Epilogue

The Global Legacy of the World War

Although the Treaties of Paris formally ended the war, peace remained hard to find on a global scale in 1919. The Latin American eyewitnesses who experienced the transition from a “hot” to a “cold” war watched the developments closely. For instance, Mariátegui remarked six years later in hindsight:

The world war not only shocked and transformed the West’s economy and politics, but also its thinking and its spirit. The economic impact is not starker or easier to perceive than the spiritual and psychological consequences. Politicians and statesmen might discover a formula and method to deal with the former, but they will certainly not find a suitable theory or practice to surmount the latter.  

In fact, the war propaganda transitioned into a postwar propaganda, especially in Latin America. The German side, above all, tried to refute the claim from the Treaty of Versailles that Germany alone was to blame for the war. The war remained part of the public consciousness to a certain extent because of the Cult of the Fallen, which foreign communities introduced to their countries of immigration shortly after the war. Memoirs, films, and novels, such as Erich Maria Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front, ensured that the topic did not completely fade from memory. In addition, Latin American writers and artists were inspired by the tragedies of world war and created works of enduring value, such as Carlos Gardel with his tango classics “Silencio” or Heitor Villa-Lobos

3 For the German side in Buenos Aires, see: Bindernagel, “Migration und Erinnerung,” p. 200.
with his symphonies.\textsuperscript{4} By the same token, it is not possible to speak of a national culture of remembrance, even in countries like Argentina or Brazil. This is even more the case in other national contexts. Such a processing of the past remained too haphazard.

Nevertheless, the war undoubtedly meant a decisive turning point in the experience of Latin Americans of different nationalities, classes, generations, and genders. The outbreak of the world war initiated a crisis of dramatic proportion. The entire region could only look on helplessly, for the foundation of its economic development broke away along with the collapse of the liberal world economy. The export sector, which was critical to the lifeblood of all countries, went through a period of highly volatile shocks. These trends continued in many places long after the war. Not all countries, though, had the good fortune of being suppliers of war-essential raw materials. The world war gave the Allies a welcome excuse for artificially suppressing the prices of vitally important Latin American commodities (which were key to the war’s successful conclusion) and for ruthlessly combating German interests.\textsuperscript{5} The Allied economic war and Germany’s submarine warfare were thus fundamentally interventions into the sovereignty of Latin American states and flagrant violations of international law.\textsuperscript{6} Latin Americans could not help but wonder what gave the Europeans the right to carry out their feud on a global scale.

Even more important than the diplomatic implications of the war were the social effects. Rapidly growing unemployment, unchecked inflation, and the increasingly precarious situation of the working population, especially in the cities, contributed to an incendiary social constellation. This culminated in the wake of the precursors in Mexico and Russia in serious unrest in many parts of Latin America in 1917. The elites were only able to restore order through the application of extreme force. That said, they failed to fix any of the underlying problems. To be sure, the First World War did not create these problems. It nonetheless greatly exacerbated them in Latin America, as in other parts of the world.

\textsuperscript{4} For a comprehensive discussion of this set of issues, see: Compagnon, \textit{L’adieu à l’Europe}, pp. 179–87.

\textsuperscript{5} Albert, \textit{South America and the First World War}, p. 119. Dehne (“How Important was Latin America to the First World War,” pp. 157–8) has recently highlighted the often-overlooked dimension of the role of Latin American commodities in the war.

\textsuperscript{6} Whether the economic war was “counterproductive” for this reason, as Dehne suggests through the examples of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, is debatable. After all, it inflicted serious harm to many smaller and medium-sized German and ethnic-German companies. Dehne, \textit{On the Far Western Front}, p. 190.
By and large, the public sphere was greatly mobilized and politicized across Latin America. The actors spurring these processes were generally young and came from the new middle class. Some were urban or – to a lesser extent – rural workers recruited from the margins of society. Although the strikers, protesting students, rebellious indigenes, and other forces pushing for social change did not prevail in the years 1917–19, the spirit of the revolution nonetheless remained a decisive factor in twentieth-century Latin American history. Cornejo was right when he admonished his Peruvian senator colleagues in September 1918: “This war, gentlemen, is not a war, it is a revolution – a visible revolution in Russia, an invisible one in the other countries. It is one that, like the light in a mirror, flits about unrecognized, waiting for the event that it reflects.”\(^7\) Contrary to the senator’s belief, however, it was not the peace conference that would first reveal this revolution. Brazilian politician and journalist Otto Prazeres also recognized the revolutionary character of the upheavals that began in Russia, but which the war had already brought with it in its wake to Latin America:

Besides a loss of illusions, the war will have many additional implications…. The mental revolutions, which result in new ways of thinking and acting, are already perceptible. Many moral, social, and political values will lose the basis upon which they were formed and be fundamentally changed. Lacking the concepts from which they subsisted, the threatened masses will march in search of new principles.\(^8\)

No doubt, the perspective that the Peruvian and Brazilian independently articulated at nearly the same time was elitist. Not everyone in Latin America was affected to the same extent by the war, either directly or indirectly. There were clear differences in the degree of involvement: In the immigrant countries of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay, for instance, the daily confrontations in the public sphere were more vehement than in Central America or the Andean countries of Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela. In Mexico, where Europe and the United States carried out their secret war more intensely than anywhere else in the region, the decades-long civil war received greater attention than the First World War. The immediate impact of the war was certainly felt here as well, however. Generally speaking, the Atlantic countries were much more involved in the war’s developments than those around the Pacific Rim like Chile or Peru. Considerable differences may also be detected

\(^7\) Cornejo, *La intervención del Perú*, p. 66.
\(^8\) Prazeres, *O Brasil na guerra*, p. 15.
within the individual countries themselves, as certain regions in the hinterlands were impacted far less by the war than the capital and port cities. On the other hand, this did not apply to the export-oriented plantation or mining regions, which had to contend with the war’s severe blows. Levels of sympathy and anxiety about the war ran the gamut. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to privilege some Latin American countries over others on the basis of power-political criteria. After all, the need to rationalize one’s involvement in world events did not stop at a country’s borders. As this study has shown, the urgency of the war in fact cut across all of Latin America.

There were also marked differences in the way the war was perceived. Urban, politically interested, and educated middle and upper classes, which constituted the bulk of newspaper readership, had more immediate access to information about the war. They were thus much more invested in the war of words than the mass of the illiterate lower classes. Nonetheless, their level of interest in the war also far exceeded any previous world event due to the dissemination of images. The national public spheres accordingly grew along with the war, but also because of it. Many people in Latin America and the rapidly modernizing press sensed the First World War to be a genuine sensation. It was especially a godsend for the fledgling tabloid journalism. Yet the marginalized poor, particularly indigenous populations and African Americans, were not integrated into these communication processes. Ingenieros gave the following assessment, albeit with a racist undertone that was typical for the time:

There is no doubt that the people living in the Andes and the Indios living at the sources of the Amazon will not feel the impact of the war. They probably don’t even know that there has been a European war, assuming, of course, we are to make the unlikely assumption that they actually know that Europe exists. But in all the countries from Alaska to the Magellan Strait that are the products of European colonization, the echo of what happened in Europe will always reverberate, indeed even more so depending on the degree of civilization. It is our incapable fate, as Sarmiento has already observed, that we “become like Europe.”

The quote further shows that the idea of bidding farewell to Europe was not even a question. Among other things, the technical innovations that the war gave rise to elicited a great deal of interest. The Latin American militaries especially wanted to benefit from the experience of the Europeans. They, therefore, brought experts from France, England, and the United States to teach them the new methods of warfare. The concern

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here was not only with fighting against external foes, but internal ones, which, as the militaries of the region concurred by the end of war, were on the left. Despite the provisions in the Versailles Treaty, German officers were in great demand because of their involvement with the *Freikorps.*

This interest in receiving military advice, however, only underlines the change that had taken place in Latin American’s relations with Europe. After the war, the Europeans failed to gain anywhere near the degree of the influence that they had had before 1914. The nationalist tendencies in the Americas were now too strong.

Europe remained an important reference point, however, even if it was now also frequently regarded as a counter model to the region’s own developmental plans. Indeed, a repositioning took place after the war inasmuch as the old continent even lost its standing as an undisputed archetype where, due to the rise of the United States, this had not yet occurred before 1914. Ingenieros, for instance, was convinced that Latin America would eventually experience problems and successes like those in Europe because of its history. At the same time, however, he remarked that the outcome was uncertain and largely depended on young men, innovators, and the oppressed, who wanted to change society. He forecast that the new societies would settle in somewhere between Wilson’s “minimalist” demands for reform and the “maximalist” revolution in Russia, but also anticipated rioting and violence.

Undoubtedly, “anti-Europeanism” developed among many Latin American intellectuals after the First World War. The feeling of disappointment over the “betrayal” of the common civilization ran deep. From their perspective, the long undisputed center of culture, education, and progress was responsible for the most horrific war in human history. Indeed, as Prazeres noted, it was civilizational progress that had finally led to the creation of the most appalling weapons technology. This realization gave rise to new, unsettling thoughts that would preoccupy Latin American thinkers for years to come.

The critical engagement with the self-proclaimed centers of the modern world system and with imperialism in all its forms took on a new character during the war years – in no small measure because its parameters shifted from the reading rooms and the publications of small intellectual circles to the streets. Different actors brought the debate to the

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10 Rinke, *Der letzte freie Kontinent*, pp. 577–656.
wider Latin American public sphere, where they fought for their convictions. For Latin Americans, the war was a great decentralizer: it put world orders that had evolved over the centuries into question, while creating a vacuum that allowed new ideas of global, but also of local transformation to take shape.

This did not mean that region’s international situation changed in any fundamental way. In the 1920s, Latin America remained a laboratory for informal imperialism and the activities of multinational corporations. The competition for the control of raw materials – especially the new “lubricant of capitalism,” crude oil – for exports, and for direct and indirect investments intensified. In all these areas, the United States emerged from the war as the big winner and the Americas’ undisputed hegemonial power. Although British interests in Argentina played a special role well into the 1930s, there was also no doubt about the fact that the United States had clearly come out ahead in the war on the Latin American stage. On the diplomatic level, the Latin Americans could do little to stop this development. From the ABC Pact to the neutrality congresses, initiatives to defend the region’s common interests failed due to individual nations’ attempts to go it alone. With anti-imperialism, however, the experience of the world war helped encourage a powerful transnational discourse beyond the diplomatic sphere that forces of change co-opted for themselves. In the Latin American context, the subject entailed a decidedly anti-American element for some time that gained in importance as the war set in. Once the idea of self-determination and international equality caught on, Latin Americans decided against continuing to play the subordinate role in the repeatedly invoked new world order that the system of states had assigned to them before 1914. This disillusionment was validated after the war, when Latin America effectively became a junior partner to the United States. The “Wilsonian disappointment” of 1918–19 lent credibility to the anti-imperialist discourse. In Latin America, the 1920s would be a decade of anti-imperialist movements. Their breeding ground, no doubt, was the intellectual ferment of the war years.

But was the First World War in fact the primary catalyst of events that had been in the making for many years, as general historians now widely agree? Albert already stated this view in reference to Latin America in 1988. Compagnon recently arrived once again at the same conclusion. 14 This study, however, has shown that the war was not just a catalyst, but

14 Albert, *South America*, p. 5.
a transformer that brought change from the realm of ideas to the social realities of the streets. To be sure, the war years in Latin America did not represent the great “seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century,” as they did in Europe. Nonetheless, they were a historic moment that put the focus on the category of social inequality. It would be a legacy of the First World War that people sought answers to the question of the future of the subcontinent in increasingly violent conflict.

The shift in global consciousness shows most clearly the transformative influence of the First World War on the region. Because of the demise of the cultural center in Europe, many commentators in Latin America as early as 1914 confidently viewed their continent to be a model for true peace. The new global postwar civilization, in other words, would need to have its new focal point in the Americas. The meta-narrative about Europe’s singular embodiment of civilization and culture was destroyed as a result of the world war. The intrinsically contradictory propaganda of warring parties made it possible to perceive Europe’s underbelly. It not only called for countries to take sides, but it also opened up room for them to engage in their own development. The horizon of the world that appeared as a medialized wartime experience in Latin American societies was repeatedly correlated to local experiences. Expectations grew as a result. The hope that Latin America would transform from a hands-off, wide-eyed observer that, despite being affected, only participated in world events reactively into an independent and self-confident actor grew decisively. Due to the global scope of the war, the spatial and temporal distances between the continents diminished; in addition, the experience of being involved in the war was inextricably linked to the experience of the conflict as a unique event in history. As the sirens of La Prensa continually announced breaking news from the battlefields in August 1914, an entirely new degree of simultaneity emerged with what Latin Americans had understood as the “world.” Today, the concurrence of the world that the media makes possible is taken for granted. One hundred years ago it was revolutionary and held out the promise of a better future. As to what this future would look like and how it should be reached, there were different opinions.