

➤ How important was Latin America to the First World War?

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Abstract: This article examines the impact of Latin America on the First World War, fitting into the gap between the existing histories of Latin America that focus on how the Great War impacted each republic and the histories of the First World War that completely ignore Latin America. This study exposes ways that the war was fought in Latin America, considers how the diplomacy and decisions of the region's leaders affected the situation of each belligerent side, and judges the impact of the conflict in Latin America on the outcome of the overall World War.

Keywords: First World War; Economic Warfare; Food History; History of Neutrality; Latin America.

Resumen: Este artículo examina el impacto de Latinoamérica en la Primera Guerra Mundial, cubriendo la laguna existente entre las historias de Latinoamérica que se centran en cómo la Gran Guerra afectó a cada república y las historias de la Primera Guerra Mundial que ignoran por completo a Latinoamérica. El presente estudio expone la forma en que se libró la guerra en Latinoamérica, examina cómo la diplomacia y las decisiones de los dirigentes de la región afectaron la situación de cada una de las partes beligerantes y juzga las repercusiones del conflicto en América Latina en cuanto a los resultados de la Guerra Mundial en conjunto.

Palabras clave: Primera Guerra Mundial; Guerra económica; Historia de los alimentos; Historia de la neutralidad; América Latina.

From the perspective of historians of Latin America, the significance of the First World War has never been in doubt. Early histories of the war in Latin America examined how it affected the diplomacy and foreign policy of individual Latin American countries, in particular their decisions to remain neutral or join a side (Martin 1925). Later the focus shifted to the way that the war transformed Latin American economies, with interesting debates over whether it was a particularly abusive moment in the relationship between the powerful western economies and the underdeveloped, dependent Latin states, and connections between these economic dislocations and labor upheaval in 1918 and 1919.¹ Recent Latin American scholarship on the war years looks anew at the political culture and social transformations brought to Latin Americans due to the war, as prominent intellectuals, the popular press, and large and powerful immigrant communities asserted more

1 Albert (1988); Graviil (1985); Fritsch (1988).

firmly than ever (or alternately shied away from) their various European roots.² In short, most of the Latin American histories of the First World War have focused on how the war affected Latin America.

This essay looks at the other side, attempting to explain how Latin America affected the First World War. I hope to determine, or at least open a conversation about, Latin America's rightful place in the global warfare waged by both sides. Despite a huge number of scholarly and popular books on the war, it's a question that has really not been directly addressed. There are a variety of possible ways to place the region into the history of the war. One way would be to focus on the style of war. Was the war in Latin America waged differently or similarly to the war elsewhere? Did the belligerents have the same goals there? Another is to look at the question of degree. How significant was Latin America to the overall global war effort of each belligerent? What expectations did they place upon Latin America, and what resources did they devote to Latin American issues? Finally, placing Latin America in the overall war demands a question about results. How should we judge the contribution of the "far western front" to the results of the war? What importance, if any, did Latin America have to the ultimate victory of the Anglo-French-American coalition?

The style of the war

For most people, and most historians, the First World War means the trenches and mass death of the European front lines. In many other non-European places violence reared its head, such as when British, Japanese, South African and Australian troops attacked various German colonies in Africa, Asia and in the Pacific. But Latin America was not a place where confrontation between the two European alliances took violent form, and in that way the style of war in South America was fundamentally different from the style of war as it was fought elsewhere. After the brief and famous runs of the German cruisers *Dresden* and *Karlsruhe*, which together sunk over a dozen British merchant vessels before going to the bottom themselves, and Britain's decisive destruction of the German Admiral Graf von Spee's small but elusive squadron at the so-called Battle of the Falklands on 8 December 1914, there was no armed confrontation even in any of the seas near South America.³ When engaging in unrestricted submarine war first in 1915 and again in 1917, German U-boats scoured the northeast Atlantic, not the south.⁴ No battles of the First World War took place in Latin America. Aside from those thousands of immigrants from Britain or Germany who, returning home to the call of war died on the European battlefields, and the handful of Latin American merchant mariners killed when German U-boats torpedoed their ships, there were no deaths of Latin Americans caused directly by the combatants in the Great War. It is hard to get a complete body count of such mariners, but it was likely very small; there were, for instance, no casualties on the Argentine flagged boats sunk by Germany in 1917 (Martin 1925: 104).

2 Newton (1977); Tato (2011); Tato (2008b); Compagnon (2004); Compagnon (2009).

3 Hurd (1921: 137-177); Strachan (2001: 466-480).

4 Holger Herwig (1997: 320-324) describes the intrepid and rare journey of two German attack subs all the way to the coast of the United States in 1918. By the end of the war Germany deployed nine "U-Cruisers" that had longer ranges, at least one of which may have crossed the equator (Compton-Hall 1991: 283-285).

For all the great powers participating in the Great War, much of the war in Latin America took the form of a sort of jousting for diplomatic advantage, aiming to get the support of the neutral governments and divided populaces of the Latin American republics. There were many things that the belligerent powers imagined getting from possible diplomatic successes in Latin America, including cooperation in waging war, access to resources, and even simply moral support. At times both sides in the European conflict entertained hopes that they might entice Latin American states to break their neutrality and decisively enter the war.

One must judge that in this diplomatic contest for the loyalties of Latin Americans, Germany failed with aplomb. Indeed in the case of Mexico, German diplomacy fatally backfired, creating what was probably the greatest, if indirect, contribution that Latin America made to the outcome of the war. Arthur Zimmerman, the German foreign minister memorably described by Roger Chickering as “a man of remarkably little subtlety even for a German diplomat,” telegraphed an urgent secret message to the Mexican government, asking President Carranza to help build an alliance with Japan with the goal of an eventual joint attack on the United States (Chickering 2004: 169). British intelligence intercepted and decrypted the message, releasing it to the US in the wake of Germany’s February 1917 declaration that it would begin unrestricted torpedoing of all ships entering the North Atlantic war zone. It is a tense and riveting story that spawned a fascinating literature. Despite its obvious Latin American aspects, one recent historian has gone so far as to suggest that the scheme had “no discernable effect” on Mexico (Boghardt 2012: 6). However it is worthwhile to note how tied together it was to the longer-term testiness of the Japanese and Mexican relationships with the US, and to the history of a few years of German diplomatic and commercial efforts to take Mexico under its wing, which fertilized the revolution paralyzing Mexico since 1910, and nearly persuaded its government in 1917 to go to war against its neighbor to the north (Katz 1981). There remains considerable disagreement as to exactly why the United States entered the war. Some historians focus on the pro-Allied proclivities of the US political and economic elite even well before 1917, while others suggest that the German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917 was the trigger event. But it remains reasonable to follow Barbara Tuchman in arguing that backlash against Zimmerman’s telegram provided the pivotal impetus propelling the US to break its declared neutrality and declare war against Germany, the resolution that decisively gave the advantage in the war to the British and French.⁵

Mexico, by the way, remained internally divided throughout the Great War, and the western allies (especially the United States) were satisfied with Carranza’s continual if petulant neutrality. But the Entente hoped for more from other Latin American countries, ones whose adherence to a war against the Central Powers could really help the cause. In the context of wartime diplomacy and the tangle for advantage in the Americas, it is worthwhile to note another series of intercepted and heavily publicized telegrams, those between the German minister in Buenos Aires, Count Karl von Luxburg, and the Foreign Ministry in Berlin from May through August 1917. On September 8 the State Department first released telegrams from May 1917 sent from Luxburg to his foreign

5 Tuchman (1958); Boghardt (2012) disagrees about the importance of the episode to the US decision to make war.

ministry during a period of tensions over Germany's sinking of an Argentine steamer off the coast of France. In his coded telegrams, Luxburg called the Argentine foreign minister "a notorious ass" and suggested that an acceptable way for Germany to deal with ships flying the neutral Argentine flag would be to sink them "without a trace".⁶ Unsurprisingly Luxburg's diplomatic credentials were revoked and the Argentine government expelled him, and there was an outpouring of anti-German sentiment from protesters in the streets and journalists in the Buenos Aires newspapers. British officials and businessmen hoped that Argentina would declare war, giving them access to the German flagged steamships in Argentine ports and maybe leading to Argentina taking measures against the Germans living and thriving across the republic. But despite such pressure, the government of President Hipólito Yrigoyen never renounced its neutrality, let alone joined the war.

There were obvious differences between the two incidents. Luxburg's telegrams mentioned to his superiors back in Berlin the possibility that the 400,000 or so Germans in southern Brazil might split from Brazil to become a separate German-friendly state, but this did not expose any threat to bring war on Argentina, as the Zimmerman telegrams had done to the United States.⁷ Wariness of the neighbor to the south had been a constant issue in United States politics ever since Mexico became independent a century earlier, and such long-term concerns had only increased since its descent into chaotic civil war over the previous decade (Katz 1981). But more importantly the differences between the reactions of Yrigoyen and Wilson to the catastrophic German diplomatic leaks were rooted in the very different political situations in the two countries. Wilson already led a largely pro-Entente government, his cabinet packed with sympathizers of the Anglo-French cause. American banks had invested heavily in British debt that funded the Entente's war effort and US factories had been running at full tilt making weapons and other goods for the Allied armies. It was fertile ground for a German miscalculation to lead to a telling reaction.

On the other hand in Argentina, Hipólito Yrigoyen, who for the previous year commanded the first government of the Radical Party in Argentina, felt little domestic pressure to declare war on Germany even after the Luxburg disclosures. In his years of at least rhetorical criticism of foreign influences in Argentina, Yrigoyen argued that the greatest of these outside threats was from the United States and its Monroe Doctrine-inspired push for "pan-Americanism", and from the British who owned and operated many vital pieces of the Argentine economy, especially the railroads and the oceanic shipping that transported Argentine goods to market and the banks that financed its international trade.⁸ The idea of maintaining neutrality as a way to stand up for the rule of international law also had much appeal for idealists in the administration who also hoped to intangibly raise Argentina's global stature. Members of his government may have been influenced by German bribes - Luxburg's telegrams revealed that he retained significant funds in local banks for targeted payouts. But Yrigoyen also recognized that Germany was doing much to appeal to Argentine desires. Among the messages from Luxburg released later in the year, some described his negotiations with the neutral Argentine government over safe

6 Quoted in full in various places, including Martin (1925: 225).

7 "Bare Berlin Plot to Rule in Brazil," in: *The New York Times*, October 31, 1917, p. 1; Schuler (2011: ch. 10); Luebke (1987).

8 Weinmann (1994); Goñi Demarchi/Scala/Berraondo (1998: ch. IV); Tulchin (1990: 38 f.); for a view of the Radical Party that plays down its antipathy to foreign economic influence, see Rock (1975: 63-66).

passage for Argentine ships through the German submarine blockade, which was apparently a courtesy that Germany extended to no neutral other than Argentina.⁹ There was probably a generally pro-Allied sentiment among the Argentine populace, but this did not translate into much demand for entering the war on that side. The real debate in Argentina was between “rupturistas” and “neutralistas”, and a heated debate it was in the newspapers, in their clubs, and on the streets (Tato 2008a: 231-237). But the significance of these two camps also highlights the lack of a call in Argentina to go further than merely “rupturing” relations with Germany by undertaking a real war against the Germans. Yrigoyen never felt any domestic pressure to enter the war on the side of Britain and the United States. Despite the hopes of the British government, Yrigoyen remained stoutly neutral throughout the war. Germany’s loss of the diplomatic war in North America may have caused its ultimate defeat. But Germany never really paid a price in South America for its similar diplomatic blunders. Yrigoyen’s refusal to break with Germany reflected in part the irritation he and many other Argentines felt towards a second unique Latin American style of the war. Certainly the most intensive direct way that the belligerents waged the First World War in the Americas was with the variety of economic warfare measures installed both by the Germans and, especially, by the British. The dueling blockades, as all economic warfare was known during the early twentieth century, made it increasingly difficult for Latin America to conduct business as usual with Europe or anywhere else. On the one hand, German U-boats engaged in unrestricted torpedoing threatened destruction of merchandise between Europe and Latin America. On the other hand, Britain and their allies placed increasing restrictions on access to the merchant shipping and banking of the world, most of which they controlled. This included the public blacklisting of German-suspected businesses in Latin American countries, which in attempting to hurt locally established businesses deeply irritated many Latin Americans who demanded efforts to maintain their countries’ sovereignty and neutrality against the imperial British.

“Blockade” makes it sound like the goal was to curtail supplies and end foreign trade, to devastate the domestic economy of an opponent and perhaps even to starve them into submission. Certainly the blockades on both sides attempted these things, and the Entente at least partially succeeded. Fairly quickly after the start of war, very few German-made goods sent to Latin American buyers passed through the blockade. After hundreds of thousands of tons of Argentine wheat made it to Germany via neutral Scandinavian ports during the first months of the war, virtually no further Latin American commodities made it through unmolested by the British blockade fleet blanketing the North Sea. German exports sent to Latin America had to pass through neutral hands under false documents to make goods seem non-German. It became increasingly difficult to even exchange correspondence between Germany and Latin America, with British postal censors reading and tracking significant amounts of the mails sent on the ships their blockading navy regularly searched.

On the other side, few traders felt that the Germans posed any significant obstacles to trade between Great Britain and Latin America. Certainly some ships were sunk on this route, particularly during 1917, but overall a tremendous volume of goods passed back and forth between Latin America and the Entente-ruled territories of Europe throughout the war. Even with strong wartime export restrictions in Britain, France and Italy, these three countries continued to supply 33.6% of Argentina’s imports in 1918 (down

9 “Lansing exposes South American plot by Luxburg,” in: *The New York Times*, December 21, 1917, p. 1

from 48.3% in 1913). More tellingly, the three European allies imported a whopping 57.3% of Argentina's exports in 1918 (up from 36.8% in 1913) (Albert 1988: 76). In 1918 Argentina exported an unprecedented 3.2 million metric tons of wheat, most of it to the Allies in Europe (Albert 1988: 63). When it came to Latin America, the British blockade clearly worked far more effectively than the German.

Under Britain's leadership, the Entente economic war in Latin America was quite different from the one faced by other global neutrals. It cut off all trade between belligerent Germany and Latin America. The rationing systems developed for the European neutrals implicitly acknowledged that some trade would take place between the neutral countries and Germany, with the British merely limiting the size of imports into the neutrals from overseas, under the expectation that demand in the neutral country (and local businesses who pledged to not send goods to Germany) would mean that few goods would make it across the German border.¹⁰ It was in no small part the news of tens of thousands of tons of grain going from Argentina to Scandinavia in late 1914, food transparently meant for shipment along to Germany, that led to the development of these allied restrictions on the trade of European neutrals (Bell 1961: 156-159). When it came to intervening with a country's trade, the British blockade in Latin America was far more upfront than the much more complex and nuanced systems the British foisted on European neutrals. The British, French and United States all had blacklists for companies in neutral countries around the world. For example, Britain ran covert "General Blacklists" for European neutrals, circulated to British banks and shippers forbidding transactions with certain businesses in the Netherlands and Sweden. But in Latin America the published Statutory List was publicized in the local press every time it was updated, making it more blatantly British intrusion on sovereign foreign nations. The inauguration of the British Statutory Blacklist in March 1916 targeted in particular large export firms that dominated Uruguayan wool, Argentine wheat and Brazilian coffee.

Britain's economic war in Latin America was also different because the local economies were dominated in significant ways by men from each of the belligerent countries, in particular by British businessmen who might expect to gain from the German losses. It is worthwhile to get beyond the term "blockade" in thinking of forms of economic warfare that held goals beyond forcing the enemy to capitulate. Taken further, a belligerent waging economic war might aim to permanently usurp something that once was the enemy's. The term "blockade" obscures ways that at least in Latin America, Britain and its allies fought an economic war of conquest. The Statutory List, put in place by authorities in the London-based Ministry of Blockade, aimed to help British companies permanently take over market share of the trade in commodities vital to the health of the Latin American economies, taking the place of German-tainted businesses like the giant grain and wool exporting firms of Argentina and the coffee traders of Brazil. In such ways, in waging the Latin American campaign of its war, Britain looked for permanent gains.

Was this different from the Entente's war aims elsewhere in the world? In Europe, the British and French plausibly proclaimed theirs a war not for aggrandizement but simply for survival, with the eventual goal the salvation of the territories seized by the aggressive Germans in 1870 and 1914. The French government remained deliberately vague about any goals beyond Alsace and Lorraine, but some certainly by 1917 considered

¹⁰ For the Dutch example, see Kruizinga (2011).

that annexing the Saar Coal fields might be a realistic spoil of victory (Stevenson 2011: 459-460). At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, often judged as having results far too harsh for Germany, the most extreme hopes of men like Marshal Ferdinand Foch called not for French expansion but for the development of some sort of self-governing buffer state along the Rhine, between France and Germany. In any case this proposal was rejected immediately by the Allied leaders, including Foch's own Premier, Georges Clemenceau (Macmillan 2001: ch. 14). As for Asia and Africa, most statesmen in Britain and France agreed during the war that the conquered German colonies would not be allowed back into German hands (Strachan 2001: 541-542). One could argue that the commercial gains that the British hoped for from Latin America were far less significant than these territorial grabs planned for other parts of the world. Then again, at least any advances in Latin America could be expected to prove quite profitable over the long term, something that might not be true of the expensive task of running new colonies. It is tempting to see the commercial war in Latin America as an attempt at globalized looting and plundering, those most traditional of war goals.

The style of warfare pursued by the belligerents in Latin America was crafted to the unique circumstances of the region. There was virtually no physical, violent warfare in South America, a huge difference from the other fronts in the war. The diplomatic war in Latin America was conducted with higher stakes than in most other regions. The economic wars in Latin America had unique methods and aims, and as we shall see also led to significantly different results than the blockade efforts in Europe and the northeast Atlantic.

The question of degree

The very fact that the war in Latin America was so tailor-made suggests clearly that Latin America attracted at least some official resources during the war. How significant was the war in Latin America to the overall efforts of both of the sides in the world war? If one sticks to expenses and the body count, one must judge the Latin American efforts of either set of belligerents as indisputably minor and fundamentally unimportant. Certainly both sides spent the vast bulk of financial and material resources and raw human effort on the battlefields of Europe. Latin America has reasonably been left out of the military histories of the war. But the bottom line and the body count only tell part of the story of the First World War. Although soldiers obviously were the ones who sacrificed the most, it is worthwhile to remember that the ability of each side to mobilize global resources needed to support their armies and societies would be critical to ultimate victory in the war.

When it comes to looking at non-lethal dimensions of warfare during the Great War, in other words the economic battle to destroy their enemy's ability to resist while enabling one's own side to continue to thrive, most histories of the global economic wars completely ignore any Latin American dimension.¹¹ This might lead one to believe that there really wasn't much of a Latin American dimension to the blockades. Yet obviously there was. Latin America played significantly into broad economic calculations on both sides, particularly on the issue of supplies of raw materials. The British navy's squadrons in the North Sea searched and boarded merchant ships coming from or going to Latin America

11 For a recent example, see Lambert (2012); also, see Dehne (2009: 2).

just like they did for cargos from other trading partners like the United States. Destruction of German businesses in Latin America was expected to sway the decision-making process of the Reich government in ways similar to the appeals of angry war-weary businessmen in Germany itself.¹²

However, the economic warfare that attacked Latin America was far cheaper to wage than those of armies. It is worthwhile to keep in mind the different degree of effort needed to bring success. The resources put into Latin America were significantly less than the expectations that the belligerents held for the war there. In this vein one might fruitfully compare the effort undertaken by both sides to get satisfactory outcomes in their relationships with neutral states across the globe. How did the way belligerents treated neutral governments in Latin America compare to their treatment of neutral governments elsewhere? Geography completely mattered when it came to defining neutral rights. Some neutrals in Europe, like the Netherlands, plausibly feared that one of the belligerents might attack or invade them. As Johan den Hertog has explained, Germany's military commander Erich Ludendorff would have attacked the Netherlands "if the Dutch impeded his own war-making capabilities or if he was no longer convinced that the Dutch would or could withstand Allied attempts to use Dutch soil" (Hertog 2011: 26). Germany was willing and able to threaten armed force to ensure that neutrals bordering the Reich followed a neutrality that did not oppose its needs. Through the last days of the war, Germany could overrun the Netherlands if it decided to do so. On the other hand, Germany could not force even Brazil (let alone any other Latin American country) into a state of servitude under Germany. In Brazil the wartime rumors fed by the Luxburg Telegrams that the large German communities, particularly in Rio Grande do Sul, might revolt and declare independence from the rest of Brazil was among the causes for Brazil's declaration of war against Germany in October 1917. But although Germany did sponsor community building efforts like German-language schools and the Lutheran churches, there is no evidence that before or during the war the German government ever considered sponsoring any such separatist uprisings, or even that the Germans there had any interest in supporting a distant Reich to whom many felt little or no loyalty (Luebke 1987: 139-146). Their threat paled in comparison to other reasons why Brazil declared war against Germany, particularly Germany's torpedoing of Brazilian ships in October 1917, the promise of selling the recent massive coffee harvest to the Allies, the general desire of many Brazilian statesmen to follow the lead of the United States, and also the expectation that they could take over and paradoxically even attenuate (rather than strengthen) the British economic war measures against the German coffee businesses and banks in Brazil.¹³

The German government could not threaten anyone in Latin America with invasion or conquest. Yet this does not mean that Germany did not work for more influence or power in Latin America. They simply did so in the only ways they really could. The Reich treasury financed some bribery and influence-buying schemes in Latin America, although probably with little definitive payoff. In terms of German effort, more interesting ideas arise when considering (again) the Zimmerman and Luxburg episodes. Despite the fact they ultimately proved gaffes, the fact that the German government floated as plausible

12 See the Foreign Trade Department report on "The Effects of the Statutory List on Enemy Firms" (88325), 3 Nov. 1916. The National Archives of the UK: FO 833/16.

13 Fritsch (1988: 45-52); Luebke (1987: 193-196).

such long-shot strategies as Mexico starting a war against the United States indicates that Germany did hold significant expectations about the Reich's power and influence in Latin America. One could see this as desperation, but if successful the reward far outran the risk. Imagine (as Zimmerman undoubtedly did) even an ill-conceived incursion by Mexican forces into the United States at exactly the same time that the US was beginning to build up its armies for Europe. Certainly there would have been a diversion of these resources away from the Western Front to the Rio Grande. Throughout the war, Germany acted cocky in Latin America, boldly assuming (and asking Latin Americans to assume) that their country would resurge to an even greater prominence across the region after the war. Germany remained attentive to affairs across the Atlantic, because the potential rewards were noteworthy, and the possibility for success seemed plausible.

But undoubtedly Latin America was far more important to the war efforts of Germany's enemies. The effort Germany spent fighting war in Latin America was far less than the ocean-controlling British. The Anglo-French alliance paid significant attention throughout the war to Latin America. Probably the moment when the First World War in South America reached its peak importance in the overall global war strategies of either belligerent power is when the British installed their Statutory Blacklists of German businesses in neutral countries in 1916. To issue a public blacklist in their country looked to many in the United States like a British attack on their sovereignty, sparking substantial anti-British anger in the neutral country whose continued benevolence Britain most keenly needed Bailey (1934: 20-21). Only by issuing a blacklist in the United States could Britain coherently argue to the real targets of the Statutory Blacklisting program, South American countries including Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Brazil, that the economic war was evenhanded and legitimately applied to all neutrals. It is surprising but telling that the British government deemed the risk to its relationship with the United States to be one worth taking to wage war against the Germans in Latin America.

At the same time, the Ministry of Blockade separated from the British Foreign Office, and ballooned into a bureaucratic apparatus of hundreds of clerks and officials in London recruited from across various government departments, private enterprise and academia, all devoted to figuring out ways to crush the trade of blacklisted German companies, while also helping British companies (especially those in Latin America) to take the place of the Germans hurt by the war. It was not quite the manpower layout of the Western Front, but new groups like the Foreign Trade Department spilled off Whitehall into the opulence of Lancaster House, commandeered by the Ministry of Blockade for use by the economic warriors. The efforts of Lord Robert Cecil, the Minister of Blockade, to build a ministry aiming to continue the constructive aspects of the war succeeded in creating a permanent Department of Overseas Trade whose limitations only became apparent after the war. In 1918 the Foreign Office sent Maurice de Bunsen, the former ambassador to the Austrian Empire, on a high profile mission to South America, where his efforts focused on stoking the national pride of the Britons in Latin America leading the war effort there. The degree of determination placed by the British government on its economic war in Latin America was significant, expecting it to develop into a useful adjunct to the existing naval blockade of the North Sea, and as a rare place where British business could potentially permanently expand during the war (Dehne 2009: ch. 5).

How much work did the belligerents put into Latin America during the war? Certainly not as much as they put into the fighting on the western and eastern fronts. In Germany,

when Admiral von Holtzendorff told him of the worries of the Foreign Ministry that the fallout from the Zimmerman telegram episode might negatively affect Germany's post-war relations with the South American republics, Field Marshal Hindenburg replied gruffly "we must conquer first" (quoted by Tuchman 1958: 138). In Britain as well the Latin American war effort did not attract any attention from Prime Ministers Herbert Asquith or David Lloyd George. But the bureaucratic and naval economic warriors in London put a significant and often ignored piece of their country's overall efforts into the quest to dominate the supplies and business world of Latin America. On the war in Latin America, resources were expended, and both the British and the Germans held significant expectations about the results of their wars there.

The question of results

Given such expectations, how exactly did Latin America contribute to the ultimate result of the war? Virtually no historians of the First World War ask this question. Latin America's complete omission in many excellent general histories of the Great War would seem to indicate that the answer is simply "not at all". One possible way to judge the effect of the battle for Latin America is to attempt to determine whether Latin American issues affected the timing of the war's end. There is no sense that anything that was going on in South America mattered to the leaders of the Reich when they decided to seek an armistice in October 1918 (Stevenson 2012: ch. 8). In particular there is no evidence that any pressure from German businesses in Latin America compelled the Reich government to capitulate, the basic rationale for all blockade measures against Germany.

When it came down to it, there wasn't actually that much going bad for German interests in Latin America in 1918. Many ships interned in South American ports remained unavailable to the Allies throughout the war. German businesses in Latin America were barely squealing at all, let alone loud enough for the German government to notice. Most German businesses blacklisted by the Allies still existed, having moved into different operations or finding ways to hide their dealings from their snoopy pro-Allied neighbors (Dehne 2013). After Brazil entered the war in October 1917, if anything things got easier for the German companies there, with the Brazilian government allowing Theodor Wille and other German businesses to avoid the *lei de guerra* and continue their domestic operations (Luebke 1987: 193-196). Many Latin American businesses targeted as German continued to operate and profit during the war and thereafter, one might argue with far more success than the British businessmen who waged their own country's economic war. As Ronald Newton and others have shown, the German presence in South American business circles remained strong throughout the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁴ If, as was argued earlier, the Allied economic war in Latin America waged against German businesses was a different type or style of economic war than was fought elsewhere, this war was also distinctly less successful. In Latin America at least parts of the Allied economic war did not meet its goals.

But there could be other ways to judge Latin America's impact on the results of the war. Permanently destroying German businesses and fostering Allied replacements was

¹⁴ Newton (1977: ch. 4); Newton (1992: 5-9); Barton (2000: 257-258); Hilton (1981: 37-38, 293).

not the most important goal of the Allied economic war in Latin America. If we define economic war as an effort to harness all available resources for the war effort, tipping the balance of global trade away from the enemy, Britain and its allies certainly won the economic war in Latin America, and their victory in the battle for resources contributed significantly to the German need for peace in the fall of 1918. Britain's economic warfare machinery placed controls on the lion's share of the world's oceanic shipping, meaning that they could largely determine who would be able to transport any available commodities from Latin America. In effect the British government controlled who could purchase commodities from their producers. Their control of such food exports did not necessarily mean that the Latin Americans were getting bad deals; indeed if anything the Allied need for such Latin American products became greater during the war. Latin America played a big role in allowing the Allies to maintain reasonable supplies, particularly in the critical year of 1918 when France received more than a third of its wheat imports from Argentina (Stevenson 2011: 342, 397). Significant amounts of the tinned meat and lukewarm coffee consumed by the *poilus* of the French Army came from Uruguay and Brazil. Regardless of its culinary appeal, such food was better in quality, freshness and quantity than what German soldiers got, and the morale of the German civilians and troops correspondingly plummeted in the summer of 1918.¹⁵ Although they did not fall into true famine by 1918, the German military and civilians had certainly worn down due to deprivation that would not have existed if the Entente simply allowed Germany to trade with all the world's neutrals. Certainly the bulk of food for the Entente came from the English-speaking North American states, but critical food supplies, particularly meat and grains from the River Plate, flooded across the Atlantic and fed the civilians and soldiers of the British and French empires. The grain crops of South America were available on the opposite seasonal cycle from the supplies from North America, filling pivotal supply gaps in the early months of each year (Dehne 2013: 239). These supplies were far quicker to ship to Europe than those from India, Australia, and New Zealand, and with significantly less usage of scant shipping. Throughout the war, food bought and paid for sat unshipped on Australian docks (Barnett 1985: 72, 90). The frozen meat supplied from the River Plate to the Allies made up more than half of the meat imported from overseas into Allied territories throughout the war, in 1917 supplying nearly four times the meat of Australia and ten times more meat than the United States (Hanson 1938: 201). Without a doubt, Latin American food tremendously improved the ability of the British and French militaries and societies to resist the German offensives during the pivotal final year of war. Although it is not quite acceptable historical practice to speculate about what did not happen, one could easily imagine that a lack of available Latin American food would have simply meant that less food would enter Allied territories, leading their people and armies closer to starvation and perhaps creating unrest similar to that which developed in Germany in the early days of November 1918 (Stevenson 2011: 533-534). It is probably impossible to calculate whether this food imbalance abetted by Latin American supplies meant that the war lasted a few days, a few weeks, or a few months less than if the Allies had not relied on Latin American produce. Regardless, it is fair to conclude that Latin American supplies contributed significantly to the Allies' critical (and perhaps even decisive) ability to outeat their German opponents.

15 Vincent (1985: ch. 5); Offer (1989: 60-61, 71-72, 77).

Conclusion

When looking at the First World War, Latin America presents a conundrum. It was a place firmly outside the core military story that inevitably and justly dominates histories of the Great War. But despite this, Latin America was far more important to the outcome of the war than many of the military sideshows in Africa and the Pacific, which despite their unimportance to the overall outcome of war are often described or at least mentioned in general histories of the war. Supplies from Latin America were critical for the Entente's war effort, helping to feed fighting men and civilians. The allegiance of Latin American neutrals was contested by both sides in the war, with real hopes and expectations that gaining such allies would be helpful if not instrumental in defeating their enemies. Yet in general both sides failed to gain such allies, as Latin American politicians and their publics were turned off by the awkward and unique diplomatic and economic wars fought by both sides in their countries. Despite (or perhaps due to) their importance, the Latin American governments remained mostly aloof from the contest.

Perhaps not surprisingly, access to food and financial supplies after the war exposed again the unique place of Latin America in the Great War. Throughout the Paris Peace Conference in the first months of 1919, representatives from all the victorious powers had to grapple with the competing imperatives of feeding the starving populations of defeated central Europe while sucking out of Germany as many tangible resources for reparations as possible. Latin America was one of the rare places where there was agreement between these imperatives. The inability of the victorious Allies to simply sequester German property in Latin America (in other words, their failure to really win the war on the "far western front") meant that the German grain businesses and banks there still had resources that could be used to purchase and send food to the starving peoples of Germany. By early May, German authorities had already purchased 100,000 tons of River Plate flour.¹⁶ Germany did not need to send money or gold, because Argentina and other South American countries remained the one place in the world where the miserable, defeated, nearly failed state of Germany still had credit.

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16 Appendix "Report of Enemy Tonnage Sub-committee" of 3 May 1919, in minutes of 20th meeting of the Supreme Economic Council on 26 May 1919; from Dockrill (1991: 392-396).

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