THE ENDURING IMPACT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

A collection of perspectives

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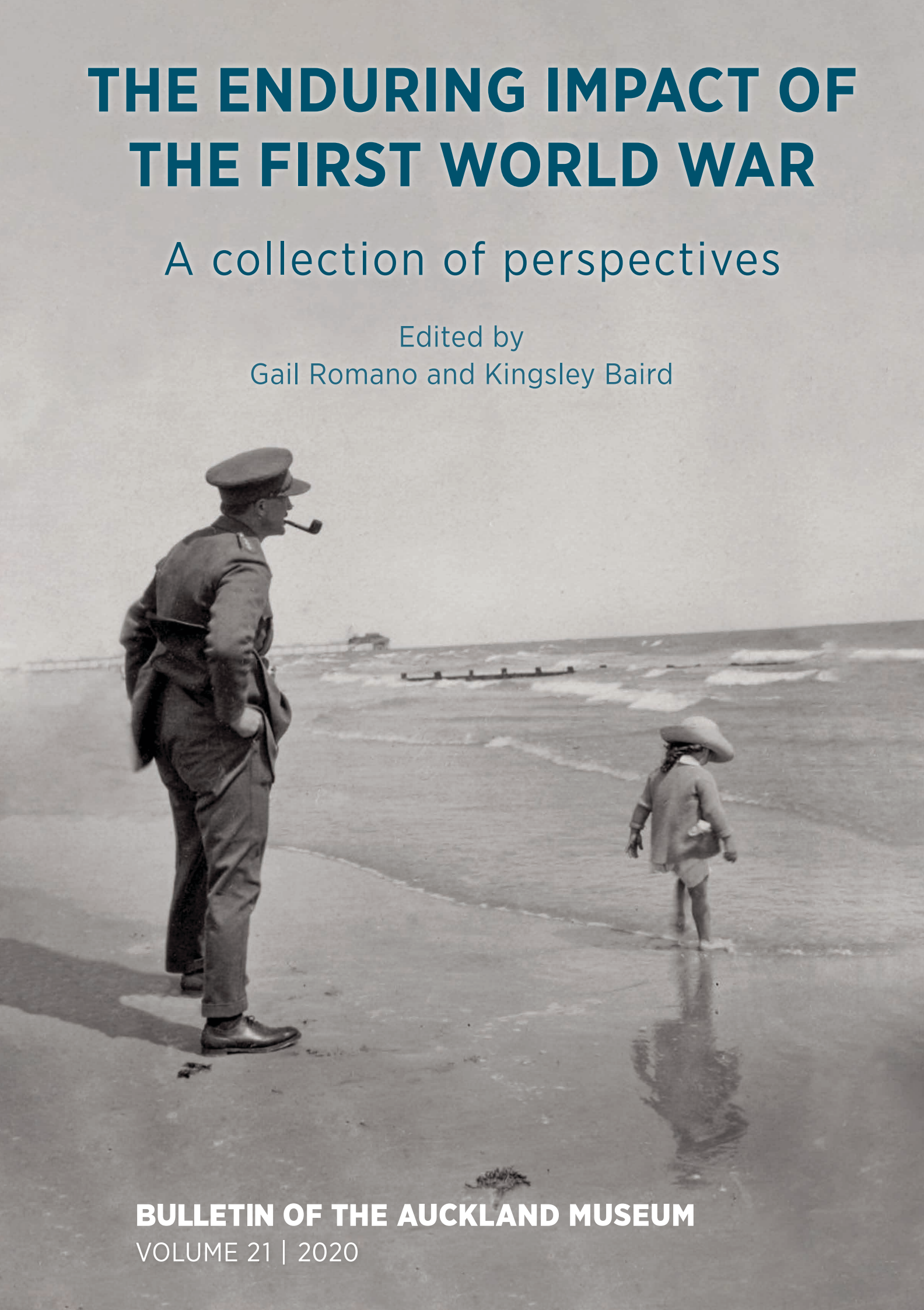

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1917 in Latin America: Between Pan-Americanism and Anti-imperialism

María Inés Tato University of Buenos Aires

Abstract

1917 was a decisive year in the diverse theatres of the First World War, contributing to the globalisation of the conflict. In Latin America, the entry of the United States into the conflict was the most significant event, which triggered essential developments in the diplomatic, economic, political, and cultural fields. The United States displayed an active campaign to align the countries of the subcontinent behind its foreign policy, led by the principle of Pan-Americanism. As a result, most Latin American states severed diplomatic relationships with, or declared war against, the German Empire, in the context of heated internal debates.

This article aims to analyse the impact of the United States' entry into the war on the Latin American intellectual field. It will tackle two main reactions unleashed by that event. On the one hand, it led many intellectuals to support the notion of continental unity under American leadership, reinforced later by the so-called 'Wilsonian moment'. On the other hand, it also gave rise to the rejection of American interference in the subcontinent's domestic affairs and the revival of anti-imperialism, a vigorous ideological trend that appeared after the Spanish-American War of 1898.

Keywords

anti-imperialism; belligerence; First World War; intellectuals; Latin America; neutrality; Pan-Americanism; United States; Wilsonian moment

INTRODUCTION

The year 1917 was a crucial year in the different theatres of the First World War, contributing to the globalisation of the conflict.[1] Although that date tends to be automatically identified with the Russian Revolution, the impact of this outstanding event was neither immediate nor direct everywhere. The dynamics of different spaces of the world were determined by many other factors happening simultaneously, the influence of which on local war experiences differed from one latitude to another. Examining the impact of events of 1917 from the margins of Europe may help to elucidate the complex entanglements between global and local dynamics during this critical year.

In 1917 Latin America, the most decisive event was undoubtedly the United States' entry into the war. In February, Germany relaunched unrestricted submarine warfare, which affected every ship—including those from neutral countries—sailing in the exclusion zone surrounding the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and the eastern Mediterranean.[2] Two months later, the United States entered the war on the Allied side, triggering a series of similar reactions all around the globe. In Latin America, it led to the widespread abandonment of neutrality, intensely defended until then by the subcontinent's states.[3] At the United States' request and—to a large extent—due to its diplomatic and economic pressures, most of the Latin American nations aligned themselves with its foreign policy, declaring war on Germany or, at least, severing diplomatic relations with it. Only six countries remained neutral until the end of the Great War, despite the obstacles and challenges posed by local and international circumstances.[4]

1 Ian F.W. Beckett, ed., *1917: Beyond the Western Front* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

2 Paul Halpern, 'The War at Sea', in *A Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 141–155.

3 Olivier Compagnon, 'Entrer en guerre? Neutralité et engagement de l'Amérique latine entre 1914 et 1918', *Relations Internationales* 137 (2009): 31–43; Stefan Rinke, *Latin America and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 38–107.

4 In 1917 Brazil, Costa Rica, Cuba, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama declared war on the German empire, although only Brazil and Cuba had a symbolic participation in the conflict. On the other hand, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Peru, and Uruguay decided to break off relations with Germany, while Argentina, Colombia, Chile, El Salvador, Mexico, Paraguay, and Venezuela stayed neutral until the end of the Great War.

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TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES

In addition to this significant change in the subcontinent's foreign affairs, different transnational ideas spread widely in Latin America and fostered renewed debates about the definition of national and regional identities. In various world locations, the First World War encouraged the circulation of several pan-national ideologies born in the 19th century, which sought to transcend geopolitical boundaries bringing together culturally or ethnically defined peoples. That was the case of Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism in the multicultural European empires,[5] but also of Pan-Islamism, Pan-Africanism, and Pan-Asianism in some colonial contexts.[6] In the Americas, Pan-Latinism, Pan-Americanism, and Pan-Hispanism—also developed from the nineteenth century—were reactivated during the Great War, experiencing fluctuations, especially after 1917.

Pan-Latinism was probably the most successful transnational configuration and contributed to reinforce the connections with France and—by extension—with its allies in the war. According to this representation, France and the Latin American nations belonged to the same cultural and spiritual race—Latinity—founded on a linguistic root and sharing a common origin and a common fate. During the wars of independence from their former mother countries, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in America found their model in the French Revolution of 1789. In the last decades of that century, during the building of their national states, they adopted a republican political paradigm and a civic pedagogy that mirrored the French ones.[7] France was also perceived as mother of the arts and literature, an image that encouraged a considerable exodus of intellectuals to Paris. In effect, since the turn of the century, a massive flow of writers and artists from the subcontinent settled in the French capital, where they formed a stable colony. Paris was considered 'the Mecca of the artistic pilgrimage', a cultural circuit that validated the intellectual merits and facilitated professionalisation and international recognition.[8] Although Latin American intellectuals made frequent allusions to the contributions to the war from France's occasional allies, in general terms, they addressed their primordial loyalty to France, which was the basis of the solidarity granted to the other Allied powers. As the Argentine pro-German writer Ernesto Vergara Biedma noted, the admirers of France 'acclaimed aristocratic Russia; acclaim revolutionary Russia, England, Japan, Serbia, and the rest of the Allies, because they defend France. There are not pro-Allies here, there are Francophiles, and even this is not the entire truth, because if we dig a bit, we find out that there are only Parisianphiles'.[9] The influence of this representation of France explains that, in general terms, a pro-Allied stance prevailed among the subcontinent's intellectuals during the Great War.[10]

Nevertheless, other competitors to Pan-Latinism also made their re-emergence in wartime: Pan-Americanism and Pan-Hispanism. Pan-Americanism affirmed the unity of the Americas based on a geographical foundation and postulated the United States leadership on a continental scale, in line with the Monroe Doctrine.[11] Since the turn of the century, this political and ideological trend had attained a particular influence among the educated elites of Central America, the Caribbean, and Brazil, favoured by the United States' commercial links in the region and its interventionist foreign policy. After the country's entry into the war, this doctrine received a new boost to bring into line the Latin American states behind the United States' foreign policy. This development produced two different political and ideological reactions among the Latin American intellectuals: enthusiastic support to the 'Colossus of the North' and a comparable rejection.

5 Sarah Danielsson, 'Pan-nationalism Reframed: Nationalism, "Diaspora", the Role of the "Nation-state" and the Global Age', in *Nationalism and Globalisation: Conflicting or Complementary*, ed. Daphne Halikiopoulou and Sofia Vasilopoulou (London: Routledge, 2011), 41–61.

6 Cemil Aydin, 'Pan-nationalism of Pan-Islamic, Pan-Asian, and Pan-African Thought', in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, ed. John Breuilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 672–693.

7 Denis Rolland, *La crise du modèle français. Marianne et l'Amérique latine. Culture, politique et identité* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2000).

8 Beatriz Colombi, 'Camino a la meca. Escritores hispanoamericanos en París (1900–1920)', in *Historia de los Intelectuales en América Latina*, ed. Jorge Myers (Buenos Aires: Katz Ediciones, 2009 I), 544.

9 Ernesto Vergara Biedma, *Guerra de mentiras: el discurso de Wilson y el peligro yanqui* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos L.J. Rosso, 1917), 44.

10 María Inés Tato, 'The Latin American Intellectual Field in the Face of the First World War: An Initial Approach', in *A Civil War of Words. The Cultural Impact of the Great War in Catalonia, Spain, Europe and a Glance to Latin America*, eds. Xavier Pla, Maximiliano Fuentes, and Francesc Montero (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016), 99–120.

11 Mark T. Gilderhus, *The Second Century: US-Latin American Relations Since 1889* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2000). In 1823 the President of the United States, James Monroe, addressed a message to the Congress rejecting European intervention in the Americas, summarised in the celebrated phrase 'the Americas for the Americans', and better known as Monroe Doctrine or Monroism. This anticolonialist doctrine legitimised the United States expansion on the subcontinent during the rest of the century. See Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2011).

GOD BLESS AMERICA

The first response to Pan-Americanism was the support for Woodrow Wilson. He acquired worldwide prestige due to his fourteen points and especially to the self-determination principle which led to the so-called 'Wilsonian moment'.[12] At least until the Treaty of Versailles, the American president was considered on a global scale to be the icon of a new and fairer international order. As a result, the United States started to be celebrated as a paradigm of freedom and as a liberating power of oppressed peoples, even in South America whose intellectuals used to resist its influence on the region. Hence, the 'Wilsonian moment' led to some Latin American intellectuals expressing a positive attitude towards Wilson's project, the revision of the previous prejudices regarding that nation, the assessment of the advantages of hemispheric cooperation, and a reappraisal of international alignments.[13] Thus, according to the Paraguayan Cecilio Báez, the United States' intervention in the war was motivated by its decision to 'ensure the freedom of the seas and to restrain the arrogance of Prussian militarism, which disrupts the order of law and threatens the independence of the civilised peoples'.[14] Báez emphasised the links between Latin American emancipation and American independence, and gave a new interpretation of historical events such as the Spanish-American war: 'North America was the land of liberty since its first origins, populated as it was by men persecuted in Europe for their free ideas and beliefs …. In the nineteenth century, the United States … protected the independence of Latin America…. [In 1898] it rescued Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines from the Spanish rule'.[15]

Doctrine was also presented in the same democratic and liberating light, as the Paraguayan Antolín Irala illustrates: '[The United States] goes to Europe to fight for the same principles that, in a certain way, protected the sovereignty of all the American peoples at the beginning of their independent life, the same principles that were expressed in the Monroe Doctrine…. [This] was not only the affirmation of American nationalities in the face of eventual European advances, but also the proclamation of democracy against the absolutist reaction victorious in the Old World'.[16]

Therefore, the American Revolution joined the French Revolution as a precedent for Latin America's independence process. These historical and ideological coincidences laid the foundations of a collective identity and imposed the moral obligation to support the United States' cause. In this same vein, the Argentine writer Ricardo Rojas celebrated the European legacy but, at the same time, distanced himself from it, seeking a new cultural reference in the American continent: 'The new generation recognises Europe's civilising deed in America, but it does not kowtow blindly to the so-called "European civilisation" … we believe in an America destined to surpass the ancestor civilisations'.[17] In his rediscovery of the Americas' unity, Rojas considered the United States the 'precursor and mentor of the emancipation, democracy, federalism, and immigrant fraternity among the colonies of the New World … we reaffirm our faith in the Pan-American ideal that was the numen of our national identity'.[18]

THE RISE OF ANTI-IMPERIALISM

On the other hand, the new impulse to Pan-Americanism also resulted in the accentuation of an anti-imperialist current that can be traced back to the Spanish-American War in 1898, when some sectors of the subcontinent's educated elites rejected the United States' growing interferences in Latin America's domestic affairs.[19] In parallel, they began to reconsider the Spanish legacy, giving shape to the 'first Latin-American anti-imperialism'[20] and an incipient rise of Pan-Hispanism.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó published his famous book *Ariel*, where he contrasted a materialistic and frivolous Anglo-Saxon America with a spiritual Latin America, forging an interpretation that would nurture later anti-imperialist

12 The so-called 'Wilsonian Moment' encompassed the period from the United States' entry into the war to the end of the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919. See Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

13 Olivier Compagnon, *L'adieu à l'Europe. L'Amérique latine et la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 326–328.

14 Cecilio Báez, 'Discurso del Doctor Cecilio Báez', in *En favor de los aliados: discursos pronunciados en la ocasión de la gran demonstración en favor de los aliados realizada en Asunción (Paraguay), el 11 de julio de 1917* (London: Hayman, Christy & Lilly, 1917), 8.

15 *Ibid.*, 8–9.

16 Antolín Irala, 'Discurso del Doctor Antolín Irala', *En Favor de los aliados*, 27.

17 Ricardo Rojas, 'Profesión de fe de la nueva generación', in *La guerra de las naciones* (Buenos Aires: La Facultad, 1924 [1919]), 274–275.

18 *Ibid.*, 279–281.

19 Alan McPherson, 'Anti-Americanism in Latin America', in *Anti-Americanism. History, Causes, Themes*, ed. Brendon O'Connor (Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), 77–102.

20 Oscar Terán, 'El primer anti-imperialismo latinoamericano', in *En busca de la ideología argentina* (Buenos Aires: Catálogos, 1986), 95–98.

argumentations.[21] The First World War revived the anti-American perspectives. From 1914, the United States advanced its presence in Central America, taking advantage of the fact that Europe was concentrated on the conflict. Thus, a succession of military interventions took place in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Nicaragua. The Colombian José María Vargas Vila accused the United States of making the most of the Great War to rule the subcontinent without the European restraint:

> The Yankees devote themselves to the sharing out and the plundering of Latin America, and the world is unaware of the sharing out made by the pirates of Carthage…. Their brothers of Europe are ignorant of this disaster, which they could not prevent for now even if they knew about it…. The Yankee has chosen well the moment…. This tragic and crepuscular hour when nobody can assist the peoples devoured by it…. The merchants have become prowlers and steal, taking advantage of the European people's fight; Monroism is their slogan; robbing weak peoples, more than attacking them.[22]

Considering these facts, the Argentine writer Ernesto Quesada condemned the war's economic and geopolitical motivations, distinguished Germany's and the Allied ones, and highlighted the American control strategies: 'Germany has never pretended to play a political role in America. Among the three great rivals disputing the Latin American markets, only the United States shows political purposes, not in the sense of territorial conquest but a sort of an innominate tutelage or high diplomatic protectorate'.[23]

Besides distinguishing Germany from the Triple Entente's imperialism, Quesada warned against the United States' expansionist ambitions on the subcontinent: 'The United States, in successive advances on Mexico, has snatched California, Texas, and has received Puerto Rico as spoils of war, practising the protectorate on Cuba and Panama'.[24]

The Venezuelan Rufino Blanco Fombona echoed Rodó's dichotomy when he defined the challenges of the subcontinent:

> Latin America's traditional enemy, present and future, is the Republic of the United States. Two races are face to face: the Latin one and the Saxon one; two Americas: The one born in Southern Europe and that born in the Northern Europe; two conceptions of life: The idealistic one and the Sanchopanzist one;[25] two sects: Catholicism and Protestantism; two social ideas: Individualism and solidarity; two civilisations: The Mediterranean one and that from the Northern seas and lands.[26]

The condemnation of the United States' imperialism was usually accompanied by the claim of an alternative supranational identity, based on historical and cultural factors. Pan-Hispanism postulated the existence of spiritual unity between Spain and its former colonies, based on language, religion, and a shared past, and was very popular during the war. Many intellectuals started to extoll Spain as the mother country of the Latin American nations and a model to follow in wartime, a tendency also actively fostered by German propaganda in Latin America.[27] It was not a coincidence that neutral Spain was reassessed when intense pressures from the United States to abandon neutrality increased. As a result, 12 October—the date of the 'discovery' of the Americas by Christopher Columbus—started to be celebrated as a national holiday in many Latin American countries, explicitly invoking the Spanish legacy.[28]

CONCLUSION

During the First World War, the United States' image in Latin America was not univocal but two-faced: perceived as an oppressive, imperialist power by some intellectual sectors, while others considered it an emancipating force. The reactions of the local intellectual field in the face of the Great War were rooted in secular circuits of economic, demographic, and cultural exchanges with Europe and the Americas, and related to the very definition of national and subcontinental identities.

Pan-Americanism drew support from a growing number of Latin American intellectuals, surpassing the limits of the traditional American influence. The

21 Patricia Funes, *Salvar la nación. Intelectuales, cultura y política en los años veinte latinoamericanos* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2006), 215–219.

22 José María Vargas Vila, *Ante los bárbaros. Los Estados Unidos y la guerra: el yanki, he ahí el enemigo* (Barcelona: Maucci, 1917), 6, 8–9.

23 Ernesto Quesada, *El 'peligro alemán' en Sud América* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos de Selin Suárez, 1915), 53.

24 *Ibid.*, 53, 32.

25 Reference to the character Sancho Panza, from Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's *Don Quixote*. While Don Quixote represents idealism, Sancho Panza incarnates the antithesis, materialism.

26 Rufino Blanco Fombona, 'Prólogo', in *El crimen de Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Carlos Pereyra (Madrid: Imprenta de J. Pueyo, 1917), IV–V.

27 Paul-Henri Michel, *L'Hispanisme dans les républiques espagnoles d'Amérique pendant la guerre de 1914-1918* (Paris: Alfred Costes Éditeur, 1930).

28 Miguel Rodríguez, *Celebración de 'la raza'. Una historia comparativa del 12 de octubre* (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2004), 77–82.

admiration for Woodrow Wilson—in fact, a global phenomenon—captivated intellectual circles usually distant and distrustful of the United States' continental leadership. However, the renewed impetus of Pan-Americanism also encouraged an antipodal response: the denouncement of imperialist meddling in Latin America and the consequent menace to the independence of the national states. Anti-imperialism was revived and directed its attacks against the United States' growing pressures on the subcontinent's governments.

In sum, the Latin American intellectual field during the First World War demonstrates the intensity of transnational cultural connections and the circulation of different representations of the conflict, re-appropriated and reinterpreted according to the subcontinent's historical experiences. As a result, in the global moment of 1917, the linkages between Latin America and its northern neighbour were passionately debated and re-examined, showing that the war impacted on multiple dimensions even in neutral countries.

María Inés Tato holds a PhD in History from the University of Buenos Aires (UBA). She is a Researcher of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council – Argentina (CONICET) at the Institute of Argentine and American History 'Dr Emilio Ravignani', UBA/CONICET, where she founded and coordinates the Group of Historical War Studies (GEHiGue). Dr Tato is also Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences – UBA, and at the Master in War History – Superior School of War – Faculty of the Army – University of National Defense (UNDEF).

Her current research area is the social and cultural history of the war in the twentieth century, particularly the impact of the First World War on Argentine society. Among her works, it is worth mentioning *La trinchera austral. La sociedad argentina ante la Primera Guerra Mundial* (Rosario, Prohistoria Ediciones, 2017) and *La Gran Guerra en América Latina. Una historia conectada* (coedited with Olivier Compagnon, Camille Foulard and Guillemette Martin, Mexico, CEMCA, 2018).
mitato@conicet.gov.ar