

Social Movements (Latin America)

By [Stefan Rinke](#)

Summary

The workers were the primary instigators of social strife in Latin America during the war and incidentally suffered most from the effects of the conflagration. Yet social movements also developed within the middle classes. There were many different kinds of movements, driven by students, pacifists, women and many others. Their emphasis lay on youth and the openness of the future. Aiming for social change, some held revolutionary beliefs while others promoted gradual change or resisted revolution completely. These movements are connected in that they all referred to the war as a moment of initiation.

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Introduction

Social disturbances in [Latin America](#) increased especially in the last two years of World War I. Above all, the workers' and middle class' desperate situation served as a driving force. However, there were other groups besides the workers' movement fighting for equal rights and participation in the national community. They all expressed reactions towards basic structural problems of Latin American societies. Nevertheless, the connection with World War I cannot be denied. The conflagration reached everyday life and the streets and public squares, especially in Argentina and [Brazil](#), due to the controversy in the public sphere about the positioning towards the war and its pros and cons.¹ Even in Mexico, where the civil war caused trouble, the media combined demands for an immediate end of the war with demands for basic reforms that would offer equal rights for all.² In retrospect, the Argentine psychologist [Aníbal Ponce \(1898-1938\)](#) put it concisely, explaining the mobilization activated by the war:

For us young people, entering life amidst the horror of the European tragedy, the war was the “liberator” in the widest sense. Every aspect of our lives before it were but passive learnings of childhood, obedient habits of education; everything that was to follow had to be painful conquests of youth, the shocks and enthusiasm of the new times. Thanks to the war, we distrusted the past from the beginning. [The war] lived amongst us in the streets, the schools, the homes. It destroyed friendships, loosened strong ties, heated the minds. How could one remain untouched in view of this torment, which carried us away and forced us into an opinion?³

Student Movements

In 1918, Ponce was one of the leaders of the student youth. They understood themselves as the motor of change. Especially in pro-Allied circles, one observed great hope for the youth’s commitment. In Argentina, the *Comité de la Juventud* (Youth Committee) was a powerful organization. In the whole country, it mobilized the masses to enter the war. Among the activists, the conviction prevailed that the old elites had proved to be incapable. The new generation should carry out social reforms for solidary assistance for the workers and the poor without being captivated by the class struggle.⁴

The *Liga da Defesa Nacional* (League of National Defense) formed the Brazilian counterpart that expanded over the whole country, too. On the one hand, the spokespersons aimed at strengthening the [youth](#) through military service. On the other hand, they tried to strengthen the nation by implementing a modernization of social structures.⁵ After all, they wanted to combat leftist movements.⁶

Without doubt, the greatest success of mobilization of these associations lay in the side effect of the politicization mentioned by Ponce. They developed a momentum of their own which at the end of the war led to the students’ movements that had its starting point in the Argentine city Córdoba. In the initial phase around 1916, the movement put an emphasis on the time-honored [university](#) structures. They combined the element of youth with the demands for participation and delivering oneself from colonial remains. The students claimed the missionary task to enter society and ensure democratization. They referred to the leaders of the world war’s great history that had to be avoided in the future and they mentioned the [October Revolution](#). According to them, this revolution heralded a new development of humanity.⁷

The students’ general strike in Córdoba that started at the end of March 1918 quickly extended and became a national matter. Well-known intellectuals showed solidarity with

them. The students' leader, [Deodoro Roca \(1890-1942\)](#), spoke consciously about a "generation of 1914" that experienced the war and had the task to fight for the nation's future and destiny.⁸

At the beginning of 1919, these ideas sparked, reached the neighboring countries Peru and Chile and influenced young academics of the whole region. The continental consciousness developed in view of the Latin American linkages that were accompanied by many lecture tours. Personalities who later became famous, like the Colombian [Germán Arciniegas \(1900-1999\)](#) or the Peruvians [Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre \(1895-1979\)](#) and [Carlos Mariátegui \(1894-1930\)](#) sympathized with the movement.⁹ In retrospect, Haya de la Torre said that the war's lessons and the betrayal of ideals like liberty and equality would have finally enabled the great and cross-border revolution of the students.¹⁰ After all, the [revolution](#) made a global claim. Haya de la Torre wrote self-confidently that the universities would have produced the great revolutionaries at that time like [Vladimir Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#) and [Sun Yat-sen](#).¹¹ Moreover, the Argentine Florentino Sangiunetti noticed that the students' and the worker's strike would have complemented each other at one point in time when the whole world order was broken due to World War I.¹² Ponce wrote: "For Latin America, 1918 is the birthday of revolutions."¹³

Anti-War Movements

The workers' movement developed an outstanding commitment to pursue the war's end. Like in other regions, in Latin America the political left and [the church](#) supported especially pacifist activities.¹⁴ For example, in August 1914 the Argentine Catholics organized a pilgrimage to the national shrine in Luján to pray for the world peace whereas *La Vanguardia* criticized that in the name of the same religion Catholics in Europe were killing themselves. Being on the other end of the ideological spectrum, the socialist movements and parties saw themselves as the true pioneers in the fight against war.¹⁵ Many hoped for The Internationale to influence the workers in Europa and claimed a continental association to get through the principle of peaceful mediation. In Brazil, the *Confederação Operária Brasileira* fought actively against war and socialist organizations joined the common congresses for peace that led to the annual May Day rally.¹⁶

However, the hope that violence as an instrument for settling future international disputes would cease was not fulfilled. In many places, the [pacifist](#) movements remained a target of ridicule because, according to many observers, the war was a "natural and unavoidable

fact.”¹⁷ Even in their own circles, the outbreak of the war revealed the movement’s fragility. In the socialist association *Vorwärts*, formed by German immigrants in Buenos Aires, massive resignations occurred because of the basis that was thrilled by the war. In October 1914, the association had only nineteen active members. Shortly thereafter, the association’s leaders declared their loyalty to the German efforts in the war. They offered the association’s rooms for patriotic demonstration, after which the number of members increased again.¹⁸ According to many frustrated comments, the fight against war was in vain because the [nationalist](#) enthusiasm had completely obliterated the hope for peace.

Women’s Movements

Not least, [women became committed in the peace movement](#). The success of [Bertha von Suttner \(1843-1914\)](#) and her novel *Die Waffen nieder!* proved this fact. Its Danish film version caused a furor in Latin American cinemas after the outbreak of the war.¹⁹ Moreover, the media now discussed the importance of women in the nation in view of war. For example, in his classic book of national literature, *Forjando Patria* of 1916, the Mexican intellectual [Manuel Gamio \(1863-1960\)](#) preferred a “feminine woman” over an archaic “serving” or a “masculined feminist” woman.²⁰ Especially in Brazil and Cuba, countries that entered the war, male authors gave clear guidelines for female behavior. The Brazilian woman, for example, should be a model in war and represent the willingness to make sacrifices. She should fight for the ideals of equality and justice by words and consoling.²¹ Moreover, now a woman had to fulfill practical demands as a family’s mother: thriftiness, hard work, diligence and the willingness to bear deprivation and hunger. Male commentators expected all this from the female half of the population as a contribution to war.²² When the war came to its end, appeals increased that the woman should marry and return to the household to bring up as many children as possible in order to contribute to the nation’s growth and boost morale.²³

Nevertheless, the women’s movement belonged to the many groups that in the context of the war fought for equality and participation rights. In November 1914, the Chilean women’s rights’ activist Elena Ivens spoke in the name of many women when she leveled fundamental criticism against the barbarian war waged by the men. The fact that a justice dominated by men had locked in the suffragists before war due to their willingness to use violence now looked like scorn. According to Ivens, the thesis of inferiority directed towards women could not be maintained because especially the war proved the moral superiority of women. Thus, the fight for the political and civil rights of women seemed more legitimate than ever.²⁴

Indeed, the women’s movement increased considerably during the war years. In Chile, the

movement of women from the well-to-do classes started in 1915 with the foundation of a Reading Circle (*Círculo de Lectura*) and a Club for Ladies (*Club de Señoras*). In Uruguay, the National Council of Women (*Consejo Nacional de Mujeres*) was created in 1916. In Argentina, where already before 1914 important women's associations had been founded, the activities increased considerably during the war years.²⁵ Already before the war, [anarchists](#) and socialists were able to mobilize their own women's movements. Now, authors like [Flores Magón \(1874-1922\)](#), the Chilean [Emilio Recabarren \(1876-1924\)](#) and the Peruvian [Manuel González Prada \(1844-1918\)](#) intensified their support. Above all, the feminist organization in the countries in the south of America received new fuel at the end of the war because of the reforms of the women's suffrage in countries like [Germany](#) or the [United States](#). At that time, the activists and their supporters thought and worked in transnational dimensions. One can only understand their claims and activities considering these entanglements that go far beyond the national frame.

Conclusion

The examples mentioned do not cover the whole breadth of new or newly invigorated social movements that gained importance during the war years. Even older organizations like labor or the anarchists were heavily influenced by the war. Of course, these movements were highly heterogeneous, but they all received or claimed to receive an initiation into a more active mode of existence. What for a long time had been debated in the discourse of outstanding vanguard intellectuals now became palpable in increasingly violent street action. Although at the end of the war none of the movements had significantly altered the societies in which they existed, their claims had to be reckoned with by traditional elites and oligarchies, who more often than not reacted with violence themselves. However, the various demands for social change that the movements stood for could not be ignored anymore. They remained central to the public confrontations that characterized the history of Latin America's 20th (and 21st) centuries.

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External Links

- [Aníbal Ponce: El año 1918 y América Latina, 1924 \(Iacorrente\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Collection of newspapers and writings by Ricardo Flores Magón \(Archivo Digital de Ricardo Flores Magón, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia-Dirección de Estudios Históricos\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Gamio, Manuel: Forjando patria \(pro nacionalismo\), Mexico 1916 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
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