The size of the Latin American commercial air transport market has always been, in absolute terms, smaller than USA or European air traffic: Latin America accounts for 5% of the world’s air traffic. Its growth possibilities were considered a few months ago as being highly promising, with annual rates of around 6%. More recently this expectations suffered the effects of the region’s volatile economic situation, that has particularly affected middle classes, a market segment still underexploited in Latin America.

However, commercial aviation in Latin America has played and continues to play an important economic, political and symbolic role. In a region characterized by large areas and deficient means of land communication, commercial aviation has promoted economic development, territorial integration and the affirmation of national sovereignty.

The academic production on the history of air transport in Latin America is scarce. Even the basic information about many of the national cases is fragmented and incomplete. Undoubtedly, the most ambitious study is the one conducted by Dan Hagerdon in his book Conquistadors of the Sky, in which he reconstructs the origins of aviation in a good part of Latin America. His study shows that the emergence of commercial aviation in the region occurred almost simultaneously with that of the United States and in a very few years followed the European airlines. In fact, in the 1920s, Latin America was a territory of dispute for the European plane manufacturers and airlines (mainly Germany, French and British). Soon afterwards, in the 1930s, the companies from the United States also began to compete for this market.

More recently, researchers from different disciplines have addressed of the history of commercial aviation in the region in the germinal period that followed the Great Depression of 1930. Some studies have focused on the relationship between air transport and the hegemony of the United States in the years leading up to the Second World War. Others,

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5 Tânia Quintaneiro, “A política estadunidense de desgermanização do sistema de transporte aéreo brasileiro: o caso da Condor”. Revista brasileira de política internacional, 52:1 (2009), 110-132; Ricardo Salvatore,
had reconstructed the trajectories of some airlines together with the cultural aspects related to the emergence of commercial aviation.⁶ Among other things, these studies have shed light on the role that commercial aviation played in modernisation processes and projects and in the economic development in Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s.

The breakout of the Second World War and its many consequences ended up reinforcing the role of the State in commercial aviation. The flag carrier airline model which had been developed in the 1930s became consolidated across the world as a result of the agreements reached at the Chicago Convention in 1944. The Allied powers agreed to further develop the organisation model of the international aviation market based on the monopoly of national traffic for the flag carriers. At the same time, the connections between countries were governed by bilateral agreements. The cold war contributed to reinforcing this vision of nations that were protective over their strategic air space during the 1950s. The Latin American states were quick to incorporate themselves in the model, largely through the development of air transport nationalism, the protection of its national markets and the promotion of national airlines. At the same time, the military interests were given priority over the civil authorities throughout the region. In this way, import substitution industrialisation programmes included the search for local aviation technology, despite the acceleration of the technological impulse experienced by the United States in contrast to the relative decline the European air transport industry which did not recover until the 1960s-1970s with the Airbus project.⁷ The development of the air transport market in Argentina with the promotion of the construction of the Pulqui I and II aircraft between 1946 and 1955 perfectly reflects this conflict of military and civil interests to boost modern aviation with the new jet engines in a country with a peripheral economy and location within Latin America⁸.


A similar case is that of Brazil in the 1960s, with the *Bandeirante* plane developed after 1965 by Embraer.\(^9\)

However, the renovation of the air fleet, with the introduction of the modern jet engines in the majority of Latin American countries, required higher public spending. The commitment to an integrated and necessary means of transport for large-sized countries such as Argentina, Mexico or Brazil obliged the state to assume a strong fiscal deficit in order to purchase aircraft in the USA market and, to a lesser extent, Europe.\(^10\) The renovation of the fleet also had major political impacts, as the allocation of resources to this new mode of transport implied relations to be established with the supplier countries of the planes through international agreements and treaties. This often meant obtaining external finance and the granting of routes and itineraries to the European and USA airlines that facilitated the supply of new planes.\(^11\)

The problems of change and adapting to aviation technology persisted in practically the whole of Latin America and were multiplied with market liberalisation introduced from 1978 by the United States and Europe. The most significant change brought about by the progressive deregulation in the international arena - development of *open sky policies* without restrictions - were the privatisations of the public aviation companies, coinciding with the end of the import substitution model. This process gave rise to a mass entry of capital from outside of the region aimed at acquiring public assets. The airlines and the airport infrastructures were also privatised, generating a permanent process of adaptation to the changes that the *open sky* policies have produced throughout the whole of Latin America\(^12\). The political instability experienced by most of the governments from 1980 generated different rhythms of development depending on the country, but the end of a controversial historical process in their political and economic ups and downs resulted in the creation of three large private airlines: LATAM, AVIANCA and AEROMÉXICO and many public airlines throughout the whole of Latin America.

Despite the progress made by the historiography on commercial aviation in Latin America, there are many aspects still to be researched. The studies included in this dossier constitute significant contributions to this research agenda. While working with a selection of national

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cases, they address key issues such as the many impacts of technology, the international air relations and the role played by publicly owned national airlines.