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Making Sense of the War (Latin America)

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The First World War significantly impacted Latin American intellectuals' view on the subcontinent's role in the world. The Great War and its repercussions divided society, reinforcing and shaping a renewed nationalism and a growing anti-imperialism in Latin America. Resistance to what was perceived as outsiders' meddling in the region's affairs, whether economic, political or cultural, grew. While political sovereignty and cultural distinctness had increasingly been affirmed in the years before 1914, the war reinforced these preexisting tendencies in a variety of ways.

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Introduction

[Latin America](#) was linked to Europe by old and deep economic, cultural and demographic ties. Although the First World War represented the crisis of European civilization, it was unarguably felt around the world. It not only intensely affected the way Latin America perceived the old continent, but also influenced the way the subcontinent viewed and represented itself. The war provoked strong divisions in public opinion in Latin America, creating a rift between the belligerent sides; it also reactivated the national question, contributed to new reflections on national identity, and stimulated a firm and growing anti-[imperialism](#). This article will examine the impact that World War I had on these trends in Latin American society and how Latin Americans responded to the new world order that the war brought with it.

Inner Polarizations

Although Latin America remained [neutral](#) during most of the First World War, the conflict had disruptive and divisive effects on Latin American culture and politics. Public opinion polarized, split between two opposed sectors with conflicting identities. In the first phase, the division involved the cultural models represented by the belligerent sides, fluctuating between [France](#) and [Germany](#). In the second phase, when the conflict touched the subcontinent more closely, the polarization took on a political dimension; primarily issues of [nationalism](#) or, in some cases, political infighting arose.

Cultural Polarization

In spite of the neutrality that Latin American states adopted at the beginning of the First World War, civil society chose sides early on in the conflict. In the first months of the war, Latin American public opinion was split between the belligerent sides, with a clear majority in favor of the Triple Entente. This distribution of support was influenced by deeply rooted cultural affinities. Since independence, the Latin American nations tended to seek political and cultural models that were alternative to their former colonizers, [Spain](#) and [Portugal](#). As a result, they mainly leant towards France, perceived as the cradle of liberty and democracy and as a mother of [arts](#). Since then, admiration for France constituted the cultural core of the subcontinent's elites and the basis of the broad solidarity given to the other Allied countries during the Great War.^[1] Conversely, the admirers of the Central Powers were a minority group, predominately found in certain professional strata such as law, natural sciences, philosophy and the military.^[2]

Thus, at the outbreak of the Great War, Latin American public opinion was polarized between the supporters of the Allied cause (the *aliadófilos*) and the defenders of the Central Powers (the *germanófilos*). Although only a few national cases have been studied from the perspective of the war's cultural history – Argentina and [Brazil](#) –,^[3] it is possible to find evidence of this polarization in other nations, like Colombia.^[4] In some countries, pro-Allied mobilization was nebulous, mainly expressed in the [press](#) and among intellectual circles; nevertheless, in others, like Brazil, it gave place to the foundation of an association with national reach: the *Liga pelos Aliados* (Pro Allies

League).^[5]

The imbalance between the opposing groups of public opinion accentuated throughout the war. The invasion and **occupation** of **Belgium** and **Luxembourg** were considered a virtual threat to the sovereignty of neutral nations, like the Latin American ones. **Atrocity propaganda** also alienated Germany, destroying any sympathy for the nation among large sectors of the public. Additionally, in Brazil, which had a considerable German community in the south of its territory, these factors and Pan-Germanic propaganda awakened suspicions of secessionism and generated a deep cultural breach.^[6]

Political Polarization

1917 marked a significant watershed in the alignments around the war. The entry of the **United States** into the conflict and the unrestricted **submarine warfare** proclaimed by Germany led most Latin American countries to abandon neutrality, following the USA's example. In most cases, they declared war against the German Empire; only a few confined themselves to severing diplomatic relationships with it. A mere six countries remained neutral until the very end of the conflict: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay and Venezuela.^[7]

Foreign policy became a central topic of public debate and contributed to reconfigure social polarizations. The schism between the *aliadófilos* and *germanófilos* was increasingly replaced by another schism, opposing the defenders of severing relationships with Germany – the so-called *rupturistas* – and those who promoted maintaining neutrality – the *neutralistas* (neutralists). These new combinations fostered a nationalist mobilization. Defending national honor became an important issue in public controversies. In Argentina, the sinking of three vessels by German U-boats and the scandal around the **Luxburg Affair** called into question the continuity of the official diplomatic course. Public opinion split between the *rupturistas* and *neutralistas*, with both sectors claiming to represent national interests exclusively. The former gathered in an association led by the most prominent intellectuals of Argentina, the *Comité Nacional de la Juventud* (National Youth Committee), and their rivals in the *Liga Patriótica Argentina pro Neutralidad* (Argentine Patriotic League Pro-Neutrality). Both operated at the national level and organized mass public demonstrations in defense of their respective cause.^[8]

In some cases, the polarization caused by the war also nurtured domestic political struggles. In Argentina, the opposition controlled parliament, which declared itself in favor of severing diplomatic relationships with Germany. The opposition parties called into question the neutrality maintained by President **Hipólito Yrigoyen (1852-1933)** and even suggested the existence of a divorce between the popular will and executive power.^[9] In Brazil, where the polarization between the *aliadófilos* and *germanófilos* remained unaltered after 1917, it played a significant role in the electoral competition, as shown by São Paulo's senate campaign of 1918.^[10] In this regard, the Great War also influenced political infighting, providing it with new arguments and languages.

Anti-Imperialism and New Nations

Latin America has not normally stood at the forefront of scholarly interest when historians have debated the effects of the First World War on the political culture of non-European societies. With regard to Asian and African countries, many of which took part in the war by default as European colonies, it has been argued that the war constituted a historical turning point. Seemingly demonstrating the bankruptcy of European “civilization,” involving hundreds of thousands of [troops from the colonies](#) and ending with a re-arrangement of international affairs that kindled Asian and African hopes for political independence, the war has been called a catalyst for an “Afro-Asian assault on the civilizing mission ideology.”^[11] According to Erez Manela, the rhetoric of U.S. President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) at the war’s end decisively added momentum to “the origins of anti-colonial nationalism” across Asia and Africa.^[12] No argument of similar scope has been and could be made for anti-imperialism and nationalism in Latin America.

It is true, however, that the first decades of the 20th century witnessed significant ideological shifts in Latin America, which ran parallel to comparable developments in other world regions. 19th-century liberal models of nation building, the export-led integration into the world capitalist system they underpinned and the previously close intellectual orientation towards Europe were increasingly criticized. Latin American authenticity in contradistinction to Europe – encapsulated in typical food, music, clothes, languages and ethnic customs – was celebrated, where until recently racial pessimists had seen them as obstacles to a European-inspired modernity and progress. A growing chorus of Latin American intellectuals and politicians demanded greater economic self-sufficiency and, most notably of all changes, bemoaned U.S. meddling in the region. In short, anti-imperialism and cultural nationalism were visibly on the rise in Latin America – especially in the Spanish-speaking countries – between 1900 and 1930, just as they were in parts of Asia and Africa.

The Role of the First World War in Driving Change

It is less clear, however, to what extent the First World War was a driving force behind these changes. Intellectual historians of Latin America typically feel more comfortable with more arbitrary starting dates, such as 1900, to chart the rise of anti-imperialism and cultural nationalism in Spanish America than with the specific ones of 1914 or 1918.^[13] The turn of the century marked the moment when the Uruguayan writer [José Enrique Rodó \(1872-1917\)](#) published his seminal essay *Ariel*, which contrasted refined Latin “spirituality” with Anglo-Saxon “imperialism” and “materialism,” thus creating a cultural blueprint according to which most subsequent forms of anti-imperialism in Latin America were to draw. A few years earlier the Cuban poet and independence hero [José Martí \(1853-1895\)](#) had lent his voice to a critique of North American intrusions. While ever more wary of U.S. political, economic and cultural influence, some Spanish American intellectuals instead began to revalorize the region’s colonial heritage by embracing Catholicism and the concept of *hispanidad*, which postulated cultural unity with the “*madre patria*,” Spain. Many countries made the so-called *Día de la*

Raza (“Day of the Race”), which celebrated Columbus’ landing in the Americas every 12 October and thus the cultural ties between Spain and its colonies, a national holiday in the 1910s and 1920s.^[14] Meanwhile, indigenous heritage was partially revalued. More forcefully, racial mixing (*mestizaje*) shed the negative connotations it had held in the late 19th century and instead evolved into a celebrated identity marker of many Latin American countries, most notably in revolutionary Mexico. Many of these reorientations coincided with the First World War and in one way or another used it as a rhetorical foil. But if a war had to be identified that stimulated these changes in Latin American understandings of national identity, most historians would probably opt for the Spanish-American War of 1898 instead of the First World War.

Even so, the First World War did accelerate and reinforce developments towards anti-imperialism and cultural nationalism in Latin America that had begun during the two preceding decades. One mechanism through which this happened was the economy. Due to the interruption of trade relations with Europe, domestic markets in Latin America needed to be strengthened, which brought about a degree of industrialization in some countries. Arguably, this inward-orientation was not as profound as it could have been. Dependency theorists later saw the First World War as a lost opportunity for a greater degree of economic independence in Latin America.^[15] Industrialization might have occurred only on a modest scale, but it did entail social changes. Nascent middle classes gained political weight in countries such as Argentina and Chile, while the rise of working-class movements fed into the foundation of communist parties in the larger countries in the years after the war (Mexico and Argentina in 1919, Brazil and Chile in 1922, Cuba in 1925). These parties bred some anti-imperialist intellectuals, even though they rarely acquired serious electoral weight and in some countries, notably Argentina, were increasingly chided for being not sufficiently popular and nationalist.

Global Intellectual Exchanges

Intellectual exchange within Latin America and between the region and Europe was another way in which the war impacted Latin America’s intellectual realm and its growing embrace of anti-imperialism. Before the war, Latin America’s (white) elites had long been closely oriented towards Europe, especially France, which they admired as the world’s navel of universal high culture. Extended stays in European capitals – again, preferably Paris – were perceived as entry tickets into successful careers back home as writers or artists. The war temporarily closed these avenues of exchange, encouraging a greater extent of cultural transfers and circulation of ideas and people within Latin America – again particularly among the Spanish-speaking countries. Latin American intellectuals had a vivid interest in the [Mexican Revolution](#), which found some detractors but ultimately more admirers, who saw it as a model for eradicating social injustices, ending the mimicry of overseas high culture and standing up to the powerful U.S. Similarly, the movement for educational reform that had begun at the University of Córdoba in Argentina in 1918 was an important stimulus for the region’s increasingly nationalist students and intellectuals. Though not directly linked to the war, it was clearly nurtured by the global political ferment that the war had

fostered.

After the war, even as Latin Americans began to assert their cultural particularities more strongly than before, the flow of ideas and people between Latin America and Europe resumed, and arguably intensified. Latin Americans who now visited Europe saw a war-torn continent full of traumatized and impoverished people embroiled in bitter political conflict. The Peruvian Marxist [José Carlos Mariátegui \(1894-1930\)](#), one of the region's best-known anti-imperialists and one of its most original thinkers, for instance, absorbed this climate of ferment and upheaval in post-war [Italy](#) and creatively adapted the ideas of *L'Ordine Nuovo* to the Andean world. His compatriot [V́ctor Raúl Haya de la Torre \(1895-1979\)](#), founder of the anti-imperialist, pan-Hispanic American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) in 1924, traveled the old continent and wrote about the effects of the war. Like many other leading Latin American intellectuals, the European [literature](#) they absorbed was decisively informed by the experience of the war. Writers such as [Henri Barbusse \(1873-1935\)](#) or [Oswald Spengler \(1880-1936\)](#) became obligatory reading among nationalist intellectuals in Latin America. Spengler's cultural pessimism regarding Europe and his interest in extra-European "civilizations" in particular came to legitimize new forms of nationalism in Latin America.

The Rise of U.S. Hegemony and Anti-Imperialism

The most decisive change spurred on by the war, which in turn reinforced anti-imperialist ideas in Latin America, was the rise of U.S. hegemony in the region. The Monroe Doctrine had long proclaimed that European powers refrain from interfering in the affairs of the "Western Hemisphere." From the turn of the century, it was gradually converted into a pretext for U.S. interference, including military occupation, in Central America and the Caribbean. During the war North American fears about European involvement south of the Rio Grande further stiffened U.S. resolve to assert its power, leading to a series of military occupations motivated by a blend of political and economic reasons: Haiti (1915-1934), the Dominican Republic (1916-1924), the so-called sugar intervention in Cuba (1917-1922) and heavy-handed meddling in [Nicaragua](#). Puerto Ricans, meanwhile, were granted U.S. citizenship in 1917, but this also made them eligible for military service. Finally, the war inaugurated the decline of European economic influence in Latin America, which was definitely replaced by North American interests.^[16]

Although the ground had been prepared since at least 1898, this change in Latin America's position in the international system boosted anti-imperial feelings, the defense of sovereignty against outsiders and the assertion of cultural particularity in contradistinction especially to the U.S. With the exception of Argentina, where anti-imperialism in part continued to be directed against [Britain](#), and Brazil, whose elites never felt threatened by outside hegemony to the same extent as their Spanish-American counterparts did, anti-imperialism was henceforth exclusively directed against the United States. Central America was an especially clear case in this respect and one where this anti-imperialism gained significant popular grounding due to the very tangible nature of U.S. dominance.^[17] All over Spanish America, a new generation of intellectuals and leaders emerged

whose politics were defined first and foremost by opposition to U.S. meddling in Latin America, a celebration of a pan-Latin American identity inspired by Rodó's writings and, especially after 1930, a growing **economic nationalism**. Although highly diverse internally, the canon of this current typically includes the Argentine Manuel Ugarte (1875-1951), the Peruvians Mariátegui and Haya de la Torre, the Mexican José Vasconcelos (1882-1959) and the Cuban Marxist Julio Antonio Mella (1903-1929). Born out of far-flung repercussions of the First World War, some of their ideas have been drawn upon by left-wing nationalist governments in Latin America that came to power almost a century later.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the First World War constituted a global event, which echoed all over the world, including neutral states. Its consequences were not confined to the economic or diplomatic realms, but also affected culture and politics. In Latin America, these effects were strongly related to the subcontinent's self-representation, developed by the intellectual elites. The Great War stimulated cultural and political inner polarizations, involving nationalism more or less explicitly. The conflict also reactivated the reflections on national and sub-continental identities. It led to the reassessment of their bonds with Europe and with other American states, like the United States or the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies, reinforcing cultural nationalism and anti-imperialism.

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Notes

1. ↑ Compagnon, Olivier: *L'adieu à l'Europe. L'Amérique latine et la Grande Guerre (Argentine et Brésil, 1914-1939)*, Paris 2013, p. 85.
2. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 104ff.
3. ↑ Rinke, Stefan: *Historiography 1918-Today (Latin America)*, in: *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-11-30. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1546333/ie1418.10501>.
4. ↑ Rausch, Jane M.: *Colombia and World War I. The Experience of a Neutral Latin American Nation during the Great War and Its Aftermath*, Lanham 2014.
5. ↑ Compagnon, *L'adieu à l'Europe* 2013, p. 77.
6. ↑ Luebke, Frederick C.: *Germans in Brazil. A Comparative History of Cultural Conflict during World War I*, Baton Rouge 1987.

7. † Compagnon, Olivier: Entrer en guerre? Neutralité et engagement de l'Amérique latine entre 1914 et 1918, in: Relations Internationales 137 (2009), pp. 31-43.
8. † Tato, María Inés: La disputa por la argentinidad. Rupturistas y neutralistas durante la Primera Guerra Mundial, in: Temas de Historia Argentina y Americana 13 (2008), pp. 227-250.
9. † Tato, María Inés: La contienda europea en las calles porteñas. Manifestaciones cívicas y pasiones nacionales en torno de la Primera Guerra Mundial, in: Tato, María Inés / Castro, Martín O. (eds.): Del Centenario al peronismo. Dimensiones de la vida política argentina, Buenos Aires 2010, pp. 61ff.
10. † Compagnon, L'adieu à l'Europe 2013, pp. 148ff.
11. † Adas, Michael: Contested Hegemony. The Great War and the Afro-Asian Assault on the Civilizing Mission Ideology, in: Journal of World History 15/1 (2004), pp. 31-64.
12. † Manela, Erez: The Wilsonian Moment. Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism, Oxford et al. 2007.
13. † For example, see: Larraín, Jorge: Identity and Modernity in Latin America, Oxford 2000, pp. 92-113; Miller, Nicola: Reinventing Modernity in Latin America. Intellectuals Imagine the Future, 1900-1930, New York 2008.
14. † Rachum, Ilan: Origins and Historical Significance of Día de la Raza, in: European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies 76 (2004), pp. 61-81.
15. † Albert, Bill (with the collaboration of Paul Henderson): South America and the First World War. The Impact of the War on Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and Chile, Cambridge 1988.
16. † The classic account is Tulchin, Joseph S.: The Aftermath of War. World War I and U.S. Policy Toward Latin America, New York 1971.
17. † An insightful account is Salisbury, Richard V.: Anti-Imperialism and International Competition in Central America, 1920-29, Wilmington 1989.

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