

## US-VENEZUELAN COMMERCE IN AGE OF REVOLUTION

*Sustaining Empire: Venezuela's Trade with the United States during the Age of Revolutions, 1797–1828.* By Edward P. Pompeian. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2022. \$64.95 cloth; \$64.95 e-book.  
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This book traces the history of “neutral trade” for three decades starting in 1797, and convincingly argues that this economic policy played an essential role in the fate of the Spanish Empire, the young United States, and Venezuela, which served as a trade nexus between those two. The book offers a fresh, illuminating perspective on these Atlantic developments and serves as a model of transnational and trans-local research, as it relies on exhaustive use of archival sources from Spain, Venezuela, Colombia, the United States, and Britain.

“Neutral trade” was an economic policy that loosened trade restrictions when normal trade was curtailed by war. Under this policy, Spanish colonial merchants, restricted to trade directly only with the metropolis, could trade with “neutrals,” that is, with merchants from neutral countries, which included the United States. As the book demonstrates, the United States benefitted enormously from the generational war that encompassed the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. First, these wars distracted and depleted Europe’s empires so that they could not conquer the fledgling country. Second, the wars enabled the neutral trade that gave US merchants privileged access to otherwise inaccessible markets, and thus enriched the coffers not only of those merchants but also their home cities (Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and others).

In his case study of Venezuela, Pompeian offers a novel approach to Spanish American independence and makes a strong argument that, on balance, neutral trade strengthened and extended the longevity of the Spanish Empire and delayed independence. In short, neutral trade quelled discontent throughout the 1790s and 1800s and, after war broke out, advantaged the royalist position. Most scholarship of Venezuelan independence focuses principally on the ideology of key republican figures and the breakdown of productive discourse between the province’s elites and colonial leaders. Pompeian argues that the driving force that determined colonial (in)stability was the reliability of foreign trade, which provided the colony with necessary imports and the market for exports.

US merchants were well aware that their commerce helped to keep the empire alive; they worked amicably with imperial officials and enjoyed trade privileges that enraged creole merchants. Among other revelations, the book offers a bold new perspective on the expedition of the Venezuelan ex-patriot Francisco de Miranda to initiate an independence movement in his homeland in 1806. While many in the US were sympathetic with Miranda’s mission, key US merchants who benefitted from neutral trade opposed the independence venture and cooperated with the Spanish government to ensure the expedition’s failure. Some years later, when the independence wars broke

out, US merchants traded with all sides in the war under the flag of neutrality, though the great majority of the trade was with royalists because they tended to control the ports. To the dismay of Spanish American revolutionaries and their sympathizers in the United States, the merchants supplied royalist forces with food, arms, clothing, and information.

The argument that neutral trade served as “as a preservative of the Spanish Empire” (13) would benefit from more engagement with scholars who have shown that the policy also fostered rebellion. For instance, Cristina Soriano’s recent book *Tides of Revolution* (2018) convincingly shows how subversion grew in colonial Venezuela, due in part to revolutionary ideas and printed materials that arrived on foreign merchant ships. This book would benefit from greater engagement with those factors, as neutral trade appears to have both spread revolutionary ideas and mitigated revolutionary energy.

The book is well written and enjoyable to read, though the density of archival data makes it more appropriate for graduate students and academics than for undergraduates. There are a few quibbles with particular details. For instance, the Introduction could use a clearer explanation of the differences between *comercio libre* and *comercio neutral*, as well as more clarity on the differences between the racial groups *pardos* and free Blacks. A more significant critique is that at times the writing becomes so dense and detailed that it is easy to lose sight of the narrative’s larger implications. Some of the chapter conclusions serve as epilogues rather than as summations that explain how the chapter connects to the book’s core arguments. Therefore, some of the chapters could use clearer signposts (topic sentences, section introductions, and chapter conclusions) to help the reader understand each section’s larger significance and how it connects to the core theses.

Overall, this book is a fascinating, innovative piece of scholarship that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Spanish American independence and the role that commerce played in the Age of Revolutions.

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## SLAVERY AND EMANCIPATION IN ARGENTINA

*Una historia de la emancipación negra. Esclavitud y abolición en la Argentina.* By Magdalena Candiotti. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2021. Pp. 272. \$18.60 paper. doi:10.1017/tam.2023.43

Magdalena Candiotti shows how the colonial practice of manumission (individual release from slavery) shaped the “time of the libertos,” the life of people freed from slavery in Argentina between the revolution of independence and abolition, roughly 1810 to 1860. During these turbulent decades, men, women, and children of African ancestry