doubt that propaganda denigrating the Central Powers played a decisive role here. From their perspective, the war was an important argument in underlining Europe's betrayal of civilization. Indeed, they were shocked and blamed the Europeans for their relapse into barbarism.⁴²

Already in 1916, no matter their political conviction, several commentators such as the Mexican anthropologist [Manuel Gamio \(1863-1960\)](#) were stunned by the rapidity of the global conflict, which seemed to have quickly transformed into a so-called "culture war."⁴³ Many images that circulated in Latin American newspapers and magazines during the war years lent credence to the perception that the European powers no longer represented superior examples to follow. For example, many media images showed the "Old World" as a greedy raptor that participated in global bloodshed. In fact, the war shook the whole value system that Europe had represented. Frequently, Europe appeared in caricatures as old and worn out.

Prior to the war, Latin American oligarchies had long identified with European civilization. From the elites' point of view, the imitation of European cultural and social models could lead to progress and development in Latin America. To achieve these visions, some oligarchs had even advocated completely replacing the allegedly sick and racially inferior local population with immigrants from Europe. However, the hope for progress remained unfulfilled.

Therefore, some people began to voice criticisms of general conceptions of progress that focused exclusively on the "Old World". Latin Americans increasingly reflected their frustration with the failure and one-sidedness of development models that stemmed from Europe.

Some well-known intellectuals of the pre-war period, such as the Cuban [José Martí \(1853-1895\)](#), the Uruguayan [José Enrique Rodó \(1871-1917\)](#) or the Mexican [José Vasconcelos \(1882-1959\)](#) had the idea that the region could do better than Europe. These intellectuals repeatedly attacked their former European tutors and discussed the wrong turns the old world had taken and that Europe should no longer serve as a model for Latin America. In addition, they referred to their own Latin American values and tried to offer alternative perspectives for a way out of the *malaise*.⁴⁴

In the context of the First World War, the idea of a "golden land" – a better and more

idealistic part of the West – spread in Latin America. However, reformers were also aware of the fact that their region still needed to fulfill this promising ideal. In addition, Latin America still had to fight for sovereignty and for its rights in the international context. A steadily growing number of Latin Americans adopted these views and participated in different movements such as Peruvian indigenism, which originated in 1897, or Argentine radicalism of 1898. They linked their calls for social and political reforms to new ideas and gained more influence in the public. Due to external and internal pressures, already circulating visions and existing attitudes developed a new spirit and dynamic breadth in the climate of the First World War. Many Latin American states experienced a universal political mobilization because of the war.⁴⁵

Rise of Social Movements

The war gave rise to numerous and diverse emancipatory movements. The majority of these were shaped by the interactions of internal influences and transnational entanglements across Latin America. Mexican revolutionary [nationalism](#) was one of the most well-known cases due to its 1917 Constitution, which, for example, regulated the nationalization of all mineral resources. Moreover, the governments introduced [social welfare](#). Many urban workers and some [rural workers](#) organized themselves during this period. Under the influence of the [1917 Russian Revolution](#), the number of protests and strikes increased dramatically in all Latin American states. As a consequence, workers voiced their claims for their rights and for more social equality ever more loudly.⁴⁶ National problems especially in the economic sector also became a focus of the reform movements.⁴⁷ Thus, the governing oligarchies responsible for tackling dependence on foreign countries and the severe social problems in their states increasingly lost their legitimacy.

In addition, in the cities, the academically educated middle classes began to voice their demands to promote social reforms in the name of the whole nation. In connection with the war, many of the middle classes benefitted from the new circumstances and structured their public activities in nationalist parties and organizations that fought, for example, for the rights of the indigenous populations, workers or women. The movements usually combined nationalist convictions and a reformist spirit in order to achieve goals of modernization. Likewise, students' movements emanated from Córdoba in Argentina and swept through many countries in the following years. Students indirectly connected their demands for a reform of their programs of study and the possibility of a new future for their own nation to the experience of the First World War.⁴⁸

In general, [social reform movements](#) ranging from [anarchists](#), indigenists, conservatives to

even [anti-Semitic](#) and xenophobic organizations all placed emphasis on youth and modernity. In doing so, they claimed to represent a counterweight to the “Old World” and the oligarchies within their own countries. They juxtaposed the images of an old and worn-out Europe and that of young Latin America.

Inheritance of World War I

Indeed, the majority of the groups mentioned above were willing to suffer for their visions in violent street fights. Notably in the last years of the war, the number of confrontations reached a climax in large parts of Latin America. Undoubtedly, the war left a heritage of violence. Events of the so-called “tragic weeks” that ensued in Argentina and Brazil in 1919 as well as the numerous massacres or strikes in other Latin American countries proved this. Doubtlessly, like many people in other world regions, Latin Americans had to face involvement in a global spiral of violence that expanded to a new transregional extent between 1914 and 1918.⁴⁹

In November 1918, Latin Americans took to the streets to celebrate the news of the armistice in Europe and the end of the slaughter. Contemporaries discussed the global importance of the war and sensed its encompassing significance. This consciousness was not only restricted to the elites or the groups usually interested in politics. In fact, this insight spread to all social strata because all had shared in the experience of the effects of war.

In comparison with crises in the region during the 19th century, the developments between 1914 and 1918 differed in longevity and intensity. Yet, it must be mentioned that the war did not directly cause the movements for social change nor the increased violence but rather served as a catalyst. In other words, the war aggravated long-standing conflicts and worsened urgent problems in Latin America which were discussed controversially in the media.

Conclusion

To sum up, the conflict in Europe confronted Latin America with significant challenges long before the first country of the American continent entered the war. Even though the major battlefields and conflicts were far away from Latin America, they still cast long shadows over the region and demonstrated a hitherto unknown dimension of connectedness and brutality. The boundaries between the civil, economic and military sphere in the conflict were becoming ever more fluid. They confronted seemingly distant regions with new weapons and technologies, especially submarines, which affected Latin Americans, too.

The Latin American governments could hardly regulate the new constellations and

troubleshoot using the traditional means of international law or national policy. In view of these conditions and increasing U.S. influence, their most important aim was to stay neutral and to safeguard national sovereignty for as long as possible. However, the economic, maritime and propaganda war led to a variety of repercussions not only for governmental circles but also for daily life in Latin America. Indeed, the war's world-encompassing dimensions fundamentally changed the conditions of neutrality. Latin American governments were no longer able to keep a low profile. In fact, they could not remain on the sidelines. Though Latin America did not make an impactful contribution to the fighting on the European continent, the experiences between 1914 and 1918 introduced a new dimension to relations between Latin America, Europe and the United States. The old order had been challenged, making way for a new beginning.

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Notes

1. For the broader picture see Rinke, Stefan: Im Sog der Katastrophe. Lateinamerika und der Erste Weltkrieg, Frankfurt am Main 2015. [↑](#)
2. This article considers Latin America to be the entity of independent republics in the Central and South America where romance languages are spoken. Thus, while Haiti is included, European colonies like French Guyana, Guadeloupe, Suriname etc. are not dealt with here. [↑](#)
3. For instance: Halperin Donghi, Tulio: Geschichte Lateinamerikas von der Unabhängigkeit bis zur Gegenwart, Frankfurt am Main 1994; Bakewell, Peter: A History of Latin America, Malden 2004; Ayala Mora, Enrique et al. (eds.): Historia General de América Latina. Vol. 7 Los proyectos nacionales latinoamericanos. Sus instrumentos y articulación, 1870-1930, Madrid 2008. [↑](#)
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Citation

Stefan Rinke, Karina Kriegesmann: Latin America, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-11-05. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10760](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:5:1-63864-p0101-9)

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Author Keywords

Latin America; Socioeconomic Effects; Submarine Warfare; Propaganda; United States

GND Subject Headings

[Lateinamerika ; Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\]](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918 ; Latin America](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Amérique du Sud](#)

Key Person(s)

[Bismarck, Otto von](#); [Martí, José](#); [Vasconcelos, José](#); [Zimmermann, Arthur](#); [Luxburg, Karl von](#); [Katz, Friedrich](#); [Gamio, Manuel](#); [Wilson, Woodrow](#); [Rodó, José Enrique](#)

Key Location(s)

[Buenos Aires](#); [Córdoba, Argentina](#); [Rio de Janeiro](#); [Santiago](#); [São Paulo](#); [Porto Alegre](#)

Title

Latin America

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