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The Danger of Dreams: Germany and American Imperialism in
Latin America (review)

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before they could grab hold of their suitcase from the baggage carrousel at a modern-looking airport. Life is hard enough for many of those who live in these societies (and in others) for those of us who live more placid lives there and elsewhere to conjure up such images.

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The Danger of Dreams: Germany and American Imperialism in Latin America. By Nancy Mitchell. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. Pp. xi, 312. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$50.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

Nancy Mitchell challenges the idea of a German threat toward Latin America between 1890 and 1914. Her research attempts a complete historical reexamination, which, in the words of Lars Shoultz (on the back cover of the book), resulted in “a genuine intellectual landmark, completely recasting our understanding of the U.S.-German rivalry in the early twentieth century.” The historical consensus developed by two generations of scholars, among them Friedrich Katz, Ragnhild Fiebig von Hase, Holger Herwig and Reinhard Doerris, is being questioned.

This book is also “a study of threat perception” (p. 7). Mitchell argues that German plans regarding possessions in Latin America was mostly big talk and unrealistic. More importantly, she sees imperialists inside the United States government knowingly exaggerating these big words to the level of real threats only to create a deceptive smoke screen behind which they realized their own imperialistic designs. The book begins with a superficial introduction of the rise of German-American antagonisms in the Western Hemisphere. Then she explores four important historical developments: the emergence of German and US war plans, President Theodor Roosevelt’s response to the Anglo-German blockade of Venezuela, the politics of ethnic German settlements in southern Brazil, and the evolution of US President Wilson’s Mexican policy in 1914. From there she draws conclusions that also pertain to the period after 1914, even the German Weimar Republic.

At first sight, her unusually broad and international primary source base promises a rich harvest of historical insights. Unlike many scholars, she has mastered the fineries of the German language and also uses British sources. On second look, this opportunity is used to make a fervent, new-leftist political accusation, but a weak historical study. Historical reality and military strategic possibilities for Mitchell remain defined by what policy makers thought in Washington, London, and Berlin. The true context for German plans—the very real, changing power relations in Latin America between 1890 and 1914—is not well understood. Mitchell offers arguments, whereas Fiebig von Hase and Friedrich Katz offer Venezuelan, Mexican, and German records, that document in over 2,000 pages of historical analysis not just threats but actions.

Mitchell’s third chapter examining the Germanization of Southern Brazil fails to consider the complexity of ethnic settlement policy used by all major powers during

this period. Ethnic settlements offered themselves to war planners and generals as effective destabilizers and pretexts in times of large-scale war. Of course they have to be built up and nurtured with much hyperbole during the times of arms races that were called peace. Lessons from China, the Far East, India and Africa also apply to Latin America. The German sources from World War I show that the German Navy and Army High Command knew these lessons. They applied them, developed them further, and gave them to democratic Germany after 1919. Thus, Lenin was allowed to travel to Russia and the Bolshevik Revolution closed the Eastern Front for Germany. War by ethnic revolution, as examined by McKale, also worked well in the Near East and finished the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the global political strength of the Holy See. Curiously Mitchell omits key German sources dealing with skilled disintegrative work by the German Navy inside Mexico and the United States, actions that confirmed the threat perceptions of the planners before 1914. In other words, examining 1914 simply as just another year full of interesting events, unrelated to a world war (!), shows a ridiculous lack of historical context as well as little knowledge of grand strategy. But it surely does make the US look bad.

German ethnic settlements abroad were always two things: ethnic European utopias in the tropics and part of military preparations, two approaches that could, and did, fuse when the international strategic situation was right. Mitchell, however, imagines arms races and times of war as if rational choice models are appropriate, as if legalities and international laws apply, and as if choices and decisions by elites are not only sane as well as easily realizable and interpretable. Plans are executed according to preparations; improvisation and revolutionary possibilities are not considered. The Kaiser acts rationally.

In the end, this ambitious study is a reminder how necessary it is to get off the high horse of political moralism when it comes to the examination of Latin American foreign relations in the 19th and 20th century and to pay attention to the selection of sources. Political history needs to include a detailed knowledge of the craft of warfare, even if this is distasteful. What happens in war in the early 20th century is determined by the moment, as war unfolds, much less than by the visions of planners, the hyperbole of propagandists, or by academics who know it better afterwards. US planners and military men were smart enough to prepare and act in such a way that not a single US life was lost defending Latin America. They were helped by luck.

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Colombianas en la vanguardia. By Lucy M. Cohen. Medellín, Colombia: Editorial Universidad de Antioquia, 2001. Pp. xviii, 351. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. No price.

In 1971, Cohen, a North American anthropologist and ethnohistorian, published *Las Colombianas ante la renovación universitaria*, a study of the first women graduates who obtained professional degrees from Colombian universities in Bogotá and