Journal of Global History (2025), 1–20
doi:10.1017/S1740022825000075

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Seeing the Berlin Conference from the periphery: Latin American reactions to imperialism elsewhere, 1884–85

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Abstract
The Berlin Conference (1884–85) is widely studied for its role in fuelling European imperialism and legitimising the scramble for Africa. However, its global impact beyond Europe and Africa has received little attention, with Latin America notably absent. This article examines how prominent diplomats from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico interpreted the proceedings. In their view, Europe's renewed expansionism in Africa—combining private adventurism, colonisation enterprises, and imperial statecraft—resembled the great powers' incursions into post-independence Latin America. They feared that new criteria for staking colonial claims would endanger their states' sovereignty over vast, remote territories. Yet, while opposing intervention, these diplomats embraced civilisational thinking and state-building projects that echoed Eurocentric racial hierarchies. Their arguments reflected both resistance to imperialism and complicity in its logic. By tracing Berlin's reverberations across multiple regions, this article highlights the broader repercussions of late nineteenth-century 'high imperialism' and reassesses the nature of Latin American anti-imperialism.

Keywords: imperialism; colonialism; Berlin Conference; Latin America; Congo; nineteenth century; international law; territoriality

On 26 September 1885, Colombia's Minister in Washington, Ricardo Becerra, visited his Mexican counterpart, the esteemed diplomat Matías Romero. Somewhat unusually, Becerra's visit was motivated by events far beyond the Americas, namely a clash between the German and Spanish empires over the distant Pacific Caroline archipelago. For Becerra, the conflict was an aftershock of the recently concluded Berlin Conference. There, the world's most formidable powers, including Britain, France, and the United States, had established 'effective occupation' as the primary international legal criterion for extending colonial rule in West Africa.

Under the principle of effective occupation, the right to rule a territory—and, by extension, its people—had to be asserted through direct and enduring control on the ground. Long-standing but unenforced claims, such as Portugal's in West Africa, were now vulnerable to challenge. In a literal sense, Articles 34 and 35 of the Berlin Final Act confined the application of this doctrine to coasts of Africa. But for Becerra, who had been dispatched to Washington to safeguard Colombia's tenuous sovereignty over the Isthmus of Panama, German expansion in the Pacific showed that powerful empires would disregard such restrictions. If legal justifications for imperial expansion could stretch from the Congo to the Caroline Islands, great powers might soon set their sights on

Colombia's strategically vital northern province.[1] More generally, an extension of this doctrine would pose dangers to vast but still unconsolidated Latin American states, which claimed territorial titles inherited from Spain and Portugal.[2] Following independence, these new states invoked the principle of *uti possidetis* to define boundaries and assert dominion based on colonial-era jurisdictions, often regardless of permanent settlement or administrative presence.

In short, imperial powers' proclamation of effective occupation threatened to vitiate the legal basis of territorial sovereignty in Latin America. The Berlin Final Act demanded a response, Becerra insisted. Spanish American republics should 'make a collective manifestation against that doctrine' and in favour of *uti possidetis*.[3] Diplomats from several large Latin American countries shared the Colombian's concerns. The Argentine minister in Berlin, Carlos Calvo, who was the region's foremost expert on international law at the time, expressed similar reservations about the implications of effective occupation for the Americas. In fact, Calvo had a ringside seat at the Berlin Conference, leveraging his reputation among European statesmen and jurists to personally follow the proceedings. The Brazilian representative in Berlin, the Barão de Jaurú, similarly fretted over his country's shaky territorial control amid the resurgence of European imperialism.[4]

International conferences like the Berlin West Africa Conference were not just sites for intergovernmental negotiations, which have been the traditional focus of diplomatic history, but also served as catalysts for ideas and exchanges with global ramifications.[5] Although recent histories have started to situate the Berlin Conference within a broader global context, Latin America remains nearly as absent from the historiography as it was from German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's guest list. Neither invited to Berlin nor explicitly targeted by the imperial powers gathered there, Latin America has fallen into the cracks between national historiographies, histories of empire, and recent transimperial research. Bringing Latin America into this history highlights the transregional echoes and entanglements of late nineteenth-century imperialism. In line with global history's aim to decentre Eurocentric accounts of significant events and processes,[6] the article draws on unpublished material from archives in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico to trace perceptions of, and reactions to, the Berlin Conference. The changes in global legal orders, including the introduction of concepts like 'hinterland' and effective occupation, created conundrums for polities that stood at the margins of the European imperial order as well as for those most directly targeted.[7]

[1]Matías Romero to the Foreign Secretary, 'Conversación con el Sr. Becerra', 2 October 1885, no. 850, L-E-2279-III, Legación Mexicana en Estados Unidos, Archivo Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (hereafter, SRE-Mexico). All translations by authors unless otherwise noted.

[2]On the nature of these titles, see Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500–c. 1800* (Yale University Press, 1995); Andrew Fitzmaurice, 'Discovery, Conquest, and Occupation of Territory', in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of International Law*, ed. Bardo Fassbender and Anne Peters (Oxford University Press, 2014), 840–61.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Barão de Jaurú (Brazilian Legation in Berlin) to João da Matta Machado (Foreign Minister), 20 October 1884, 2ª section, no. 13, in *Cadernos do Centro de História e Documentação Diplomática (CHDD)* (2015), v. 14, no. 26, 14–26.

[5]An expanding body of literature reassesses these summits, most famously in the cases of the Paris Peace and Bandung conferences. Madeleine Herren, 'Diplomatie im Fokus der Globalgeschichte', *Neue Politische Literatur* 61, no. 3 (2016): 413–38. On Paris, see Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019); on Bandung, Christopher J. Lee, ed., *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Ohio University Press, 2010); Luis Eslava, Michael Fakhri, and Vasuki Nesiah, eds., *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[6]Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 4.

[7]On this score, we tread a path parallel to Mostafa Minawi, who explores Ottoman participation and the consequences for the Sublime Porte's attempts to defend and expand the empire. See M. Minawi, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz* (Stanford University Press, 2016); M. Minawi, 'International Law and the Precarity of Ottoman Sovereignty in Africa at the End of the Nineteenth Century', *The International History Review* 43, no. 5 (2020): 1098–1121.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022825000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Latin American responses to great power overreach in the nineteenth century are often portrayed as precedents for later anti-imperialism.[8] However, integrating Latin America into a global historiography of the Berlin Conference offers a distinctive vantage on the region's complex relationship with colonialism and empire. As we demonstrate, ruling elites in Latin America's largest countries ultimately set aside their concerns and accommodated the outcome of the conference. Calvo—renowned both then and now as an opponent of intervention—went so far as to defend Portugal's historical rights to colonise West Africa at the Berlin Conference. Meanwhile Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico acceded to King Leopold II's requests to recognise his Congo Free State in the conference's aftermath. These findings complicate narratives about regional diplomatic traditions, particularly regarding major figures like Romero and Calvo. Recognition of empire in Africa occurred during a period when internal colonisation was taking a bloodier form in many Latin American states, from Argentina's 'conquest of the desert' to Mexico's renewed Yaqui Wars. Criticism of European overseas rule reflected not a full-throated anti-imperialism but a disagreement over who had the right to colonise. These diplomats rejected foreign interventions in the Americas and contested their secondary status in a hierarchical world order, even as they embraced civilisational missions at home and acquiesced to the expansion of empire elsewhere.[9]

Berlin, Congo, and beyond

The Berlin Conference, held between 15 November 1884 and 26 February 1885, arose from fierce imperial competition and colonial fervour. Resurgent European expansion in Africa mixed private expeditions, colonial corporations, roguish adventurers, and, often arriving late to the scene, more traditional statesmanship. By the early 1880s, disorderly ventures under Belgian, French, and German auspices increasingly challenged Britain's dominance and Portugal's sprawling, if ancient, prerogative over vast swathes of sub-Saharan Africa. Seeking to harness this imperial ferment to their advantage, the French and German foreign ministers seized upon an earlier Portuguese suggestion for an international conference to ease tensions in West Africa and European capitals. The powers settled on a broad agenda: to establish freedom of trade and navigation in the mouths and basins of the Congo and Niger Rivers and to agree on the 'formalities to be observed so that new occupations on the Africa coasts shall be deemed effective'.[10]

For decades, the Berlin Conference has been derided for fuelling the 'scramble for Africa'. Without a single African present, delegates debated the continent's political and territorial order for four months before the participating powers finally agreed upon the Berlin Final Act. The document set rules—soon and repeatedly violated—for free commerce and navigation, the prohibition of slavery, and the neutrality and internationalisation of the Congo basin.[11] Diplomats, aristocrats, and humanitarians boasted of ending the slave trade within Africa,

[8]Isidro Fabela, *Intervención* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1991); Kathryn Sikkink, 'Reconceptualizing Sovereignty in the Americas: Historical Precursors and Current Practices', *Houston Journal of International Law* 19 (1996): 705; Max Paul Friedman and Tom Long, 'Soft Balancing in the Americas: Latin American Opposition to U.S. Intervention, 1898–1936', *International Security* 40, no. 1 (2015): 120–56; Alan McPherson, *The Invaded: How Latin Americans and Their Allies Fought and Ended U.S. Occupations* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

[9]Cristina Rojas, *Civilization and Violence: Regimes of Representation in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Carsten-Andreas Schulz, 'Civilisation, Barbarism and the Making of Latin America's Place in 19th-Century International Society', *Millennium* 42, no. 3 (2014): 837–59; Carsten-Andreas Schulz, 'Territorial Sovereignty and the End of Inter-Cultural Diplomacy along the "Southern Frontier"', *European Journal of International Relations* 25, no. 3 (2019): 878–903.

[10]'[Jules] Ferry's Circular to French Representatives in London, The Hague, Madrid, Lisbon, Brussels, Washington, Vienna, St. Petersburg, Stockholm, Rome, Copenhagen, 5 October 1884', in *The Scramble for Africa: Documents on the Berlin West African Conference and Related Subjects, 1884/1885*, ed. R.J. Gavin and J.A. Betley (Ibadan University Press, 1973), 255–8.

[11]Berlin Final Act of 1885.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022825000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

advancing scientific knowledge, opening the way for missionaries, and 'instructing the natives and bringing home to them the blessings of civilization'.[12]

Consequentially, they also agreed on doctrines for justifying new colonial claims, especially in Articles 34 and 35. These clauses required notification to other powers when a colony or protectorate was established, as well as demonstration of physical presence and an 'effective' exercise of political authority. Claims without control would no longer confer title.[13] Debates at and in the wake of Berlin shaped the understanding of *territorium nullius*, 'hinterland', and other doctrines central to colonial expansion.[14] Although the conference was not solely responsible for partitioning sub-Saharan Africa, the meeting granted a seal of approval to the creation of Belgian King Leopold II's Congo Free State,[15] soon one of the bloodiest entries in a catalogue of European imperial horrors in Africa.[16]

Given these legacies, scholars have widely studied the Berlin Conference as 'an important juncture' in European imperialism.[17] Social scientists invoke the 'curse of Berlin' to explain the origins of arbitrary colonial boundaries and their lasting political and economic effects.[18] International legal historians stress how the Berlin Conference catalysed prominent debates over conquest and occupation.[19] Meanwhile, historians have moved beyond early accounts of imperial geopolitics to place the conference in a global political and juridical context.[20] Recent studies show how diplomats drew on practices and norms from colonial projects elsewhere in their deliberations and decisions in Berlin.[21] This was not limited to European empires. The Ottoman Empire redeployed concepts from the conference, including effective occupation and hinterland, for its own imperial ambitions around Lake Chad.[22]

[12]US delegate Henry Shelton Sanford, quoted in 'Protocol no. 9 – Meeting of February 23, 1885', in *The Scramble for Africa*, 257.

[13]Minawi, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa*, 46–8.

[14]On the use of such norms elsewhere, see Matthew Unangst, 'Hinterland: The Political History of a Geographic Category from the Scramble for Africa to Afro-Asian Solidarity', *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 3 (2022): 496–514; Andrew Fitzmaurice, 'Liberalism and Empire in Nineteenth-Century International Law', *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 1 (2012): 122–40; Fitzmaurice, 'Discovery, Conquest, and Occupation of Territory'. Steven Press's *Rogue Empires: Contracts and Conmen in Europe's Scramble for Africa* (Harvard University Press, 2017) examines how statesmen used private contract models from Borneo and beyond for empire-building in the 1880s, which were later re-deployed elsewhere.

[15]'Protocol no. 9 – Meeting of February 23, 1885', in *The Scramble for Africa*, 255–8.

[16]The most influential account remains Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Pan Book, 2012), 225–34.

[17]Wolfgang Mommsen, 'Preface', in *Bismarck, Europe and Africa the Berlin Africa Conference 1884–1885 and the Onset of Partition*, ed. Stig Förster, Wolfgang Mommsen, and Ronald Robinson (Oxford University Press; German Historical Institute, 1988), v.

[18]Adekeye Adebajo, 'The Curse of Berlin: Africa's Security Dilemmas', *Internationale Politik Und Gesellschaft* 4 (2005): 83–98. See also Ieuan Griffiths, 'The Scramble for Africa: Inherited Political Boundaries', *The Geographical Journal* 152, no. 2 (1986): 204–16; Joanne Yao, *The Ideal River: How Control of Nature Shaped the International Order* (Manchester University Press, 2022).

[19]See Matthew Craven, 'Between Law and History: The Berlin Conference of 1884–1885 and the Logic of Free Trade', *London Review of International Law* 3, no. 1 (2015): 31–59; Andrew Fitzmaurice, *King Leopold's Ghostwriter: The Creation of Persons and States in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 2021); Press, *Rogue Empires*, 233–5. On the importance of colonial encounters in the development of international law, see Pagden, *Lords of All the World*; Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Lauren A. Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[20]On the former, see Sybil Eyre Crowe, *The Berlin West African Conference 1884–1885* (Longmans, Green and Co., 1942); Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (Macmillan, 1961); Förster, Mommsen, and Robinson, eds., *Bismarck, Europe and Africa*; H.L. Wesseling, *Divide and Rule: The Partition of Africa, 1880–1914* (Praeger, 1996).

[21]On the global antecedents and legal consequences, see Press, *Rogue Empires*.

[22]Minawi, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa*, esp. ch. 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022825000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

However, Latin America remains almost entirely absent from this recent, more global historiography on Berlin.[23] Perhaps this is unsurprising. Bismarck invited no Latin American states, and the region's interests in a meeting of European powers about their African imperial ambitions are not immediately obvious. That said, key themes on the conference agenda, such as annexation, protectorates, colonisation, and territorial sovereignty, converged with the concerns of Latin American statesmen.[24] The Congo Free State, with its specious sovereignty claims and mixing of royal and private enterprise, bore a disquieting resemblance to private–public imperialism that Latin America knew all too well. This episode, then, put in relief Latin Americans' concerns about their liminality in the face of US and European imperialism.

Many of the delegates gathered at Berlin had their own entanglements with Latin America, as observers in the region were aware. The Belgian royals who set their sights on the Congo in the 1880s were implicated in France's failure to install a Habsburg monarchy in Mexico two decades earlier and had sponsored colonial enterprises from Guatemala to Brazil. Other participants mobilised their fleeting knowledge and prejudices about Latin America to argue their case at the conference. A Belgian delegate deployed his experiences with 'Indian populations' and 'the plantations of South America' to support racialised arguments for banning liquor sales in West Africa.[25] For the French emissary, diplomatic recognition of Leopold's Congo Free State despite its defects would forestall 'the formation of a republic of American negroes or mulattoes, like Liberia or Haiti'.[26] Berlin's legal committee referenced South American examples to justify the free navigation of rivers, citing treaties about the Paraná and Uruguay waterways.[27] Latin America was part and parcel of the participants' imperial imaginaries, just as multifaceted manifestations of empire chimed with Latin American interests.

Latin American views of empire, near and far

Latin American observers were no strangers to imperial interventions cloaked in civilising missions. As in West Africa, foreign interference in Latin America often took a hybrid form: private enterprises or filibusters pursuing personal interests, on the one hand, and foreign governments offering diplomatic protection to their nationals or collecting debts, on the other. Despite these similarities, correspondence among Argentine, Brazilian, Colombian, and Mexican diplomats reveals little solidarity with colonised peoples elsewhere—after all, the proponents of a *Latin* America exalted the region's cultural proximity with Europe while ruling over indigenous peoples and racially heterogenous populations.[28] Still, these diplomats recognised unsettling parallels between renewed imperialism in Africa and their own countries' experiences with

[23]The exception is a PhD thesis on Brazil and the Berlin Conference. See Frederico Antonio Ferreira, 'No festim dos lobos: o império do Brasil e o colonialismo na África Centro-Ocidental (1880–1885)' (PhD diss., Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, 2018). On connections between the Congo rubber boom and the later 'scramble for the Amazon', see Susanna B. Hecht, *The Scramble for the Amazon and the 'Lost Paradise' of Euclides Da Cunha* (University of Chicago Press, 2013); Janne Schreurs, 'Entangled Colonialisms between Belgium, Congo and the Amazon: The Perspective of Brazilian Diplomats in Brussels (1895–1911)', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 24, no. 2 (2023).

[24]Craven, 'Between Law and History', 46–8.

[25]Belgium's Count van der Straten, drawing on his experience in Brazil, claimed: 'There is, however, a difference between the effects produced by alcoholism on the Indian races and those of African origin. The negro does not succumb physically to drunkenness, he succumbs morally. If the Powers do not save him from this vice, they will make of him a monster which will swallow the work of the Conference' (quoted in 'Protocol No. 5 – Meeting of December 18, 1884', in *The Scramble for Africa*, 184).

[26]Courcel to Ferry, Berlin (private), 3 February 1885, in *The Scramble for Africa*, 373.

[27]See 'Annex to Protocol No. 5: Report of the Commission charged to Examine the Projects of Acts of Navigation for the Congo and the Niger', in *The Scramble for Africa*, 189.

[28]Michel Gobat, 'The Invention of Latin America: A Transnational History of Anti-Imperialism, Democracy, and Race', *The American Historical Review* 118, no. 5 (2013): 1345–75. Our research has been limited to the archives of these four large countries. Greater sympathy may have existed among subaltern populations in countries, like Bolivia, Ecuador, or Paraguay,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022825000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

empire. These experiences included, most blatantly, the US conquest of half of Mexico's territory in 1846–48, as well as France's full-blown project of regime change in Mexico in the 1860s. In living memory, Spain had attempted to reconquer islands off South America's Pacific Coast and briefly reasserted control over the Dominican Republic.[29] In response, Spanish American statesmen had rallied around proposals for a regional confederation grounded in republican fraternity.[30] These efforts reinforced norms of territorial integrity based on colonial boundaries—*uti possidetis*—and fostered practices of consultation and arbitration that became hallmarks of Latin American internationalism.[31]

However, the immediate European threat to Latin America seemed to diminish after 1867, when Mexican Liberals defeated Napoleon III and executed his puppet emperor, Maximilian. As France and Spain saw their influence wane in comparison to the newly unified Germany, they scaled back their ambitions in the Western Hemisphere. Britain's territorial objectives in the Americas remained limited and increasingly deferential to the United States.[32] Meanwhile, US expansion southward gave way to commercial dominance, although many US politicians still set their sights on islands in the Caribbean and Pacific.[33] In sum, the nature of imperial competition in the Western Hemisphere shifted from wars of conquest to informal modes of dominance during the two decades preceding Berlin.[34] This happened even as empires turned to Africa, with an emphasis on attaining greater, more exclusive forms of territorial control.

At the same time, various Latin American states were intensifying their campaigns of territorial expansion and consolidation. Violent state-making was often accompanied by efforts to promote European immigration into areas usurped from indigenous people.[35] Throughout the nineteenth century, most Latin American governments sought to attract European immigrants, often through colonisation companies linked to foreign countries and entrepreneurs. European settlers were viewed as racially and economically desirable, but their presence required a delicate balance. Concentrated foreign settlements had instigated diplomatic interference and even secessionism, a persistent concern in southern Brazil. As a result, Argentine and Brazilian diplomats in Europe sounded notes of caution over the surging influence of overseas colonial societies in Belgium and

that had suffered territorial losses to their neighbours, or in remaining imperial outposts like Cuba and Puerto Rico; however, this awaits further research.

[29]Erika Pani, 'Dreaming of a Mexican Empire: The Political Projects of the "Imperialistas"', *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82, no. 1 (2002): 1–32; Gobat, 'The Invention of Latin America'; Edward Shawcross, *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America, 1820–1867: Equilibrium in the New World* (Springer, 2018); Scott Eastman, *A Missionary Nation: Race, Religion, and Spain's Age of Liberal Imperialism, 1841–1881* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021).

[30]Tom Long and Carsten-Andreas Schulz, 'A Turn against Empire: Benito Juárez's Liberal Rejoinder to the French Intervention in Mexico', *American Political Science Review 119*, no. 2 (2025): 763–77.

[31]Arie Marcelo Kacowicz, *The Impact of Norms in International Society: The Latin American Experience, 1881–2001* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); Steven R. Ratner, 'Drawing a Better Line: Uti Possidetis and the Borders of New States', *American Journal of International Law* 90, no. 4 (1996): 593–5; Tom Long and Carsten-Andreas Schulz, 'Republican Internationalism: The Nineteenth-Century Roots of Latin American Contributions to International Order', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 35, no. 5 (2022): 639–61.

[32]Peter Winn, 'British Informal Empire in Uruguay in the Nineteenth Century', *Past & Present* 73, no. 1 (1976): 100–26; Andrew Thompson, 'Informal Empire? An Exploration in the History of Anglo-Argentine Relations, 1810–1914', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24, no. 2 (1992): 419–36; Alan Knight, 'Rethinking British Informal Empire in Latin America (Especially Argentina)', *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 27, no. s1 (2008): 23–48.

[33]Mark T. Gilderhus, 'Forming an Informal Empire without Colonies: US–Latin American Relations', *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 3 (2005): 312–25; Alan Knight, 'U.S. Imperialism/Hegemony and Latin American Resistance', in *Empire and Dissent: The United States and Latin America*, ed. Fred Rosen, Gilbert M. Joseph, and Emily S. Rosenberg (Duke University Press, 2008), 23–52.

[34]A.G. Hopkins, 'Informal Empire in Argentina: An Alternative View', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26, no. 02 (1994): 469–84; Knight, 'Rethinking British Informal Empire'.

[35]Carolyne R. Larson, *The Conquest of the Desert: Argentina's Indigenous Peoples and the Battle for History* (University of New Mexico Press, 2020); Claudia Briones and Walter Delrio, 'La "conquista del desierto" desde perspectivas hegemónicas y subalternas', *Runa* 27 (2007): 23–48.

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Germany. However, such apprehensions were often secondary to the purported benefits of attracting people of European stock. Although Latin American leaders in the 1880s remained wary of imperial interference, particularly regarding sovereign debt and private claims, fears of foreign conquest had receded compared to the acute anxieties of the 1860s.

The imperial non-interventionist? Calvo in Berlin

At the crossroads of nation-building, migration, and gunboat diplomacy stood Carlos Calvo. Today, Calvo is best remembered for his defence of non-intervention, especially his arguments that debt defaults and private pecuniary claims did not justify European or US armed interference in Latin American affairs. This emphasis on non-intervention gave rise to the 'Calvo clause', later interpreted as incipient anti-imperialism.[36]

While diplomats such as Becerra, Romero, and the Barão de Jaurú observed the Berlin Conference from the outside, Calvo paced the corridors of Bismarck's Chancellery in the Wilhelmstrasse.[37] Argentina had not been invited to the Berlin Conference, yet Calvo—in a largely unknown episode—observed the proceedings, likely in an advisory role to the Portuguese delegation.[38] In that capacity, he 'defended, although without success, the rights of Portugal' to retain its historic claims in western and central Africa.[39]

By the time of the Berlin Conference, Calvo had spent more than two decades building his reputation. In the early 1860s, he successfully defended Paraguay against dubious British claims, drawing the attention of Napoleon III's imperial government. Calvo then settled in Paris and embarked on a career as a publicist, beginning with his Spanish translation of Henry Wheaton's Histoire des progrès du droit des gens en Europe et en Amérique [*History of the Progress of the Law of Nations in the Europe and America*].[40] Calvo later focused on compiling historical legal documents to demonstrate that Latin America's territorial rights stemmed from European claims to the New World dating back to the conquest.[41] This rationale meant that Argentina's sovereignty over Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, and the South Atlantic Islands was bound up with the legitimacy of Spain's and Portugal's remaining colonial possessions.[42] Calvo's success drew the ire of some jurists back home; critics accused him of being an 'usurper of titles' who lacked legal training,

[36]See, for example, Facundo Perez Aznar, 'Revisting Carlos Calvo on the 200th anniversary of his birth', EJIL Talk! Blog of the European Journal of International Law, accessed 1 May 2025, https://www.ejiltalk.org/revisiting-carlos-calvo-on-the-200th-anniversary-of-his-birth; Mark T. Gilderhus, *The Second Century: U.S.–Latin American Relations since 1889* (Scholarly Resources, 2000), 31.

[37]Calvo's participation at the Berlin Conference has long escaped notice. Two exceptions mention the episode in passing: Eduardo Ricardo Pérez Calvo, *Vida y trabajos de Carlos Calvo* (Ediciones Dunken, 1996); Liliana Obregón, 'Carlos Calvo y la profesionalización del derecho internacional', *Revista Latinoamericana de Derecho Internacional*, no. 3 (2015): 1–23). See also the biographical sketch of José Yves Limantour, *Memoria sobre la vida y la obra de D. Carlos Calvo* (Libreria de la Vda de C. Bouret, 1909). Scholarship on Calvo rarely uses archival sources, drawing almost exclusively on two biographies, legal commentary, and Calvo's own published writings.

[38]Limantour, *Memoria sobre la vida y la obra de D. Carlos Calvo*, 15–16. To our knowledge, we provide the first study based on archival sources, including Calvo's confidential dispatches to Buenos Aires.

[39]Becerra to the Secretary of Foreign Relations, Colombia, 5 November 1885, Archivo General de la Nación (Bogotá, Colombia) [hereafter, AGN], Caja 148, Orden 153, ff. 470–2.

[40]Henry Wheaton, *Historia de los progresos del Derecho de Gentes en Europa y en América desde la Paz de Westfalia hasta nuestros días:* con una introducción sobre los progresos del Derecho de Gentes en Europa ánte de la Paz de Westfalia por Enrique Wheaton; traducida y aumentada con un apéndice por Carlos Calvo (Imprenta de José Jacquin, 1961).

[41]Pérez Calvo, *Vida y trabajos de Carlos Calvo*, 21, 27, 73.

[42]Charles [Carlos] Calvo, *Le droit international théorique et pratique*: précédé d'un exposé historique des progrès de la science du droit des gens (Guillaumin et Cie; G. Pedone-Lauriel; E. Thorin; A. Rousseau, 1887), vol. 1, 290–302. The work was initially published in Paris in 1868 under the corresponding Spanish title.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022825000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

originality, and doctrinal sophistication.[43] Yet Calvo's publications earned him widespread recognition among European peers, including membership in the exclusive Institut de France (1869). He cemented his place in the professionalisation of international law as a founding member of the Institut de Droit International,[44] a position that likely brought him into early contact with debates on occupation as prerequisite for colonial claims.

Calvo entered official service to Argentina in 1876 as the country's immigration commissioner in Europe. In 1884, he was dispatched to Berlin as a minister plenipotentiary to the Austrian, German, and Russian courts. Upon his arrival, the Argentine was already familiar with what he termed the 'German doctrine' of effective occupation,[45] a legal argument advanced by Swiss jurist Johann Bluntschli and embraced by Germany's colonial enthusiasts. Bluntschli reasoned that 'fictitious' claims over extensive territories, such as those of 'Spain and Portugal in South America', did not serve humanity's interests. Therefore, such claims could not establish legal title, and states that took possession of such territories did not breach international law.[46]

Although Calvo was a strong proponent of European migration to Argentina, he was alarmed that Germany's growing 'colonisation fever',[47] now endorsed by the imperial government and influential colonial societies—posed a threat to Argentina. In his dispatches to Buenos Aires, Calvo reported on the activities of nationalists who insisted that colonial expansion was vital to Germany's survival as a nation-state.[48] Chief among them was historian and Reichstag member Heinrich von Treitschke, who argued that Germany's late start in the centuries-long struggle for colonial territories placed it at a disadvantage compared to Britain and France. Moreover, he saw emigration to European colonies and the Americas as a drain on national strength. To counter this, he maintained, Germany needed to acquire colonies or extend its protection over German settlements abroad.[49] The Society for German Colonization, founded in early 1884, endorsed Treitschke's views in its founding manifesto, prompting Calvo to issue a warning to his foreign ministry that these doctrines could be invoked at Argentina's expense.[50] Inspired by these ideas, the merchant-adventurer Adolf Lüderitz, who had previously failed to make his fortune as a rancher in Mexico, sought official German protection in 1884 for his private colony in Southwest Africa (today's Namibia). The incident exacerbated tensions with Britain and ultimately led Bismarck to convene the Berlin Conference.

Initially, Argentine Foreign Minister Francisco Ortiz did not share Calvo's concerns. However, when Calvo explained that Bismarck planned to invite all states of international relevance to Berlin, Ortiz insisted that Argentina, as South America's leading power, deserved representation.[51]

[43]Pérez Calvo, *Vida y trabajos de Carlos Calvo*, 172, 225; Amancio Alcorta, 'La ciencia del derecho internacional. Reseña de Carlos Calvo, Le droit international théorique et pratique (Paris: 1880–1881)', *Nueva Revista de Buenos Aires* vol. 7 (1883): 419, 422.

[44]Obregón, 'Carlos Calvo y la profesionalización del derecho internacional'; Juan Pablo Scarfi, 'In the Name of the Americas: The Pan-American Redefinition of the Monroe Doctrine and the Emerging Language of American International Law in the Western Hemisphere', *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 2 (2016): 199.

[45]Note from Carlos Calvo, no. 28, Berlin, 14 June 1884, Misiones: Carlos Calvo [without numerical catalogue reference], Archivo Histórico de la Cancillería de Argentina, Buenos Aires (hereafter, AHCA).

[46]Johann Caspar Bluntschli, *Le Droit International Codifié*, 3rd edn (Guillaumin et cie, 1881), 177–8. Calvo sent a translation of the section to Ortiz (Calvo to Ortiz, no. 56, Berlin, 29 August 1884, AH0023-3, AHCA).

[47]Calvo to Ortiz, no. 56, Berlin, 29 August 1884; Calvo to Ortiz, no. 73, Berlin, 6 October 1884; Carlos to Ortiz, no. 77, Berlin, 25 October 1884; Comunicaciones entre las Legaciones Argentinas en Alemania y Portugal con el Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores al respecto de la Conferencia, sus resultados y posibles consecuencias', all in AH0023-3, Series 5 'Conferencia de Berlín. 1884–1885, AHCA.

[48]Calvo to Ortiz, no. 56, Berlin, 29 August 1884, AH0023-3, AHCA.

[49]Earlier lectures, dating from 1874, were collected and reprinted in Heinrich von Treitschke, *Politik: Vorlesungen Gehalten and Der Universität Zu Berlin von Heinrich von Treitschke*, ed. Max Cornicelius, vol. 1 (S. Hirzel, 1899).

[50]Calvo to Ortiz, no. 76, Berlin, 23 October 1884, AH0023-3, AHCA.

[51]Indeed, Calvo spent much of his time with German officials making a case for why Argentina deserved greater recognition and status than Brazil. He sought, successfully, to have the German diplomatic mission in Buenos Aires upgraded to the same level as that in Brazil. See Ortiz to Calvo, no. 31, Buenos Aires, 25 April 1884, AH0023-3, AHCA.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022825000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

He instructed Calvo either to seek an invitation from Germany or liaise with other countries to secure one. Although Calvo was unable to obtain an official invitation, he took advantage of 'very fortuitous circumstances [*circunstancias muy casuales*]' to attend the conference as a legal expert.[52] In Calvo's view, Portugal's claims in Africa rested on the same legal foundations as those inherited by the independent countries of the Americas; conversely, a global legal order based on effective occupation would leave Argentina's territorial sovereignty at the mercy of stronger powers. Given his professional standing, Calvo's arguments carried significant weight, reaching other Latin American elites across the Atlantic through both formal and informal channels.

However, Calvo's opposition to German imperial aspirations was not a blanket rejection of colonialism. Calvo readily appropriated Europeans' civilisational discourses to legitimise expansion and the appropriation of indigenous lands.[53] Primarily, he insisted that Latin America be placed on the same side of the civilisational dividing line as Europe and the United States. 'Calvo resented that Latin America [was] either frequently confused with other uncivilized regions of the world or still mistakenly identified with the period of colonial domination, disregarding the incessant progress Latin America had made since independence.'[54] Calvo's actions in Berlin reflect this stance. Later, Calvo was celebrated for his defence of the rights of the small nation at the conference—but this meant advocating for Portugal's historical claims, not defending African polities facing an imperialist onslaught. Davis interprets Calvo as offering a 'pragmatic critique of empire' that emerged from his prioritisation of liberal property rights and commerce.[55] Placing Calvo's views with the broader context of Berlin's changing global legal order, rather than solely within a regional framework, suggests a need for further qualification.

A Spanish American rejoinder?

When the Colombian minister Becerra entered the Mexican mission in September 1885, he expected to find an ally, even suggesting that Mexico take the lead in proposing a counter-conference. He met Matías Romero, whose diplomatic career had begun a quarter-century earlier, serving as envoy to Washington under President Benito Juárez during the French intervention in Mexico. Upon his return to Washington in 1882, Romero focused on tightening relations with the United States through a reciprocal commercial agreement.[56] Known as an admirer of the United States (and married to US citizen Lucretia Allen), Romero's youthful idealism had faded as he served as the representative of the decades-long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Becerra, by contrast, was a newcomer to Washington's diplomatic corps, although he had previously served as envoy to Caracas, justice minister, and interim foreign minister before being dispatched to the United States in 1884.[57]

Becerra's visit to Romero was prompted by tensions between Spain and Germany over the Pacific Caroline archipelago. In mid-1885, the dispute intensified when Germany sent a battleship

[52]Calvo to Ortiz, no. 74, Berlin, 16[?] October 1884, AH0023-3, AHCA. Later that year, Calvo reported that Count Hatzfeldt's temporary replacement had offered him a personal invitation to attend as a legal expert in lieu of an official invitation, which he duly declined, Calvo to Ortiz, no. 107, Berlin, 28 December 1884, AH0023-3, AHCA.

[53]Arnulf Becker Lorca, *Mestizo International Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); Liliana Obregón, 'Between Civilisation and Barbarism: Creole Interventions in International Law', *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (2006): 815–32.; Obregón, 'Carlos Calvo y la profesionalización del derecho internacional', *Revista Latinoamericana de Derecho Internacional* 3 (2015).

[54]Lorca, *Mestizo International Law*, 71, fn. 80.

[55]Teresa Davis, 'The Ricardian State: Carlos Calvo and Latin America's Ambivalent Origin Story for the Age of Decolonization', *Journal of the History of International Law/Revue d'histoire du droit international* 23, no. 1 (2021): 44.

[56]Graciela Márquez and Sergio Silva Castañeda, *Matías Romero and the Craft of Diplomacy: 1837–1898* (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2019), 58–72.

[57]Rafael Ramón Castellanos, 'Becerra, Ricardo', *Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela*, accessed 3 May 2025, https://bibliofep.fundacionempresaspolar.org/dhv/entradas/b/becerra-ricardo.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022825000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to the island of Yap. War fever raged in Germany and, unwisely, in weaker Spain.[58] The Mexican minister in Spain conveyed the shock in Madrid and beyond, noting that 'the precedent that the Prince of Bismarck is trying to settle is a threat for them in all their colonies'.[59] Bismarck insisted that the Spanish-claimed islands were *res nullius* and open to German occupation, amplifying risks to Spain and other colonial powers, the Mexican diplomat reported.[60]

Because the dispute concerned territory claimed under Spanish rights of discovery, it was a distressing precedent for republics erected on the ruins of that same empire. As Romero relayed word of Becerra's visit to Mexico City, he noted the Colombian's vexations about territories that 'are not in possession of the respective States, because they are entirely unpopulated, because they are self-governing, or because they are in dispute between two or more American States'.[61] The German naval occupation of the Caroline Islands, Becerra concluded, 'had been done in conformity with that declaration [of the Berlin Conference]'. The connections between Berlin and the Carolines evidenced Germany's revisionist intentions to implement a new, transregional principle. American nations, Becerra insisted, must protest.[62]

Nearly two weeks after his initial visit, Becerra handed Romero a written statement that reiterated his verbal presentation.[63] Becerra's note brimmed with anti-imperial scepticism, denouncing how the European powers were colluding to partition commercial privileges and expand territorial claims in Africa. Doctrines originally confined to West Africa were now being used against Spanish possessions in the Pacific, he observed. Worse, Spain's former territories in the Americas could be next, given the manifest vulnerabilities of the republics: 'even within the limits of many States, which like Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, possess only de jure titles, not confirmed or made effective by de facto occupation and the continual exercise of sovereignty authority.'[64]

Even 'tacit consent to the doctrine of the Conference of Berlin could be threatening and damaging to the Hispanic American Republics, and especially to Colombia', Becerra feared.[65] Germany was not the only aggressor. Becerra highlighted a leading French republican, who 'sustains that superior races have a right to subjugate the inferior ones, civilizing them with the invasion of their territory and the imposition of a government'. He continued:

> If these are the notions of justice and international morality of the most enlightened Governments and statesmen of Europe, the fear is more than justified that tomorrow, when the Panama Canal opens, for example, that the same Germany or any other power could apply to our deserted coasts of the Darien, the doctrine subscribed in Berlin and already put into practice with respect to the Carolines.

[58]On the conflict, see Francis X. Hezel, *The First Taint of Civilization: A History of the Caroline and Marshall Islands in Pre-Colonial Days, 1521–1885* (University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 306–13.

[59]Mexican Minister in Spain (Madrid) to the Foreign Secretary, Mexico, 28 August 1885, no. 194, Conflicto Hispano Aleman, L-E-2279-III, Legación Mexicana en Estados Unidos, SRE-Mexico.

[60]Mexican Minister in Spain (Madrid) to the Foreign Secretary, Mexico, 26 October 1885, no. 238, Conflicto Hispano Aleman, L-E-2279-III, Legación Mexicana en Estados Unidos, SRE-Mexico.

[61]Matías Romero to the Foreign Secretary, 2 October 1885, no. 850, 'Conversación con el Sr. Becerra', L-E-2279-III, Legación Mexicana en Estados Unidos, SRE-Mexico.

[62]Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

[63]Having examined the exchange in both the Colombian and Mexican archives, it appears that Becerra may have been working ahead of clear instructions from his government. After the delay, the ministry supported Becerra's proposal on 23 November 1885, adding an endorsement to the earlier note. See Marginal note, 'Por el Secto, Marco F. Suárez', 23 November 1885, Becerra to Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores de Colombia, Bogotá, 20 September 1885 [also dated 20 November 1885], caja, 148, orden 153, f. 465, AGN.

[64]Becerra to the Secretary of Foreign Relations in Bogotá, 20 September 1885 (copied by Cayetano Romero, Mexican Legation, 6 October 1885), attachment of Becerra to M. Romero, 6 October 1885, Washington, L-E-2279-III, Legación Mexicana en Estados Unidos, SRE-Mexico;.

[65]Ibid.

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Inter-American divisions remained prominent, particularly lingering doubts about Brazil's position in a region of republics,[66] as 'the legitimate heir of the devious Lusitanian invasion', as Becerra dubbed it. Although the term 'Latin America' was in circulation, Becerra pointedly used *las Repúblicas Hispano Americanas* to underscore the contrast with monarchical, Lusophone Brazil. The South American empire had coercively taken territory in the Amazon despite Colombian protests, he charged. After Berlin, both Brazil and European powers 'impelled by the vertigo of the conquest and colonisation of territory' might cast their eyes on other Spanish American lands.[67] Looking northwards, Becerra opined that the US commitment to the hallowed notion of separate spheres was undermined by President Chester A. Arthur's decision to participate in Berlin and accept its principles. Rather than trusting 'the famous declaration of President Monroe', Becerra argued that Spanish Americans must cultivate and unify their own strengths.

Becerra's 'collective declaration of the Hispanic American Republics' intentionally echoed Chile's 1864 proposal for a defensive confederation against Spanish and French imperial incursions. The declaration would counter the Berlin Final Act by emphasising that the doctrine of *res nullius* could never apply in the Americas; instead, 'inside the national jurisdictions demarcated in accordance with "*uti posidetis*" there exists a real sovereignty, ready to be made effective in all its rights'. Becerra anticipated European justifications that their civilising imperialism promoted 'universal utility', criticising Lockean theories of 'property and public domain ... that the earth belongs only to those who work it and make it produce'.[68] Such arguments could be redeployed against Spanish American territorial integrity.

That Becerra's concerns intersected with those of Calvo was not entirely coincidental. Becerra reported to his superiors that a friend in Washington, 'who maintains epistolary correspondence with Mr Carlos Calvo', had given him a letter in which 'this eminent publicist' discussed the territorial proposals advanced in Berlin. Calvo regarded these articles as 'producing disastrous consequences in America', confidentially noting, according to Becerra's reading of the letter, that 'in the anteroom of the Conference of Berlin, the German representatives proposed the occupation of territory in the Patagonia, under the title of ownerless territory [*territorio adéspota*]'. Adding further weight to these rumours, Becerra reported that Argentina's authorities had dispatched officials to the area to rebut any suggestion that it was ungoverned.[69]

For Colombia, whose hold on the Panama transit was ever more tenuous, the risk seemed perfectly clear.[70] One might have thought the same of Mexico; as Becerra alluded, it had faced similar threats less than twenty years prior. Both Romero and his president, Porfirio Díaz, had gained prominence in the war against France. During that conflict, Romero and his government had called upon the Monroe Doctrine, but to no avail. Indeed, one Mexican diplomat noted the 'precedent' of US participation at Berlin, worrying that 'European nations may take advantage of this to intervene in turn in the business of America'.[71] The northern power might abide such

[66]On the Brazilian Empire's ambivalent position vis-à-vis the cooperation of its neighbours, see Luís Cláudio Villafañe Gomes Santos, *O Brasil Entre a América e a Europa: O Império e o Interamericanismo (Do Congresso Do Panamá a Conferencia de Washington)* (Unesp, 2004); Leslie Bethell, 'Brazil and "Latin America"', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 42, no. 3 (2010): 457–85.

[67]Becerra to the Secretary of Foreign Relations in Bogotá (copy), 20 September 1885; response from the secretary, Ignacio Mariscal to the Minister in Washington [M. Romero], 21 October 1885. In L-E-2279-III, Legación Mexicana en Estados Unidos, SRE-Mexico. Also, Becerra to the Secretary of Foreign Relations, Colombia, 5 November 1885, AGN, caja 148, orden 153, ff. 470–2.

[68]Becerra to the Secretary of Foreign Relations, Colombia, 5 November 1885, AGN, caja 148, orden 153, ff. 470–2.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Vicente Restrepo (Colombian Foreign Minister) to Becerra, 30 November 1885, caja 128, carpeta 1006, AGN, f. 59.

[71]Cayetano Romero (Washington) to Subsecretary of Foreign Relations, Mexico, 6 January 1885, L-E-2279-III, Legación Mexicana en Estados Unidos, SRE-Mexico. This critique was made by US opponents of participation, as well, prompting a response from the US Secretary of State. The next president, Grover Cleveland, largely walked back US participation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022825000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

intrusions, prioritising near-term interests over Monroe's principle, as it had when it begrudgingly tolerated French troops in Mexico until its own civil war was resolved. Nicanor Bolet Peraza, a Venezuelan intellectual and publisher of exile literature in the United States, reached a similar conclusion. Writing for Mexico's liberal *El Monitor Republicano*, he warned that US involvement in Berlin endangered the Monroe Doctrine by inviting future European intrusions, particularly over a potential inter-oceanic canal in Central America.[72]

In Romero's eyes, however, Mexico did not have as much at stake in Berlin or the Caroline Islands as Becerra or Bolet Peraza thought. In a letter to his foreign minister, the Mexican diplomat suggested that having concluded a recent boundary treaty with Guatemala, negotiated by Romero himself, Mexico had no outstanding territorial issues. As a result, Becerra's suggestion was of 'little practical utility'.[73] The Mexican foreign ministry assured that it would 'study the question and resolve it in the case that the Government is officially invited to take part in the Congress referred to by the Sir Minister of Colombia'.[74] Romero delivered a tepid official response to Becerra on 5 November 1885. Without Mexican support, Colombia's proposal fell by the wayside.

Accommodating imperialism, civilising others

Initially, it seemed that Mexico might adopt a line more aligned with Calvo's views. In November 1884, the Mexican consul in Lisbon, Luis Bretan y Vedra, sent an early dispatch on the Berlin Conference. He noted that Portuguese efforts to rally European support for its African possessions had come under pressure from Bismarck's colonial policy and 'all class of intrigues' by the Belgian king.[75] Despite Portugal's weakness, Bretan y Vedra believed its colonial titles remained relatively secure. Failing to grasp the shifting imperial context, he stressed that Portugal was 'the most sympathetic among the other powers, because it is the most ancient, the most glorious, the vastest Metropole of the African Continent, which before History and civilisation no other power can humble [*humillar*] its rights created more than four centuries ago by its illustrious son Diego Cano, intrepid discoverer of the Zaire'.[76] More attuned to Europe's changing political and legal landscape, Calvo foresaw the fragility of those claims.

After the West Africa Conference, Mexico's attention shifted from Berlin to Brussels. There, Mexican representative Ángel Núñez Ortega noted that although Leopold I's ill-fated projects had been fanciful and driven by jealousy of his neighbour's empires, his son's endeavours were more serious. The elder Leopold had backed a failed company that briefly dispatched 300 poorly prepared Belgians to the coast of Guatemala. Another attempt came from Felix Eloin—erstwhile personal secretary to the executed Habsburg Maximilian I of Mexico—who searched for Pacific colonies to no avail. In contrast, Leopold II's initiatives in Central Africa were more successful politically and diplomatically, even if not economically. Núñez Ortega observed that Leopold II's

[72]*El Monitor Repúblicano*, 12 February 1885.

[73]Romero al Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores, 2 October 1885, no. 850, Conversación con el Sr. Becerra, L-E-2279-III, Legación Mexicana en Estados Unidos, SRE-Mexico. On Romero and the boundary treaty, see Márquez and Silva Castañeda, *Matías Romero and the Craft of Diplomacy*, 73–81.

[74]Marginal note, Romero to the Secretary of Foreign Relations, 6 October 1885, no. 861, 'Nota del Sr. Becerra sobre la Conferencia de Berlín', L-E-2279-III, Legación Mexicana en Estados Unidos, SRE-Mexico.

[75]Luis Bretan y Vedra to General Don Ramon Corona, 31 October 1884 (copied in Madrid on 15 November 1884), L-E-2279-II, SRE-Mexico.

[76]Ibid.

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achievements at Berlin had 'been received with the applause of the Belgian people', who were pleased to see their small country take part on the large imperial stage.[77]

This sanguine Mexican assessment was swiftly followed by entreaties from the Belgian leadership of the Congo Free State that exalted its civilising mission in Africa.[78] During the same month that Becerra delivered his declaration in Romero's office, Mexico's domineering President Díaz exchanged letters with Leopold II. After explaining the 'exclusively personal' connection between the Belgian monarchy and the Congo venture, Belgian colonial administrators sought a favourable reception and, soon after, diplomatic recognition from Mexico.[79] Mexico displayed no anti-imperial hesitation: within a month, Mexican foreign minister Ignacio Mariscal replied to the Congo Free State's foreign minister Edm. Van Eetvelde, establishing 'cordial and equally beneficial relations in the interests of the two countries'. Answering promptly, Díaz told Leopold II of his 'satisfaction' at the creation of the Congo Free State and the establishment of the Belgian king's personal reign. Díaz conveyed his 'pleasure in knowing that Your Majesty seeks to guide the new State on a path of peace and civilization'.[80] Leopold II acknowledged the gesture at a reception at the Palace of Laeken, remarking that it 'was of the first received from America', and extended his best wishes for 'tranquillity and progress in Mexico'.[81]

This exchange of recognition has been overlooked. Despite referencing the Berlin Conference, for instance, the most prominent history of Mexico–Africa relations describes the nineteenth century as 'marked by a great vacuum'.[82] True, the agreement on diplomatic recognition was mostly symbolic. However, the symbolism of rushing to embrace Leopold II's naked colonial aspirations is striking. After all, Leopold II was the brother of Empress Carlota, who had deigned to rule over Mexico just two decades before with similarly grandiose pretensions.

The act of recognition furthered a shift in Mexican foreign policy away from radical republicanism and towards rapprochement with European empires. Diplomatically, this meant restoring relations with European governments, which Díaz's predecessor Juárez had pointedly severed in the wake of Napoleon III's attempts to establish a monarchy in Mexico.[83] Although Díaz's subservience to US businesses has often been overstated,[84] his regime certainly sought to make Mexico an attractive destination for international capital. Díaz prioritised friendly relations with the United States, and it is notable that Mexican recognition of Leopold's polity came only weeks after US President Grover Cleveland's hasty acknowledgement on 11 September 1885. Beyond these considerations, Mexico's embrace of Leopold II and the apathetic treatment of Becerra's call appear rooted in an increasing embrace of civilisational narratives at home and abroad. Under Díaz, the Mexican government saw itself as the agent of progress, as it sought to reshape—and often to whiten—its Indigenous and Mestizo population.[85] At the very least,

[77]Núñez Ortega (Mexican Legation in Brussels) to the Ministry of Foreign Relations, 17 June 1885, L-E-2279-I, SRE-Mexico.

[78]L'Administrateur General de Département des Affaires Etrangeres del Etat Indépendant du Congo (Ostende), to México MRE, 16 September 1885, L-E-2279-I, SRE-Mexico.

[79]Ibid.; Edm. Van Eetvelde to Mariscal, 16 September 1885, L-E-2279-I, SRE-Mexico.

[80]Diaz to Leopold II, 17 October 1885, published in *La Voz de México*, 1 November 1885; Mariscal to Van Eetvelde, 17 October 1885, L-E-2279-I, SRE-Mexico; Diaz to Leopoldo II, 17 October 1885, L-E-2279-I, SRE-Mexico.

[81]Núñez Ortega to Mariscal, 30 November 1885, L-E-2279-I, SRE-Mexico.

[82]Hilda Varela and Indira Iasel Sánchez, *África y Medio Oriente*, part of *Historia de Las Relaciones Internacionales de México, 1810–2010*, ed. Mercedes de Vega, vol. 7 (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Dirección General del Acervo Histórico Diplomático, 2011), 26.

[83]Long and Schulz, 'A Turn against Empire', 1–15.

[84]Mark Wasserman, *Pesos and Politics: Business, Elites, Foreigners, and Government in Mexico, 1854–1940* (Stanford University Press, 2015).

[85]On the growing embrace of pseudo-scientific views of race in Mexico's Porfiriato, see Moisés González Navarro, 'Las ideas raciales de los científicos, 1890–1910', *Historia Mexicana* 37, no. 4 (1988): 565–83; Natalia Priego, 'Porfirio Díaz, Positivism and "The Scientists": A Reconsideration of the Myth', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 18, no. 2 (2012): 135–50.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022825000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mexico's recognition of the Belgian project in the Congo tacitly endorsed the imperial missions advanced at Berlin.

A South American empire contemplates imperialism elsewhere

Brazil's position towards Berlin was more ambiguous.[86] Despite the country's problems with secessionist provinces, the Brazilian diplomats who monitored the proceedings had divergent perceptions of Berlin and its aftermath. Brazil's representative in Berlin expressed concerns that paralleled Colombia's, while the diplomat in Brussels voiced sympathies. The foreign ministry then granted swift recognition to Leopold II's specious state.

The debates in Berlin dealt with issues of immediate importance to Brazil. Brazil remained a slaveholding empire in 1885, but the legality of slavery was under growing domestic and international scrutiny. Earlier in the century, Brazilian elites had supported European colonisation in Africa to ensure the supply of enslaved Africans, imperative for maintaining the country's socioeconomic model. Slavery had been curtailed by British pressure and the prohibition of slave importation in the 1850s, followed by an 1871 'free womb' law.[87] Facing 'international humanitarian pressures', Emperor Pedro II expressed growing doubts about the institution's legitimacy. Still, he took a moderate course in the face of entrenched slaveholding interests.[88] In the 1880s, Joaquim Nabuco led a charge for abolition, drawing support from anti-slavery campaigners in the United States and Britain. Among these allies was Travers Twiss, a lawyer and influential proponent of the idea to separate African property from African sovereignty in the context of the Berlin Conference, a position intended to place occupation on a firmer legal foundation.[89] Playing to international abolitionist currents, Leopold II and some Berlin delegates stressed their Christian, humanitarian motives in banishing slavery within Africa (although in Leopold's case, this served as flimsy cover for imperial ventures).[90]

Brazil had additional reasons to pay close attention to Europe's colonial manoeuvres. The Brazilian imperial court and aristocracy maintained closer relations with Europe than their Spanish American neighbours. Elites were often sympathetic and personally connected to Portugal, although this did not translate into unconditional support for its claims. Even as Brazilian commercial interests turned to the United States, dynastic ties remained significant for a monarchy resisting the republican tide. Pedro II travelled to Europe and met with Leopold II both before and after the Berlin Conference.[91] It is hardly surprising, then, that Pedro lent his imprimatur to his fellow monarch's project. Leopold II, in turn, astutely used promises of African free trade—soon broken—to secure US and European support for his colonial ambitions.

[86]On Brazil, the Berlin Conference, and the Congo, see Ferreira, 'No festim dos lobos'. In a recent article, Janne Schreurs examines how 'entangled colonialisms' shaped the views of Brazilian diplomats in Brussels in the years after the Berlin Conference ('Entangled Colonialisms between Belgium, Congo and the Amazon'). The Brazilian foreign ministry's Historical Centre (Centro de História e Documentação Diplomática, or CHDD) has published a selection of documents on the conference in its journal, *Cadernos do CHDD*. We draw on Ferreira, the CHDD documents, and our own research in the Archivo Histórico de Itamaraty, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

[87]Robert Conrad, *The Destruction of Brazilian Slavery, 1850–1888* (University of California Press, 1972); Ricardo Salles, 'Abolição no Brasil: resistência escrava, intelectuais e política (1870–1888)', *Revista de Indias* 71, no. 251 (2011): 259–84; Emília Viotti da Costa, *Abolition: From Slavery to Free Labour* (Editora Unesp, 2013).

[88]Leslie Bethell, 'The Decline and Fall of Slavery in Nineteenth Century Brazil', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 1 (1991): 81.

[89]Leslie Bethell and José Murilo de Carvalho, eds., *Joaquim Nabuco, British Abolitionists, and the End of Slavery in Brazil: Correspondence, 1880–1905* (Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2009), 87. On Twiss's machinations around the Berlin Conference, see Fitzmaurice, *King Leopold's Ghostwriter*.

[90]Daniel Laqua, 'The Tensions of Internationalism: Transnational Anti-Slavery in the 1880s and 1890s', *The International History Review* 33, no. 4 (2011): 705–26; Press, *Rogue Empires*, 94.

[91]Ferreira, 'No festim dos lobos', 386.

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That rhetoric found a receptive audience in Brazil, where the ascendant Liberal Party embraced laissez-faire ideas as readily as their US counterparts.[92]

Finally, Brazil had long sought European immigration, with Germany and Belgium as key sources. The Brazilian state encouraged this influx to populate and 'whiten' the nation; as in Argentina, however, concentrations of foreigners, who tended to invoke consular protection, fed long-standing fears that secessionism would gain overseas backing. In earlier decades, French settlers supported separatist campaigns in Pará, in northeastern Brazil, establishing the short-lived Republic of Cunani. Their efforts had gained the support of the governor-general of neighbouring French Guiana, leading to a protracted territorial dispute.[93] Similarities between such episodes and the new West African colonial scramble prompted misgivings about the Berlin Conference. The Brazilian minister in Berlin, César Sauvan Viana de Lima, ennobled as the Barão de Jaurú, feared that Brazil could find itself at the mercy of a new imperialist doctrine.[94] With its population and government concentrated along the coasts, large parts of vast Brazil were vulnerable to charges that the state lacked effective occupation. The archives shed little light on the reception of the Barão de Jaurú's views in Rio; however, his arguments illustrate that governing elites in Europe and the Brazilian Empire asserted contrary positions about how territoriality shaped rights to rule, tutor, and civilise racialised others.[95]

Like Becerra and Calvo, Jaurú worried that shifting norms of territoriality and conquest made the Americas vulnerable to European imperial claims. Even as the conference agenda took shape in late 1884, the Brazilian diplomat reported on the 'transcendental magnitude' of the legal questions as stake. Hyperbolically, perhaps, Jaurú fretted that general acceptance of the principle of effective occupation, which he equated with forceful conquest, would 'cause us to recede four centuries into the past, that is, to return to semi-barbarous epochs!'[96] He wrote:

> If this [proposal] prevailed, and if it were transformed into a principle of the law of nations, Africa would not be the only field of territorial despoilments, but these would be extended to other parts of the globe on a much greater scale, because they would no longer be the work of simple adventurers, as in the past, but also of governments of powerful nations. In America, for example, few States have the means to effectively occupy all of the vast territory that belongs to them.[97]

Even before the Berlin Conference opened, Jaurú feared that European empires would grant sovereign sanction to the private contracts of explorers, adventurers, and colonisation enterprises. This 'subversive doctrine' had the backing of powerful states and jurists in Berlin, he warned. Jaurú likely would have concurred with legal historian Steven Press's conclusion: the conference's result was 'that everyone legally could participate in a worldwide market for sovereignty, be they monarchs, entrepreneurs, or missionaries'.[98]

[92]Ferreira, 'No festim dos lobos', 371; Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, 78–82.

[93]Ferreira, 'No festim dos lobos', 351; Stéphane Granger, 'O contestado franco-brasileiro: desafios e consequências de um conflito esquecido entre a França e o Brasil na Amazônia', *Revista Cantareira*, no. 17 (2012): 24, passim.

[94]The Brazilian minister, however, did not share Becerra's preoccupations with being targeted by South American neighbours or discuss the applicability of the Monroe Doctrine. Nor does he seem to have noted any particular concern for the effects of colonisation on Africans.

[95]On these debates, see Sebastián Mantilla Blanco, 'José María Torres Caicedo and the Politics of International Law in Nineteenth-Century Latin America', *American Journal of Legal History* 61, no. 2 (2021): 177–210; Rojas, *Civilization and Violence*; Obregón, 'Between Civilisation and Barbarism'.

[96]Barão de Jaurú to João da Matta Machado (Minister of Foreign Affairs), 20 October 1884, 2ª section, no. 13, in *Cadernos do CHDD*, v. 14, no. 26, 14–26.

[97]Ibid. Emphasis in original.

[98]Press, *Rogue Empires*, 235.

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This multi-actor imperialism had ample precedent in the Americas and remained an ongoing concern. Fascination with the Brazilian Amazon had sparked expeditions and colonisation schemes in previous years, exemplifying the global imperial entanglements that animated Jaurú's apprehensions. Brazil had attracted unrepentant Confederates from the US South, faced incursions from European explorers, and hosted major Belgian and French colonisation enterprises.[99] One such company had the backing of Leopold I of Belgium;[100] Leopold II, before turning to West Africa, had coveted the Amazon for his colonial ambitions. In that light, the Barão de Jaurú reminded the ministry that long-standing German colonies in southern Brazil—a hotbed of secessionist fervour—might invoke Berlin's doctrines to legitimate their autonomy.[101]

Jaurú did not have to look far for a reminder of such risks. Belgium's delegate at the Berlin Conference, and the de facto emissary for Leopold's Congo scheme, was Count Gabriel van der Straten. In the late 1840s, a young van der Straten had served as Belgium's representative to Brazil, treating with Belgian colonisation companies, emigrants, and investors. Some of them hoped to steer secessionist pressures in Santa Catarina to Belgium's advantage. When these subjects sought diplomatic protection with limited success, Belgium's foreign minister reminded van der Straten of his duty to protect Belgian nationals.[102]

As the Congress unfolded, the Brazilian minister observed that the consensus on effective occupation was being enacted in Germany's recognition of Leopold's African International Association.[103] Expressing his scepticism of the principle, Jaurú noted that Portugal would have to contend with 'a commercial association, flagged as an independent State . . . which from here on out will pursue with much greater ardour its business of conquest at Portugal's expense!'[104] The Brazilian concluded that the conference's outcome stripped Portugal of vast claims in the Congo, although the intercession of other powers had allowed it to preserve some rights against Leopold's expansionism.[105]

Ultimately, the Final Act contributed to the continuing competition between German expansion and British colonial pre-eminence instead of ending it, Jaurú astutely observed. Similarly to Becerra, the German occupation of the Caroline Islands reinvigorated Jaurú's fears that claims of effective occupation could threaten Brazil. Underlining his own prescience to a newly installed Brazilian foreign minister, the Barão de Jaurú pointed to his 20 October 1884 memo: 'relative to the *definition of the right of possession of territories that are not yet subject to the sovereignty of civilised States*'. Calls from official newspapers in France and Germany to 'introduce an important innovation in universal public law, instating [*estatuindo*] that no possession of territory should be considered legal and respected except in the case that it was accompanied by *an effective occupation*' had been ratified in Berlin, albeit supposedly limited to West Africa. The German occupation of the Caroline Islands corroborated Jaurú's qualms over the doctrine's global consequences. That Europe's strongest powers sought to place effective occupation at the heart of their colonial policies, creating 'a great danger for relatively weak States'.[106]

[99]Hecht, *The Scramble for the Amazon*.

[100]Ferreira, 'No festim dos lobos', 82–5.

[101]For example, Rio Grande do Sul tried to secede in the 1830s and later led the Federalist Revolution (1893–1895).

[102]Eddy Stols, 'Sainte-Cathérine du Brésil ou os belgas em Santa Catarina', in *Brasil e Bélgica cinco séculos de conexões e interações*, ed. Eddy Stols, Luciana Pelaes Mascaro, and Clodoaldo Bueno (Narrativa, 2014), 25.

[103]This was something of a misunderstanding, as the African International Association was defunct and had been replaced by the International Association of the Congo; however, Leopold and his agents fomented the conflation of an international geographic and philanthropic association and the king's private colonial initiative.

[104]Barão de Jaurú to João da Matta Machado, 10 December 1884, 2ª section, no. 14, *Cadernos do CHDD*, v. 14, no. 26, 337–8.

[105]Barão de Jaurú to Manoel Pinto de Souza Dantas (Minister of Foreign Affairs), 21 February 1885, 2ª section, no. 4, *Cadernos do CHDD*, 345–6.

[106]Barão de Jaurú to Sr. Visconde de Paranaguá (Minister of Foreign Affairs), 27 August 1885, 2ª section, no. 17, *Cadernos do CHDD*, v. 14, no. 26, 354–5.

Neither Germany nor Spain had any good reason to go to war, other than wounded national pride, Jaurú reported.[107] Eventually, they avoided conflict through papal mediation. However, even in his note of rapprochement, 'Bismarck alluded to the decision of the Conference of Berlin to demand that territorial annexation be accompanied by effective occupation'. This reference, the Brazilian argued, was clear proof that Germany proposed a radical revision of international law.[108]

> Perchance, can there be another explanation of the fact that the cabinet of Berlin invokes with respect to the Caroline archipelago, situated in Oceania, a resolution from the Conference of the Congo only applicable to the African continent? Certainly not. It is, thus, evident that certain powerful States seek to ensure that a new doctrine of *effective occupation* prevails in their colonial policy.[109]

The pope issued a Solomonic solution: Spain retained sovereignty, but Germany gained freedom of navigation and commerce, as well as the right to a naval coaling station in the Carolines. In Jaurú's assessment, Bismarck won the day through his insistence on effective occupation. Because Spain had ships moored in the area when the Germans arrived, the papal decision tacitly acquiesced to Bismarck's claims about territoriality without eliding Spanish sovereign rights. The minister noted that, 'Germany triumphed with its principle established by the Berlin Conference for the Congo region'.[110]

Acquiescence and aftermath

Ultimately, Jaurú's warning about the dangers this principle posed to weaker states failed to alter Brazil's stance on Leopold II's Congo designs. Records of internal deliberations do not appear to have been preserved. Perhaps inattention to Jaurú's apprehensions resulted from inconsistent policymaking and turnover at the foreign ministry. Between the convening of the Conference of Berlin and the outbreak of the Caroline Islands conflict, Brazil cycled through three different foreign ministers, Ferreira notes. Although the Barão de Jaurú held a prominent position in imperial Brazil, Brazil's minister in Brussels was distinctly deferential to Leopold II, and dynastic ties likely reinforced official sympathy.[111]

In mid-September 1885, Brazil received nearly identical communications to those sent to Mexico, advising of the creation of the Congo Free State and its approval by the Berlin Conference and Belgian legislature under the personal auspices of Leopold II.[112] The Brazilian Empire moved almost as swiftly as Porfirio Díaz's Mexico to recognise the new African state, issuing its response on 10 November 1885.[113] This position aligned with the views of Brazil's minister in Brussels, Conde Villenueve, who echoed the same racial justifications and civilising rhetoric advanced by Leopold II and his agents.[114] Brazil's recognition was soon followed by Argentina, whose president 'hurried to answer in the most cordial terms the signed letter from the King [Leopold]', while ordering an assessment of whether opening consulates in the Congo 'would give greater impulse to

[107]See, for example, Barão de Jaurú to Sr. Visconde de Paranaguá, 12 September 1885, 2ª section, no. 20, *Cadernos do CHDD*, v. 14, no. 26, 351–3.

[108]Barão de Jaurú a Sr. Visconde de Paranaguá, 27 September 1885, 2ª section, no. 21, *Cadernos do CHDD*, v. 14, no. 26, 355–6.

[109]Ibid., 358. Emphasis in original.

[110]Barão de Jaurú to Sr. Visconde de Paranaguá, 21 November 1885, 2ª section, no. 29, *Cadernos do CHDD*, v. 14, no. 26, 14–26.

[111]Ferreira, 'No festim dos lobos', 364–71.

[112]Edm. Van Eetveld to Brazilian Foreign Ministry, 16 September 1885, in Ministerio das Relações Exteriores, *Relatorio* da Repartição dos Negocios Estrangeiros, 1885 (Rio de Janeiro: Imprenta Nacional, 1886), Anexo I, doc. 22, 37–9, accessed 3 May 2025, https://www.funag.gov.br/chdd/images/Relatorios/Relatorio_1885.pdf. [Hereafter, *Relatorio,* 1885].

[113]'Estado Independente do Congo', in *Relatorio*, 1885, 51–2; Baron de Cotegipe, 'Nota do Governo Imperial ao Governo du Congo', 10 November 1885, in Anexo I, doc. 23, 39–40.

[114]Ferreira, 'No festim dos lobos', 365–71, 381.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022825000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

our commercial transactions abroad'.[115] Despite the initial misgivings of Latin American statesmen including Becerra, Calvo, and Jaurú, diplomatic recognition from Latin America's largest states conferred broader legitimacy to Leopold II's endeavour. As a watershed episode of late nineteenth-century 'new imperialism', the Berlin Conference and related establishment of Leopold II's Congo Free State underscored colonial conceits of civilising and tutoring supposedly barbarous and racialised others. Diplomatic and juridical debates offered a veil of legality to renewed imperial expansion, casting doubt on formerly settled norms of territoriality and upholding the overseas sovereign claims of states and private entities.[116]

The conference's reverberations were not limited to the region's largest states. Emboldened by its recent victory over Bolivia and Peru in the War of the Pacific, news of the Berlin proceedings fuelled debates in Chile about the need for overseas expansion, culminating in the annexation of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in 1888.[117] Drawing directly from the Berlin playbook, this move aimed to forestall the enslavement of the local population and establish effective occupation by a 'civilised state'—the only instance of Latin American saltwater colonialism. Nor did the region's entanglements with Berlin's legacies end with diplomacy and statecraft. In the years after the Berlin Conference, the Brazilian region of Acre would be targeted by foreign powers amid the same rubber boom that turned the Congo Free State into a source of immense wealth through violence and forced labour. The brutality of the Brazilian rubber boom was not unlike the horrors of Leopold II's Congo colony; indeed, Amazonian *hevea* trees attracted capital from the same Belgians investors who operated in Africa.[118]

Conclusions

Imperialism, international law, territoriality, civilisation, and race were pressing concerns for Latin American statesmen in the second half of the century. Many European participants at the Berlin Conference had imperial ties to the Western Hemisphere, and some drew on their experiences there to buttress their arguments. Despite these connections, the region's engagement with the conference has received little scholarly attention. It is true that no Latin American states were formally invited, and their elites had few material interests in West Africa. Of course, many of the region's enslaved and free Black populations had more immediate connections, although diplomats never acknowledged these. Still, despite their geopolitical distance, diplomats and jurists from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico grasped the global implications of the Berlin Final Act and repeatedly voiced alarm over the potential ramifications of the imperial surge for their countries' territorial sovereignty. Examining these responses to Berlin reveals how the conference reverberated globally, connecting the multifaceted and far-flung imperial projects of the late nineteenth century.

The article responds to calls for 'a new understanding of global diplomatic history',[119] centring the long-overlooked responses of larger Latin American states to the Berlin Conference. Latin

[115]*Memoria de Relaciones Exteriores, 1886* (Imprenta de Juan A. Alsina, 1886), 150–1.

[116]Press, *Rogue Empires*; Craven, 'Between Law and History'; Fitzmaurice, 'Liberalism and Empire in Nineteenth-century International Law'.

[117]Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, 'El reparto del Pacífico: la posesión de la Isla de Pascua', *Revista de Marina* 1 (1885): 65–8; Policarpo Toro Hurtado, 'Importancia de la Isla de Pascua y la necesidad de que el Gobierno de Chile tome inmediatamente posesión de ella', October 1886, reprinted in *La Isla de Pascua. Dominación y dominio*, ed. Victor M. Vergara (Memoria de Prueba, Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas y Sociales de la Universidad de Chile, 1939), 87–8.

[118]Domingos Sávio da Cunha Garcia, *Território e negócios na 'Era dos Impérios': os belgas na fronteira oeste do Brasil* (Fundação Alexandre de Gusmão, 2009), chs 5, 7; Schreurs, 'Entangled Colonialisms', 8–9.

[119]Lisa Hellman, Birgit Tremml-Werner, and Guido van Meersbergen, 'Global Diplomacy Network', accessed 10 May 2025, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/ghcc/research/globaldiplomacy/.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022825000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

America's liminality—sovereign yet often relegated to secondary status—makes the region's international entanglements particularly revealing of the global repercussions of imperialism in the nineteenth-century 'transformation of the world'.[120] These insights are especially relevant given Latin America's marginal role in global history.[121]

At first glance, these Latin American concerns about European incursions, and especially Becerra's proposed counter-conference, seem to mesh with narratives of the region's diplomats as steadfast, anti-imperial defenders of non-intervention, sovereignty, and inclusive multilateralism. Berlin's legal innovations had a familiar ring for elites, who had long seen the United States and Europe dismiss their polities as disorderly, politically immature, and incapable of self-government. Just two decades earlier, similar arguments had paved the way for invasions by filibusters and imperial troops; by the 1880s, civilisational tropes still appeared in defence of gunboat diplomacy and diplomatic protection. Having heard such justifications marshalled at their expense, Latin American diplomats knew the stakes well.

As Hedinger and Heé note, the tendency to nationalise histories of empire often obscures the variety of imperial agents beyond states.[122] A global history of Berlin that foregrounds Latin American reactions challenges this tendency, even as we draw on diplomatic sources. The protagonists examined in this article were acutely aware of the dangers posed by imperialistic actors beyond the state—private companies, opportunistic filibusterers, and others. Individual claims became even more threatening when backed by imperial powers. Figures such as Brazil's Barão de Jaurú repeatedly underscored the multiplicity of imperial actors and their transregional connections: the same colonisation companies, private investors, greedy nobles, and 'civilising' states were involved in South America, too. These transregional connections between Latin Americans and distant imperial projects suggest continuities; for the Argentine, Brazilian, Colombian, and Mexican diplomats studied here, seemingly new practices in Africa echoed their own region's post-independence experiences with recurring interventions.

However, these diplomats' anti-imperialism only extended so far. This article has reconsidered Latin American foreign policy traditions, whic are often read in juxtaposition to US expansionism, in a more global and contextualised perspective. Well into the nineteenth century, questions of international membership and prerogatives remained in flux. In that context, the Berlin Conference sparked real unease from Colombia to Argentina, but ultimately it did not catalyse a rotund rejection of imperialism. Views on empire and intervention were shaped by the 'civilising' internal colonisation that underpinned state projects of territorial rule. Colombia's Becerra and Brazil's Barão de Jaurú worried that the principles advanced in Berlin were already being applied in the Caroline Islands; similarly, such doctrines posed a threat to Latin American states with tenuous control over the lands they claimed. Argentina's Carlos Calvo shared these concerns, particularly regarding the potential implications for his country's sovereignty over the Falklands/Malvinas Islands and Patagonia. Yet Calvo set aside these worries and found reasons to praise the 'liberal spirit' and humanitarian impulses of his counterparts in Berlin. For others, like Mexico's Matías Romero or (apparently) Brazil's Emperor Pedro II, there was little cause for concern. Objections to European imperial practices in West Africa were minimal, at least from these large Latin American states; what these elites opposed, for the most part, was threats to their own states'

[120]Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

[121]On Latin America's uneven place in global history, see Matthew Brown, 'The Global History of Latin America', *Journal of Global History* 10, no. 3 (2015): 365–86; Bernd Hausberger and Erika Pani, 'Historia Global: Presentación', *Historia Mexicana* 68, no. 1 (2018): 177–96; Gabriela de Lima Grecco and Sven Schuster, 'Decolonizing Global History? A Latin American Perspective', *Journal of World History* 31, no. 2 (2020): 425–46.

[122]Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, 'Transimperial History—Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition', *Journal of Modern European History* 16, no. 4 (2018): 429–52.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022825000075 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rights to rule and civilise the formerly colonised lands and peoples of the Americas. Ultimately, when Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico followed the United States in quickly recognising Leopold's II Congo regime, they added Latin American voices to Berlin's cheering colonial chorus.

Acknowledgements. Authors listed alphabetically; both contributed equally to this article. Previous versions of this article were presented at the 'Towards a Global Diplomatic History (c. 1400–1900)' Conference, held 30–1 May 2024, University of Warwick; the International Studies Association 2024 Annual Conference, San Francisco; and the University of Oxford Latin American Centre's History Seminar. We appreciate feedback received from participants in those events. Thank you to Felipe Cifuentes for additional archival support in Bogotá and to Nahuel Hernán Ojeda Silva and Nicolás Flores for archival support in Buenos Aires. Rogério de Souza Farias offered helpful advice on Brazilian archives and sources. Special thanks to the editors and anonymous reviewers at the *Journal of Global History* for constructive comments.

Financial support. Research for this paper has been funded by UK Arts and Humanities Research Council project AH-V006621, 'Latin America and the Peripheral Origins of Nineteenth-Century International Order'.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

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Cite this article: Long T and Schulz CA. Seeing the Berlin Conference from the periphery: Latin American reactions to imperialism elsewhere, 1884–85. *Journal of Global History* (2025). doi:10.1017/S1740022825000075