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**MEXICANS IN
REVOLUTION**
1910 - 1946

AN INTRODUCTION

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The Mexican Experience

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Tidings of Revolution

Francisco Madero became a revolutionary by accident. His entire life—his family, his education, his marriage, and his early business efforts—marked him as a member of the elite. Madero's status rested on his family's connection with the Porfirian inner circle of promoters, but his prospects suffered because he came from the provinces, not the capital city. His frustrations serve as a microcosm of the growing exclusion of provincials from the political and economic opportunities of the Porfirian regime. These provincials had limited access to federal political power though their social world had broadened beyond their home states. Educated in Mexico City and in other countries, dressed in the latest fashions, and possessing the requisite wealth and appropriate manners, the provincials were indistinguishable from the capital city politicians and socialites except for their lack of a capital city accent and acceptance by the locals. They had everything except a Mexico City street address—though some even maintained weekend homes there. These disgruntled provincial leaders could have been drawn into the political system had Porfirio Diaz supported political parties. Sensitive to their exclusion, they had become an explosive potential; their shoddy treatment later came back to haunt Díaz and his capital city clique. In many ways Madero represented the least able of the disenfranchised provincial elites: inferior in almost every way

except the one that counted most, Madero possessed the crucial daring needed to challenge Díaz.

Madero launched a presidential campaign following the publication of the Creelman magazine interview in which Díaz announced that he believed Mexicans were ready for an open presidential race in 1910. Madero's friends and family, as well as many other Mexicans, believed that Madero's campaign was foolhardy if not suicidal. Nevertheless, he campaigned across the nation on the platform of no presidential reelection and developed a following that recognized his courage in entering politics. His organizational efforts, especially the organization of the Anti-reelectionist Party, eventually seemed a little too successful to Díaz, who had Madero arrested on trumped-up felony charges and jailed in San Luis Potosí under house arrest in the summer of 1910. As a result Madero became ineligible to stand for election and Díaz swept the balloting for a sixth term.

In July 1910 Madero fled from San Luis Potosí to San Antonio, Texas, where he transformed the Anti-reelectionist political organization into a revolutionary apparatus and began planning for revolution to begin on November 20. He relied on political allies that he had recruited personally during his campaign trips. He envisioned a political revolution that would bring democracy to his nation and expressed his goals in the slogans "Effective Suffrage" (that is, honest voting), "No Reelection" (to prevent the Díaz pattern of holding office), and "Municipio Libre" (local control of issues such as taxes). Madero's effort to return and lead troops in Coahuila failed, but by identifying leaders who recruited followers—and financing and arming them—he

sparked the revolution into life. Rebels appeared in Chihuahua, Puebla, Morelos, and other places.

The Chihuahua revolutionaries commanded by Pascual Orozco and Pancho Villa scored small but successive victories that revealed a modern army's vulnerability to guerrilla warfare, the provincial hostility to the capital city, and the pent-up anger of rural peoples who had been exploited or ignored by the Porfirian regime. Their small groups gained volunteers from the independent mountain communities, and adventure-seeking recruits from across the state and along both sides of the border. Madero's revolutionary junta in El Paso, Texas, soon attracted a motley group of international volunteers that included Giuseppe Garibaldi, grandson of the Italian hero, veterans of the Boer War and wanted felons. Madero formed them into a foreign legion that he attempted to integrate in his insurrectionary force. These foreigners caused a great deal of friction, and following the Madero era few foreigners found their way into the revolutionary armies.

None of the rebel victories occurred in important cities until the battle of Ciudad Juárez. The rebel victory there gave the rebels a port of entry and a major railhead from which to bring in weapons and provisions from the United States. The Madero victory at Ciudad Juárez in April 1911 encouraged small revolutionary bands to appear across the nation and seemed to foretell an uprising of national proportions. Fear that his regime was crumbling brought Díaz into peace negotiations and in May 1911 he, his family, and most of his cabinet left Mexico for exile in Paris. This first phase of the revolution gave no hint of the ubiquitous violence that soon followed.

The revolution that began in 1910 had a personal character

not seen in other social upheavals. The revolutionaries did not act according to a set of principles, a consciousness of economic relationships, or a commitment to ethnic values. They did not plan to overthrow the government. Rather, they wanted to overthrow Porfirio Díaz and his henchmen and return to the mythical glory days of Benito Juárez. After the rebels drove Díaz out, the Porfirian military officers and old-guard plutocrats remained, though they cared nothing about the man or the administration of Francisco Madero. They waited for the moment when they could remove him and place one of their own in the presidential office. Even the anarchists of Flores Magon referred to Madero as "Díaz the Little." Only Madero's expectant revolutionaries respected their leader, but that too began to fade soon after Madero took office.

Madero expected Mexicans to put down their guns, join political parties, and elect local, state, and national leaders who would legislate reform programs. He never moved beyond the view that the revolution had been purely political and all that was needed was to set aside the fraudulent 1910 presidential voting and hold new democratic elections. As for other reforms, Madero looked to newly elected officials, especially in the state and local governments, to assess the needs of their people and to offer reforms. Madero arranged for an acting president to govern the country until elections could be arranged, so that he himself could be elected president and serve a full four-year term. No one had the slightest doubt that he would win in a landslide, but Madero insisted on following procedures.

Francisco León de la Barra (1863–1939) served as acting president. De la Barra was a man of the Porfiriato by birth (Díaz

attended his baptism). Through his family and social ties, de la Barra became one of the foremost diplomats of the time. As Díaz expanded the diplomatic corps in the 1890s, he rewarded the talented de la Barra, who served in Buenos Aires. Transferred in 1904 to Brussels as the minister to the low countries, he distinguished himself as a genial and accomplished diplomat who discreetly kept his private opinions to himself. In 1908 he replaced Enrique Creel as the ambassador in Washington DC, the pinnacle of his career and the only post in the diplomatic service that carried the title of ambassador. Relations between Mexico and the United States had been strained over Chamizal Island in the Rio Grande, over Colorado River water, over the desire of President William Taft to remove the dictator of Nicaragua, and over Japanese interest in a naval base in Baja California. De la Barra's most public success came with arranging the meeting of Taft and Díaz on the Rio Grande border, where the two presidents shook hands in the middle of the international bridge. De la Barra also cultivated close personal relations with Taft and members of his cabinet. He courted Wall Street financiers as honorary president of the New York Mexican Club, whose membership included Andrew Carnegie among other financial giants. He took credit for reviving interest in investing in Mexico, which had tapered off because of the recession of 1907 (although he personally did not invest in Porfirian development). He lived on his government salary and family resources.

From Madero's standpoint de la Barra had all the qualities one needed in an interim president: he could reassure Washington, he had contacts with foreign financiers, he enjoyed the trust of European governments and diplomats, and, perhaps most important,

he did not have political ambitions. De la Barra's long service abroad disconnected him from the internal functioning of the Díaz regime, and thus Mexicans did not link him directly to the departed regime. De la Barra appeared to be a neutral bridge between the old government and the pending reformed administration ostensibly based on effective suffrage. In many ways his brief tenure as president (May 26–November 6, 1911) provided a preview of the Madero administration.

The central problem to be solved, de La Barra and Madero believed, was the restoration of social order. Maderista groups, some formed after the Treaty of Juárez that theoretically reestablished peace with Díaz's resignation, wanted a share of the spoils of victory. Many wanted land, but a few wanted whatever they could carry away. Armed bands entered cities and towns, where they sometimes met resistance. In a poor country, sacking villages and small towns offered little, and what could be seized had to be torn from hands as impoverished as those that made up revolutionary armies. The army garrison in Durango for a time fended off some three thousand Maderistas who eventually entered the city to loot and rob its civilian inhabitants. In Cholula a band of self-declared Maderistas burned the archives with land titles and made off with the municipal treasury. Disorder and violence ranged from the annoying to the destructive.

Demobilization of Maderistas seemed prudent. President de la Barra and President-in-waiting Madero understood that only a small percentage of revolutionaries could be incorporated into the federal army or the rural constabulary (called the *Rurales*). Madero developed a plan to offer the vast majority twenty-five to forty pesos to turn in their weapons and be mustered out of

the ranks. He gave no thought to the danger represented by the floating pool of unemployed ex-revolutionaries his program created.

In the state of Morelos, Emiliano Zapata refused to demobilize or disarm his men. He demanded the return of land that villagers claimed they had lost over the years to large landholders. They wanted Madero to redeem the promise to return their lands that they thought he had made. Madero had been misunderstood. Most of the land in question carried legal titles that both President de la Barra and Madero refused to ignore. Rather than seize and distribute land, they favored setting up a commission to investigate, adjudicate and perhaps compensate villagers. Neither man envisioned a massive land redistribution program.

Porfirian bureaucrats and officers who remained in office in Mexico City argued that Zapata's army disrupted life throughout the nearby state of Morelos and that he had to be brought under control. Madero did his best to appease Zapata, while de la Barra lost patience with him. Zapata repeatedly refused to disarm his men and return to civilian activities. De la Barra and Madero failed to understand that they faced villagers who could not be appeased with political reforms, promises, or due process. They refused to recognize land titles that conflicted with the village memory of their land tenure ("from time immemorial"). Whether the villagers exaggerated their losses or not mattered little. Two parallel lines of reality existed that could not be made to converge. Dispatching the federal army to Morelos under Gen. Victoriano Huerta achieved a temporary respite.

Urban labor unrest presented another problem. Many factory owners feared that the revolution might encourage workers to

burn down buildings or destroy machinery. President de la Barra understood that workers needed relief and insisted that employers respond to complaints, but he also set legal bounds on strikes. He attempted to act with temperance in response to strikes and demonstrations. In one of his last official acts before the inauguration of Francisco Madero, de la Barra introduced a bill in Congress to establish a labor department in an effort to mediate conflicts in the workplace. De la Barra's brief presidency proved to be the calm before violence engulfed the republic.

As the interim president, de la Barra faced a series of problems that quickly multiplied when Madero took office. Madero assumed control of the existing governmental apparatus that had served the republic under Díaz and that in his view did not need to be replaced. The Porfirian bureaucracy and the federal army remained intact. Madero wanted to share in the political system and open it to more Mexicans, with reforms to limit reelection, provide an honest vote, and restore viable local government. These administrative reforms failed to satisfy many revolutionaries, and revolts broke out against his government from all sides. Unhappy rebels included Emiliano Zapata, who demanded land for villagers in the south, and Pascual Orozco, who insisted on rewards for the revolutionaries. Unreconciled Porfirians, such as Gen. Bernardo Reyes in the north and Gen. Felix Díaz on the east coast, also challenged the regime.

Madero had served for little more than a year when traitorous military officers ordered an attack on the presidential palace.

Another northerner intent on riding the revolution as far and as high as it would take him was Pancho Villa from Chihuahua. Like Obregón in many ways—young, daring, and eager to make his mark—Villa had joined Madero and then Carranza without lofty or long-range social programs. Personal ambition can too easily be dismissed as a negative characteristic. For saints and martyrs, ambition may be unacceptable, but among revolutionaries it often goes hand in glove with a leader's commitment to achieve a better life for his revolutionary followers. Villa represented his people in the north who had left their villages to work in the mines and larger towns and were set adrift without ties to their home communities. Their hopes crossed back and forth, from land in the countryside to opportunities in town, but always included an anti-foreign tinge in their demands for fair treatment for all Mexicans.

Villa, who had left a career as a bandit to join the revolution, represented the disinherited peoples of society. Like many others dispossessed by the economic policies of the Porfiriato, land and village life dominated his thoughts. Villa's pretensions did not immediately extend to the presidency, but battlefield successes overcame the insecurities that an impoverished youth and criminal livelihood had bequeathed him. For each person who saw him as Robin Hood, another saw him as a predator. Nevertheless, his successes gave him a place in the first rank of the revolution.

The wild card was not a northerner but a revolutionary who occupied a strategic location in Morelos, within striking distance of Mexico City and the important secondary city of Puebla. Emiliano Zapata, the village farmer and horse trainer who had battled against Díaz, Madero, and Huerta, remained constant in his revolutionary demand for land. He and his army of peasants and textile workers had more in common with Villa than with Carranza or Obregón.

Huerta, as his regime collapsed around him, found that even sympathetic international powers refused him aid, so he fled into exile, initially in Spain. His departure only days before Obregón's arrival in the capital city set the stage for the most vicious turn of the revolution. Following the flight of Huerta, the revolutionaries, already divided by bitter rivalries, especially between Carranza and Villa, but including all the major leaders, turned on each other. The lessons of four years of grim, if sporadic, revolution taught that compromise, reconciliation, pardon, and trust served as the weapons of suicide. Execution or exile of obvious enemies, suspicion of everyone except the closest associates, and doubts about even them served as the weapons of survival. These lessons revealed the nature of the revolution.

It had taken sixteen months to defeat Huerta and destroy the federal army. Obregón entered Mexico City in August 1914, paid a symbolic visit to Madero's grave, and began preparations for Carranza's entrance. Obregón paraded at the First Chief's right

hand as he accepted the capital from his best general. In nearby Morelos, Zapata received emissaries from both Villa and Carranza. With his own agenda, Villa drifted into opposition to the First Chief whom he dismissively referred to as "the perfumed one," charging that he perfumed his full beard. General Obregón, after some wavering, joined the First Chief, who was anxious to avoid Madero's fate and insisted on the disbandment of the defeated federal army. Federal army general José Rufugio and Obregón signed the Treaty of Teoloyucán, providing for the surrender of weapons, demobilization of all officers and enlisted men, and the turning over of military installations. Ex-Federales had little difficulty finding a revolutionary general to serve.

With Obregón's troops in Mexico City, Zapata's men on its south edge, Villa's army camped at Aguascalientes, and Carranza's forces in San Luis Potosí, an eerie pause occurred. Almost in slow motion, military envoys assembled in Aguascalientes. Villa invited men with military rank only, in a deliberate plan to exclude Carranza. Delegates to the Aguascalientes meeting had to command at least one thousand troops. The convention, again at Villa's behest, considered how to organize victory. Villa and Zapata's representatives ignored Carranza's claims to leadership, and attempted to preempt charges of ambition by choosing neither of their leaders. They selected Gen. Eulalio Gutiérrez, governor of San Luis Potosí, who supported Villa, as provisional president. This represented a political skirmish to establish legitimate control of the capital. Violence, the political currency of the times, quickly reasserted itself.

Carranza's men withdrew as the First Chief refused to recognize the Aguascalientes convention and its president. Zapata and

Villa prepared to impose the convention's presidential choice on the nation. Gutiérrez, of course, had his own army and prepared to use it. Some seventy-two thousand men prepared to occupy the capital. Together they formed the Conventionists. A thoughtful Obregón stepped away from the conflict to assess his course of action. These events moved in a curious calm. For a moment, the peace held. Then Obregón decided to join Carranza, and the Constitutionals and Conventionists collided in a vicious war between these previous allies. Neither side practiced any form of restraint—because the winner would claim Mexico.

Carranza, faced with a Conventionist army at the gates of the capital, would have been undone had Obregón sided with his fellow generals. Obregón expected to be rewarded at a later date with a presidential term. Carranza withdrew to the safety of Veracruz. Prodded by Obregón, he reluctantly issued some reform decrees designed to bolster his support among the working class. This was part of a deal brokered by Obregón. He had convinced the anarchist workers of the Casa del Obrero Mundial to join him in exchange for some reforms in their favor.

Villa and Zapata occupied the capital and Zapatistas briefly held the nearby city of Puebla. Regrouping his forces, General Obregón forced his way into Mexico City. Violence in a furious kaleidoscope careened across the nation, not everywhere at once and not at the same time, from 1914 to 1920. In frightening and deadly succession, the Constitutionals and Conventionists killed each other in battles for Mexico City, the cities of the east (the United States played a role here by evacuating Veracruz and leaving a storehouse of armaments to Carranza), at El Ebano, and—the largest and most costly in lives—at Celaya

(twice) and Zacatecas. The battle at Celaya in April 1915 tested Villa's cavalry against Obregón's well-armed and well-trained forces. Villa lost 1,800 men in the initial charge. Undeterred he threw wave after wave against Obregón over the course of several days. An estimated twenty-five thousand Villistas failed to overwhelm Obregón's nine thousand defenders. Some six thousand cavalry hidden from Villa made a sudden and decisive attack. Villa lost ten thousand, four thousand killed and another six thousand taken prisoner. Subsequently, Obregón mopping up some Villistas at Trinidad, lost his lower right arm to a sniper bullet.

The grim, wanton violence came not at the major battles fought by leading generals, but in the random shootouts, ambushes, and murders accompanied by the taking of hostages and the sacking of villages. The residents of Tepostlán, Morelos, fled to nearby hiding places in the forest whether it was Zapatistas, Carrancistas, or any other armed band spotted on the road to their town. Allegiance mattered little, because every group foraged horses in the cornfields, and sacked houses for food and anything else they needed, or looted for things someone suddenly wanted. By mid-1915, Carranza's and Obregón's armies had won enough battles (especially at Celaya) to insure that the Convention supporters would never claim the nation, but they had eliminated neither Villa nor Zapata, and violence continued.

The widely dispersed small bands of revolutionaries caused an epidemic of violence that included cruel and patriotic conduct, often by the same person. The violence destroyed day-to-day behavior because of the insecurity it inspired.

Zapata and Villa both retreated to their home territories and continued to threaten the new regime created by Carranza and Obregón. Zapata, south of Mexico City, continued to raid haciendas in the region, becoming the personification of the peasantry's demand for land. His actions became the unspoken voice of the country people, at least according to popular mythology. Villa fell back to the North, particularly to Chihuahua. His reputation as the champion of the underdogs received its greatest boost March 6, 1916. Villa, in a brilliant and daring stroke, sent a lightning attack across the international boundary to raid the small U.S. cavalry outpost of Columbus, in New Mexico Territory. Most of the detachment of troopers had left earlier in the day on weekend passes to El Paso, Texas. The raiders struck their primary target, the main hotel and home of the Ravel brothers. The Ravels had run guns for Villa, until his last order when they had decided he had lost the war, so they took the cash and had not delivered the guns. Villa's men learned that the brothers had gone to Albuquerque, so they grabbed the only Ravel around, a young nephew. As the raiders pulled the child down the street, one of the few remaining troopers shot one of the kidnappers and the child then quickly slipped away from his other captor and escaped. The raiders shot up the town, set fire to some buildings, and drove off whatever

horses they spotted. Villa's raid on a gringo town electrified all Mexicans with pride, whether or not they supported Villa.

The Columbus raid made Villa a national hero, even among those supporting both Carranza and Obregón, who wanted him out of national politics. The attack demanded action from the United States, but President Woodrow Wilson feared being bogged down in Mexico when he expected his country would soon enter the war in Europe. As a result, he ordered a punitive force after Villa. Mexicans, of course, offered no help to the invaders.

Gen. John J. Pershing, who commanded the punitive expedition, endured a disastrous dress rehearsal for the U.S. entry into world war. The mobilization of both regular and reserve troops, the experiments with mechanized transport (both trucks and airplanes), and the system of command all proved shockingly inept and flawed. All the difficulties revealed in the Spanish-American war had been ignored, not solved. To watching military experts, especially the German high command, the U.S. Army's efforts to organize and execute the punitive expedition seemed farcical. The Germans lost all respect, hence fear, for the U.S. military. The German decision to engage in unrestricted submarine warfare rested in large part on the High Command's conclusions about these weaknesses.

Pershing and his troops, guided by Mormon colonists, and waited on by Chinese cooks and launderers, both groups living south of the border, wandered around Chihuahua for about a year. The expedition never caught Villa, nor his men, and fought only one battle, against Carranza's troops at Parral. Finally, with the European war demanding his attention, Wilson declared the

punitive campaign a success and called Pershing home. Unsuccessful from the U.S. perspective, whatever the president stated, the punitive campaign served Carranza well, bottling up one of his major rivals in Chihuahua.

In 1916, with his election to president, Carranza devoted his attention to regularizing his government, pacifying where he could, and convening a constitutional convention in Querétaro. The president did not envision a new and radical constitution, rather he hoped to revise the 1857 document to reflect revolutionary changes. The convention admitted only delegates loyal to Carranza. No unredeemed followers of Villa or Zapata participated. Nevertheless the delegates soon abandoned the president's directions and decided to write a new document. Led by Francisco Mújica from Michoacán, who intensely believed in nationalism and social revolution, the delegates wrote a remarkable statement outlining a national government and a people committed to social justice, economic opportunity, and political participation.

The new constitution of 1917 dictated changes that reflected the goals of different revolutionaries, whether or not they had been Carrancistas. Early opportunistic decrees of Carranza, not meant as statements of enduring principles, were included, much to the president's annoyance. His December 1914 "Addition to the Plan of Guadalupe" and the early 1915 "Law of Restoration and Donation of Ejidos," which had been designed only for the moment, became constitutional objectives to provide land to those who worked it. Mújica persuaded delegates to include sweeping statements on education, labor, agrarian reform, and regulation of the church. Another article took up the fundamental question

of land ownership, calling for the return of lands to communities and indigenous groups (for example, the Yaquis and Mayos of Sonora). This clearly expressed a widespread concern of rural, self-sufficient villagers (*labradores*) and highlanders (*serranos*), most clearly personified by Zapata but represented by a cluster of leaders. In another provision, the delegates redeemed Obregón's promise to organized labor through the 'House of World Workers' and gave workers the most advanced statement of rights in the world. In still another article, delegates prohibited monopolies harmful to social interests, implying a guarantee of food and shelter at reasonable prices to the entire population. Finally, two overriding concerns clearly emerged in the document's guarantees for a reasonable life. These were declarations that included restrictions on foreigners and nationalization of all properties of the Roman Catholic Church.

Carranza ignored the document, nevertheless the new constitution of 1917 appealed to Mexicans hoping for substantial change and a new government orientation toward their needs. It mentioned the working class fifty times. Article 27 (land) and article 123 (labor) provided the basis for formative legislation. The idea of economic balance evident in article 28, that directed the government to prevent ruinous industrial competition, provided the foundation for government intervention in all aspects of the economy, including wages, prices and profits, and suggested government-owned industries. Its connection with the liberalism of Benito Juárez was evident in provisions that directed the expropriation of all Catholic Church properties, limited the number of priests (to be determined by each state governor), and stripped away political rights of Church officials. Of great consequence,

the principle of social justice trumped private property rights, enabling the federal government to rearrange property in the interest of social justice and national needs.