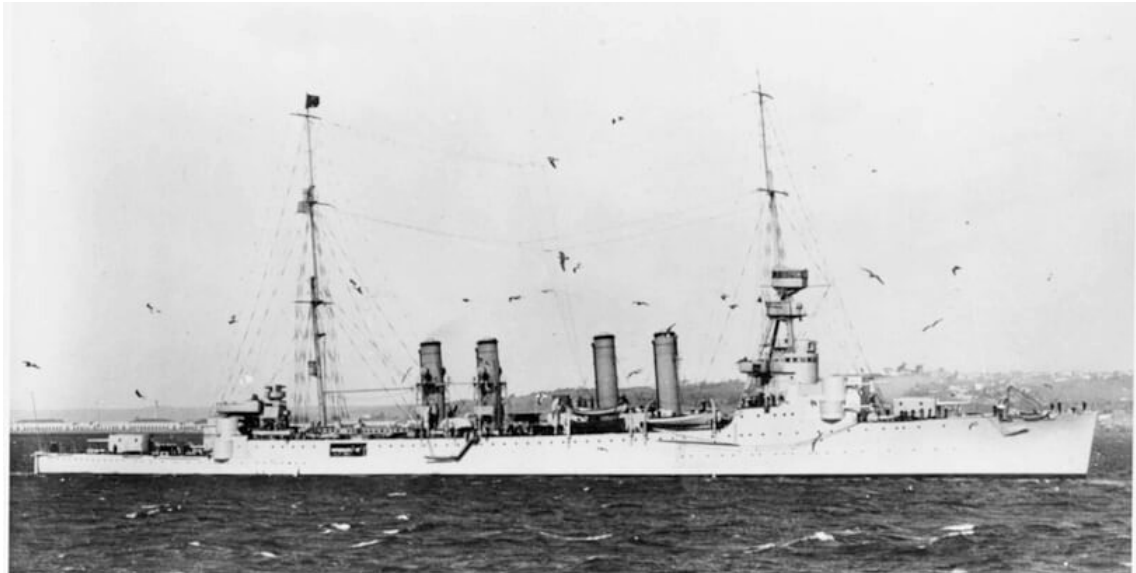


Some Mexican attempts to procure ex-USN cruisers

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*The author continues his series exploring proposals to export
second-hand warships during the term of the
1922 Washington Navy Treaty.*



The light cruiser USS OMAHA (CL4) on 8 December 1923. The first two vessels of this class (OMAHA and MINNEAPOLIS) had been laid down in 1918, and completed in 1923, and were therefore due to become over-age in 1939.¹ (Photo: US Naval History and Heritage Command #NH 97970)

In late 1923/early 1924, the Mexican Navy sought to purchase several light naval craft of gunboat or destroyer type in response to a rebellion then occurring in Vera Cruz. This was not possible from official sources, as the Washington Naval Treaty specifically forbade the signatory powers from disposing of any warships in a manner which would permit them to become a vessel of war in the navy of any foreign power.

Agents of the Mexican government then searched the harbours of the US for privately owned vessels suitable for their naval purposes. Included in these craft were numerous old destroyers, gunboats, and

¹ Cruisers laid down prior to 1920 were considered over-age 16 years after completion, while those laid down from 1920 onwards became over-age 20 years from the date of completion – see London Naval Treaty 1936, Part I, Article 1, Section C(c).

cruisers stricken from the USN and sold at auction. Many of these had been sold in 1919 and 1920 before the Washington Conference, and their sale contracts imposed no restrictions that would have prevented resale to Mexico or any other Government. Most of these had been sold for scrap, but a few had either been converted to alternate uses, or were still in the same configuration as they had been when taken over from the Navy Department.²

On 11 January 1924, a Mexican navy engineer, Manuel Escudero, accompanied by Captain Carlos A. Ferrer of the Mexican navy, arrived in San Antonio under the orders of the Minister of War and Marine of Mexico to inspect and receive three ex-USN destroyers which had been purchased for the Mexican Navy. The identities and locations of these destroyers were not disclosed, and Escudero stated that the destroyers would be manned by their present crews until they arrived in a Mexican port, when they would be replaced with Mexican officers and sailors, and the ship re-registered. Escudero also advised that the destroyers would be used to blockade the port of Vera Cruz, which was held by rebels.³

The owners of a number of ships which the Mexican Government had sought to buy made enquiries of the US Federal Government, asking for an indication of the Governments attitude to such sales. On 22 January the Mexican newspaper *El Universal*, published a statement that the Mexican Government had purchased “ships sufficient in numbers and strength to clean Mexican waters of shipping that is outside Government Authority.”⁴ This article did not specify where these ships had been obtained, and by 24 January US Administration Officials were being quoted as indicating that sale to the Government of Mexico by American citizens of vessels intended to be added as fighting craft to the Mexican navy would be in spirit, if not in letter, a violation of the conception of the treaty obligations of the US.⁵ The next day, the *New York Times* reported that owners of ex-US warships were disposed to defer to the wishes of the US Government in this regard, and that an unnamed Philadelphia firm which dealt with obsolete warships was reluctant to deal with Mexican agents that had arrived in that city with a complete set

² Halts Ship Sales to Mexico; Held as Treaty Violation; Attitude of Administration Expected to Result in Dropping of Negotiations with Private American Owners – Tampico Blockade is Lifted, *Washington Post*, 24 Jan 1924, p1. Virtually identical stories were published as Warship Sale Banned, *Los Angeles Times*, 24 Jan 1924, p1, and Ban on War Craft Sales to Obregon, *New York Times*, 24 Jan 1924, p2.

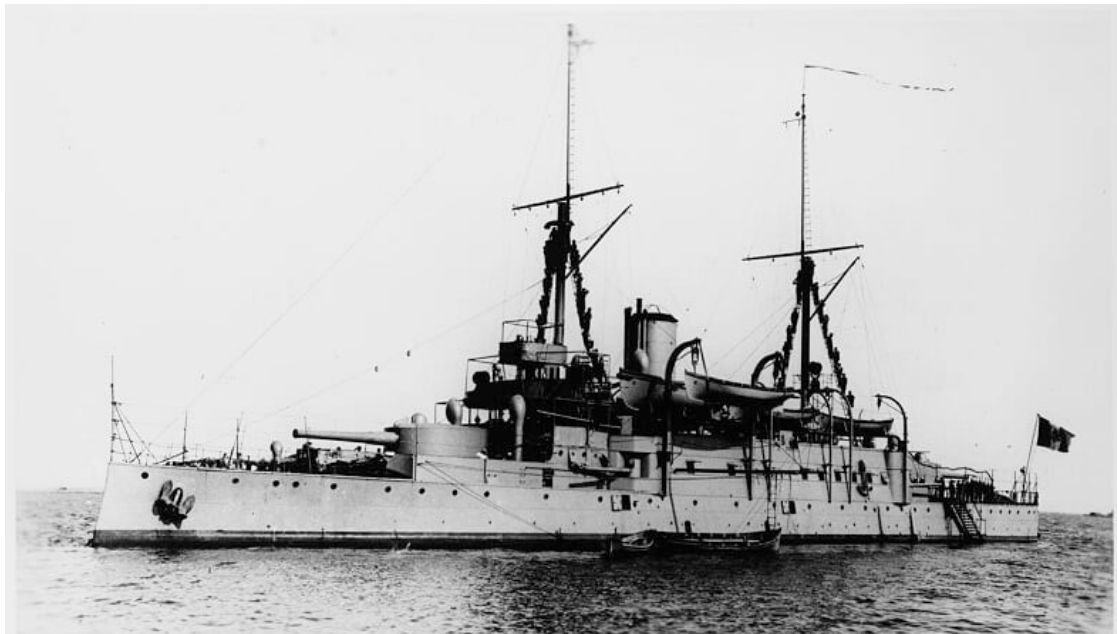
³ Destroyers are bought by Obregon; Three Warships Obtained for Use in Blockade of Vera Cruz, *Los Angeles Times*, 12 Jan 1924, p1. A similar, although shorter article was 3 Destroyers for Obregon, *New York Times*, 12 Jan 1924, p3.

⁴ Mexican Senators try to make Peace, *New York Times*, 23 Jan 1924, p3.

⁵ Halts Ship Sales to Mexico; Held as Treaty Violation; Attitude of Administration Expected to Result in Dropping of Negotiations with Private American Owners – Tampico Blockade is Lifted, *Washington Post*, 24 Jan 1924, p1.

of officers for the crew of one destroyer.⁶ The same article also copied a report from Mexico City that naval units were on their way to the US to man destroyers recently purchased.

In the event, no sales of ex-USN warships to Mexico were completed, however Mexican efforts to procure second-hand warships at this time were not completely fruitless. On 16 April 1924 Mexico successfully purchased the old French-built Coast Defence Ship DEODORO from Brazil. Renamed ANAHUAC, this vessel served in the Mexican Navy until the late 1930s, while Brazil used the sale to partially fund the new submarine HUMAYTÁ, ordered from Italy.⁷



ANAHUAC (ex-DEODORO) in Mexican Service. (Photo: US Naval History and Heritage Command #NH 93255)

Brazilian and Argentine attempts to procure *Omaha* class cruisers

In late 1931, the Brazilian Foreign Office sent identical telegraphic instructions to its Ambassadors in Washington and London to inquire whether one or other of these governments was in a position to sell Brazil two light fast cruisers for use in protecting national interests, and for training seamen.⁸ It was intended that these two vessels would replace the obsolete battleships MINAS GERAES and SAO PAULO which it was intended to scrap. Subsequent discussions on 1 December

⁶ Selling Warships to Mexico, *New York Times*, 25 Jan 1924, p16.

⁷ *Diretoria do Patrimônio Histórico*, n.d., *Deodoro – Encourçado*, retrieved 10 October 2020 from <https://www.marinha.mil.br/dphdm/sites/www.marinha.mil.br/dphdm/files/DeodoroEncouracaodo1898-1924.pdf>.

⁸ *FRUS*, 1931, Vol. 1, pp 883-885.

1931 between the Brazilian Ambassador to the US and the Assistant Secretary of State related specifically to vessels of 8,400 tons capable of making 32 knots. The Brazilian Government misunderstood that the Washington Naval Treaty Restrictions relating to the disposal of warships to other nations only applied to vessels of greater than 10,000 tons. But the US position was that the relevant clause applied to any vessels, and that it would not be possible for the US to meet the Brazilian Government's request.

In January 1935 the Brazilian Government made a further proposal through its Ambassador to the US, that the US sell to Brazil all ten of its OMAHA class cruisers, at a rate of one or two a year as these cruisers were replaced by new vessels.⁹ In 1936, the Argentinian Government indicated that it would like to buy five of the ten cruisers that were rumoured to have been requested by Brazil.¹⁰

The State Department were in favour of selling the *Omaha* class cruisers when they became over-age and were replaced,¹¹ Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles writing that this would provide "the chance which might never be repeated, to obtain unification of standards between the Argentine, Brazilian, and United States navies, and through this step, to consolidate for a long time the position we now temporarily enjoy, of having our own naval instructors in both Argentina and Brazil."¹²

However no such sales eventuated. On 19 March 1936 the Acting Secretary of State wrote to the US Ambassador in Argentina that it would not be possible to comply with this request both because the USN would require these vessels for some years to come, and because LNT36 then pending would contain a stipulation prohibiting the disposal of naval vessels in the manner suggested. On 6 July 1936 President Roosevelt wrote to the Brazilian President advising that the USN would not be able to relinquish any of the requested cruisers due to the needs of US national defence, but interestingly made no reference to potential treaty constraints.



⁹ *FRUS, 1936, Vol. 5, pp299-301.*

¹⁰ B Wood, 1962, External Restraints on the Good Neighbor Policy, *Inter-American Economic Affairs*, 16 (2), p4.

¹¹ Taussig to Standley, 27 Feb 1936, *Standley Papers*, Box 24, University of Southern California Libraries.

¹² Letter, 25 March 1936, Franklin D. Roosevelt library, OF 366, Box 1, quoted in B Wood, 1962, External Restraints on the Good Neighbor Policy, *Inter-American Economic Affairs*, 16 (2), p4.