

A VANISHED MEMORY: THE GREAT WAR IN PRESENT ARGENTINA

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A vanished memory: The Great War in present Argentina

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The First World War had a deep impact on its Argentine contemporaries. This country maintained solid economic, demographic, cultural and historical bonds with Europe; for all these reasons the outbreak of the war has not gone unnoticed at all. On the contrary, the war provoked an intense and sustained social mobilisation, and laid the foundations of a political and cultural polarisation and of an activism that would reappear with a new vigour during other great conflicts of the first half of the XXth century. How is this war reminded a century later? Which are the current social perceptions about it? This paper aims to examine the collective remembrance of the Great War in Argentina since the 1980s and to risk some explanatory hypothesis about the place that it takes up in the social memory.

AN ARGENTINE WAR

While the Argentine government maintained an unaltered neutralist policy along the war, civil society showed a high level of commitment to one or another belligerent side through different modalities of mobilisation.¹ It is possible to distinguish two phases with defined profiles and different motivations in the involvement of Argentine society in the war, phases that recognised in 1917 a turning point. The United States entry into the war encouraged the abandonment of neutrality by most nations of Latin America, a decision stimulated by a campaign of diplomatic and economic pressures under the motto of Pan-Americanism.² In the Argentine case, it was added another issue: the effects of the submarine warfare declared by Germany. Until 1917 the war awakened a remarkable interest and was perceived as a distant spectacle that activated an emotional adhesion to the cause of the warring nations

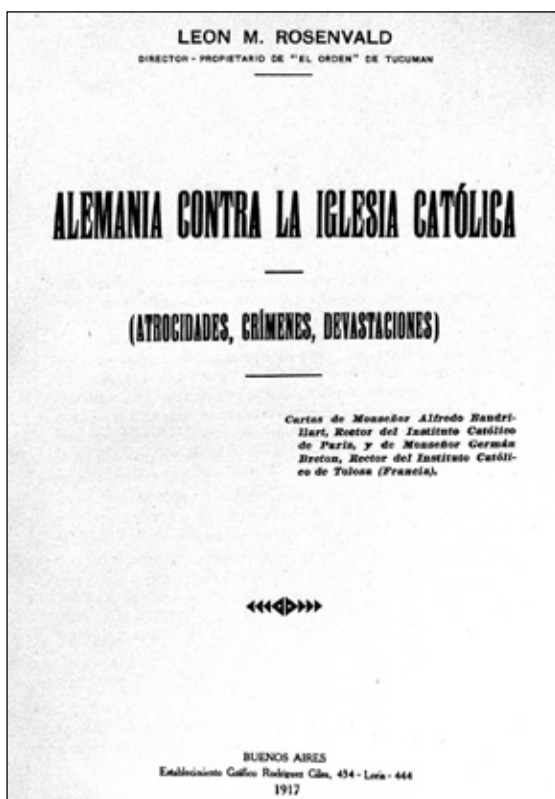
based on the aforementioned ties with the Old Continent.³ But, ultimately, it was seen as a conflict that did not concern directly to Argentina. The “European war”, as it was called, was intensely discussed in the press and among some intellectuals, debating on the causes and responsibilities of its outbreak and taking sides explicitly in favour of one or other belligerent. In general terms, most of society supported the Allies, especially France, which since the previous century was the political and cultural model for the elites. On the contrary, Germanophiles were frankly a minority and should take care of the difficult mission of defending the German cause from a hostile public opinion.

Besides this cultural activism, the war caused an important economic and military mobilisation. The first protagonists of this movement were logically the immigrant communities residing in the country, which in 1914 constituted almost the 30% of the Argentine population and nearly the half of the inhabitants of the republic's capital. Through their preexisting associative networks and also through patriotic committees organised at the beginning of the conflict, they channeled financial resources to their far Fatherland and responded in different degrees to the military call of their States.

But also the Argentines contributed to the cause of the warring nations through solidarity works. For example, German occupation of Belgium and the subsequent atrocities against civilians sensitised public opinion and led to the creation of the *Comité Argentino Pro Huérfanos Belgas* (*Argentine Committee Pro Belgian Orphans*), which, as well as other civil associations, collected funds throughout the country to help these victims. In addition to the material assistance to soldiers and civilian victims, Argentine society provided the European armies with many volunteer soldiers, doctors and nurses.

Nevertheless, in 1917 circumstances transformed radically the perception of the war and the objectives of the mobilisation. As stated before, Pan-Americanism

León M. Rosenvald,
*Alemania contra
la Iglesia Católica*
[atrocidades,
crímenes,
devastaciones], Est.
Gráf. Rodríguez
Giles, Buenos Aires,
1917, Coll. BDIC



- together with the effects of submarine warfare -which provoked the sinking of three merchant ships of Argentine flag- had a decisive influence to break the neutralist consensus dominant since 1914. The far-off war transmuted into a close conflict that affected Argentina. In consequence, it stirred nationalist passions that turned the cultural tensions registered previously into political ones. It started a symbolic fight for the appropriation of Argentine nationality that exacerbated the political and ideological polarisations and strengthened society mobilisation. In that way, the dichotomy between “Alliadophiles” and “Germanophiles”, which until 1917 described the public opinion’s elective affinities, received a denigratory semantic charge, being almost a political insult, respectively applied to the supporters of the breaking of diplomatic relations with Germany and the defenders of neutrality. In particular, the use of the term “Germanophile” was distorted and included not only the confessed admirers of Germany but also any supporter of neutrality, whatever the reasons of their position were. In this stage, the war intensified the activism of the press, the intellectuals and the associations, putting the international matter in the public agenda. The streets and squares of the main Argentine cities were transformed into the privileged scene of the dispute on the country’s external affairs. There were massive demonstrations organised by a multiplicity of neutralist and

rupturist associations, born in diverse social and geographical areas, which interacted with the press and the intellectuals, causing a political mobilisation of great proportions, which would have to last until the end of the war.

The Great War also left long-lasting legacies, such as the configuration of cultural and political antagonistic grounds, holding identities (“Alliadophiles” and “Germanophiles”) based on enduring ideological topics; the appeal to nationalism; and the use of a particular repertoire of modalities of collective mobilisation. This heritage experienced a revival during the Spanish civil war and the Second World War, conflicts that also shook Argentine society intensely.

THE FORGOTTEN WAR

The memory of the Great War got weaker through the decades. Not only commemorative public policies and other modes of collective remembrance are almost nonexistent in Argentina. Even for historians, the Great War seems to be a conflict that never happened. Only in the last decade several works on this topic came out from the perspective of cultural and social history, exploring the intellectual circles, immigrant communities, press, associations, volunteer soldiers.⁴ In some way, the growing field of First World War studies in Argentina is fighting a solitary struggle against forgetting.

At present the indicators of the social visibility of the Great War are scarce, feeble and isolated. The first of them belongs to the sphere of public policies. On April 15th 1994, a decree of the then President Carlos Saúl Menem gave to the presidential heliport in the city of Buenos Aires the name “Capitán Vicente Almandos Almonacid”. Among the reasons of that recognition to Almonacid, decree recitals mentioned the crossing of the Andes in a night flight for the first time (in 1920) and the establishment of the first air company that offered regular flights to Patagonia and Argentine northeast (Aeroposta Argentina S. A., created in 1927).⁵ This personage had been one of the many Argentine volunteer soldiers in the service of France during the Great War. Almonacid stood out as an aviator, being profusely decorated and having paraded with the French Army in the Arc of Triumph in November 1918.⁶ The feats of the so called “Riojan Condor” were remembered shortly after by the French president Jacques Chirac, who in his 1997 visit to Argentina delivered to Menem documentation confirming his participation in the Foreign Legion.⁷ Nevertheless, even this indirect allusion to WWI was quite ephemeral. On June 14th 2011, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner renamed the heliport after its remodeling as “Roberto Mario Fiorito”, in homage to the only helicopter pilot

dead in the Malvinas/Falklands war.⁸ Another recent reference to WWI comes from the literature field, in the confluence of academic history and public history: Federico Lorenz's historical novel *Los muertos de nuestras guerras* (*The deads of our wars*), set in the aftermath of the Great War.⁹ One of its characters, Captain Morris Llwyfen, from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, in charge of the dead British soldiers' exhumation in Flanders to be buried in fallen cemeteries, is a Welsh born in Patagonia. He works as a peculiar link between WWI and Argentina, showing the identity question of the Anglo-Argentines.

Except these only two fleeting traces of the Great War, no memories remain from that past. On the contrary, most people are unaware of the significance that the conflagration had for their ancestors. In that sense, there is an undeniable divorce between history -the set of available evidences of the social place of this war in the past- and memory -the way in which that time is currently remembered-.¹⁰

Compared with the impact of later international conflicts, the Great War is in fact a forgotten experience. The Spanish Civil War has been an important landmark in social memory, with a relevant number of academic and historical dissemination texts, especially centred on Argentine volunteers in the International Brigades¹¹ or in the Republican exiles.¹² The presence of a strong Spanish community, deeply rooted in Argentine society, fostered the society's concern and allegiance. Furthermore, as it happened in belligerent nations as France, the Second World War exerted a fundamental role in the eclipse of the Great War, despite its centrality for its contemporaries.¹³ The importance of the new war was reinforced by a plentiful academic production on Nazi and fascist infiltration in Argentina and the parallel action of antifascist activists.¹⁴ But the significance of WWII for Argentine society was particularly nurtured by the prolific cultural productions of public history, which transmitted the image of Argentina as a haven for Third Reich's leaders, including a supposedly surviving Adolf Hitler,¹⁵ or for survivors of the Holocaust.¹⁶ At the end of the 1990s, the interest in this period gave room for the formulation of a public policy of memory institutionally expressed in the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de las Actividades del Nazismo en la Argentina* (Commission of Enquiry into the Activities of Nazism in Argentina), an agency under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship.

Temporal proximity also helped to strengthen the remembrance of the 1936 and the 1939 wars. Witnesses, protagonists, familiar accounts, are still available to testify the wartime experience, something almost impossible to find in the case of WWI. All these factors explain that the Spanish civil war and

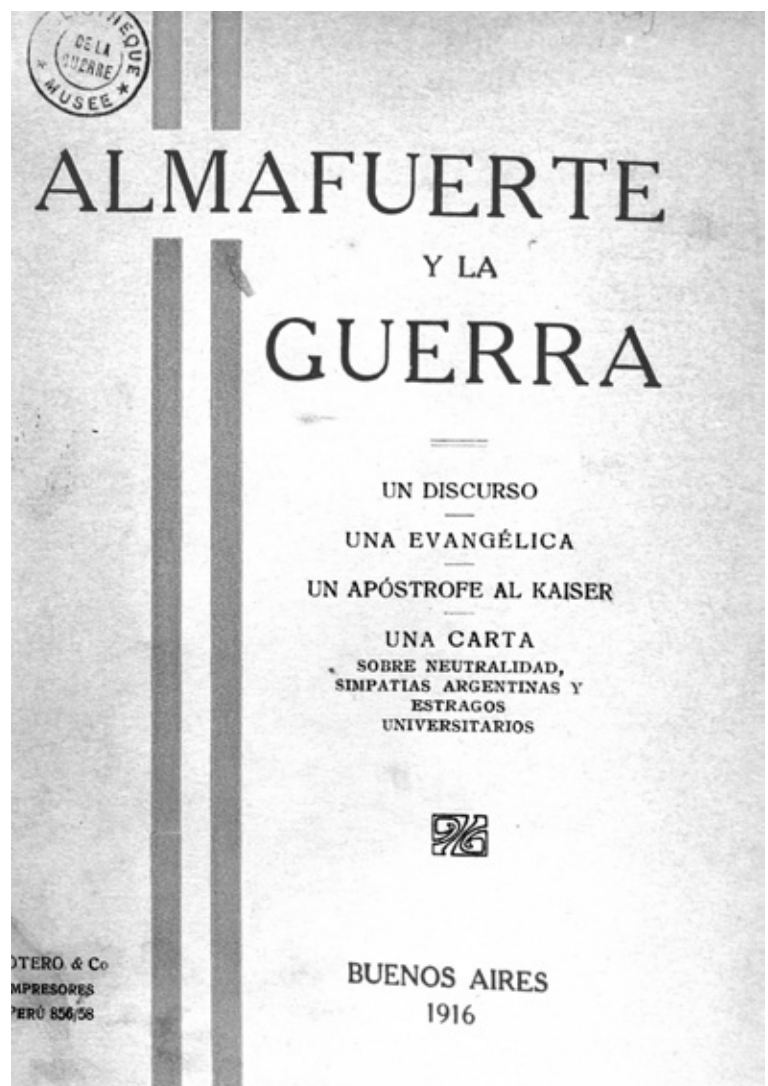
the Second World War contributed to overshadow the memories of WWI, perceived as a far-off conflict, unconnected to national past.

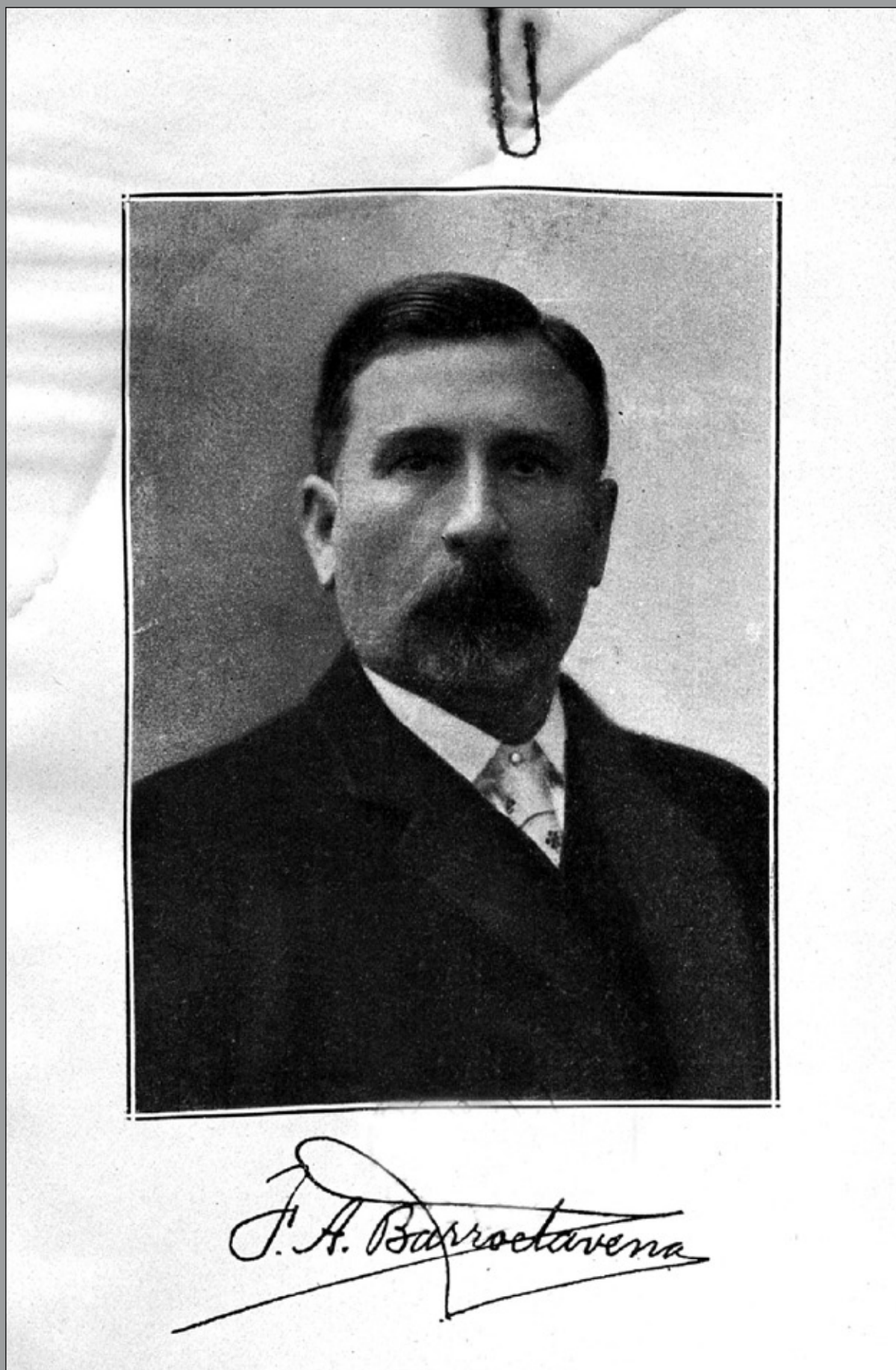
SOME CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, WWI was a meaningful experience for Argentine society, at least until the Second World War. It encouraged the activism and mobilisation of civil society, and in that sense it constituted a foundational experience, later recreated during other international conflicts. Nowadays the Great War was cast into oblivion. How to explain its forgetting? It is possible to indicate several factors that get together to clarify at least partially that fact.

On one side, the internal political dynamic had its influence. Argentine's convulsed political history during the XXth century led to the result that social interest in the past has been largely dominated by those periods that marked it deeply, such as per-

Pedro B. Palacios
Almafuerte,
Almafuerte y la
guerra. Un discurso.
Una evangélica.
Un Apóstrofe al
Kaiser. Una carta
sobre neutralidad,
simpatías argentinas
y estragos
universitarios, Otero,
Buenos Aires, 1916,
Coll. BDIC





Portrait de Francesco Barroetavena, extrait de *Alemania contra el mundo*, Otero, Buenos Aires, 1916, Coll. BDIC

onism -a phenomenon that has hegemonised the local political scene for the last seventy years- and 1970s' political violence. Likewise, at least since 1930 a cultural and radical nationalism has characterised Argentine political culture. This nationalist bias has favoured a self-referential approach to the past, frequently guided by an endogenous logic, far away from global determinations. Besides, radical nationalism, sometimes bordering on chauvinism, condemns universalist expressions, considered opposite to the primacy of the nation (like the consecration of WWI's volunteer soldiers to the cause of other countries) to be forgotten.

On the other side, probably the most important factor in the forgetting of WWI was the Malvinas/Falklands war, which affected Argentina in a direct and long lasting manner. This conflict, occurred between April and June 1982, was the only war in which this country was directly involved in the XXth century. This brief but intense armed conflict is still an open wound in Argentine society, for which it constitutes a traumatic experience hard to be assimilated.¹⁷ It is possible to state that the memory of Malvinas finished burying into the shadows of oblivion the remembrance of WWI, a war that, by comparison, had hardly affected Argentina. ■

Notes

1. On this concept, see John Horne, "Introduction: mobilizing for 'total war', 1914-1918", in John Horne (ed.), *State, Society, and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
2. Olivier Compagnon, "Entrer en guerre ? Neutralité et engagement de l'Amérique latine entre 1914 et 1918", *Relations Internationales*, 137, 2009.
3. For the reactions of Argentine society to the war, see María Inés Tato, "La disputa por la argentinidad. Rupturistas y neutralistas durante la Primera Guerra Mundial", *Temas de Historia Argentina y Americana* n° 13, 2008.
4. For a historiographical panorama on this point, see María Inés Tato, «La Gran Guerra en la historiografía argentina. Balance y perspectivas de investigación», in Dossier "América Latina y la Primera Guerra Mundial", *Iberoamericana. América Latina - España - Portugal*, forthcoming.
5. «Decreto 538/94», en *Boletín Oficial de la República Argentina*, 22/4/1994.
6. There are only a few tracts on Almonacid, whose rich trajectory would deserve an exhaustive biography: Juan Aurelio Ortiz, *Los Vicente Almandos Almonacid. Descendientes de chuqueños, Chuquis (La Rioja)*, s/e., 2001; Nicolasa Amanda Suárez de Carrara, *Alas valientes, La Rioja*, Riojagraf, 2009.
7. Germán Sopena, «La globalización no sirve si fomenta la desigualdad», *La Nación*, 19/3/1997.
8. «Bautizan el helipuerto presidencial 'Roberto Fiorito' y la presidenta entregó DNI a un malvinense», <<http://www.infoplatense.com.ar/index.php/la-plata/aguafuertes/2383-bautizan-el-helipuerto-presidencial-qroberto-fioritoq-y-la-presidenta-entrego-dni-a-un-malvinense>>, 15/6/2011. Visited on January 18th 2013.
9. Federico Lorenz, *Los muertos de nuestras guerras*, Buenos Aires, Tusquets, 2013. The author is a professional historian and also frequents the historical dissemination, especially on the Malvinas/Falklands war.
10. For a discussion of the relationships between history and memory of WWI, see Jay Winter, *Remembering war. The Great War between memory and history in the twentieth century*, New Haven / London, Yale University Press, 2006.
11. For example, Graciela Mochkofsky, *Tío Boris: un héroe olvidado de la guerra civil española*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2006; Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, *El Camarada Carlos. Itinerario de un enviado secreto*, Buenos Aires, Aguilar-Alfaguara, 2007; Lucas González et al., *Voluntarios de Argentina en la Guerra Civil Española*, Buenos Aires, Centro Cultural de la Cooperación, 2008. In 2010 some relatives of victims of the Francoist regime asked the intervention of the Argentine judicial system under the principle of universal justice. This initiative, currently under way, updated the interest in the Spanish civil war and its legacies.
12. Among others, the pioneer works of Dora Schwarzstein, such as *Entre Franco y Perón. Memoria e identidad del exilio republicano español en la Argentina*, Barcelona, Crítica, 2001.
13. Nicolas Offenstadt, *14-18 aujourd'hui. La Grande Guerre dans la France contemporaine*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2010, p. 9.
14. Such as Ronald C. Newton, *El cuarto lado del triángulo: la "amenaza nazi" en la Argentina, 1931-1947*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1995; Andrés Bisso, *Acción Argentina. Un antifascismo nacional en tiempos de guerra mundial*, Buenos Aires, Prometeo, 2005; Leticia Prislei, *Los orígenes del fascismo argentino*, Buenos Aires, Edhasa, 2008.
15. For instance, Jorge Camarasa, *Los nazis en la Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Legasa, 1992, and *Odessa al Sur. La Argentina como refugio de nazis y criminales de guerra*, Buenos Aires, Planeta, 1995; Uki Goñi, *La auténtica Odessa*, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2002; Álvaro Abós, *Eichmann en Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Edhasa, 2007; Ariel Basti, *El exilio de Hitler*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2010; the documentary *Oro nazi* (2005); the film *Wakolda* (2013).
16. Among other modes of remembrance, the Museum of the Holocaust, in Buenos Aires, opened in 2000, and the Anna Frank Centre Argentina, opened in 2009; Diana Wang, *Los niños escondidos. Del Holocausto a Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires, Marea Editorial, 2004; *Y le contarás a tus hijos... Testimonios de los/as sobrevivientes de la Shoá en Argentina*, Buenos Aires, INADI, 2008, and many other testimonies of survivors, largely disseminated on TV and the press.
17. On this topic, see Federico Lorenz, *Las guerras por Malvinas*, Buenos Aires, Edhasa, 2006.