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Historiography 1918-Today (Latin America)

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Scholarship on Latin American history has for decades largely ignored the First World War as a major event in which the continent played a part. This was mainly due to historiography's focus on the nation and as well as initially on diplomatic and later social and economic topics. Only recently, with the rise of the new cultural history and global history, have the tides started to turn. Several important studies have now been published.

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Introduction

The entanglement between global events and local developments during the First World War has almost gone unnoticed in the historiography of [Latin America](#) since the end of the conflagration. Scholarship on Latin American history usually distinguishes between the long phase of the emergence of the new republics in a “long” 19th century and a phase during which the continent underwent a transformation into modern mass societies during the 20th century. The standard treatments and textbooks of Latin American history usually take the Great Depression as a point of

departure for periodization. According to these views, the great crisis was the moment in time when Latin American history took a new turn and a new era began. In these works, the First World War, however, does not play a major role as a break in historical development for the continent. Moreover, textbooks often do not even or only scarcely mention it.^[1]

The Contemporaries

However, there was indeed an early historiography on World War I and Latin America. It appeared at the end of the war, when several authors published initial studies. These were still very much influenced by the recent events and wartime [propaganda](#). They tried to establish certain interpretations and inflict revenge on the former enemy. These texts concentrated only on the diplomatic sphere. Their interpretations were one-dimensional in the sense that they contained a clear definition of good (pro-Allied voices) and bad (those who had fought for [neutrality](#) or even the German cause).^[2]

The U.S. American historian Percy Martin was the first to discuss the topic from a less partisan point of view, based on primary sources taken from the many documents that Latin American governments published after the war. His starkly negative views about the [Mexican Revolution](#), however, heavily influenced his verdict on that country's attitude during the war. According to Martin, Mexico remained a troublemaker in a hemisphere that was largely sympathetic towards the [United States](#) war effort.^[3] After Martin's publication, the Great Depression and the Second World War redirected historians' attention to other topics and the First World War lost its place of interest in historiography for a long time.

Dependence Theory and Social History

With the emergence of the dependency theory in the 1960s and 1970s, however, interest in the relevance of the 20th century's first global war in Latin America re-emerged. It was not a historian, but the sociologist and economist André Gunder Frank who in 1969 voiced the hypothesis that only the rupture of external dependencies had allowed autonomous industrialization and development in Latin America. Frank quoted the First World War as his major element in proof.^[4] When historians later evaluated the works of dependency theorists like Frank, they found that most of their hypotheses lacked a solid basis. Bill Albert showed in his socioeconomic comparative study of four South American countries published in 1988 that dependency even deepened during the war years because of the blockade and the blacklists. The export sector, so Albert, gained in strength because of the war. Albert's book has remained the standard treatment on the socioeconomic history of Latin America during the war.^[5]

National Historiographies

The interest of Frank and Albert in the First World War remained an exception to the norm until the end of the 20th century. If one looks at national histories, however, the situation is different. For countries such as Argentina, [Brazil](#), Chile, and Mexico, works about the respective nations' diplomatic histories in relation to the war exist.^[6] In addition, although historical experiences differ enormously amongst the nineteen states in the region, there was without a doubt a rise in major social upheaval and socioeconomic changes from 1910 to 1920. In Mexico, for example, the year 1910 is without a doubt a major turning point in national history because it marks the beginning of the first major revolution in the 20th century. Historians of countries as diverse as Bolivia, Chile, Guatemala and Peru point to the years 1919 and 1920 as important crossroads, due to political and social changes. Even smaller countries like [Nicaragua](#), Haiti or the Dominican Republic experienced ruptures, when, in 1912, 1915 and 1916 respectively, extended periods of [U.S. military intervention began](#). [Panama](#), where the transoceanic channel opened its gates in 1914, only a few days before the fighting in Europe began, is also a case in point. However, the national historiographies that discuss these issues do not address the world war or the transnational entanglements of these events from an analytic perspective.

Argentina is an exceptional case. Indeed, Argentine historians have long since seen the year 1916 as an important landmark in national history because of democratic reform and the election of [Hipólito Yrigoyen \(1852-1933\)](#), the candidate of the Radical Civic Union (*Unión Cívica Radical*, UCR). Four books and a major collection of sources focus on the war's impact on Yrigoyen's presidency.^[7] In recent years, Philip Dehne has analysed the British economic war in Argentina, basing his argument exclusively on British sources.^[8] Most important are the works by the Argentine historian [María Inés Tato](#), who has studied the mobilization of [urban masses](#) and public controversies during the war years.^[9] Olivier Compagnon compared Argentina and Brazil in his most recent book.^[10] However, neither of these works looks at the transnational entanglements of events in the Latin American dimension.

A study that goes beyond the confines of the nation and looks at global consciousness in Latin America in the context of the war as a truly global event is now forthcoming.^[11]

New Cultural History and Global History

The First World War has been a marginal topic in the historiography of Latin America for a long time. For scholars concentrating on the First World War itself, Latin America hardly existed at all. Instead, they concentrated mainly on the European and U.S. perspectives and on military, political and socioeconomic dimensions for decades. Parallel to the rise of global history, the past decade has seen the publication of several studies that have interpreted the war in its global context. Following a call voiced by [Jürgen Kocka](#) in 2004, historians have looked for the broader global meaning in the concept of "world war".^[12] Not surprisingly, the publications have focused on the [European colonies in Africa](#) and Asia or the Near East, where the war at land or sea took place. This focus reflects the

limitation towards military matters characteristic of the traditional [historiography](#) on the First World War. If Latin America is mentioned in these works, then only in relation to the naval [battles at Coronel](#) and the Malvinas Islands in late 1914. For example, [Lawrence Sondhaus](#) characterized the war as a “global revolution”.^[13] Only very recently has the global dimension of the war in relation to the mobilization of economic, social, military and cultural resources in all parts of the world caught historians’ attention.

World War I historiography had another reason to not consider Latin American states. Until 1917, they remained completely neutral; important states such as Argentina, Mexico and Chile remained so until the war’s end. Traditionally, military historians have deemed neutrals as passive and uninteresting, save the United States. More recent scholarship, however, has pointed to the fact that in the total wars of the 20th century, neutrality changed. Passivity is not the right term to capture the many dimensions of neutrals’ involvement in war. Because of their resources and strategic location, neutrals had a certain power to negotiate with belligerents. It is important to ascertain the capabilities and limitations of each power individually.^[14]

In the context of the [Fritz Fischer \(1908-1999\)](#) controversy in [German historiography](#) fifty years ago, the thesis of Germany’s global plans for war and [revolution](#) have caught the attention of historians again.^[15] The incitement of revolutionary upheaval in the colonial world was a form of waging the war in Latin America, too, although only informally colonized. The “secret war” in Mexico falls into this category. Not only Germans but also the other powers actively participated with the help of their spies and nationals abroad. All warring parties tried to support social revolutions and nationalist liberation movements in the territories of their enemies.^[16] Thus, the [imperialist](#) rivalry outside Europe, including Latin America, which was obviously an important reason for the outbreak of the First World War, is now regaining the attention of historical scholarship.^[17]

Conclusion

The “global turn” in historiography opens a window of opportunity to “bring Latin America back in” to the history of the First World War. Thus, the history of that continent during the war years, which from a European perspective was at the margin of events, needs a re-evaluation. The global perspective allows insights into transnational entanglements in Latin America in this period, which in turn throw a new light on sociocultural change and calls into question the traditional periodization of Latin American history.^[18]

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Reviewed by external referees on behalf of the General Editors

Notes

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16. † Friedrich Katz has already made this point. Katz, *Secret War* 1981, p. x.
17. † Bayly, Christopher A.: *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914*, Malden 2004, p. 472.
18. † Rinke, *Lateinamerika und der Erste Weltkrieg* 2015.

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