

➤ Colombia's Neutrality during 1914-1918: An Overlooked Dimension of World War I

Jane M. Rausch

University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA

Abstract: In the horrific conflict of 1914-1918 known first as “The Great War” and later as World War I, Latin American nations were peripheral players. Perhaps this lack of involvement explains why historians have paid scant attention to events in Latin America related to the war, but nevertheless, it is remarkable that Percy Alvin Martin’s account, *Latin America and the War* first published in 1915, remains the standard text on the topic. This essay partially redresses this omission by examining Colombia’s role in the war and its impact on the country’s development. These findings support Martin’s assertion that even those countries that were neutral in the Great War were not immune to its effects.

Key Words: World War I; Historical Revisionism; Colombia; 20th Century.

Resumen: Las naciones latinoamericanas fueron actores secundarios en el horrible conflicto de 1914-1918, conocido primero como “la Gran Guerra” y luego, como la Primera Guerra Mundial. Tal vez esa escasa participación explique por qué los historiadores han prestado poca atención a los acontecimientos relacionados con la guerra en América Latina, pero, sin embargo, es notable que el libro de Percy Alvin Martin, *Latin America and the War*, publicado por primera vez en 1915, siga siendo el texto estándar sobre el tema. Este ensayo busca remediar esta omisión examinando el papel de Colombia en la guerra y su impacto en el desarrollo del país. Los resultados apoyan la tesis de Martin, según la cual incluso los países neutrales en la Gran Guerra no fueron inmunes a sus consecuencias.

Palabras clave: Primera Guerra Mundial; Revisionismo Histórico; Colombia; Siglo xx.

Introduction

Before it achieved its designation as World War I, the conflict of 1914-18 was aptly known to millions of Europeans as the “Great War.” Responsible for more than ten million deaths and twice that many seriously wounded, in concentrated destructiveness it surpassed anything in human history up to that time. The direct monetary cost has been estimated at more than 180 billion dollars and in the indirect financial cost (through property damage and so forth) at more than 150 billion dollars. Immeasurable in Europe was the cost in broken lives, shattered societies, and the residue of hate and bitterness (Blum/Cameron/Barnes 1970: 342).

Viewed from this perspective the war barely touched Latin America. For the first two and one half years all twenty Latin American nations remained neutral. Once the U.S. entered the conflict, Brazil and Cuba took an active part in the fighting; six more countries

—Costa Rica, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama— declared war; Peru, Bolivia, Uruguay, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic severed relations with Germany; while Argentina, Chile, Mexico, El Salvador, Venezuela, Paraguay, and Colombia maintained strict neutrality.

This lack of direct involvement may explain why World War I is rarely discussed in Latin American historiography. In 1925 Percy Alvin Martin published *Latin America and the War*, an expanded version of a series of lectures he delivered at Johns Hopkins University four years earlier. What is remarkable is that after ninety years, Martin's study, reprinted in 1967, remains the definitive work on the subject. Given the substantial economic and financial crises the war precipitated in Latin America and the realignment of global interests in its aftermath, it seems reasonable to conclude that this period deserves greater attention.

A case in point is the absence of the Great War in Colombian historiography. While numerous studies emphasize transformations that occurred in the 1920s after the conflict, virtually no attention has been paid to developments during the conflict. Bushnell in his widely-read survey, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself* (1993) dismisses the war with a single sentence; Palacios in *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia 1875-2002* (2006) devotes one page to the topic, while the most recent text in English, *Colombia: A Concise Contemporary History* by La Rosa and Mejía (2012) barely mentions the war. Studies of U.S. policy regarding Colombia such as Lael's *Arrogant Diplomacy: U.S. Policy toward Colombia* (1987) are concerned almost exclusively with the taking of Panama in 1903, the building of the canal, and the subsequent battle in the U.S. Senate to ratify the Thomson-Urrutia Treaty in order to restore normal relations between the two countries. Tulchin's more general survey, *The Aftermath of War: World War I and U.S. Policy Toward Latin America* (1971) contains only the briefest of references to Colombia.

Sources in Spanish are hardly more informative. Rivas in *Historia diplomática de Colombia (1810-1934)* (1961) includes a chapter on the diplomacy of the Concha, Suárez, and Holguín administrations, but his brief section on World War I is based almost entirely on information supplied by Martin in his previously mentioned book. Melo's chapter, "De Carlos E. Restrepo a Marco Fidel Suárez: Republicanismo y gobiernos conservadores" in Volume 3 of the *Nueva Historia de Colombia* (1989) provides a good overview of domestic policies during this period but offers little information about the war. In his mammoth four-volume survey of Colombian diplomacy from the Wars of Independence to the present, *La política internacional de Colombia* (1997) Cavelier allots five pages to World War I. Perhaps the best source remains Mesa's "La vida política después de Panamá," in Volume 3 of the *Manual de historia de Colombia* (1980), but even here Mesa relies on Martin's analysis for the basis of his discussion.

The purpose of this study is to redress this gap by reviewing diplomatic developments between 1914 and 1918 in order to assess the role neutral Colombia played in the Great War and the impact of the conflict on the country. To explore these issues the essay will consider Colombia's economic and political situation in 1914; the factors that contributed to its adoption of neutrality at the outbreak of the war; the country's experience in the conflict before the U.S. declaration of war on Germany on April 6, 1917; its involvement in the war after that date until the armistice on November 11, 1918, and finally, the overall impact of the war on Colombia. The data suggests that a survey of developments during these years supports Martin's assertion that even those countries neutral in the Great War were not immune to its consequences (Martin 1967: 2).

1. Colombia in 1914

On August 7, 1914, when José Vicente Concha began his presidential term, the outlook for Colombia could not have been more favorable. Political peace had returned to the country after a series of devastating civil wars waged by the Liberal and Conservative Parties during the previous century. These struggles climaxed in the War of the Thousand Days (1899-1902), a conflict that cumulated in the decisive defeat of the Liberals. In addition, it widened a split between the National and Historical factions in the Conservatives and provoked the separation of Panama in 1903.¹ National restoration began during the Quinquenio dictatorship of Rafael Reyes (1904-9) and was further consolidated by the election in 1910 of President Carlos E. Restrepo, the candidate of the Republican Union, a new political party committed to a program of bipartisan participation in government and laissez-faire economics. Restrepo continued Reyes' policies of promoting export growth and selective protectionism for domestic industry that supported the interests of large landowners. Although the lack of a viable transportation system restricted international trade, the rise of coffee prices on the world market promoted the expansion of Colombia's major export crop to meet growing demand in Europe and the United States (Melo 1989: III, 214-242).

With regard to foreign policy the key issue facing the government was the resolution of its dispute with the U.S. over the loss of Panama, but it was not until after the election of President Woodrow Wilson in 1913 and the completion of the canal the following year, that negotiations began in earnest. Wilson was aware of the need for a final agreement given Colombia's proximity to the canal and the country's growing importance as a potential source of oil. On April 6, 1914 he signed the Urrutia-Thomson Treaty by which Colombia recognized Panama's independence, and the U.S. expressed "sincere regret" for its actions in 1903, paid Colombia a \$25 million indemnity and granted it special privileges in using the canal. In May the Colombian Senators ratified the treaty after contentious debate being persuaded that whatever its defects, this arrangement with the U.S. would boost public finance, improve the country's financial infrastructure and make Cartagena and Barranquilla more viable transit ports of inter-oceanic trade. It was expected that the treaty would quickly clear the way for renewed relations with the U.S., but the outbreak of World War I and the resistance of the U.S. Senate to the clause expressing "sincere regret" delayed American ratification until 1921 (and only then with the deletion of the regret clause) (Palacios 2006: 66-67; Iriarte Núñez 1999: 725).

2. Factors contributing to the adoption of neutrality at the outbreak of the war

José Vicente Concha, a leading member of the Historical faction of the Conservatives won the presidency in 1914 backed by the official Conservative party machinery, the Catholic Church, and (somewhat surprisingly) Rafael Uribe Uribe, the leader of the Liberals, who believed he could influence Concha to insure that his party received fair

1 The split in the Conservative party began in the 1880s when those labeled "Nationalists" supported the government in power while those who opposed it, regarded as more doctrinaire, were dubbed "Historicals."

treatment (Puentes 1961: 564.) Although war had been declared in Europe three days earlier, Concha's inaugural speech made no mention of it, but his selection of Marco Fidel Suárez as his Minister of Foreign Relations proved a fortunate choice. Suárez had served in the same capacity in previous administrations and had been one of the chief participants in the Thomson-Urrutia Treaty negotiations. Within and without Colombia he was well regarded as a distinguished authority on international relations and international law. His presence as foreign minister insured that Colombia would have an experienced and consummate diplomat during this critical time in world affairs (Martin 1967: 411).

The rapid expansion of the war caught not just Colombia but all the nations of the Western Hemisphere by surprise. By the end of August Germany and Austria-Hungary (the Central Powers) were fighting France, Belgium, Britain, and Japan (the Allies). Faced by this unexpected crisis the Latin American governments declared neutrality following the U.S. example. Colombians were especially aware of the potentially terrible consequences posed by this new conflict. Both the Germans and the Allies were major trading partners and had substantial investments within the country. Propaganda from both sides flooded Colombia often disseminated by local periodicals. With their admiration especially for French culture, Liberal and Republican newspapers tended to favor the Allies, while Germany had a champion in the fiery Conservative, Laureano Gómez who consistently supported their cause in his pro-clerical newspaper, *La Unidad* (Henderson 1988: 79).

Colombia's declaration of neutrality reflected its historical pattern of international diplomacy and the firm conviction of Foreign Minister Suárez. In his noteworthy book *Neutralidad y orden: política exterior y militar en Colombia 1886-1918* Esquivel Triana suggests that throughout the nineteenth century Colombian governments when facing international crises consistently sought resolution through arbitration and international justice, even when such a policy worked against their own national interests (Esquivel Triana 2010: 51). Although Esquivel Triana considers this stance as an example of political weakness with negative consequences, in 1914 it was a realistic reaction with regard to the European conflict. Thus, Suárez reiterated the formula adopted by Colombia during the War of the Pacific (1879-1883), and the Cuban-Spanish-American War (1898). Between August and October he proclaimed neutrality and imposed a series of resolutions concerning the belligerents that regulated the dispatch of boats, armaments and elements of war, provisioning of food and coal supplies, length of stay in Colombian waters, and the use of wireless stations (Rivas 1961: 656). In implementing these policies he was further guided by Article V of the Hague Convention adopted in 1907 which set out "The Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in case of War on Land."²

3. The war between August 1914 and April 7, 1917

Neutrality meant that Colombia could no longer trade with any of the belligerent powers and led to an alarming budget crisis. Revenues fell in 1914 and 1915, recovering the following year, but falling again in 1917 and 1918. The closing of European markets and their partial replacement by the U.S. had an impact on all credit and mercantile

2 Colombian delegates were signatures to the Hague Convention of 1907, and although it was not ratified by the Colombian Senate, Suárez nevertheless adhered to it.

operations. In 1916 Minister of Hacienda Diego Mendoza reported that the rapid rise of the U.S. as a trading partner would have been unimaginable without the special circumstances of the war since the habit of buying English goods dated back to the colonial era (Palacios 2006: 68). Further complicating the domestic scene was the assassination of Rafael Uribe Uribe on October 14, 1914, a tragedy that left the Liberals without an effective leader and deprived President Concha of an important ally and spokesman among the loyal opposition.

In the meantime, a key concern of Minister Suárez's was monitoring Colombia's wireless stations based in the Atlantic ports of Santa Marta and Cartagena. The first belonged to the United Fruit Company (UFCO) and the second to a German company, the Gesellschaft für Drahtlose Telegraphie of Berlin. On September 1, Suárez issued a decree stating that Colombia's policy of neutrality required that these stations might remain open only under the supervision of authorities in Santa Marta and Cartagena in order to insure that they did not transmit communications of a military nature. The United Fruit Company managed to operate its wireless station in accordance with this decree without interruption throughout the war although all ships entering the port were required to dismantle their radio antennas as long as they were in Colombian waters. The German station in Cartagena, however, was another matter. Faced with accusations by both the U.S. and Britain that it was already sending illegal messages, Suárez on November 19 ordered the company to remove all its Germans employees. Then on December 5 with the full consent of the German ambassador, Kracker von Schwartzefeldt, he shut the station down completely for the duration of the conflict (Martin 1967: 414-416).

Suárez's other concern in the early months of the war was to prevent Colombia's highly partisan newspapers from making statements that might conceivably violate the policy of neutrality. Given that legislation protecting freedom of the press was quite Liberal, some journals launched violent attacks against the belligerents. Suárez sought to temper these outbursts in a circular dated November 17, 1914 addressed to the editors. To clarify the role which newspapers might play, he wrote that "the absolute freedom of the press does not mean the absence of duties or responsibilities." Conceding that a state of "absolute" indifference was impossible, he exhorted the editors to express their sympathies and antipathies "in the rational form of truth, in the respectful form of courtesy, and in the Christian form of benevolence" (Suárez 1918: 483-485). Repeated on several occasions this warning was clearly necessary. Intemperate newspaper reports of the fighting in Europe did tend to inflame public opinion as was evident in Bogotá on December 15, 1914 when police were called out to break up a fight between pro-German and pro Allied patrons at the Olympia Theater.³

Suárez made clear that Colombia did not embrace passivity as a neutral in the Great War. Along with a number of other South American leaders he believed that the countries in the Western Hemisphere should work together to escape immediate effects of the conflict and possibly mitigate some of the problems it was creating. With Suárez's blessing, on May 24, 1915 Santiago Pérez Triana, editor of the journal *Hispania*, and Roberto Ancízar, secretary of the Colombian Legation in Washington, participated in the first Pan-American Financial Conference that was meeting in Washington chaired by U.S. Treasury Secretary William G.

3 "Colombia y el mundo, 1914". In: <<http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/revistas/credencial/mayo2005/mundo1914.htm>> (19.12.2013).

McAdoo. Delegates to this conference discussed issues regarding public finance, the monetary situation, existing banking systems, extension of inter-American markets, the merchant marine, and improving transportation facilities. Their discussions went beyond reviewing emergencies caused by the war to considering the organization of a permanent hemispheric association that could deal with such problems as they arose. The delegates voted to establish an Inter-American High Commission, which was to begin its work at once, and represented a step toward the eventual creation of the Pan-American Union (Moore 1920: 343-344).

Pérez Triana took an active role in the conference proposing in a well-received speech that the Monroe Doctrine be transformed into a multi-lateral tenet. Later in July when the Germans were intensifying U-boat attacks on passengers as well as commercial ships, he published a book of essays, *Some Aspects of the War* (1915) in which he was relentlessly critical of the German war effort. For example, in one essay entitled “Why a Spanish-American should not be Pro-German,” he wrote:

The tragedy of Belgium, attacked with cold deliberation and torn from limb to limb by the troops of his Majesty the Kaiser, has staggered humanity; it stands out against the horizon like a hellish vision of agony and of shame for the whole human race (Pérez Triana 1915: 176).

In the meantime, back in Bogotá the fiercely nationalistic Laureano Gómez was championing the Central powers. In “The Convenience of a German Victory,” an editorial published on December 13, 1915, he wrote: “Several times we’ve argued in this newspaper that Latin American nations should lean toward Germany in the present conflict, this because the victory of that nation would favor the autonomy and development of South American nations presently menaced by Yankee imperialism,” and he added that all the principal countries allied against Germany —England, Italy, and France— had in recent years abused Colombia and her sister republics (Gómez quoted by Henderson 1988: 79-80).

In 1916 Suárez turned his attention to resolving long-standing border disputes. The independence of Panama in 1903 did not end Colombia’s contacts with Central America as its Caribbean archipelago of San Andrés and Providencia lay within maritime boundaries claimed by Nicaragua and Honduras. When the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty was signed on August 5, 1914, the United States acquired the rights to any canal built in Nicaragua in perpetuity, a renewable ninety-nine year option to establish a naval base on the Gulf of Fonseca, and a renewable ninety-nine year lease to the Great and Little Corn Islands in the Caribbean (Stuart/Tigner 1975: 501). In full knowledge that this treaty impinged on territory claimed by Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Honduras, the U.S. Senate ratified the treaty on February 18, 1916 disregarding formal protests from those countries. Suárez was likewise concerned since the treaty jeopardized Colombia’s control of the two Mangles islands that formed part of the San Andrés Archipelago. During the nineteenth century Nicaragua had challenged Colombia’s claim to some of the islands off the Mosquito Coast, and eventually the two countries had agreed to ask the president of France to arbitrate their dispute. In 1900 the French issued a *laudo* that left the Islas Mangles under Colombian rule. Fortified by this decision, Suárez instructed the Legation in Washington to protest the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty, which seemingly violated Colombia’s territorial rights. That the U.S. refused to recognize Colombia’s claim only added to the frustration over its Senate’s failure to ratify the Thomson-Urrutia Treaty (Suárez 1957a: 59-60).

Suárez achieved more success in settling long-standing issues over the delineation of Colombia’s borders with its neighbors. The Suárez-Muñoz Vernaza Treaty signed on

July 15, 1916 and ratified by both Ecuador and Colombia on January 26, 1917 established a mutually acceptable frontier extending for 586 kilometers between the two countries (Rivas 1961: 667). Negotiations over the 2, 219 kilometer border with Venezuela proved to be more contentious, but on November 3, 1916 Suárez signed with Demetrio Losada Díaz the Suárez-Losada Díaz Treaty agreeing to submit the dispute to Switzerland for arbitration (Zea Hernández 1989: 99-102).

It was also in February 1916 that Suárez, addressing a group of journalists, enlarged upon his doctrine known as *Respice polum* or *Estrella Polar* (Pole Star) that he first introduced during the Thomson-Urrutia negotiations in 1914. In addition to being an internationalist and a supporter of Pan-Americanism, Suárez was also a positivist who had a realistic idea of the dominant role the United States was destined to play in the Western Hemisphere in the twentieth century. In *Respice polum* doctrine he argued that it was necessary to look to the “pole” because luck would follow the people within its economic and international orbit. That “pole” was the United States, which by its geographic position, political and industrial organization, and advanced technology was found to have a great influence in the world. President Wilson had emphasized that North America would be indispensable in the reconstruction of Europe and would be equally important in the development of the Latin American countries. Suárez believed that Colombia must embrace new relationships with the U.S. because lacking economic resources and international influence, it was not possible for it to remain isolationist (Torres del Río 2010: 55). When in July Suárez defended this doctrine before the Congress, the opposition denounced him as a traitor to Colombia, but he held fast to this idea throughout his political career, and given the steady incursion of U.S. interest into Colombia during and after the Great War, he was merely being pragmatic (Sánchez Camacho 1955: 138-140).

4. The War between April 6, 1917 and November 11, 1918

On February 7, 1917 President Wilson severed relations with Germany, and on April 8 Congress declared War. Wilson hoped that the remaining neutral countries in the Western Hemisphere would follow the U.S. example but only eight eventually declared war, while five others broke relations with Germany. Choosing to remain neutral were Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, El Salvador, Venezuela, and Paraguay. An editorial published in *El Tiempo* on April 18, 1917 thoughtfully set out the reason for Colombia's decision. It observed that while the German submarine offensive was despicable, unlike Brazil and the U.S. Colombia had not suffered any losses from that campaign nor had it any specific complaint to rise against the Central Powers. The other countries that had followed the U.S. by declaring war or breaking relations had little choice being virtual protectorates of that nation. The editorial continued:

Colombia, more than any other country in America, needs to emphasize its personality and independence against Yanqui power, not in a hostile way, which would be foolish and absurd, but by refusing to become part of the states controlled by Washington which is what would happen if we broke relations with a friendly people that has not harmed us in any way except by becoming an enemy of the U.S.⁴

4 *El Tiempo*, April 18, 1917.

It concluded that the paper was solidly on the Allied side, but to declare war without any reason would be “the most tragic page in our history and expose us to the well-deserved scorn of all of Latin America”.

Despite this rationale, Colombia’s staunch neutrality and refusal to follow the U.S. into the conflict left it open to charges that it was plotting with Germany. In March 1917 the revelation that Germany’s Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann had sent a telegram to Venustiano Carranza, president of Mexico, proposing an alliance sparked accusations from some American newspapers that Colombia was somehow involved in the scheme. According to the *New York American*, evidence had been laid before President Wilson and his cabinet of a secret alliance between Germany and Colombia “having as its object the capture or destruction of the Panama Canal in the event of war between the U.S. and Germany”.⁵ Colombia’s ambassador Julio Betancourt immediately issued a statement that persistent reports of an alliance between Colombia and Germany “are absolutely false”.⁶ In Bogotá on March 30 Suárez sent an urgent telegram to governors of the departments declaring that there was not the least foundation for this rumor, and on April 19 he again issued guidelines for the national press emphasizing the importance of moderation in the publication of articles referring to the war (Suárez 1957b: 251; 253).

Colombians who favored the Allied cause were offended by allegations of a secret pact with Germany, and they were horrified by the steady reports detailing the ruthless cruelty of the submarine campaign. When Germany first announced the policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, Suárez himself wrote to Ambassador von Schwartzenfeldt on February 16, 1917 stating that the methods proposed by Germany were calculated to aggravate rather than mitigate the horrors of the war and that “as for the effects which in determined cases these methods and practices may have upon the rights of Colombia, her government reserves the right to protest against them and demand the justice which may be due her” (Suárez 1957b: 313). On October 17, 1917 the Colombian Senate after a stormy debate approved a resolution fully supported by Archbishop Bernardo Herrera Restrepo declaring that the use of submarines against any kind of vessel whether neutral or belligerent was a practice contrary to international law and that submarines should not be admitted into Colombian ports and other jurisdictional waters of the republic (Barrett/Pérez-Verdía 1919: 13).

Despite these actions rumors of a Colombian-German alliance continued to circulate until the end of the war. In December 1917 the German writer, Alfredo Hartwig wrote in *Deutsche Rundschau*, that next to Mexico, Colombia had the greatest reason to desire the triumph of Germany. He added, “It is no wonder that this country publishes with satisfaction the communications of the German general staff and that even the simple Indian people listen to the illuminating reports from Germany when they are publicly read in the market place. The progress of the German offensive is greeted with the greatest joy” (Hartwig quoted by Martin 1967: 422). Even during the Versailles Peace Conference on January 24, 1919 the Associated Press published a news bulletin that accused Colombia of aiding the Germans by permitting them to use its Caribbean islands as bases for provisioning submarines, a charge which the then Foreign Minister Pedro Antonio Molina immediately denied (Holguín y Caro 1957: 597).

⁵ *New York American*, March 3, 1917.

⁶ *New York American*, March 7, 1917.

America's entry into the war raised Colombia's distress over the safety of its ports, renewed anxiety about the activities of the wireless stations and intensified its trade with the U.S. With regard to the first matter U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing reassured Suárez on April 17 that while American and allied ships would patrol the Colombian, Venezuelan and Ecuadorian coasts to protect them from the submarine threat, no American force had or would disembark on Colombian soil (Suárez 1957b: 253).

Concerning activities of the wireless stations, Suárez affirmed in a circular to the governors dated April 26, 1917 that Colombia would continue to follow the Hague Convention in this matter. He reported that since it was not possible to monitor the activities of the radiotelegraph station on San Andrés, it had been removed and at that time communications with the islands were conveyed solely by maritime mail. Stations in Arauca and Orocué in the eastern plains had never functioned because they depended on English-made equipment that could not be assembled due to lack of expertise. The German-owned station in Cartagena remained suspended, and messages sent by the United Fruit Company from Santa Marta were strictly limited to commercial topics. All ships that entered Colombian ports were required to lower their telegraph antennas, but after captains of UFCO boats complained that this stipulation cause unnecessary complications some allowances were being made specifically for the company (Suárez 1957b: 260-261).

Trade with the U.S. had become more complicated. In order to organize an army of more than a million men prepared to fight overseas, the American government placed severe restrictions on exports of any goods that might be needed by the military, and it announced that because most of its ships would be required to transport these troops, it would suspend all commercial shipping to Colombia. Duly alarmed the Colombian Legation worked to mitigate the impact of these pronouncements by obtaining special licenses to continue shipments of materials critical to national and commercial needs. In addition the Foreign Minister protested to "high American functionaries" that if the policy was enforced, Colombia, left without any means of transport, would be unable to send coffee to the U.S., its major trading partner. Apparently his arguments were convincing for American officials assured him that "traffic and commerce with Colombia would be maintained in the best conditions that circumstances would allow" (Holguín y Caro 1957: 594). In the end the worst feared disruptions did not occur, but trade throughout the Caribbean Basin was noticeably curtailed when the U.S. government requisitioned ships from the United Fruit Company, a measure that caused a dramatic decrease in bananas and other exports (Bucheli 2005: 31).

Colombia continued to supply the U.S. with coffee, but an unanticipated development was the surging demand for platinum mined in the western coastal territory of Chocó by the American-owned Chocó Pacifico Company. Until 1917 Russia had been the Allies' principal supplier of this heavy metal which as a good conductor of electricity and a powerful catalyst was critical for military purposes, but events generated by the October Revolution of that year led to an 84 percent drop in its production between 1914 and 1918. With Russia eliminated, Colombia became the largest producer in the world averaging 1,460 kilograms a year between 1916 and 1924. In 1913 Colombia had provided only 9 percent of U.S. needs but by 1918 it was supplying over half (Leal León 2009: 161-62; Palacios 2006: 70).

Throughout this period Colombia's domestic economy was severely restricted. With the exception of the textile industry centered in Medellín, other sectors were hobbled by a lack of circulating currency, the loss of tariff revenues and the drop of imports. In 1915 Congress had passed Ley 57 known as the Ley Uribe, which regulated health standards in factories, and in 1918 it passed Ley 46 mandating hygienic housing for workers (Archila 1989: 232). These tentative measures, which echoed the aims of the Catholic idea of social justice as already proclaimed by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Rerum novarum* of May 15, 1891, did nothing to regulate the abysmally low wages, inflated prices and food shortages.⁷ Thus it was not surprising that in January 1918 port workers in Barranquilla went on strike demanding higher wages and the protests spread to Santa Marta and even the United Fruit Company. By January 24 order was restored along the Atlantic coast, but the movement sparked the organization of the first Colombian trade unions and set the stage for larger and more violent strikes in the decade to come (Urrutia 1969: 57-60).

The social unrest bubbling under the outward calm came to the fore with the presidential campaign that began in late 1917. Marco Fidel Suárez was the official candidate sponsored by the National Conservatives and the Catholic Church. His opponents were Guillermo Valencia, a candidate of the Historical Conservatives and José María Lombana Barraneche representing the Liberal. Suárez's unswerving support of the Thomson-Urrutia Treaty had made bitter enemies of the Historical conservatives who were led by Laureano Gómez, who blamed Suárez and the Nationalist of betraying Colombian patriotism. The animosity between the two men helps to explain the vicious nature of the campaign. The Conservative political machine supported by the Catholic Church took an active part in the battle accusing Valencia of leading a radical Masonic movement and ordering people not to vote for him because he had been ex-communicated. The opposition stumped the country accusing Suárez and the Nationalists of ruining Conservatism. Violent incidents attend the campaign, and on February 4, 1918 there was even a thwarted attempt to assassinate Gómez in the Egipto Barrio of Bogotá (Henderson 2001: 107.)

The Suárez candidacy aroused such opposition that when outgoing President Concha was asked what he took most pride in during his four years in office, he replied "that it was keeping the army from shooting into the crowds protesting the election of February 11, 1918!" (Concha quoted by Henderson 2001:107). The official results of the balloting declared Suárez as the winner, and the Colombians now had at their helm, a man who believed that the U.S. rather than Europe would be the future leader of the Western Hemisphere and that Colombia would need to combine American capitalism with the doctrine of the Catholic Church. As Marco Palacios has suggested, "This recipe of Catholic social doctrine and Yankee progress would put its stamp on 'progressive conservatism' for the rest of the century" (Palacios 2006: 69).

In his inaugural speech addressed to Congress on August 7, 1918 Suárez affirmed that Colombians would hold fast to Concha's policy of neutrality, but he qualified this assertion by stating that "neutrality was not the same as indifference," and that it would not keep the government from the "frank manifestation of its opinions where they were demanded by the need to support the guiding principals of law".⁸ His appointment of

7 *Rerum Novarum* issued by Pope Leo XIII was an open letter to all Catholic bishops dealing with the "Rights and Duties of Capital Labor." It specifically addressed the condition of the working class and condemned unrestricted capitalism.

8 *El Tiempo*, August 9, 1918.

Jorge Holguín y Caro as minister of foreign relations likewise reflected an increasing awareness that the Allies would be victorious in the Great War, for Holguín had been the author of the October 1917 Senate resolution protesting the German submarine campaign. In addition, a month before his inauguration, Congress passed another resolution congratulating France on the celebration of its national anniversary, and a British diplomatic mission arrived in Bogotá in time for the inauguration with the principal object of exploring commercial possibilities in Colombia (Barrett/Pérez-Verdía 1919: 13; Holguín y Caro 1957: 654-658).

On November 11, 1918 *El Tiempo* published the long-awaited news that an amnesty had been signed. The Great War was over. Germany had surrendered, but for Colombia and the rest of the world, the cessation of fighting did not stop one of the conflict's most deadly aspects — the 1918 "Spanish" flu pandemic involving the H1N2 influenza virus. Before it had run its course, the virus infested 500 million people throughout the world, killing 50 to 100 million of them to make it one of the deadliest disasters recorded in human history. In Colombia between June and December 1918, 30,000 people died of "*la gripa*" including six thousand in Bogotá.⁹ President Suárez was personally devastated for besides grieving for the stricken Colombians, his beloved son Gabriel, a youth of 18 studying electrical engineering in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania succumbed to the flu on October 14, 1918 and was buried a week later in New York (Sánchez Camacho 1955: 157).

Conclusion

What role did Colombia play in the Great War and what was the impact of the conflict on the country? As a neutral nation its participation in the conflict was minimal. Colombia did not send any soldiers or ships to fight in Europe. It did, however, monitor its Atlantic islands and ports to make sure that their radiotelegraph stations were not being used to aid the belligerents, and once the U.S. entered the war, it supplied the Allies with strategic materials such as platinum. It actively fostered stronger ties between the Latin American countries, and in the aftermath of the war it gained membership in the League of Nations and a larger role on the world stage.

The impact of the war on the country was far more substantial. In spite of being neutral, Colombia lost 30,000 citizens to the ravages of "Spanish" flu. The loss of European markets thrust Colombia directly into the U.S. economic empire. Economic dislocation caused by the war forced the abandonment of vital transportation and infrastructure projects, delayed modernization on numerous fronts, and unleashed discontent among the popular classes that produced violent and bloody strikes in the 1920s.

The most negative impact, however, was that the war provided the U.S. Senate with an excuse to delay ratification of the Thomson-Urrutia Treaty in spite of continual urging for its passage by Presidents Concha, Suárez, and Wilson, and businessmen in both countries. The Senate's repeated refusal to act added to the resentment felt by many Colombians over the U.S. role in Panama's declaration of independence in 1903, and once

⁹ "Colombia y el mundo, 1918". In: <<http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/revistas/credencial/sept2005/mundo1918.htm>> (19.12.2013)

America did enter the war, this understandable hostility was seen outside the country as a legitimate reason to support the German cause.

The Panama question roiled Colombian politics setting Conservatives against one another and against Republicans and Liberals. President Suárez who had virtually staked his entire career on the treaty's passage was forced to resign before the end of his term without achieving this goal and under accusations of malfeasance coming from members of his own party. When the Senate finally did ratify the Thomson-Urrutia Treaty during the administration of Suárez successor, Pedro Nel Ospina, the \$25 million indemnity that it brought to cash-starved Colombia created a bonanza known as the "Dance of the Millions." Swept along by the political, economic and social dynamics restrained by the war but unleashed after the armistice, Colombia belatedly but decisively entered the twentieth century.

Bibliography

- Archila, Mauricio (1989): "La clase obrera colombiana (1886-1930)". In: Tirado Mejía, Álvaro (ed.): *Nueva Historia de Colombia*. Bogotá: Planeta, Vol. 3, pp. 219-244.
- Barrett, John/Pérez-Verdía Benito (1919): *Latin America and the War: Special Memorandum*. Washington D. C.: s. e.
- Blum, Jerome/Cameron, Rondo/Thomas G. Barnes (1970): *The European World since 1815: Triumph and Transition*. 2nd ed. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Bucheli, Marcelo (2005): *Bananas and Business: The United Fruit Company in Colombia 1899-2000*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bushnell, David (1993): *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cavelier, Germán (1997): *La política internacional de Colombia. Vol. 3: 1903-1953*. Bogotá: Universidad Externado de Colombia.
- Esquivel Triana, Ricardo (2010): *Neutralidad y orden: Política exterior y militar en Colombia, 1886-1918*. Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.
- Henderson, James D. (1988): *Conservative Thought in Twentieth Century Latin America: The Ideas of Laureano Gómez*. Athens: Ohio University.
- (2001): *Modernization in Colombia: The Laureano Gómez Years, 1889-1965*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Holguín y Caro, Hernando (1957): *Informe del Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores al Congreso de 1919*. En: *Anales Diplomáticos y Consulares de Colombia*, 7, pp. 554-700.
- Iriarte Núñez, Gabriel (ed.) (1999): *Colombia a su alcance*. Bogotá: Planeta.
- Lael, Richard (1987): *Arrogant Diplomacy: U.S. Policy Toward Colombia 1903-1922*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources.
- La Rosa, Michael J./Mejía Germán R. (2012): *Colombia: A Concise Contemporary History*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Leal León, Claudia (2009): "La Compañía Minera Chocó Pacífico y el auge del platino en Colombia 1897-1930". In: *Historia Crítica Edición Especial* (noviembre), pp. 150-164.
- Martin, Percy Alvin (1967 [1925]): *Latin America and the War*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith.
- Melo, Jorge Orlando (1989): "De Carlos E. Restrepo a Marco Fidel Suárez: Republicanismo y gobiernos conservadores". In: Mejía Tirado, Álvaro (ed.): *Nueva Historia de Colombia*. Bogotá: Planeta, Vol. 3, pp. 215-242.
- Mesa, Darío (1980): "La vida política después de Panamá". In: Jaramillo Uribe, Jaime (ed.): *Manual de historia de Colombia*. Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura, Vol. 3, pp. 83-176.

- Moore, John Bassett (1920): "The Pan-American Financial Conferences and the Inter-American High Commission". In: *The American Journal of International Law*, 14, 3, pp. 343-355.
- Palacios, Marco (2006): *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia, 1875-2002*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Pérez Triana, Santiago (1915): *Some Aspects of the War*. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- Puentes, Miguel (1961): *Historia del político liberal colombiano*. Bogotá: Prag.
- Rivas, Raimundo (1961): *Historia diplomática de Colombia 1810-1934*. Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional.
- Sánchez Camacho, José (1955): *Marco Fidel Suárez*. Bucaramanga: Academia de Historia de Santander.
- Stuart, Graham H./Tigner, James L. (1975): *Latin America and the United States*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Suárez, Marco Fidel (1918): *Informe del Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores al Congreso de 1915*. En: *Anales Diplomáticos y Consulares de Colombia*, 5, pp. 397-555.
- (1957a): *Informe del Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores al Congreso de 1916*. En: *Anales Diplomáticos y Consulares de Colombia*, 7, pp. 1-162.
- (1957b): *Informe del Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores al Congreso de 1917*. En: *Anales Diplomáticos y Consulares de Colombia*, 7, pp. 169-374.
- Torres del Río, César (2010): *Colombia, siglo xx. Desde la guerra de los mil días hasta la elección de Álvaro Uribe*. Bogotá: Editorial Normal.
- Tulchin, Joseph S. (1971): *The Aftermath of War: World War I and U.S. Policy Toward Latin America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Urrutia, Miguel (1969): *The Development of the Colombian Labor Movement*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Zea Hernández, Germán (1989): "Proceso de Negociaciones de Colombia para la demarcación y señalamiento de sus fronteras terrestres". In: Tirado Mejía, Álvaro (ed.): *Nueva Historia de Colombia*. Bogotá: Planeta, Vol. 3, pp. 91-118.