

Death lurks in grey seas: Experiences of the maritime crossing between Argentina and Europe during the First World War

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Abstract

In recent years, the repercussions of the First World War in Latin America have received increasing attention in the academic literature. However, the impact of the war at sea on the continent has not been exhaustively investigated. With the belligerents fighting for control of overseas communication and trade routes, passengers and sailors embarked on ocean liners and cargo ships to travel between South America and Europe. This article explores and analyses the experiences of those who crossed the Atlantic to and from the Argentine Republic. In so doing, it adds a Latin American dimension to the knowledge and understanding of the 1914–18 naval war.

Keywords

Argentine Republic, crew, First World War, passengers, sociocultural history, steamships

The study of the repercussions of the First World War in Latin America is a topic that has received much attention in recent years in a historiography that has

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increasingly questioned the largely hegemonic character of the Eurocentric discourse on the conflict.¹ In effect, as a result of new approaches, especially the sociocultural study of war,² historians have revealed much about the economic and diplomatic impacts of the conflict, as well as its effects on civil society.³ In this context, the Latin American continent has recovered its place within the great historical processes of the twentieth century.

However, much of the historiography on the Great War has been marked by ‘terra-centrism’,⁴ a tendency to focus on the experiences of individuals on land and ignore the maritime space, which has largely been treated as a border separating regions and

1. The historiography of the Great War is Eurocentric, with a focus on the European stage or, more precisely, the Western Front. Other spaces, such as Asia, Africa and Latin America, have been neglected; at best, they have been mentioned as a secondary prolongation of the conflict. Olivier Compagnon and Pierre Purseigle, ‘Geographies of Mobilization and Territories of Belligerence during the First World War’, *Annales: Histoire, Sciences, Sociales*, 71 (2016), 37–64.
2. Eduardo González Calleja, ‘La cultura de guerra como propuesta historiográfica: Una reflexión general desde el contemporaneísmo español’, *Historia Social*, 61 (2008), 68–87; Martin Evans, ‘Opening up the Battlefield: War Studies and the Cultural Turn’, *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 1 (2007), 47–51; Hilary Footitt, ‘War and Cultural Studies in 2016: Putting “Translation” into the Transnational?’, *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 9 (2016), 209–21; Jeremy Black, *War and the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, 2012); Joanna Bourke, ‘New Military History’, in Matthew Hughes and William J. Philpott, eds., *Palgrave Advances in Modern Military History* (London, 2006), 258–80; John Horne, ‘End of a Paradigm? The Cultural History of the Great War’, *Past and Present*, 242 (2019), 155–92.
3. Agustina Rayes, ‘Los destinos de las exportaciones y la neutralidad argentina durante la Primera Guerra Mundial’, *Política y Cultura*, 42 (2014), 31–52; Beatriz Rosario Solveira, *La Argentina, el ABC y el conflicto entre México y Estados Unidos 1913–1916* (Córdoba, 1994), 153–83; Bill Albert, *South America and the First World War: The Impact of the War on Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Chile* (Cambridge, 1988), 1–6; Phillip Dehne, *On the Far Western Front: Britain’s First World War in South America* (Manchester, 2009); Jane van der Karr, *La Primera Guerra Mundial y la política económica argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1974); Juan Archibaldo Lanús, *Aquel apogeo: Política internacional argentina, 1910–1939* (Buenos Aires, 2001); María Inés Tato, *La trinchera austral: La sociedad argentina ante la Primera Guerra Mundial* (Buenos Aires, 2017); Olivier Compagnon, *América Latina y la Gran Guerra: El adiós a Europa (Argentina y Brasil, 1914–1939)* (Buenos Aires, 2014); Olivier Compagnon et al., *La Gran Guerra en América Latina: Una historia conectada* (México City, 2018); Ricardo Weinmann, *Argentina en la Primera Guerra Mundial: Neutralidad, transición política y continuismo económico* (Buenos Aires, 1994); Stefan Rinke, *Latin America and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2017).
4. The concept of terracentrism criticizes the assumption that the only significant story, with the exception of battles or mutinies, occurs on land. For further reading, see Marcus Rediker, *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail* (Boston, MA, 2014), 2–3; Marcus Rediker, ‘Toward a People’s History of the Sea’, in David Killingray, Margarette Lincoln and Nigel Rigby, eds., *Maritime Empires: The Operation and Impact of Nineteenth-Century British Imperial Trade* (Woodbridge, 2004), 205–6; Rila Mukherjee, ‘Escape from Terracentrism: Writing a Water History’, *Indian Historical Review*, 41 (2014), 87–101; Roland Wenzlhuemer, ‘The Ship, the Media, and the World: Conceptualizing Connections in Global History’, *Journal of Global History*, 11 (2016), 163–86. John R. Gillis argues that modern historiography has been terrestrial because it considers the sea as something that must be crossed – in short, as a non-central factor in territorial narratives. Donald

continents – in other words, as a zone of passage that allowed the circulation of ideas, goods and individuals.⁵ Thus, the potential of the sea has been relegated to the background, forgetting its role as a historical setting.⁶ It should also be noted that the First World War exposed millions of people to new experiences,⁷ because belligerents used new tactics and strategies that, together with innovative technological developments,⁸ transformed the maritime space into a zone of struggle for the control of war materials and food.⁹

Although voyage times had shortened by the beginning of the twentieth century, the ships that connected South America with Europe still needed several days to reach their destinations.¹⁰ That time on board was significant; indeed, it was a transit moment in which individuals shared their experiences within the relatively narrow confines of the ship.¹¹ It is therefore instructive to consider the experiences of the men and women who crossed these maritime areas of dispute and hostility,¹² facing the effects of a total and global war. Addressing such an issue is a complex task that entails detailed research, but it is possible to reach some tentative conclusions.¹³

- A. Yerxa, 'Seacoasts in History: An Interview with John R. Gillis', *Historically Speaking*, 14 (2013), 15–17.
5. Wenzlhuemer, 'The Ship', 166; Craig A. Lockard, 'The Sea Common to All: Maritime Frontiers, Port Cities, and Chinese Traders in the Southeast Asian Age of Commerce, ca. 1400–1750', *Journal of World History*, 21 (2010), 219–20.
 6. Rila Mukherjee and Radhika Seshan, 'Introduction: Approaches to a Water History', *Water History*, 7 (2015), 147–9.
 7. Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT, 2006), 17–51.
 8. Michael Howard, *La guerra en la historia europea* (Mexico City, 1983), 29.
 9. John Horne, *A Companion to World War I* (Chichester, 2012), xviii.
 10. Wenzlhuemer, 'The Ship', 167.
 11. Roland Wenzlhuemer and Michael Offermann, 'Ship Newspapers and Passenger Life Aboard Transoceanic Steamships in the Late Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Transcultural Studies*, 3 (2012), 80.
 12. Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthum, *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (New York, 2004), 3–4.
 13. For the concept of total war, 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, 1997), 1–18 and Annette Becker, 'The Great War: World War, Total War', *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97 (2015), 1029–45. Regarding the First World War as a global war, see Hew Strachan, 'The First World War as a Global War', *First World War Studies*, 1 (2010), 3–14; Lawrence Sondhaus, *World War I: The Global Revolution* (New York, 2011); Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, 'The Great War as a Global War: Imperial Conflict and the Reconfiguration of World Order, 1911–1923', *Diplomatic History*, 38 (2014), 786–800; Oliver Janz, 'Einführung: Der Erste Weltkrieg in globaler Perspektive', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 40 (2014), 147–59; Helmut Bley and Anorthe Kremers, eds., *The World during the First World War: Perceptions, Experiences and Consequences* (Essen, 2014); and Maximilian Lakitsch, Susanne Reitmair and Katja Seidel, eds., *Belligerous Entanglements, 1914: The Great War as a Global War* (Zurich, 2015).

This article relates the words of passengers and crew who embarked on ocean liners and cargo ships that sailed between the Argentine Republic and Europe during the First World War. Their words have been recovered from contemporary newspapers, which included reports on sailings and sinkings, interviews with those who completed transatlantic passages, and accounts written by sea travellers about their experiences on board.

The sea as a war zone

From the start of the war, the strategy of the Royal Navy was to establish a naval blockade to deny the Triple Alliance access to the Atlantic. Thus, for example, the German merchant fleet, of about 1,500 units, was displaced from the oceans: 245 vessels were captured, 1,059 were locked in neutral ports and the rest did not leave the Baltic.¹⁴ However, the central powers did not automatically lose their international market since they could still trade with some neighbouring neutral states, such as Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands.¹⁵ Therefore, the United Kingdom needed to exert some form of control over the maritime traffic of the non-belligerents, as they could still re-export cargoes to the enemy.¹⁶

On 20 August 1914, the British government issued its first Order in Council, which established that limited contraband merchandise had the same status as absolute contraband, and therefore could be seized. Britain then decreed that it had the right to inspect neutral vessels transporting goods to a neutral port. The French government endorsed the measures adopted by London in several decrees between August and November 1914, in addition to successive blacklists.¹⁷ In essence, the economic war affected not only the belligerent countries but also the neutral powers.

Argentine journalist Juan José de Soiza Reilly, who had been shipped to Europe as a war correspondent, wrote about this situation in *La Nación* on 22 October 1914, and in the magazine *Fray Mocho* the following day:

England is not content just to keep an eye on the ships of the nations that it's in war with. It does something else ... It stops merchant steamships of all nations. Inspects their navigation books, sanitation papers, passengers, payrolls, and seizes all men who, by their surname or their face, reveal to be of a Germanic origin.¹⁸

The steamship *Barcelona*, on which Soiza Reilly was travelling, was twice stopped and inspected at sea. She was first intercepted off the Canary Islands by the cruiser *Vivit* and the war transport *Empress of Britain*, and 'while the Barcelona inspection lasted, both

14. Alan Kramer, 'Blockade and Economic Warfare', in Jay Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War, Volume II: The State* (New York, 2014), 465.

15. Strachan, 'The First World War'.

16. Kramer, 'Blockade and Economic Warfare', 466.

17. Weinmann, *Argentina*, 46.

18. Juan José de Soiza Reilly, 'La policía inglesa en el mar', *Fray Mocho*, 23 October 1914. For Soiza Reilly's experiences as a war correspondent, see María Inés Tato, 'A Discordant Voice from the Trenches: Juan José de Soiza Reilly's War Chronicles', *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature*, 41 (2017), Article 4. All translations are my own.

English ships kept the guns pointing at us'.¹⁹ Then, while entering the Mediterranean through the Strait of Gibraltar, she was stopped by two British destroyers:²⁰

Mr Laureano Ugarte, captain of the Barcelona, knew how to avoid all danger skilfully. At the same time, he was able to give safety and peace to the passengers, who waited every moment for our ship to be escorted by the battleships.²¹

Meanwhile, the belligerents began to redouble their efforts to isolate their opponents from the main maritime access routes. In October 1914, the United Kingdom began laying mines in particular areas of the North Sea and, one month later, declared it a war zone, limiting the movement of all ships, including neutrals.²² In response to the British strategy, on 4 February 1915, Berlin announced an unrestricted submarine warfare campaign, sinking all merchant ships with war material on board without prior notice.²³ Such strategies transformed the maritime space into a war zone. Although some shipping companies maintained their operations, others withdrew, not least because overseas trading contracted during the war.

The Argentine Republic, which had strong transatlantic interests, felt the impact of the conflict.²⁴ Without its own merchant fleet, its vessels only had the capacity to carry out cabotage voyages.²⁵ Foreign-going ships flying the Argentine flag had just a 1.6% stake in total overseas shipping in 1914. According to the Argentine authorities, the main factor restricting the nation's trade and shipping was the Great War.²⁶

19. Soiza Reilly, 'La policía inglesa'.

20. Juan José de Soiza Reilly, 'La policía marítima de los ingleses', *La Nación (Buenos Aires)*, 22 October 1914.

21. Soiza Reilly, 'La policía inglesa'.

22. Weinmann, *Argentina*, 47.

23. The use of warships against trade was regulated by conventions. Before attacking, the vessel had to be searched and the crew's safety ensured, whether by transporting them to a friendly port or putting them in lifeboats near the coast. However, these rules put submarines at risk and the German High Command understood that they should ignore them. See Juan A. Sánchez Ortiz, 'La neutralidad en la guerra marítima', *Boletín del Centro Naval*, 111 (1993), 464–5. For naval warfare and prize regulations, see Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Atrocity, Deviance, and Submarine Warfare: Norms and Practices during the World Wars* (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2013), 78–84.

24. Rayes, 'Los destinos', 38; Albert, *South America*, 77; Hugo Raúl Satas, *Una política exterior argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1987); Jorge G. Fodor and Arturo A. O'Connell, 'La Argentina y la economía atlántica en la primera mitad del siglo XX', *Desarrollo Económico*, 13 (1973), 3–65. During the Great War, Argentina's main trading partner was the United Kingdom. See Roger Grivil, 'The Anglo-Argentine Connection and the War of 1914–1918', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 9 (1977), 61.

25. Rayes, 'Los destinos', 47. Navigation companies operating in Argentine waters were private enterprises. For exports, the country depended on foreign merchant companies. See Rodolfo Frigerio Miró, 'La marina mercante argentina', *Boletín del Centro Naval*, 118 (2000), 709.

26. Juan Pablo Sáenz Valiente, *Memoria del Ministerio de Marina correspondiente al ejercicio 1914–1915* (Buenos Aires, 1915), 73.

The development of naval warfare also deeply affected observers such as Roberto J. Payró and Julio Llanos, who covered the conflict in Europe for the newspaper *La Nación*. Payró had resided in Brussels since 1909, and regularly published his impressions of various cultural, political and economic aspects of Belgium. At the outbreak of the Great War, he decided to stay there to pen reports on the conflict,²⁷ including descriptions of losses at sea:

There are also floating mines. A Dutch fishing boat just stumbled into one of them, sinking with its entire crew. And the tough, brave herring fishermen are not encouraged to go to sea ... A steamship laden with fugitives going to England also wrecked, by a mine, and some passengers, without the cold blood necessary to take advantage of the rescue organized by the ships sailing in their own waters, perished drowned ... These are episodes of an immense tragedy, which go unnoticed.²⁸

We can see from Payró's account of the situation in the North Sea how the belligerents transformed European waters into a zone of dispute. It is, of course, an important testimony because it represents how that new experience was perceived and understood by contemporary observers:

and the catastrophes that have touched the whole of humanity, the destruction of Messina, the shipwreck of the Titanic, seem to me to be mere trifles ... We are in the midst of such a cataclysm that was never dreamed of.²⁹

On the other hand, Llanos dedicated some of his columns in *La Nación* to the day-to-day struggles. In the edition of 4 April 1915, the author informed his readers about the effects and repercussions of the unrestricted German submarine warfare campaign:

the Kaiser has responded with a bold and arrogant challenge: 'The waters surrounding England and Ireland, as well as the entire English Channel, are declared a military zone', and ships from neutral countries are warned to be at risk ... This is not a vain threat, since German submarines circulate everywhere.³⁰

No less important were the comments of Frigate Captain Esteban De Loqui, who, like many Argentine naval officers, offered his impressions of the effects of the maritime conflict:

27. Tato, *La trinchera austral*, 52. For further information about Roberto J. Payró, see María Inés Tato, 'Emociones en guerra: Las crónicas de Roberto J. Payró durante la ocupación alemana de Bélgica en la Primera Guerra Mundial', in María Inés Tato, Ana Paula Pires and Luis Esteban Dalla Fontana, eds., *Guerras del siglo XX: Experiencias y representaciones en perspectiva global* (Rosario, 2019), 77–96.

28. Roberto J. Payró, *Corresponsal de guerra: Cartas, diarios, relatos (1907–1922)* (Buenos Aires, 2009), 754.

29. Payró, *Corresponsal de guerra*, 754.

30. Julio Llanos, 'Días de París (para La Nación), XXII', *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), 4 April 1915.

the mail steamship, the sailboat, the bulk freighter, which runs through the war zones, is the victim of those fearsome weapons [submarines]. There are no international codes or conventions to protect them; war is war, and both, the civilian as the military, have to pay the penalty; women, elderly people and children are mercilessly sunk for the purposes of the cause.³¹

Thus far, we have looked at accounts from observers – mostly sailors and journalists – who, due to their knowledge of the facts, described the perils of the maritime space during the Great War. But beyond the testimony of observers, it is necessary to present the stories of those who suffered in the flesh from the effects of the conflict – the passengers and crew who, without being combatants, were victims of a fight that was far from the trenches but equally dramatic. This point is important because it allows a more complex understanding of what it meant to venture on board the various types of ship that maintained overseas communications between Europe and South America during the years of the conflict.

The victims

On 17 February 1915, the German steamer *Holger*, belonging to the Rolland Linie company in Bremen, arrived in Buenos Aires. On board were 314 passengers and crew who had been picked up from the sea after their vessels – the *Highland Brae*, *Potaro*, *Hemisphere*, *Wilfrid M.* and *Semanta* – had been scuttled by the German auxiliary cruiser SMS *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, an ocean liner that was armed to attack Allied trade in the Atlantic.³² On 18 February 1915, *La Nación* published testimonies from some of the survivors, among them the diary of a crew member of the *Highland Brae*:

About 10.30 a.m. a steamship was sighted marching ahead towards us at full speed. Passengers were joking. 'It's the Dresden,' they said ... but when that ship was 300 yards away ... it began to fire at us with its cannons so that the bullets passed in front of our bow or were felt around us; panic took hold of our crew ... on the other hand, the passengers led splendidly, thinking, as was natural, that there was no chance of escape.³³

This testimony not only shows the dramatic moments when a warship suddenly boarded a passenger ship, but also describes the different reactions of the individuals

31. Esteban De Loqui, 'Carta al director', *Boletín del Centro Naval*, 378–9 (1915), 291. Esteban De Loqui was an Argentine naval officer who, after reaching the rank of Frigate Captain and retiring from the force in 1906, collaborated as a consul in Cardiff. The impacts and repercussions of the war caught the attention of several Argentine naval officers, who wrote about and discussed this subject in the main newspapers and specialized magazines of the time. For further information, see Agustín Daniel Desiderato, 'La Primera Guerra Mundial y su influencia en la Armada Argentina, 1914–1927: Una aproximación', in María Inés Tato, Ana Paula Pires and Luis Esteban Dalla Fontana, eds., *Guerras del siglo XX: Experiencias y representaciones en perspectiva global* (Rosario, 2019), 63–76.

32. 'Las correrías del Kronprinz Wilhelm: Buques ingleses hundidos. Llegada de pasajeros y tripulantes', *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), 18 February 1915.

33. 'Las correrías del Kronprinz Wilhelm'.

facing danger. While the crew of the *Highland Brae* were panic-stricken, the passengers were calm, perhaps believing that obeying their captors would be preferable for their safety.

The *Kronprinz Wilhelm* could not approach any port due to the possible presence of a British warship. For this reason, the captain, Paul Thierfelder, ordered the steamer *Holger* to leave Pernambuco (Brazil) and meet his ship to take charge of the captives. This was achieved after several days, and it took another five to get to Buenos Aires, a voyage on which the passengers suffered all kinds of hardships because of the small size of the *Holger* and its lack of provisions for the occupants.³⁴ In short, the sufferings of individuals were not limited to the fear of being sunk or boarded by warships. Sometimes, their captors moved them to port in units that were not prepared for the task, where food was scarce and sanitary conditions rudimentary.

Another testimony illustrating some of the effects of naval warfare on those individuals who had experienced the dangerous Atlantic crossing comes from Captain José Moneta,³⁵ who was appointed head of the naval commission in Europe and attached to the Argentine legation in London.³⁶ Determined to take up his new position, Moneta and his wife, Margarita Ceballos,³⁷ left Buenos Aires for Liverpool aboard RMS *Amazon*, a British vessel belonging to the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company.³⁸ The ship carried 133 passengers, including women and children, and was bound for Montevideo, Santos, Rio de Janeiro, Pernambuco, San Vicente, Lisbon and Vigo. Moneta noted that ‘to avoid the danger of finding us on board, if the steamship were torpedoed, we would disembark in Lisbon, to continue by land and through the English Channel to London’.³⁹

Confident in the precautions taken by the ship’s personnel, Moneta and his wife decided to continue with the voyage to London. However, the remaining leg of the *Amazon*’s passage, from the island of San Vicente to Liverpool, was the most dangerous. For this reason, ‘a very limited number of passengers had been on board, and only three ladies in first class’.⁴⁰ The Spanish Atlantic coast constituted one of the main sea lanes at that time, but several German submarines operated in the area.⁴¹ The *Amazon* sailed with

34. ‘Las correrías del Kronprinz Wilhelm’.

35. José Moneta, *Recuerdos de un marino* (Buenos Aires, 2013), 9–14. José Moneta was born on 19 February 1869. At the age of 15, he entered the Naval Military School (Escuela Naval Militar), graduating in 1888 as the best student of his class. He held several positions and performed several functions until he asked to retire from the navy in 1919. He died on 7 October 1941.

36. ‘Captain Don José Moneta Has Been Appointed Naval Attaché to the Argentine Legation, and Has Arrived in London with Mme. Moneta’, *The Times* (London), 13 June 1916.

37. *Fray Mocho*, 21 April 1916.

38. The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, established in 1840 by London merchants, functioned as a maritime link between the United Kingdom and Latin America during the Great War.

39. Moneta, *Recuerdos*, 213.

40. Moneta, *Recuerdos*, 213.

41. José Antonio Montero Jiménez, ‘España y los Estados Unidos frente a la I Guerra Mundial’, *Historia y Política*, 32 (2014), 71–104.

its lights off and constantly changed course, while it was directed by radiotelegraph orders from the British cruiser divisions that patrolled the area.⁴² Still, Moneta was not entirely at ease. He therefore decided to take some additional precautions based on his experience as an officer of the Argentine Navy:

In the last few days, we slept half-dressed and exercised in the way of quickly putting on cork lifeguards, thinking that if something happened, it would be likely that we should stay completely in the dark. I practised with my eyes closed the path that I had to follow from the cabin, by several stairs, until I found myself on the upper deck, in front of our lifeboat.⁴³

Finally, and without any setbacks, Moneta and his wife arrived in Liverpool. However, the *Amazon* did not survive the war. It was sunk by the German submarine U-110 on 15 March 1918 on the northern coast of Ireland.⁴⁴ The press at the time reported the facts, noting that there were no human casualties in the sinking.⁴⁵

Moneta's reaction to the danger of the submarine threat is telling, since it is the testimony of an experienced Argentine naval officer – but what happened to those who lacked military training? Moreover, how did they experience the traumatic situation of being attacked at sea? The sinking of the Dutch ocean liner SS *Tubantia*, which left Amsterdam for Buenos Aires, offers insight into the experiences of the victims.⁴⁶ Soiza Reilly had the opportunity to interview several of the passengers who survived the disaster, including two Argentinians: Alejandro D. Ortiz and José A. Battilana:

we went to sea ... At the agency we had been told that to avoid the danger of torpedoes and mines, the ship would travel only by day, anchoring at night. But, to everyone's surprise, when night came, the ship continued sailing. We went to eat, without worrying about what might happen to us. The confidence of going on a neutral ship made us forget the danger. However, my travel companions did not hide their concern when, before serving us the first dinner plate, some small cards were distributed to us, on which we were told the number and location of the lifeboat that we had to occupy in the event of a disaster ... I remember that while we were reading the small cards, we all smiled, without doubt to cheer us up. But we grew pale.⁴⁷

It is notable that some individuals travelled without a care, while others did not hide their concern about the future. Some shipping companies often warned their customers about the dangers of navigation; even so, the experience of living through an attack at sea was probably something that was difficult to imagine for many passengers, as there was a certain consensus on the safety that the current international conventions granted to neutral ships.

On concluding their dinner, the passengers retired to rest. However, at 2.10 a.m., there was a thud, which woke Ortiz.⁴⁸ His account coincides with the subsequent report of two

42. Moneta, *Recuerdos*, 214.

43. Moneta, *Recuerdos*, 214.

44. Edwyn A. Gray, *The U-Boat War 1914–1918* (London, 1994), 245.

45. *Boston Globe*, 22 March 1918.

46. *Caras y Caretas*, 25 March 1916.

47. *Fray Mocho*, 2 June 1916.

48. *Fray Mocho*, 2 June 1916.

crew members of the SS *Tubantia*, who had sighted a stream of bubbles approaching the ship before the explosion.⁴⁹

I understood ... that we had been torpedoed. Without getting dressed, I opened my cabin door. I saw that in the halls there was light. I could not see any passengers. No voices were heard. No shouting ... That gave me enough peace of mind to get dressed ... [But] when the screaming of the passengers and the desperate running on deck began ... What cruel moments! Women prayed and cried, while the ship slowly leaned down to sink. Then, the most difficult manoeuvre began. We occupied our place in the lifeboats. The sailors were unravelling the ropes with which the lifeboats were to be thrown into the water, with us inside ... Not even realizing that the ship was sinking or that the danger of getting off the boat was threatening us, we felt so much horror, as when we found ourselves lost in the immensity of the sea, inside that real nutshell.⁵⁰

We can see the strength of Ortiz's story, who described how the passengers took their belongings and ran to the lifeboats in the midst of panic and the darkness of night. With the same impact, Battilana, the other Argentine passenger, added further details of the final moments of the SS *Tubantia*:

Meanwhile, the ship was sinking, and the few men remaining on board were throwing fireworks and cannon shots into the air, asking for help ... Suddenly, all the lights that were illuminating the ship shuddered and the ship listed to the left, violently. The *Tubantia* had sunk. We were left alone in our lifeboats. While we had the ship ahead, our spirits harboured a slight hope. But when it sank, only then did we feel the despair of agony.⁵¹

Those who had managed to escape the sinking ship, faced a new challenge: to float in lifeboats in the immensity of the sea and the solitude of the night. With despair and anguish, and flooded by multiple sensations, the *Tubantia*'s passengers had become cast-aways as a result of maritime warfare. Ortiz described their emotions:

I, as a physician, have been in the midst of pests, cholera, bubonic plague, typhus, tuberculosis, etc. As a politician, I've been with General Arredondo, in danger of dying, when the revolution against General Roca was taking place. I have seen death very closely. I have seen it many times. Well, I have never felt the tremendous, indescribable, barbaric emotion that I suffered in that weak lifeboat, sailing adrift. And the same thing happened to everyone. Minister Dr Salinas Vega [Minister for Bolivia in Germany], who had barely managed to save his three daughters and his wife ... who is a man of great courage and of great integrity, had stood still and serene during rescue. But when he found himself in the lifeboat, at the mercy of fate – having by his side those loved ones that the sea could swallow in any wild impulse of its waves – that serene and brave man felt an anguish so great that if the memory of his daughters and his wife would not have comforted him, he would have thrown himself into the sea to die.⁵²

49. Hubert P. van Tuyll van Serooskerken, *The Netherlands and World War I: Espionage, Diplomacy and Survival* (Leiden, 2001), 159.

50. *Fray Mocho*, 2 June 1916.

51. *Fray Mocho*, 2 June 1916.

52. *Fray Mocho*, 2 June 1916.

In the context of war, in which maritime space was disputed by the belligerents, numerous vessels suffered a similar fate to that of the *Tubantia*. However, it should be noted that not all of them left survivors or testimonies. For example, the steamship *Curumalán*, flying Argentina's flag, sailed in early 1916 to Europe. In Cardiff, on 4 May 1916, it was seized by British authorities while loading coal for the Argentine Fishing Company on the grounds that the owner of the vessel maintained commercial relations with German firms.⁵³ However, due to the efforts of the Argentine ambassador in France, Enrique Rodríguez Larreta, the ship was released and sailed to Buenos Aires at the end of that year.⁵⁴ On returning to Latin America, transport vessels normally stopped at the island of San Vicente, but the *Curumalán* never did.⁵⁵ By mid 1917, the newspapers of the time considered the ship lost, along with all of its crew.⁵⁶ This event provoked several protests, such as that of Luis María Drago, former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Argentina:

It is not unreasonable to suppose that the ruthless counsel of the minister has been applied to the steamer Curumalan – Argentine owned, and flying the Argentine Flag – which disappeared mysteriously, 'leaving no trace', some months ago on its journey between Liverpool and Bahía Blanca, with a cargo of coal.⁵⁷

On 2 February 1917, Berlin decided to resume its unrestricted submarine warfare campaign.⁵⁸ The strategy reaped rapid returns,⁵⁹ although it provoked incidents with neutral nations, such as Argentina after three of its ships were sunk by German submarines between April and June 1917.⁶⁰ The first was the schooner *Monte Protegido*, chartered by the Dutch government, with a shipment of flax and linseed for Rotterdam. As one eyewitness explained:

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53. The blacklist policy, introduced in March 1916, included all German firms and also companies suspected of doing business with German firms or individuals, regardless of their place of residence. See Weinmann, *Argentina*, 47. The owner was Ernesto Tornquist, a former representative of the Krupp company in Buenos Aires.
 54. Hebe Carmen Pelosi, 'La Primera Guerra Mundial: Relaciones internacionales franco-argentinas', *Temas de Historia Argentina y Americana*, 4 (2004), 176–7.
 55. Ajax, *The German Pirate: His Methods and Record* (London, 1918), 50.
 56. '... the Case of the Curumalan, Which Disappeared with All Hands...', in *The Times* (London), 11 September 1917.
 57. *Wilmington Morning Star*, 11 November 1917. Luis María Drago's comment alludes to the telegrams of the Ambassador of the German Empire, Karl Von Luxburg, who suggested the sinking of Argentine ships without trace. See Compagnon, *América Latina*, 150.
 58. Jeremy Black, *Naval Warfare: A Global History since 1860* (Lanham, MD, 2017), 70.
 59. The German Admiralty's goal was to sink 600,000 tons per month during the first five months, forcing the British to surrender before the intervention of the United States in the conflict. Lawrence Sondhaus, *The Great War at Sea: A Naval History of the First World War* (Cambridge, 2014), 260.
 60. Tato, *La trinchera austral*, 121.

On April 4, near the Scilly Islands, a submarine started firing at us, without warning ... Once the crew had embarked on the lifeboat, the ship was sunk, with explosive bombs, after taking out the provisions and nautical instruments. The crew was abandoned at sea.⁶¹

The second ship was the *Oriana*, owned by Pablo P. Pesce, which left for Genoa on 7 March 1917 with 1,500 tons of old steel.⁶² While sailing through the Mediterranean, the *Oriana* had an encounter with a German submarine during the night of 6 June 1917. The *Owensboro Inquirer*, a Kentucky newspaper, reproduced the ship's log, in which the incident was described as follows:

we heard a cannon shot without knowing from what direction it came. At 8 we heard another and saw a projectile fall 50 meters from our bow. Comprehending that a hostile submarine was near and seeing the impossibility of escaping on account of the clear moonlight and the slow speed of our vessel, I gave the order to stop, that they might see that we had no idea of escaping, and in the hope that they would cease cannoning us.

Immediately after this maneuver a shell hit us which cut the shrouds on the upper part of the main mast. Another shell passed us parallel to the ship at a distance of only some inches on the starboard side.⁶³

In such situations, there was little that a ship like the *Oriana* could do, considering that it had no weapons or defensive devices. In this sense, it was at the mercy of one of the most advanced units of the time: the submarine. Therefore, the captain of the *Oriana*, Holger Waldemar Jensen, a Danish nationalized Argentine who was married to Maria Luisa Ferro and had children born in the country,⁶⁴ gave the order to go down to the boats:

The submarine was then well visible. After firing three other shells at the Oriana it approached our lifeboat and ordered the captain and crew to come aboard ... an officer and two German seamen, with four men from the Oriana proceeded in the direction of the Oriana ... the Germans placed on board the Oriana three automatic bombs, one in each hold. Afterwards all returned to the submarine, and the Germans went aboard. The commander of the submarine then ordered the captain and other members of the crew of the Oriana to return to the lifeboat. Two minutes later we heard three consecutive explosions, very faint, and the Oriana began to disappear with all her sails set.⁶⁵

The third ship was the *Toro*, which had left Buenos Aires for Genoa on 14 May 1917. Its captain was Pablo Badano Pul, an Italian with a letter of Argentine citizenship. The ship was torpedoed and sunk in the Atlantic by a German submarine on 22 June, news of which was communicated by the British authorities in Gibraltar, where a boat had arrived with the surviving crew.⁶⁶

61. *Caras y Caretas*, 21 April 1917.

62. *Fray Mocho*, 15 June 1917.

63. *Owensboro Inquirer*, 23 July 1917.

64. *Fray Mocho*, 15 June 1917.

65. *Owensboro Inquirer*, 23 July 1917.

66. *Caras y Caretas*, 30 June 1917.

The *Monte Protegido*, *Oriana* and *Toro* incidents were used by the United States government to incite Argentina's entry into the war, although without success. Despite the internal repercussions unleashed by the German attacks (see Figure 1), President Hipólito Yrigoyen did not alter his neutralist policy.⁶⁷

Towards the end of the war, some shipping companies had taken measures to protect their ships. For example, the French company Chargeurs-Réunis equipped the merchant ship *Amiral Troude* with a 65-millimetre gun on the stern, operated by an officer and two gunners. Under these conditions, the ship encountered a German submarine during its voyage from Bordeaux to Buenos Aires:

at 2.40 p.m. a watchman sailor exclaimed, 'Steam to starboard; it looks like a submarine!' Four sounds of the ship's siren and everyone was in position. The battle between the merchant ship and the submarine, which was armed with two 105 cannons, immediately started.

The contest lasted 2 hours ... The fighting ceased at nightfall; at the mercy of its shadows the French ship continued its route with the lights off.⁶⁸

Similarly, a convoy system was deployed, which was far more successful than the isolated navigation system because it entailed the use of armed cruisers as escorts.⁶⁹

The steamship *La Negra*, owned by the British and Argentine Steam Navigation Company of West Hartlepool, transported Argentine meat from Buenos Aires to Le Havre. The ship was sailing in convoy, along with five other vessels, but had left its group to go to Plymouth. There, it was attacked by a German submarine on 3 September 1917. In less than three hours, it received two torpedoes. The first hit the stern, removing the rudder and putting the artillery gun out of action.⁷⁰ The crew improvised another rudder and the ship managed to navigate for a while, transmitting distress signals. However, the second torpedo arrived later. It punctured the hull, made its way to the engine room and caused an explosion. *La Negra* sank in less than 20 minutes, with the survivors later rescued by a destroyer.⁷¹

German attacks on ocean liners and transport ships continued throughout 1918. However, the new countermeasures adopted by the Allied powers diminished the effectiveness of submarines.⁷² By the end of the war, the press was printing articles that spoke of German failure, since its submarines had been defeated by the Allies.⁷³

67. Tato, *La trinchera austral*, 121. Hipólito Yrigoyen was the president of Argentina between 1916 and 1922. He was from the Unión Cívica Radical (Radical Civic Union), a centrist social-liberal political party created in 1891.

68. *Fray Mocho*, 2 March 1917.

69. Holger H. Herwig and David F. Trask, 'The Failure of Imperial Germany's Undersea Offensive against World Shipping, February 1917–October 1918', *Historian*, 33 (1971), 614.

70. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 September 1917.

71. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 September 1917.

72. Howard, *La guerra*, 221–2; Herwig and Trask, 'The Failure', 634–6.

73. See *Fray Mocho*, 20 August 1918; *The Guardian (London)*, 10 July 1918; *The Gazette (Montreal)*, 30 July 1918.



Figure 1. Meeting of the National Youth Committee in Buenos Aires, with posters alluding to the German attacks on Argentine ships, October 1917.

Source: Inventory no. 21.800, Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Conclusions

The Great War left a deep scar on the individuals who experienced the difficult sea crossing between Europe and South America. As well as relating what happened and how it made them feel, their testimonies challenge the traditional Eurocentric and Terracentric narrative of the First World War.

International trade flows altered during the conflict due to the British naval blockade and the German submarine campaign, although some shipping companies continued to maintain regular communications via transoceanic routes, including those between Europe and South America. While this features prominently in the academic literature, the human repercussions of that maritime war have not yet been studied thoroughly. For this and other reasons, an approach that fully addresses the total dimensions of the conflict is still needed. The sea is not simply an area over which goods and war materials are transported from one port to another, but also a historical space in which processes and transformations occur. Moreover, it is a space in which the belligerents employed new weapons and means of warfare, which questioned the ethical and regulatory frameworks of the time.

The testimonies analysed in this article allow us to understand that individuals who embarked on ocean liners and transports were victims of a maritime experience that

was far from the trenches but equally dramatic. The sensations they felt were as diverse as they were complex: the abandonment experienced by the survivors of sunk vessels as they waited in lifeboats for the arrival of a rescue ship in the immensity of the ocean; the tense moments that afflicted passengers when British and French ships stopped and searched them; and, finally, the fear of the attack of a German submarine or armed ocean liner, which might fire without identifying itself and without giving enough time to abandon ship. It should be noted, however, that the misfortunes and disappointments did not end there. When warships respected the relevant conventions, the passengers were evacuated to other units, which often resulted in serious hygiene and food supply problems.

In summary, the war at sea meant more than confrontations between modern battleships and other units of war, for the control of commercial routes and maritime access was a vital strategic objective. To stop at the statistics of battle, where victory was decided by technological and strategic factors, would be to overshadow the complex and rich framework of human experiences, which were a significant element of a total and global war that the world had never known before. Rebuilding and analysing some of the experiences of these men and women, who were not combatants but still cast in life-or-death situations, contributes to a more global conception of the Great War. It is hoped that such issues will be the subject of further scholarly research.


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