

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Dan Hagedorn.** *Conquistadors of the Sky: A History of Aviation in Latin America.* Washington DC: Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, 2008. Illustrations. xiv + 587 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3249-8.

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*Conquistadors of the Sky* is a reference work of encyclopedic proportions. Running at 540 pages of text, it covers the history of aviation in Latin America from its earliest pioneers to the end of the Cold War. Dan Hagedorn's credentials make him an ideal author for this volume. As an adjunct curator at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, he organized the ¡Arriba! Exhibit, the first to highlight Latin American aviation. He has also published extensively on the subject. In opening the preface, the author explains that a visitor to the National Air and Space Museum could easily "assume, from the thousands of words and pictures and hundreds of glorious objects, that aviation history has been the exclusive province of the United States, Western Europe and, to a lesser extent, the former Communist Bloc and Japan" (pp. xi). This concern is the driving motivation behind the book, and a valid one—not only for the history of aviation but also for the history of science and technology at large, where Latin Americans are often portrayed as passive receptors of superior, foreign technology, when not ignored outright.

*Conquistadors of the Sky* is organized much like national aviation histories, narrating chronologically, starting with ancient flight myths and feathered pre-Columbian deities. It then moves to colonial era aeronautical experimentation with balloons, early twentieth-century pioneers and their many firsts. It narrates major aviation developments, chronologically and arranged alphabetically by country, through the Cold War. It is

sprinkled with a variety of photographs and posters, as well as many charts and tables summarizing airline route mileage, aircraft sales, and other information.

Of the early pioneers, special attention is given to Bartholomeu Lourenço de Gusmão, a Brazilian priest who demonstrated small-scale balloon flight to the Portuguese court in 1709, more than seven decades before the Montgolfier brothers made their ascensions in France. During the nineteenth century, a variety of aeronauts made balloon ascensions throughout Latin America, mostly as exhibitions, but also in war. During the War of the Triple Alliance, for instance, the Brazilian army used balloons for aerial military observations during the siege of Humaitá.

Moving to the twentieth century, and transitioning to heavier-than-air flight, Hagedorn highlights another Brazilian, Alberto Santos-Dumont. Living in Paris, he made various early experiments with dirigibles (blimps), and also constructed an aircraft in 1906. Due to his enormous fame and showmanship in Europe and lavish praise from the French press, he was often considered to have been the first person to fly in a heavier-than-air craft, despite the Wright brothers' earlier (and more secretive) flights starting in 1903. The book points to some more hostile firsts as well. The Mexican Revolution, for instance, saw some of the earliest uses of military aviation. Hagedorn credits a French aviator serving under Venustiano Carranza with the first aerial combat against war-

ships in history, bombing federalist vessels at the Bay of Guaymas and also dropping propaganda leaflets, another first in global aviation history.

From his introductory chapters on Latin American aviation pioneers, Hagedorn moves to a chronological narrative, with alphabetic entries for each country under each year. Chapter 4 covers the period between the world wars, and its title serves as a good guide to its content: "Airlines, Air Wars, and Foreign Missions." As the First World War wound down in Europe, both governments and airplane manufacturers sent missions or exhibition squads throughout Latin America, to analyze the potential aviation market and promote their respective industries. Entrepreneurs throughout the region started experimenting with aircraft to reach far-flung mines, ranches, and other distant enterprises, and also started small airlines. In addition, we see in the Chaco War and the Brazilian civil war of 1932 some of the first extensive uses of aviation in Latin American warfare. The author is very concerned with demonstrating the competition between German, Italian, French, and American enterprises throughout Latin America in this period, especially the strategic rivalry between North American and German airline services.

The next two chapters focus on Lend-Lease, defense aid programs, and World War II itself. Here we see a history of American concern over Axis influences in the region. U.S. policies more aggressively confronted German aeronautical ventures in the region, and supplied American made airplanes at an increased rate in the years preceding the war, while engaging in the training of Latin American military pilots at U.S. academies. Hagedorn's coverage of World War II readily falls back on the narrative of a military historian, recounting the details of various aerial combat engagements, once again, organized alphabetically by country. This chapter is replete with minute details of such engagements, from specific times, bombs used, aircraft models, and even exact coordinates of attacks, focusing especially on the aerial defense against German submarines.

Two more chapters are dedicated to the postwar period, covering U.S. aid and the Rio Pact of 1947. These tend to focus on American foreign policy. The account is dominated by U.S. defense aid programs, and how many and what kind of airplanes they were sending to Latin American militaries. Such focus on American military aid, a reader may think, obscures some of the events on the ground in Latin America, particularly the use of such aircraft for repressive measures. Hagedorn, however, comes back in the last chapter with a full list of conflicts in which aircraft were used in Latin America, including such incidents as Augusto Pinochet's bombing of the Chilean presidential palace in 1973.

The last chapter, "Cold War and Beyond," deals with four major issues: the emergence of local aeronautical industries, the postwar boom of commercial airlines, the use of aircraft in counterinsurgency, and airborne drug trafficking. The section on native industries focuses heavily on Argentina and Brazil, and reaches far back into the early twentieth century for a comprehensive narrative of the aeronautical industry in both countries, even rescuing obscure early airplane designs. Hagedorn also covers the airline industry, registering many details, such as the first women to pilot airliners in Latin America. Finally, the book closes with a brief look at the state of aerial smuggling, focusing mainly on how narco-traffickers have used aviation as a logistical tool in their business.

With an abundance of facts and great images, from photographs to posters, it is a great read for aeronautical enthusiasts. With its extensive charts, lists, and wealth of bibliographical information, it also serves as a great reference for historians. The literature on the history of aeronautics in Latin America is dominated by detailed national histories in Spanish and Portuguese, but very little has been written in English, and certainly not about the region at large. Thus, Hagedorn's lengthy volume stands as a reference on Latin American aviation that is about as comprehensive as one can find in the English language, one that will be very useful to future students of the subject.

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