



Latin America

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Latin America

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The First World War has long been considered a non-event in the history of contemporary Latin America, far from the main theatres of military operations. The only exception came in the form of two naval battles off the southern coasts at the end of 1914: a German victory over the Royal Navy at Cape Coronel on 1 November and the British victory at the Falkland Islands on 8 December, which gave the British control of Cape Horn. The subcontinent was spared the blood-letting which afflicted the main belligerent nations, and the score of states south of the Rio Grande were seen as distant spectators of the first total conflict. This was unlike the African and Asiatic colonial regions which were involved in the great mobilisation of the imperial capitals, and would finally suffer only passing economic consequences or distant echoes of propaganda from the two coalitions. In no case did the 1914–18 war appear as a significant rupture in the long course of a Latin American century routinely seen through the prism of two great turning points: the economic crisis of 1919 and the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

On the basis of a view of the Great War which gave pride of place to military matters, and from a representation of Latin America as a peripheral world region, this generally accepted historiographic view at least partially accommodates some well-known facts about the relationships between former Spanish and Portuguese colonies and Europe in the early twentieth century. In fact, the density of migrational ties between the two sides of the Atlantic, and the integration of the subcontinent into the worldwide financial and commercial markets since around the 1870s – like the intellectual cult of the Old Continent among most elites since the time of their national independence – all indicate a need to re-evaluate the effects of the Great War in Latin America.¹ The

¹ For a general overview on the history of Latin America at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Leslie Bethell (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, vols. iv and v: c.1870–1930 (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

historian's examination of the archives immediately reveals the war as an omnipresent element in the national and religious press in all countries, in the very prompt attention that it received from governments and chancelleries, the mobilisation of important social sectors and the scale of intellectual output devoted to it, not only from 1915 onwards but until the end of the 1930s. Although we must therefore take care not to consider the region as a single whole, and to take into account the specificities of each national experience of the war as part of a reasoned comparison, the First World War nonetheless must be appreciated as an important moment in the Latin American twentieth century. It needs to be reassessed in its multiple dimensions.²

Neutrality in 1914

In the first days of August 1914, as the flames spread across Europe, all the Latin American nations declared their neutrality towards the nations at war. Unusual, in view of the recurrent diplomatic cleavages which had been a feature of inter-regional relations since the winning of independence, this managed consensus survived until 1917 and arose from a number of causes.

Unanimously, the war was first perceived as an exclusively European matter – even though protectorates, colonies and Dominions automatically joined the war alongside their 'mother country'. The Latin American diplomats *en poste* in the European capitals, most of whom had viewed the assassination of Archduke Franz-Ferdinand at Sarajevo as a simple item of news, saw the growing flames as the logical end point in the old Franco-German rivalry, the clash between imperial ambitions and territorial matters intimately linked to the assertion of nationalities. All these were stakes related only to an 'Old World' rationale. According to the teachings of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, the basis of non-interference by the young American states in European affairs in exchange for European non-interference in American matters, the American hemisphere should not become involved in this Old

² The works devoted to a comparative history of the Great War on the scale of the whole of Latin America are rare: see Olivier Compagnon and Armelle Enders, 'L'Amérique latine et la guerre', in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Jean-Jacques Becker (eds.), *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre, 1914–1918* (Paris: Bayard, 2004), pp. 889–901; and Olivier Compagnon and María Inés Tato (eds.), *Toward a History of the First World War in Latin America* (Frankfurt am Main: Vervuet, and Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2013). Some old works supply precious information: see, for example, Gaston Gaillard, *Amérique latine et Europe occidentale: L'Amérique latine et la guerre* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1918); and Percy Alvin Martin, *Latin America and the War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1925).

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World struggle. In the press or in diplomatic exchanges, the bloody ventures that were the consequences of imperialism or the crystallisation of nationalisms were denounced without any thought of involvement in the conflict. Like the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1, it seemed distant and certain to be short-lived. In fact, this reaction to the flare-up in August 1914 reflected the relative indifference of Latin Americans towards the concert of European nations that emerged from the Congress of Vienna. One of a few marginal voices to see clearly what was coming was the Argentinian writer Leopoldo Lugones (1874–1938), who at the end of 1912 had published a series of chronicles in the daily newspaper, *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), in which a European war was judged unavoidable in the short or medium term.³

To this first level of analysis of Latin American neutrality in 1914 were added economic considerations of prime importance for the profitable investing nations, mostly exporters of raw materials – agricultural or mining – and importers of manufactured products, structurally dependent on the outside world. Over the previous two decades, many of South America's northern states had seen the United States replace Europe's industrialised countries as prime partners in finance and commerce. They felt less directly threatened by the flames in Europe. In 1914, Mexico, Central America, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Haiti thus held 74.5 per cent of the United States direct investment in Latin America, while the remaining 25.5 per cent was divided among the ten independent countries of South America. At the same date, Mexico and Central America were dependent on the United States for 62.7 per cent of their exports and 53.5 per cent of their imports. The situation was, however, very different in South America, where the European nations – with Great Britain in the lead, but also Germany since the last years of the nineteenth century and France to a lesser degree – remained by far the leading investors and commercial partners. Uruguay and Argentina depended on the United States for only 4 per cent and 4.7 per cent respectively of their exports, and 12.7 per cent and 14.7 per cent of imported goods. On the eve of the war, 24.9 per cent of Argentinian exports went to Great Britain, 12 per cent to Germany and 7.8 per cent to France, while 31 per cent of the imports of these countries came from Great Britain, 16.9 per cent from Germany and 9 per cent from France. In this context, a declaration of war – whether against the Entente or the

3 These articles are collected in Leopoldo Lugones, *Mi beligerancia* (Buenos Aires: Otero y García Editores, 1917). On anticipations of war in Europe, see, in particular, Emilio Gentile, *L'apocalisse della modernità: la Grande Guerra per l'uomo nuovo* (Milan: Mondadori, 2008).

Alliance – would necessarily lead to alienating strategic economic partners and would weaken the strong growth that had been characteristic of the region for several decades.⁴

Finally, the fear of reopening the question of the nation's homogeneity if it were to intervene in the war was not without significance in a region which, since the second half of the nineteenth century, had seen a massive degree of immigration from Europe and where some foreign communities still only had a very relative sense of belonging to their new home country. The scope of this argument should of course be adjusted in the case of the Andean states (Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia) or of Central America, where the influx of European migrants was infinitely smaller than in the south of the subcontinent. Of the 8–9 million Europeans who sailed for Latin America between the 1820s and 1914, nearly 50 per cent settled in Argentina and 36 per cent in Brazil, the remaining 14 per cent choosing above all Cuba, Uruguay, Mexico and Chile.⁵ Depending on the scale of these migratory streams, the possibility of a break-up of these melting pots on the occasion of a European war was more present in the thinking of the political elites, because the early twentieth century was a time of widespread questionings of identity in these young migrant nations – notably at the time of the independence centenaries which were celebrated in 1910 throughout most of Hispanic America. Chile is an example, where the many German colonies watched jealously over their inheritance, while in Argentina the substantial Italian community mobilised massively after May 1915. Brazil had a community of around 400,000 people of Germanic origin, mainly settled in the southern states of São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catalina and Rio Grande do Sul, who were considered to be very poorly integrated and, since the end of the nineteenth century, had been observed by the intellectual leaders with lively distrust. Since then, neutrality was seen at least as much a necessity of internal politics as a preference in external policy. This attitude was stronger when the national political context was particularly unstable, as in Mexico where the revolution sparked off in 1910 had generated a civil war that entailed strong tensions in relations with the United States.

4 For the ensemble of the figures given, see Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *La historia económica de América Latina desde la Independencia* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998), pp. 95, 189–92.

5 On this point, see Magnus Mörner, *Aventureros y proletarios: los emigrantes in Hispanoamérica* (Madrid: Mapfre, 1992).

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The mobilisation of communities of foreign origins
and of intellectuals

Governmental neutrality and the relative indifference of the press in the first weeks of the war did not prevent early mobilisation in certain sectors of society. Faced with orders for military mobilisation sent by the diplomatic representatives of the belligerent nations in Latin America, and widely distributed in the community press, European immigrants were undoubtedly the first to be touched by the war, providing a remarkable insight into their sense of integration into the host societies. Although the great majority of Germans (or of those with Germanic origins) of military age could not cross the Atlantic because of the offshore naval blockade which was rapidly established around Latin America, French and British immigrants responded conscientiously to the call. Yet the total figures drawn up by Paris and London at the end of the war showed the very limited results of this mobilisation. Only 32 per cent of the 20,925 men born in France and living in Argentina, of military age in the classes of 1890–1919, seem to have reached the front, 2,834 of them being exempted or rejected, and 12,290 unsatisfactory in some way. As for the sons of Frenchmen born in Argentina and enjoying dual nationality, probably numbering between 40,000 and 50,000, only 250 to 300 seem to have embarked for Europe – fewer than 1 per cent of the total. Although submitted to strong pressure within community associations, the Italians who went to join the war in Europe appear to have been proportionately still less numerous, although there is no reliable quantitative study available that deals with the whole of Latin America.⁶

From these facts, it would, however, be wrong to conclude that most immigrants of European origin were indifferent to the war. This would be to underestimate the immense mobilisation undertaken by their press, charitable organisations or other associations, which spent the years 1914–18 with their eyes fixed on their European mother countries. The press in all the communities portrayed the very deep emotions stirred by the conflict, despite the separation of thousands of kilometres. Among the score of German-language newspapers published in Brazil at the beginning of the war, from

6 Hernán Otero, *La guerra en la sangre: los franco-argentinos ante la Primera Guerra Mundial* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2009); and María Inés Tato, 'El llamado de la patria: Británicos e italianos residentes en la Argentina frente a la Primera Guerra Mundial', *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos*, 71 (July–December 2011), pp. 273–92. On the topic of comparison with the British in Uruguay, see also Álvaro Cuenca, *La colonia británica de Montevideo y la Gran Guerra* (Montevideo: Torre del Vigía Editores, 2006).

the anticlerical *Germania* in São Paulo to the very Protestant *Deutsche Post* in São Leopoldo, via the *Kompass* in Curitiba, all honoured the moral purity of the war initiated by the Reich in the first days of August 1914. All followed the sequence of military operations through to 1918 with passion and attention – some of them launching editions in Portuguese in order to encourage Brazilian feeling in favour of the Reich's cause.⁷ Although they did not contribute to the war effort physically as much as the European belligerents would have liked, the communities of foreign origin were also quick to establish sites of memory directly linked to the war. Having paraded noisily in the streets of Buenos Aires, São Paulo or Mexico to celebrate Rome's joining the war on 23 May 1915, the Italian communities took to the streets each year on the same date to sustain the war effort 'back home', and publicly commemorated each important military advance until the decisive Battle of Vittorio Veneto. Above all, the immigrants and descendants of immigrants contributed massively to charity ventures and charitable works throughout the war. Patriotic committees and other community associations could be counted in their hundreds, in existence before the war or created especially in wartime to organise fund-raising and displays of support for one or other of the nations at war. In Argentina, for example, the Comité Patriótico Francés was responsible for the many displays of charitable welfare which received almost daily publicity in the *Courrier de la Plata*. Shortly after Italy joined the war, the Italian community of Salvador de Bahi organised a Comitato Pro-Patria and collections and subscriptions, notably for men permanently handicapped by the war.⁸ In Buenos Aires, it acted as the relay point for loans floated by the Italian government to finance the war effort, through bodies as varied as the Pompieri Volontari della Boca, the Primo Circulo Mandolinístico Italiano or the Associazione Italiana di Mutualità ed Istruzione. More evident in the southern 'cone' of South America and Brazil than in the rest of Latin America, and fundamentally urban, this mobilisation of the communities of European origin during the Great War remained constant from the end of 1914 to the Armistice in November 1918 – even, in some cases, into the 1920s – and played a decisive role in the gradual involvement of the Latin American societies in the conflict.

Once the illusion of a short war had vanished, currents of opinion also emerged, beyond these more or less immigrant communities, which clearly

⁷ Frederick C. Luebke, *Germans in Brazil: A Comparative History of Cultural Conflict During World War I* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

⁸ See the commemorative volume published by the Italian colony in Bahia: *Per la guerra, per la vittoria, 1915–1919* (São Paulo: Fratelli Frioli, n.d.).

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leant towards one side or the other, although without challenging governmental neutrality. By way of the press, through conferences or by means of specially created associations, the intellectual elites played a front-line role in the crystallisation and diffusion of representations of a war which was setting fire to what they saw as the heart of the civilised world. In effect, following their independence in the early nineteenth century, most Latin American elites had rejected the models represented by Spain and Portugal, imperial powers henceforward held up to the most severe contempt. They looked instead towards the enlightened world as represented by Northern Europe. Under various headings, France, Great Britain and Germany then became the incarnations of modernity, the beating heart of a civilisation whose values were the finest guarantees of a reasoned advance in the former Iberian colonies. In discourse and in practice, this Europe was now the pattern on which public policies were shaped, the matrix for all cultural effort, a guide in everything which illuminated the future of societies. Published in Chile in 1845 and very widely diffused through all the nations of the region during the following decades, the *Facundo* of the Argentinian writer Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811–88) – subtitled *Civilisation et Barbarie* – had endowed this Euro-worship with its fictionalised manifesto and definitively set up the Old Continent as the modernising totem.⁹

In these circumstances, the early mobilisation of Latin American intellectuals is no surprise, and reflects the geography of the dominant points of intellectual reference. The vast majority of them, in fact, were outspoken advocates of the Allied cause, basing their feelings fundamentally on the blind cult of France which was considered as the source of every freedom, as well as the cradle of letters and the arts, and the supreme location for every form of modernity. As a legacy of the nineteenth century and the ‘tropical Belle Epoque’,¹⁰ the *afrancesamiento* of the elites explains why their dominant image of the war represented the clash between eternal and glorious French civilisation on the one hand, and German barbarity and militarism on the other. On 3 September 1914 the Uruguyan writer and politician José Enrique Rodó (1871–1917), whose essay ‘Ariel’ (1900) had been immensely popular with Latin American intellectual youth, published a text in the daily newspaper *La*

9 On this point, see Annick Lempérière, Georges Lomné, Frédéric Martinez and Denis Rolland (eds.), *L'Amérique latine et les modèles européens* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998); and Eduardo Devés Valdés, ‘América latina: civilización-barbarie’, *Revista de Filosofía Latinoamericana*, 7–8 (January–December 1987), pp. 27–52.

10 To follow the expression of Jeffrey Needle, *A Tropical Belle Epoque: Elite Culture and Society in Turn-of-the-Century Rio de Janeiro* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

Razón (Montevideo), assimilating the cause of France to that of humanity. In March 1915 the Liga Brasileira pelos Aliados was created in Rio de Janeiro, and brought numerous writers and politicians together to raise Brazilian awareness of the Entente cause. Its President, the famous writer and diplomat, José Pereira da Graça Aranha (1868–1931), whose Germanophobic novel, *Canaã*, brought him great fame on its publication in 1902, transmitted this representation of the war in his inaugural speech, declaring that ‘from the unleashing of the war, we have come to France, moved by the same instinct which in this war has shown the renewed battle of barbarity against civilisation’.¹¹ Throughout the war, several publications, from the revue *Nosotros* in Buenos Aires in 1915 to the daily paper *El Universal* in Mexico in 1917, published the results of enquiries among the nation’s leading intellectual figures who confirmed the commonly shared wish to see the courage of the *poilus* rewarded. A good indicator of this pervading francophilia, strengthened by the massive distribution of more or less fantastic accounts of the atrocities committed by the Germans during the first weeks of the war, can also be seen in the flow of volunteers enlisting in the French army, which was without equivalent in the armies of the other belligerents: between 1,500 and 2,000 individuals for the whole of the year, most of them literate, from the urban oligarchies and sometimes living in Paris, who proved their readiness to spill their blood in defence of the ideal of civilisation as represented by France. This followed the examples of the Colombian, Hernando de Bengoechea, or the Peruvian, José García Calderón, killed in action in May 1915 and May 1916 respectively.

It is still important to deal carefully with a body of opinion of which the outline remains blurred and which is without doubt less homogeneous than has sometimes been accepted. The great majority of sympathisers with Germany were committed figures who openly supported the cause of the Central empires or who, at least, claimed a strict intellectual neutrality – nonetheless combined with a Germanophilia in the context of the majority support for the Allies. This applied particularly to jurists and philosophers, often trained in the spirit of German science, such as the Argentinians Alfredo Colmo (1878–1934) and Ernesto Quesada (1858–1934), military men persuaded by the concept of *Reichswehr* supremacy, or members of the Catholic hierarchy for whom a French defeat would be just punishment after the teaching interdict laid on religious congregations in 1901 and the separation of Church and State in 1905. Further, the sense of being, on balance, favourable to the

¹¹ Quoted by Gaillard, *Amérique latine et Europe occidentale*, p. 41.

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Allies, often forged through the press, also deserves to be set in context in terms of the monopoly held by the Havas and Reuters agencies in the transmission of news and the many pressures exercised on these agencies by the propaganda services of the Entente powers. Finally, the particular case of Mexico should be mentioned, where the hostility shown by many intellectuals in the case of the military interventions by the United States during the 1910 revolution, generally brought them closer to the German cause – as witnessed in the editorial line of a daily such as *El Demócrata* (Mexico) – even before Washington joined the war.¹² Nonetheless, it remains true that the cultural prestige enjoyed by France in Latin America at the dawn of the twentieth century, combined with the financial and commercial domination still exercised by Great Britain across the whole region, naturally encouraged a majority of the elites to wish for the triumph of Paris and London rather than of Berlin and Vienna – at least until 1917.

War, economy and societies

To the extent that the nineteenth century had been a time of accelerated integration of Latin America into world markets, and spectacular growth in its commercial and financial relations with Europe, the economic effects of the war were quickly felt. Suspension of the gold standard for currency by some belligerent nations in the first days of August 1914 immediately raised the spectre of monetary instability. In order to avoid a banking panic, many governments temporarily suspended the activities of exchange bureaux and banned the export of gold bullion. However, these emergency measures did not prevent an immediate inflationary trend which was to last until around 1920. In addition, many European banks – notably British – fell in with the injunctions of their government, demanding the prompt repayment of loans granted to Latin American countries and annulling those which were being negotiated. The long-term loans to Brazil, which represented a total of \$19.1 million in 1913, consequently fell to \$4.2 million in 1914 and zero in 1915. The war context was also responsible for a considerable reduction in the flow of direct investment from Europe, and affected a certain number of activities such as mining, railway construction and the modernisation of urban transport systems. United States capital funds could partially replace the traditional

12 See Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States and the Mexican Revolution* (University of Chicago Press, 1981); and Esperanza Durán, *Guerra y revolución: las grandes potencias y México, 1914–1918* (Colegio de México, 1985).

financial partners of Latin American states from 1915, but it was not until the 1920s that a volume of foreign investment comparable to that of the Belle Epoque was recovered. Seen from the financial angle, the Great War thus corresponded to a phase of shrinking investments and shortage of capital.¹³

More generally, the place of the conflict in the economic history of contemporary Latin America has resulted in numerous polemics, in which the stake has been to determine whether the years 1914–18 represented a phase of take-off, characterised by an acceleration of industrialisation, or on the contrary a period of contracting activity interrupting development in the secondary sector, which had begun cautiously in the final years of the nineteenth century. In a book which was for long a classic of the theory of dependence, André Gunder Frank attributed the underdevelopment of the region to its historically unequal exchanges with the 'First World'. He observed that the two world wars, marked by a weakening in the financial and commercial relations between Latin America and its traditional partners, could be seen as periods of real economic take-off, in that this would have enabled a break from the prevailing *rentier* logics, and initiated a dynamic of import substitution.¹⁴ Although mentioned in many texts, this interpretation has been convincingly refuted. In the case of São Paulo, for example, Warren Dean has shown that the reduction in coffee exports from August 1914 hobbled the process of the accumulation of capital – which had effectively been at the root of local industrial expansion since the 1890s – and that the war restricted expansion despite the continued growth in many industrial enterprises from the mid-war period until 1920.¹⁵ In emphasising the case of Argentina, Roger Gravel has also vigorously challenged Frank's assertions, showing that the secondary sector did not stop shrinking throughout the war because of a contraction in trade with Europe which was balanced by investments and the North American market, a shortage of labour and of a lack of capital equipment and rising energy costs.¹⁶

The chief effect of the war concerned the circulation of goods and assumed that it was possible to distinguish short-term effects from the long-term. During an initial phase, which lasted until the beginning of 1915, the shortage

¹³ Bulmer-Thomas, *La historia económica de América Latina*, pp. 186–7.

¹⁴ André Gunder Frank, *Latin America: Underdevelopment or Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969).

¹⁵ Warren Dean, *The Industrialization of São Paulo, 1880–1945* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1969).

¹⁶ Roger Gravel, 'Argentina and the First World War', *Revista de História*, 54 (1976), pp. 385–419.

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of shipping and the sudden shortage of commercial credit handicapped the usual transatlantic patterns of trade; substantial stocks built up and the price of many raw materials collapsed. As the economies of the nations at war changed direction to meet the needs of the war, however, a balance became established which, despite cyclical variations, was maintained until the beginning of 1919. On the one hand, the European need for strategic war products and basic food supplies destined for soldiers as well as civilians, created a rapid rise in trade and stimulated the exports of certain Latin American countries: Mexico with its oil, Bolivia with tin, Peru with copper and wool, Chile with its nitrates, Cuba with sugar, or Argentina with its meat and grain, all saw substantial growth in income from exports. On the other hand, countries without resources that were considered strategic – for example the great coffee exporters like Brazil, Colombia or Venezuela – could not genuinely profit from the rise in markets because of the reduction in transatlantic traffic, and suffered a clear drop in their trading balance throughout the war. In return, the European nations which normally supplied everyday consumer goods and capital equipment to Latin America were unable to meet the demand because of changes in their own economies. Although certain products from the United States partially made up for the shortage in traditional suppliers, Latin American imports rose in price and fell away in volume to the extent that the whole subcontinent was in a position of commercial surplus in 1915. This entailed a brutal fall in national income in states which were broadly founded on import rights. Further difficulties in honouring the servicing of debt and strong inflation characterised the full period of the war.¹⁷

Elsewhere, the sustained demand for strategic products from European belligerent nations and the increase in the prices of raw materials, did not lead to all the financial surpluses expected, given the limits imposed on maritime trade.

The Allies did all they could to prevent the Central Powers from gaining access to Latin America's immense resources, trying to control European neutrals potentially capable of acting as intermediaries and, in March 1916, establishing the famous 'black lists', an index of Latin American businesses and

17 For this data in full, see particularly Bulmer-Thomas, *La historia económica de América Latine*, pp. 185–95. See also Bill Albert and Paul Henderson, *South America and the First World War: The Impact of the War on Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Chile* (Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Frank Notten, *La influencia de la Primera Guerra Mundial sobre las economías centroamericanas, 1900–1929: Un enfoque desde el comercio exterior* (San José: Centro de Investigaciones Históricas de América Central and Universidad de Costa Rica, 2012).

trading companies either under German control or considered as such.¹⁸ At the same time, the German declaration of all-out submarine warfare early in 1917 made the Atlantic crossing even more dangerous, resulted in serious shipping losses and discouraged a certain number of shipowners, who saw losses by torpedo increasing dramatically. Within the entire Latin American region, the sectors associated with the export of strategic products were thus great beneficiaries of the Great War, but for more than four years the nations had to deal with an extremely precarious financial situation. With the expansion of local artisan or industrial activity capable of making up for the drop in European imports limited to a few urban or harbour districts, the populations suffered from shortages and the growing cost of many everyday consumer goods. To this was added the abrupt halt in immigration, which crucially had contributed to the growth of internal markets and had fuelled economic growth with a cheap and plentiful labour force. In consequence, although the Great War undoubtedly ensured the elites' growing awareness of the structural dependence which threatened their economies, and consequent drawbacks, it cannot be considered a key moment in the industrialisation process in Latin America.

Finally, to the extent that they affected people at the very core of their daily lives from the end of 1914, and increasingly from the first quarter of 1915, the economic effects of the Great War were, of course, not without a role in the widespread growth of social agitation between 1915 and 1920. From the outbreak of the war, many states tried to calm the financial crisis with the creation of new taxes – for example, in Peru where the sale of tobacco and alcohol was heavily taxed in September 1914. In the large Brazilian cities the prices of basic food products (flour, rice and oil) rose by between 10 and 35 per cent in the second half of 1914. In Buenos Aires, inflation reached 50 per cent for food products, 300 per cent for textiles and 538 per cent for coal between 1914 and 1918. Shortages affecting a whole range of consumer goods normally supplied by Europe were felt everywhere, but urban circles and the emerging middle classes, the main consumers of this imported modernity, characteristic of the Latin American Belle Époque, were more affected than most rural people. Nonetheless, the latter also felt the effects of the war, for example in Brazil or Venezuela, in Colombia and some countries in Central America where the crisis in the coffee economy, brutal and long-lasting, considerably limited the demands of the workforce in this sector and stimulated a first wave of rural

18 On the black lists, see in particular Philip A. Dehne, *On the Far Western Front: Britain's First World War in South America* (Manchester University Press, 2009).

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exodus which the cities could not absorb. More generally, the restrictions on trade led to the disappearance of many jobs, the appearance of chronic unemployment and a general lowering of real wages, despite the negative migratory balance of the second half of the 1910s. In Buenos Aires, 16–20 per cent of the population of working age thus faced a shortage of jobs during the war years. In São Paulo, the wages of workers in the O Cotonofício Rodolfo Crespi textile factory fell by 50–70 per cent between 1913 and 1917. These facts taken together help to explain the great number of strikes and social protests, as thousands of people demonstrated against fiscal pressure in Arequipa in southern Peru in January 1915, up to the 196 work stoppages recorded in Argentina in 1918, via a general strike which paralysed São Paulo in July 1917. Often repressed with violence, most of these movements explicitly associated their claims with the war, and called for peace in Europe at the same time as increased wages or better conditions at work.¹⁹

Because it seriously endangered the economic growth of the preceding decades, but also because it contributed to the hardening of the social question and the renewed challenge to the established order, the Great War thus imposed its reality on the Latin American governments despite its distance from them and the initially proclaimed neutrality. From that point of view, it was not only the foreign communities and intellectuals who took a sustained interest in the war, as in the second half of 1914, but large sectors of Latin American societies which suffered directly from the worldwide upsets arising from the state of war.

Omnipresent in the press from 1915, the war was also visible everywhere in daily life and popular culture, as in certain compositions in the literature of Brazilian *cordel*, many stage plays in Argentina, some Germanophile slogans painted on ceramics of the Bolivian Altiplano by an Aymara Indian, or the production of children's games based on the European war.²⁰ Although in the current state of research it is not possible to confirm the existence of a real war

19 For these, see Clodoaldo Bueno, *Política externa da Primeira República: os anos de apogeu – de 1902 a 1918* (São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2003), p. 468; Juan Manuel Palacio, 'La antesala de lo peor: la economía argentina entre 1914 y 1930', in Ricardo Falcón (ed.), *Nueva historia argentina*, vol. vi: *Democracia, conflicto social y renovación de ideas, 1916–1930* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2000), pp. 101–50; Héctor A. Palacios, *Historia del movimiento obrero argentino*, 4 vols. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Gráfica Mundo Color, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 106–25; and Maria Luisa Marcilio, 'Industrialisation et mouvement ouvrier à São Paulo au début du XXe siècle', *Le Mouvement social*, 53 (October–December 1965), pp. 111–29.

20 See Idelette Muzart dos Santos, 'La représentation des conflits internationaux dans la littérature de cordel, 1935–1956', in Denis Rolland (ed.), *Le Brésil et le monde: pour une histoire des relations internationales des puissances émergentes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), pp. 148–78; Osvaldo Pelletieri (ed.), *Testimonios culturales argentinos: la década del 10*

culture in Latin America, there is no doubt that the European war sent its shock waves fully and quickly to the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

The great turning point of 1917

Diplomatic archives, both European and Latin American, reveal the scale of involvement of the main European belligerents in Latin America from 1914 onwards. Through the closest possible control of information in the press, the massive distribution of propaganda in Spanish and Portuguese – through the traditional written media or cinema newsreels – or tempting promises about the new world which would emerge from the war, public opinion was informed about the relevance of the struggle under way. In addition, the goodwill had to be sought of governments which had already strongly asserted their refusal to join the war, but whose economic collaboration could in the end prove decisive.²¹ In this general setting, 1917 brought spectacular activity in the Latin American chancelleries and marked an essential break in a whole series of developments.

Mexico was at the heart of the tensions between Germany and the United States which intensified after the Zimmermann Telegram was sent. On 16 January the German Foreign Minister addressed a secret telegram to his ambassador in Mexico, Heinrich von Eckardt, encouraging him to conclude a German–Mexican agreement against the United States in exchange for which Mexico would recover Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, lost after the war of 1846–8 and the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Intercepted by the British, this document was decisive in the collapse of relations between Washington and Berlin.²² Furthermore, the unrestricted submarine warfare decreed by Germany in January had an even greater effect on the trade activities of most Latin American states and led some governments to reconsider their position in relation to Berlin. Finally, the break in diplomatic relations between the United States and the Reich in February, then Washington's declaration of war two months later, overturned the situation on the scale of the entire hemisphere.

(Buenos Aires: Editorial del Belgrano, 1980); Rodrigo Zarate, *España y América: proyecciones y problemas derivados de la guerra* (Madrid: Casa Editorial Calleja, 1917), p. 375; and Manuel Buil, *Juego de la Guerra Europea* (Buenos Aires: s.e., 1917).

²¹ On the case of Mexico, see Ingrid Schulze Schneider, 'La propaganda alemana en México durante la Primera Guerra Mundial', *Anuario del Departamento de Historia*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 5 (1993), pp. 261–72.

²² On this point, see Barbara Tuchman, *The Zimmermann Telegram* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1965); also Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico*.

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In fact, the neutralist consensus of Latin America observed in August 1914 did not survive the United States' declaration of war on 6 April 1917. In the same year, Panama and Cuba (April), then Brazil (October), also declared war on Germany, followed in 1918 by Guatemala (April), Costa Rica and Nicaragua (May) and Haiti and Honduras (July). Six other countries broke off diplomatic relations with Germany, although without declaring war: Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Uruguay, El Salvador and Ecuador. At first, the positions adopted from April 1917 by the different states in the region made it possible to construct a map of the zones of North American influence. With the exception of Brazil, the nations at war were all located in Central America or the Caribbean, which in the space of a quarter of a century had become a private hunting ground of the United States.

Since its emancipation following the war between the United States and Spain in 1898, Cuba – which joined the war only a few hours after the United States, on 7 April, and from where several dozen drafted soldiers were to depart to the European battlefields – was a *de facto* protectorate, because of the Platt Amendment approved by the American Congress in March 1901 and introduced into the Cuban constitution on 22 May 1903. Cuba suffered three US military interventions between 1906 and 1917. Seized from Colombia in November 1903 in order to put an end to the rivalries between Europeans and Americans over the project for the transcontinental canal – officially inaugurated on 15 August 1914 – Panama emerged as a political creation of the United States, pure and simple, while Nicaragua and Haiti were occupied by the Marines from 1912 and 1915 respectively. All these elements proved that for these countries, joining the war could not be seen as a deliberate choice of foreign policy, but rather illustrates the political and diplomatic dependence to which US policy had reduced them since the external projection of the *manifest destiny* at the end of the 1880s and the beginning of the 1890s.²³

The case of Brazil, on the other hand, was different. Shaken by the fall in its exports throughout the entire war and by the torpedoing of merchant ships like the *Paraná*, the *Tijuc* and the *Macaú* in April, May and October 1917 by German submarines, Brazil had objective reasons for joining the Allied camp. Joining the war also provided Brazil with the opportunity to assert itself as the favoured partner of Washington, in the line of the policy led by the Baron de Rio Branco – Minister for External Relations from 1902 to 1912 and a great

²³ On the origins of the United States' Latin American policy, see John J. Johnson, *A Hemisphere Apart: The Foundations of United States Policy toward Latin America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

partisan of a lasting alliance between Rio and Washington – and as the natural leader of Latin America. In fact, while revolutionary Mexico could not claim to play a major role on the international scene, and Chile held back from declaring war on Germany in view of the substantial political influence and numerical size of the German-origin immigrant community, the First World War was a privileged moment for observing Rio's strategies towards hegemony over the subcontinent and, more generally, the relations of internal power in the Latin American region. A telegram to the presidency of the Republic in July 1917 from the Foreign Minister, Nilo Peçanha, thus enjoined the Brazilian government to join the war in the wake of the United States in order to meet the urgent expectations of London, Paris and Washington, but also to avoid being overtaken by another South American nation. Concerned to play a substantial role on the international scene – with an eye to the end of the war – Brazil was thus to prove itself a much more cooperative ally than its neighbour Argentina, determined in its neutrality. It was, therefore, in the light of these various arguments of a diplomatic nature, but also in the hope of increasing sales of its coffee, of which stocks were continuing to accumulate – in 1917, 6 million sacks were piled up in the Santos docks waiting for buyers and transport – that Rio's declaration of war on the side of the Allies on 26 October 1917 should be interpreted. Participation in the war effort was nonetheless very limited, as much due to the relatively late declaration of war as to the limitations of the Brazilian army. Apart from thirteen officer airmen who joined the Sixteenth Group of the Royal Air Force, Brazil sent a medical mission to France which operated in the rue de Vaugirard in Paris until February 1919. Above all, the *Divisão Naval em Operações de Guerra* (DNOG) was integrated into the British naval force. It consisted particularly of the cruisers *Bahia* and *Rio Grande do Sul* and the anti-submarine ships *Piauí*, *Rio Grande do Norte*, *Paraíba* and *Santa Catarina*, under the command of Rear-Admiral Pedro Max Fernando de Frontin, with a force some 1,500 strong. This force left the north-east on July 1918, and was decimated by the Spanish' flu during its stopover at Dakar in September. Finally, the naval force entered Gibraltar on 10 November in an ever-diminishing state and was unable to take any part in the fighting. Nonetheless, Brazil thus found itself in the victors' camp and, as such, participated in the peace negotiations.

Of the twenty states in the region, only six – Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, Colombia and Paraguay – did not finally break off relations with the Central Powers. The maintenance of this absolute neutrality did not prevent the majority of them from gradually turning towards the Allies for reasons above all of economic pragmatism, as in the case of Argentina. In

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power until 1915, President Victorina de la Plaza had been concerned to hold on to the European markets in all their diversity at any cost. Despite the shooting of the Argentinian vice-consul in Dinant without apparent motive by the Germans in the first weeks of the war, or that the *Presidente Mitre*, a merchant ship flying the blue-and-white flag, but owned by a branch of the Hamburg Sudamerikanische Dampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft, was accepted in port by the British in November 1915, the flabbiness of protests as to their neutrality was evident. In 1916, the coming to power of the radical Hipólito Yrigoyen – the first President of the Republic elected by male universal suffrage after the Sáenz Peña law of 1912 – did not challenge the choice of neutrality, but changed the situation to the extent that Argentina now envisaged playing an active role in the diplomacy of war. In 1917, when the United States was piling on the pressure for the whole of Latin America to join the war, and Argentina ceased trading with the Central Powers through the intermediary of European neutrals, Yrigoyen envisaged a conference in Buenos Aires with the neutral states of Latin America, thereby provoking fury in Washington. The obstinate refusal of the President to declare war – despite urgings to the contrary from Congress – nonetheless turned into goodwill towards Paris and London from January 1918, when Argentina signed a commercial treaty with France and Great Britain, with a view to the export of 2.5 million tons of wheat before November. Henceforward in favour of supplying the Allies and concerned primarily with the health of her external trade, the position of Argentina could then barely be distinguished from the unarmed engagement with the Allies of countries in Central America and the Caribbean. The more or less tacit tipping of governmental sympathies towards the Allies – in Buenos Aires as elsewhere – did not prevent the years 1917 and 1918 from being marked by growing anxiety over a possible United States expansion into Latin America under cover of the war. Caught between the diplomatic intrigues of Germany, the wish to counterbalance the omnipresence of Washington since the beginning of the revolution and the need to sell its oil to Great Britain, the Mexico of President Venustiano Carranza – in power between 1915 and 1920 – chose to frame an equidistant position between the two coalitions in being until November 1918, despite the tensions existing at the very heart of its government between those who leaned towards the Allies in the name of the old *afrancesamiento* and those who would be ready to yield to the siren voices in Berlin, out of dislike of the United States.

Finally, even after Washington declared war, 1917 also marked a turning point in that the war became a major issue everywhere in domestic politics. In

Argentina, the gulf between supporters and opponents of President Yrigoyen was the object of a semantic slippage from the beginning of the year and gradually turned into a confrontation between *neutralistas* and *rupturistas*.²⁴ In Brazil, a French diplomat reported in May 1918 that the world crisis was even affecting local elections: two of the candidates for the position of Senator for the state of São Paulo took the nation's participation in the war as the central argument of their campaign. In Cuba, the state of war led the government of President Mario García Menocal to introduce a law in August 1918 to make military service obligatory, thereby arousing great anger in public opinion which was largely hostile to conscription. Directly or indirectly, the war became a fundamental matrix of policy in Latin America until the end of 1918.

World war and national identity

News of the Armistice of 11 November 1918 was greeted with relief and enthusiasm by the press, political leaders and public opinion throughout Latin America. On the one hand, it enabled a vision of a return to normality in international economic life in the short or medium term, a recovery of the growth characteristic of the Belle Époque and, as a result, a calming of social conflict. Alternatively, the propositions formulated by Woodrow Wilson in January 1918, designed to establish lasting peace in the world, had aroused great hopes for the settling of latent conflicts in the Latin American region – such as that which set Chile and Peru and Bolivia at odds (the latter having lost its access to the sea at the end of the 1879–84 Pacific War) and the possibility of better-integrated international relations within the subcontinent. However, circumstance at the end of the war dispelled the optimism that reigned in the final weeks of 1918, and strengthened a series of identity crises which had emerged during the war.

In the first place, the turning point in the war decade and the 1920s was not matched by a corresponding return to the world economic order of pre-1914. All the nations of Latin America returned to growth, as the currency was gradually restored to gold convertibility. Maritime trade was normalised and the volume of exports and imports increased rapidly, but they also had to settle with the new role and status of the United States as a consequence of the Great War. In 1918, the US took 45.4 per cent of Latin American exports, up

²⁴ On this point, see María Inés Tato, 'La disputa por la argentinidad: rupturistas y neutralistas durante la Primera Guerra mundial', *Temas de Historia Argentina y Americana*, 13 (July–December 2008), pp. 227–50.

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from 29.7 per cent in 1913, and supplied 41.8 per cent of the region's imports, against 24.5 per cent on the eve of war. Although this stronger commercial tendency tended to decline through the 1920s, while remaining clearly greater than in 1913, this increased commercial presence brought a degree of financial hegemony. It rested on direct United States investment in the region between 1914 and 1929 – from \$1,275.8 to \$3,645.8 million – and the great increase in the largest Latin American cities of banks whose mother houses were in New York.²⁵ As observed by many intellectuals at the beginning of the 1920s, from the Peruvian Victor Haya de la Torre (1895–1979) to the Argentinian Manuel Ugarte (1875–1951), the war had not only failed to change the structural dependence of Latin American economies on the outside world, but it had additionally redistributed the cards in such a way that the United States now possessed powerful financial and commercial weapons on top of the military power that Washington had regularly exercised in the region since the 1890s. From this came numerous questions about the future of Latin American states, apparently condemned to live in the shadow of their northern neighbour after having lived under Europe's economic guardianship throughout the nineteenth century.

Elsewhere, the hopes in the coming of a new international order were swiftly dispelled in the 1920s. Present during the peace negotiations, the representatives of the Latin American states which had declared war on Germany were unanimous in their complaints at the lack of attention paid by Paris, London and Washington to the positions that they were defending, and the attempts at manipulation from which they frequently suffered.²⁶ After the first assembly of the League of Nations in Geneva in November 1920, the experience of the states admitted was very similar, and generated profound scepticism about the new international order. Through the voice of its delegate, Honório Puyrredón, Argentina argued that the victory did not benefit her, and turned its back on the Geneva organisation from December 1920, disappointed at the fate reserved for neutrals and defeated nations in an assembly supposed to promote an ideal of universal peace. Peru and Bolivia followed suit in 1921, failing to obtain a settlement of frontier disputes which had occupied most of their diplomatic activity since the 1880s. Brazil in turn left the League in 1926, weary at not being able to obtain the permanent seat on the Council which it coveted. As for revolutionary Mexico, considered a

25 Bulmer-Thomas, *La historia económica de América Latina*, pp. 189, 192.

26 See, for example, Yannick Wehrli, 'Les délégations latino-américaines et les intérêts de la France à la Société des Nations', *Relations internationales*, 137:1 (2009), pp. 45–59.

pariah in international relations, it was not invited to take a seat in the organisation at the time of its constitution and was not able to participate in its work until 1931 – by which date the hopes of perpetual peace as envisaged at the end of the war were already no more than sweet and distant utopian dreams.²⁷

From the ensemble of these economic and diplomatic facts, should it be concluded that the Great War did no more than reinforce the peripheral status of Latin America in the concert of nations, and signify the simple transition from the European wardship of the nineteenth century to that of the United States from the 1920s? The answer is probably no, if the question is considered from the angle of cultural history, and if one returns to representations of the war among the elites of the region. In effect, the initially dominant concept in which the European conflagration signified confrontation between an eternal French civilisation and German barbarity was gradually replaced by a sense of a general European failure. In an article published by the satirical revue *Caras y Caretas* (Buenos Aires) on 22 August 1914, the Argentinian philosopher José Ingenieros (1877–1925), of Italian origin, interpreted the recent failed expectations of the Old World as a ‘suicide of the barbarians’. Two years later, the Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio (1883–1960) published his *Forjando Patria*, in which he commented ironically on the futile combat being played out between France and Germany – as would be repeated, in 1919, by the Brazilian writer José Bento Monteiro Lobato (1882–1948) in his chronicles published in the *Revista do Brasil*. Indeed, the examples of disenchantment about Europe after 1916 and 1917 could be counted in their hundreds and in every Latin America country, and more still in the 1920s and 1930s. How could a continent considered to be the incarnation of the values of civilisation and modernity have sacrificed 10 million of its sons in the mud of the trenches? What had happened to the ideals of human progress and the cult of rationality that it could have produced such mass violence? From that point, the suicide of Europe logically rendered null and void the concept so characteristic of the nineteenth century and the Belle Époque – even if the latter had already been heavily challenged before 1914 – according to which any form of modernity could only come from the Old Continent. ‘Europe has failed. It is no longer up to her to guide the world’, asserted the Argentinian jurist and writer Saúl

²⁷ On Latin America and the League, see particularly Thomas Fischer, *Die Souveränität der Schwachen: Lateinamerika und der Völk erbund 1920–1936* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2012). On the particular case of Brazil, see Eugênio Vargas Garcia, *O Brasil e a Liga das Nações (1919–1925): vencer ou não perder* (Porto Alegre: Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2000).

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Taborda (1885–1944) in 1918.²⁸ Fed by the wide distribution in Latin America of the ‘decadentist’ European literature of the immediate post-war period – from the *Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler to *La décadence de l’Europe* by Francesco Nitti, via *La crise de l’esprit* by Paul Valéry – the rupture was essential in the mimetic reflexes which had naturally been current until then, and invited renewed reflection on the true identity of the young nations born at the dawn of the nineteenth century out of the ruins of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism.

In very concrete terms, disenchantment with Europe was reflected first in a hardening of the national paradigm directly linked to representations of the Great War. The political terrain thus acquired multiple parties and movements which exalted each nation’s grandeur and purity, reinventing its mythic origins and defining the new conditions of a collective destiny in a radical alternative to Europe.²⁹ Heralds of ‘Argentinianism’ in the 1920s and 1930s, Leopoldo Lugones, Ricardo Rojas (1882–1957) and Carlos Ibarguren (1877–1956) – to cite only three of many – were attentive observers of the Great War, and each in his own way exercised himself to redefine the contours of the ‘race’ and the ideal political regime to guarantee its perpetuation.

The 1920s and 1930s were also marked by cultural nationalism, reflected in the work of the Mexican mural artists who stopped reproducing the dominant pictorial styles of Europe to paint their true national identity – native-born and mixed race as much as white and Iberian – right through to Brazilian modernism. The dominant figure of this aesthetic movement launched in São Paulo in February 1922, and claiming the entirely new creation of a national art, Mário de Andrade (1893–1945) dedicated his earliest poems to the war, in a collection published in 1917 entitled *Ha uma gota de sangue em cada poema*, and analysed the recent aesthetic turbulence in Brazil in a work of 1929:

With the end of the war of 1914, all the arts took on a fresh force. Was this an influence of the war? Of course. The four years of carnage were bound to precipitate matters. New governments rose up, new scientific thinking and new arts.³⁰

28 Saúl A. Taborda, *Reflexiones sobre et ideal político de América* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Universitario, 2007 [1918]), p. 121.

29 As was very well shown by Patricia Funes, without necessarily taking the full measure of the role of the Great War in this dynamic, in *Salvar la nación: intelectuales, cultura y política en los años veinte latinoamericanos* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros, 2006).

30 Mário de Andrade, *Pequena história da música*, 8th edn (São Paulo: Livraria Martins, 1977 [1929]), p. 194.

In the long period of the building of Latin American nations, the Great War was thus an essential stage. It was also paradoxical, in that it was precisely the great carnage resulting from the exacerbation of European nationalisms which became the catalyst for Latin American nationalisms. However, the interrogation of identities emerging from the war could equally transcend the nationalistic frame to promote other possible ways of creating a sense of belonging. In the trajectory of a Manuel Ugarte, convinced from the first years of the twentieth century that the future of Latin America must lie in solidarity between its different national elements in the face of the threat of the United States, the years 1914–18 marked both a change of direction and led them to assert ever more strongly the need for Latin American unity.³¹

Conclusion

Study of the years 1914–18 in Latin America remains a historical work in progress. Although national experiences of the war, such as those of Argentina and Brazil, are becoming better known, many unnoticed corners remain and await researchers to examine them. What about the mobilisation of societies in Colombia or Bolivia, countries of which we know nothing or nearly nothing of their relationship with the Great War? Their intellectuals were as strongly Francophile as elsewhere in Latin America, but their immigrants of European origin were infinitely less numerous than in the southern 'cone' of the subcontinent. What about attitudes to the distant conflagration in the eminently rural world of Central America, where the vast majority of the population was illiterate at the beginning of the twentieth century? How were the war years experienced in Haiti, so closely linked to France both historically and linguistically, but occupied militarily by the United States since 1915? What microanalysis was at work in the reception and representations of the conflict between the national framework – reduced to capital cities and major cities in most cases – and the various local levels? All these questions remain unanswered, though the stakes far exceed the simple documentary dimension. In effect, to build a true comparative history of the years 1914–18 in Latin America would enable us to avoid the hazards of a rise in over-hasty generalisation based on the mistaken view that the region was culturally uniform, and naturally homogeneous. Such an enterprise would confirm – if confirmation

³¹ For these facts on the war as a whole as a break in identity, see Olivier Compagnon, '1914–18: the death throes of civilization: the elites of Latin America face the Great War', in Jenny Macleod and Pierre Purseigle (eds.), *Uncovered Fields: Perspectives in First World War Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 279–95.

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were needed – that the first total war was truly a world event, in that no region of the planet, or nearly none, was spared, independently of the geography of military operations. Finally, to re-evaluate more precisely the place of the Great War at the heart of the Latin American twentieth century, would naturally invite a rethinking of the commonly accepted periodic definition based on the rupture points of 1929 and 1959 and, notably, redefine the 1920s and 1930s which were the matrix of so many later developments. With the coming of the centenary of the Great War, the challenge is certainly great – but it deserves to be examined collectively.

It would be right, moreover, to question the motives for the oblivion which hid the Great War in Latin America until very recently. Of course, the region did not pay the blood price and did not suffer the extreme losses and mourning which confronted the societies of the principal belligerent countries. The men who enlisted voluntarily, and other migrants of European origin summoned to serve under the flag of their mother country, who have sometimes left the mark of their experience of mass violence, were not enough, some eight or ten thousand kilometres from the slaughter-houses of the Somme, to perpetuate the memory of the Great War. Of course, the Second World War created a curtain in Latin America as well as in Europe, and helped to conceal the period of 1914–18 behind a veil, which can still be seen in the school textbooks of many countries.

Nonetheless, there are also genuine historiographic reasons for this oblivion. In Latin America even more than elsewhere, the discipline of history consisted in the nineteenth century of the strict framework of young states issuing from the struggles for independence. It virtually never looked beyond the national frontiers. Until very recently, comparative history and the writing of national history into a global history were extremely rare, leading to an inward-looking pattern of writing history which has made it possible to ignore, or almost ignore, seismic shocks such as the two world wars. From this point of view, the contemporary rediscovery of the Great War in Latin America is equally capable of encouraging new approaches to the history of a region far less peripheral than is often appreciated, and routinely part of the rest of the world since the end of the fifteenth century.

PROOF