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## RAILROADS IN LATIN AMERICA

CIA/RR-G/E-76  
30 October 1957

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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RAILROADS IN LATIN AMERICA

The distribution and density of the rail networks in Latin America have always been good indexes to the extent of economic development in that vast area. As frontiers were pushed back and newly discovered resources were exploited, transportation facilities followed close behind and provided outlets to existing markets. An overall glance at the present-day railroad pattern, however, shows that very little of Latin America -- even now -- is accessible by rail.

Until the completion of the accompanying map, no map has been available that specifically showed railroad facilities in all Latin America.\* On this map, entitled Railroads in Latin America and printed in 3 sheets at 1:6,750,000, all common carriers and a few industrial lines that carry passengers locally are shown according to gauge. In addition, the name, ownership (government or private), and gauge of each railroad are listed and keyed by number to the individual lines shown on the map. No lines under construction or projected were included because proposed completion dates cannot be determined definitely.

The map is believed to be currently accurate since the initial research included all available source materials and, in March 1957, a preliminary printing was checked by each American

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\*The network of the railroads is fairly accurately shown as one feature on general maps produced between 1944 and 1953 by the American Geographical Society and the National Geographic Society, but no additional railroad data are given.

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Embassy (or Consulate where appropriate) in Latin America. Coastlines and political data were taken from the Army Map Service reprint (1952) of the American Geographical Society's Map of Hispanic America at 1:5,000,000, with minor revisions.

The three sheets of the new map -- North, Central, and South -- cover all the Latin American Republics and Dependencies. Since the projection and the symbols are consistent throughout, the sheets can be joined to make one large map. When put together, however, the North Sheet should be overlapped by the Central Sheet, which is a slightly more up-to-date portrayal of the Venezuelan and Colombian lines.

Several observations can be drawn from a study of the new map.

1. The rail networks are dense in only a few areas. With the exception of the Mexico City area, central Chile, east-central Argentina, and southeastern Brazil, the rail pattern consists of isolated lines connecting primary market centers, mining areas, or interior towns with river or ocean ports. Vast areas with excellent economic potentialities are not served by any railroads.

2. Thirteen different railroad gauges are identified on the three map sheets; even within a single network gauge changes occur. As a result, through-service for long distances is rarely possible, and the frequent need for transshipment greatly impedes the efficient movement of goods.

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3. The most common gauges are 1-meter (3'3-3/8") and 1.676-meter (5'6"), which are used widely throughout Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. The North American "standard" gauge of 1.435 meters (4'8") is prevalent only in Mexico, Uruguay, and a small section of Argentina east of the Río Paraná.

4. Few international lines exist. Railroads with tracks of the same gauge provide through-service between major points in adjacent countries in eight places only. They are between: (a) Guatemala and El Salvador; (b) Bolivia and Brazil; (c) Bolivia and Chile, in 2 places; (d) Bolivia and Argentina, in 2 places; and (e) Argentina and Chile, in 2 places. A train-ferry between Posadas, Argentina, and Encarnación, Paraguay provides another significant international connection. A short, meter-gauge line crosses the Colombia-Venezuela border and connects Cucutá with Encontrados and El Táchira; and at the northern end of the Costa Rica-Panama border a privately owned yard-gauge line connects small towns in these two countries.

5. Only two rail routes span the entire South American continent from east to west; both of them cross Argentina and Chile. The first to be completed (1911) goes west from Buenos Aires through Mendoza, across the Andes via a tunnel near the crest, and on to Santiago.

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The second, completed only a few years ago (1948), goes through the city of Salta in northern Argentina to the port of Antofagasta on the Chilean coast. The two countries exchange only limited amounts of goods via these lines because of transshipment problems on the southern line and customs restrictions on both lines. Customs regulations are a critical international transport problem for many Latin American countries.

Except for one short gap, a third transcontinental rail route crosses the central part of the continent. At present, transshipment of goods is necessary via the highway between Santa Cruz and Cochabamba. When the last stretch of rail construction is completed, however, the ports of southeastern Brazil will be connected by rail with Arica on the northern coast of Chile -- a distance of nearly 2,500 miles.

In many cases the history of railroad development in Latin America reveals the causes of the transport dilemma that faces most of the countries today. The earliest railroads were built, often by foreign investors, either to connect growing cities that were seeking expanded commercial opportunities or to get minerals or agricultural products from isolated regions to markets or ports. In so vast an area, with widely separated localities generating transportation needs, many independent rail systems grew spasmodically into sizeable networks. Little thought was given

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to connecting links or to the standardization of gauge and services because other considerations were of more significance at the time. Serious natural obstacles -- rugged terrain, swamps, jungle, seasons of heavy rain or intense drought, great distances between populated areas, and lack of fuel resources for operating the lines -- constantly hampered railroad expansion and greatly increased engineering costs. As a result, many narrow-gauge, lightweight lines were built because they were satisfactory for immediate requirements and were cheaper to construct. Unfortunately for the railroads, the subsequent years of expanding economic development increased transportation demands beyond the capabilities of the old lines. Today, rail facilities in many countries are entirely inadequate.

The economic growth of Latin America has been accompanied by increasing attitudes of nationalism, including an acceptance of state ownership of railroads. As a result, more and more of the extensive networks that were built and operated for years by foreign companies have been taken over by local governments -- often before an adequate, internal capability was developed for proper management and maintenance. Too few trained technicians, an almost nonexistent rail-equipment industry, lack of local capital, limited foreign currency, and a reluctance to use foreign capital have been deterrants to progress in correcting operating deficits, improving deteriorated equipment and services, introducing dieselization and electrification, converting gauges, and building connecting lines.

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In every Latin American country, however, programs are now underway to correct the deficiencies in rail services. Not only locally but on an international scale, efforts have been made to analyze and solve the railway problems common to all Latin American countries. The Pan American Railway Congress Association (PARCA) was initiated as the South American Railway Congress (Congreso Sudamericano de Ferrocarriles) as long ago as 1907. Its meetings, which bring together railroad officials, governmental and industrial representatives, and other persons with related interests to work on technical and economic problems of mutual concern, are held at frequent intervals. The Ninth Congress, at which the new map\* was presented by the United States Delegation, was held from 30 August through 13 September 1957 in Buenos Aires, with over 400 delegates in attendance. Conclusions and recommendations arrived at in these Congresses have been and will undoubtedly continue to be a significant influence in the improvement of railroads throughout Latin America.

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\*Copies of this map may be obtained by calling the CIA Map Library, Executive 3-6115 (or Code 143), extension 2596, and requesting Map No. 13886, Railroads in Latin America, in 3 sheets.

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