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Propaganda War (Latin America)

By [Stefan Rinke](#)

Latin America was a major battlefield for worldwide propaganda because the continent boasted a major number of neutral countries. While the Allies tried to lure them into the war on their side, the Germans attempted to keep them neutral. Both parties used all kinds of media messages in their fight for public opinion. New media like cinema started to play an important role. Argentina and Mexico were the mainstays of German propaganda with Mexico playing a special role due to its vicinity to the United States.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Allied Propaganda](#)
- [3 German Propaganda^{\[10\]}](#)
- [4 Propaganda Wars](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

From the outset, observers were convinced that [propaganda](#) would have a decisive impact upon the outcome of the war, calling it a “sixth arm of the service.” This propaganda war was global and [Latin America](#) was a major battlefield because the continent boasted a large number of [neutral](#) countries. This was an unequal fight because the Allies had access to all communications and had cut German cables at the very beginning of the war. At this stage, new [wireless technology](#) was still in its infancy. Nevertheless, [Germany](#) fought back with propaganda which caused a confrontation that endured until the end of the war in 1918. From the Latin American perspective, the daily propaganda war in the national media was one of the main elements that brought the conflict directly home.

At first, Latin Americans wanted to keep out of the war because they were convinced that no one could exactly know who was to blame for the imbroglio. Because of aggressive propaganda and the onset of [total warfare](#), it became ever more difficult to evade opinionating. Partisan reports about events in Europe progressively split public opinion in two or three parties: those who sympathized with the Allies (*aliadófilos*) and those who sympathized with the Central powers (*germanófilos*). After 1917, many *aliadófilos* wanted their countries to join the war on the side of the Allies while *germanófilos* and others wanted to remain out of the conflict, and were thus called *neutralistas*.^[1]

Allied Propaganda

The Latin American elites who sympathized with [France](#) dominated great parts of the media landscape. Therefore, French [propaganda](#) had an advantage when the war broke out. Moreover, French foreign cultural and media policy had already been very active in Latin America before 1914^[2] and the French Foreign Ministry and general staff intervened actively in propaganda issues. They printed books and brochures and spread them in Latin America. The visuality of photos and films became increasingly important as well. Before the war, French providers dominated Latin American film markets and war propaganda only strengthened the industry. The weekly newsreels distributed by the company Pathé reached a growing number of spectators in the region because they were shown before the movies. Art exhibitions, lecture tours of well-known French scientists and a systematic policy of honoring outstanding Latin American personalities like intellectuals, military officers or politicians were also components of France's policy. The "Week of Latin America," organized for the first time in 1916 and annually thereafter, was a highlight. It called up France's cultural and ideal unity with Latin America and it was obvious that France saw itself as a teacher, as a "priest of the holy fire."^[3]

The activities of other Allies had a similar structure but were less intensive. Due to the market power of its media services and companies, [Great Britain](#) was able to force the printing of pro-British messages. There were English-speaking newspapers wherever British traders had settled. In Santiago de Chile, they published the magazine *La Patria de los Aliados*.^[4] The Allied propaganda styled the war against Germany as a fundamental conflict between civilization and barbarism, a historical opposition well known in Latin America. They compared Allied civilization with the supposed perverted German "*Kultur*" which had to be combated.^[5] Francophile Latin Americans had no doubt that their own civilization was closely linked with the French through the concept of *Latinity*. Since the outbreak of the war, numerous pro-French thinkers in Latin America connected the declared belief in the "*race latine*" with the idea of a fight against a "Germanic" or "Teutonic" race. They called up the spiritual band of brothers that in its logical extension leads to an appeal to break off neutrality and to stand by Latin France.^[6]

Francophile publications were already widespread in many parts of Latin America and propaganda

from Paris fell on fertile ground. France's heroism and willingness to make sacrifices was celebrated not only in public media but also in the context of assemblies and demonstrations. In 1915, the Uruguayan government even declared 14 July a bank holiday. In many of the big Latin American cities the French national holiday served as an opportunity for statements of solidarity.^[7]

The attitude towards other Allies was not equivalent to that towards France. Latin American opinion regarding the "martyr land" of Belgium was an exception. In general, the small land's defensive fight was praised as heroic. Many Latin American countries appealed for donations and demonstrations of solidarity. The strong sympathies for Belgium can be attributed to the fact that Latin Americans saw parallels to their own situation in the international system. The attack on Belgium was also an attack on the principle of neutrality. Moreover, it was the attack of a great power on a small, weak country. Latin Americans knew this constellation very well due to U.S. imperialism in their own hemisphere. According to the Argentine intellectual Manuel Ugarte (1875-1951), what happened to little Belgium could also take place in Latin America in the near future.^[8]

Given the aforementioned context in Latin America, it was not difficult for the Allies' anti-German propaganda to gain ground. These propaganda activities reached a peak with the sinking of the ship Lusitania. Not only anti-German observers condemned the act of terror.^[9] The Allies again equated Germany with barbarism and enjoyed great popularity by doing so. According to the Allied propaganda, Prussian-German barbarism found a very clear expression in militarism matched with blind obedience. In Latin America, these ideas reached great distribution due to the image of the "German Peril" that had developed since the turn of the century in response to German gunboat diplomacy in the region.

German Propaganda^[10]

Because of this constellation, it was difficult for the Germans to defend their own cause in Latin America. However, German propaganda was not inactive. Researchers have hardly considered the role that German propaganda played in influencing public opinion. They have not questioned Allied dominance in this field. Moreover, sources at that time already presented pro-Allied comments as authentic "public opinion" whereas they dismissed completely pro-German statements as the unrepresentative propagandist lies of outsiders.

German *Weltpolitik* emulated that of France and discovered the power of foreign cultural propaganda but Latin America was of secondary importance. Scarcely coordinated propaganda production took place at various military, civil and unofficial institutions until October 1914 when the Control Center for Foreign Service (*Zentralstelle für Auslandsdienst*) was installed.

In the neutral countries of Latin America, the scant but well-connected Germans and citizens of German origin, the so-called "*Auslandsdeutsche*," their associations and churches were important agents of propaganda. In Argentina, Chile and Paraguay, their institutions formed unions, the so-

called “*Volksverbände*,” to organize all German communities. They received financial support from foreign banks and companies and founded Spanish-language newspapers and journals, published pamphlets and books and tried, partly by bribery, to influence the local press.^[11]

The radio was a new and important medium for spreading German propaganda in Latin America. Until 1917, the Transocean Company sent daily radio services to Sayville and Tuckerton in the U.S. From there the news was distributed to German newspapers and associations in foreign countries. Afterwards, these edited and translated messages were placed in the local press both in and beyond the capital cities. From the customers’ perspective, the advantage of the German war news service was the fact that it was free of charge in contrast to the news offered by Havas and Reuters. German propaganda was based mainly on news from Nauener near Berlin and completed with prepared articles and reports from neutral Spain. Above all, Spain represented an elemental bridge to the Western hemisphere for the Germans.^[12]

In view of the massive criticism provoked by the invasion of Belgium, German propaganda appeared helpless at first. The refutation of the Allied reproaches and their “exposition” as propagandist lies therefore became important elements of German propaganda. Especially during the initial phase of the war, official institutions and Germans living abroad frequently used this method of reply.^[13] Particularly distinctive was the German propagandist strategy of victimization. It presented the German Reich as a “whipping boy” and victim of a disgraceful smear campaign from the enemy’s superior propaganda.^[14] Finally, German propaganda strategists tried to promote their own cause because, according to the opinion of many of them, Germany and its achievements were rarely known. Despite all of this, German propaganda remained largely ineffective.

Propaganda Wars

The consequences of the propaganda war in Latin America went far beyond German and Allied activities. On both sides, well-known personalities supported the debates that increased over the course of the war. These debates, which sometimes became violent, were partly held in the public. Incidents occurred especially in the immigrant communities in Argentina and Brazil where the quarrels about war events surfaced in public assemblies, demonstrations, assemblies of protest and also in encounters in the streets.

Due to propaganda and its distortions, the war was always present in public discussions in Latin America. Never before had an event abroad shaken the Latin American public to such an extent. The war mobilized many people politically. This found evident expression in the belligerent’s controversies. Although the emphasis lay clearly on the capital and port cities, the propagandists tried also to reach the provinces (only to partial success). It was no surprise that the pro-Allied voices clearly retained the upper hand in view of the deeply rooted Francophile attitudes and the aggressive German warfare against neutrals. However, groups on both sides were generally heterogeneous with different motives that only can be understood in the local context.

Reviewed by external referees on behalf of the General Editors

Notes

1. ↑ Rausch, Jane M.: Colombia's Neutrality during 1914-1918. An Overlooked Dimension of World War I, in: *Iberoamericana* 14 (2014), p. 107.
2. ↑ L'Œuvre du Comité France-Amérique. In: *France-Amérique* 8 (Nov. 1917), p. 29.
3. ↑ Compagnon, Olivier: *L'adieu à l'Europe. L'Amérique latine et la Grande Guerre (Argentine et Brésil, 1914-1939)*, Paris 2013, pp. 76-78.
4. ↑ Holder, Arthur L. (ed.): *Activities of the British Community in Argentina During the Great War 1914-1919*. Buenos Aires 1920.
5. ↑ Piccione, Enrico: *La guerra ante la historia y la ciencia*. Santiago de Chile 1918. Bonow, Stefan Chamorro: *A desconfiança sobre os indivíduos de origem germânica em Porto Alegre durante a Primeira Guerra Mundial [The Distrust in Individuals of German Origin in Porto Alegre During the First World War]*. Diss. phil., Porto Alegre 2011, pp. 286-287.
6. ↑ See for example Mejía Rodríguez, Alfonso: *La France, notre mère intellectuelle, conférences et articles*. Location Unknown 1918.
7. ↑ Compagnon, *L'adieu à l'Europe* 2013, pp. 84-88.
8. ↑ Ugarte, Manuel: *Mi campaña hispanoamericana [My Hispanic American Campaign]*, Barcelona 1922, pp. 184-185.
9. ↑ *A guerra e a civilização [War and Civilization]*. In: *O Imparcial* (Rio de Janeiro, 12.5.1915), p. 1.
10. ↑ Of course, the Central Powers were not only Germany but also Italy, Turkey and the Habsburg Monarchy and others, but Germany was the most prominent imperialist power among these Central Powers and there is a lack of basic research about the other powers.
11. ↑ Rinke, Stefan: *The Reconstruction of National Identity. German Minorities in Latin America during the First World War*, in: Foote, Nicola and Goebel, Michael (eds.): *Immigration and National Identities in Latin America*. Gainesville 2014, pp. 170-174. Luebke, Frederik C.: *Germans in Brazil. A Comparative History of Cultural Conflict During World War I*, Baton Rouge 1987, pp. 93-99.
12. ↑ Katz, Friedrich: *The Secret War in Mexico. Europe, the United States and the Mexican Revolution*, Chicago 1981, pp. 441-446.
13. ↑ Bonow, *A desconfiança* 2011, pp. 166-167.
14. ↑ Tato, María Inés: *Contra la corriente: los intelectuales germanófilos argentinos frente a la Primera Guerra Mundial*, in: *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas* 49 (2012), pp. 220-221.

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