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THE REVOLUTION OF 1910 (1910-1940)

The Revolution . . . was an explosion of reality.



Octavio Paz, 1961

The most devastating civil war in Mexican history produced modern Mexico. In the 10 years of its military phase, between 1910 and 1920, as many as 2 million people may have been killed, or one out of every eight Mexicans. Trains were blown up, haciendas were burned, and corruption prevailed. Yet the Mexican Revolution created new political structures and produced the Constitution of 1917. It destroyed the privilege of the Creole and gave birth to the mestizo nation. It ended feudalism and peonage and created labor unions and redistributed land. It gave birth to such Mexican heroes as Emiliano Zapata and Lázaro Cárdenas and such Mexican artists as Diego Rivera. The revolution gave Mexicans a sense of national pride and a deeply held appreciation for their own culture, called *mexicanidad*.

The Beginning

A century after Hidalgo's declaration of independence, Francisco Madero (1873-1913) declared himself provisional president of Mexico from the safety of San Antonio, Texas. A member of the upper class, Madero typified his era by having been educated in both Paris and the United States. His family owned large estates as well as a smelting factory and mines. Liberal in his thinking and actions, Madero provided schooling and medical care for his workers and peons. Much like Hidalgo, he seemed to have little understanding of the forces he was about to unleash. Like Hidalgo, he thought political, not social, change

would rectify the nation's problems. He had previously opposed unseating Díaz by violence, but now realized that honest elections were impossible under the dictatorship.

In October, Madero issued his Plan de San Luis Potosí calling for Mexicans to rise against tyranny on November 20, 1910, after 6 P.M. His call to arms was vague enough to appeal to everyone with a complaint against the Porfiriato. On the appointed day small guerrilla forces sprung into action throughout much of Mexico. Like the caudillo revolts of the Santa Anna epoch, these poorly armed groups were inspired by local leaders and, except for local members of Madero's Anti-Reelectionist Party, were not coordinated with each other. The fighters were teachers, mechanics, merchants, and miners; and they were the unemployed, the soldiers of fortune, and bandits. They were Creoles who received too few favors from Díaz and the *científicos*. They were hacendados like Madero, who were concerned with electoral reform and foreign influence. Living off the countryside, the revolutionaries found plenty of support among the peasants, who quickly swelled their ranks. The radical and liberal, wealthy and poor, no matter their differences, united against Díaz.

Díaz tried to defeat them. He sent the army; he sent the *rurales*. He did quash the rebellions in most regions. But in the state of Chihuahua, he had no success. Chihuahua had long been simmering under the despotic hand of Luis Terrazas and his family. Terrazas was the richest man in Mexico, made more rich and powerful by Porfirio Díaz. He personally owned 50 haciendas and ranches that covered 7 million acres; his son-in-law, Enrique Creel, owned nearly another 2 million by himself. They owned mines, banks, telephone companies, textile mills, and meat-packing plants. Family members were governors, state legislators, and senators. Nothing happened in Chihuahua without their permission.

The revolutionary movement in Chihuahua grew under the leadership of a former mule skinner, Pascual Orozco, Jr. Joining him was the cattle rustler Pancho Villa. Orozco had lost his business because Terrazas did not favor him. Pancho Villa had escaped from debt peonage. Both understood what was at stake in changing the established order. And there were many others on the outs with the Terrazas clan. The Chihuahua rebels successfully routed a large contingent of the federal army and took control of most of the state.

In February 1911 Madero crossed the border into Mexico to join forces with Orozco and Villa: he would be the political symbol; they would be his army. It turned out to be a fragile alliance between civilian and military authority, one easily broken by strong personalities and

military might. Unfortunately, it would typify the problems of governance in Mexico for the next decade.

Victories in Chihuahua reignited the rebellion in other states—Coahuila, Puebla, and Morelos—and soon revolutionaries such as Emiliano Zapata controlled most of the Mexican countryside. On May 8, Orozco and Villa captured the first large city, Ciudad Juárez. The rebels, against Madero's orders, defeated the army and occupied the city as their provisional capital. Other cities in the north and central Mexico were soon in rebel hands.

Federal troops began deserting. Madero's supporters demonstrated in the capital. Newspapers attacked Díaz. Businesses faltered. President Taft stationed U.S. warships off Veracruz to express displeasure at the continuing civil war. Díaz finally realized his situation was hopeless: an armistice was negotiated and signed on May 21.

The news spread through the streets of Mexico City. Mobs of people gathered in front of the National Palace shouting for Díaz to resign. The dictator responded as he always had—with force. Two hundred demonstrators were gunned down. He did resign on May 25, 1911, and surreptitiously slipped away to Paris. An interim president was appointed until an election could be arranged.

President Madero

Madero has unleashed a tiger; let's see if he can control him.



Porfirio Díaz, 1911 (quoted in Meyer & Sherman)

Madero marched into Mexico City to the joyful cheers of mobs of Mexicans. In a matter of months, he had swept away the Porfiriato, and yet he would find it difficult to satisfy the aspirations of most of those who greeted him in the capital that day.

The most agile and charismatic leader would have stumbled, and Madero was neither. He appointed family members, some quite conservative, to important posts and left them to undermine the reforms he advocated. He invited charges of corruption against his government by giving out contracts to his family businesses. Most important, he did not fully understand the injustices requiring redress: early in his presidential campaign he had said that Mexico needed liberty, not bread. He thought the battle was over with a free and open election. He naively agreed to disband the revolutionary army.

Meanwhile Porfiriato conservatives were still active. Foreign businesses required profit. Workers demanded better conditions. And Emiliano Zapata, recognizing that Madero's victory did nothing for his cause, never stopped fighting for the return of peasant lands in the south. Workers struck for better conditions, but despite good intentions, Madero did little more than disperse the strikers. There were many factions Madero needed to appease, but he satisfied few. When he announced his support of a tax on idle land, those fighting for land redistribution were as disappointed as any foreign investor.

Many caudillos declared against him. Unfortunately for Mexico, they would continue declaring for the next decade, sometimes for their political principles but just as often out of envy and personal pique. The factions fought not only the Porfiristas, they fought each other. Against Madero, the first to proclaim was his former commander Orozco. Another was President Díaz's nephew. And there were others. He put them down with the assistance of Victoriano Huerta, who would later turn out to be traitorous.

Events overtook Madero and the fledgling democracy he instituted. Too kind to execute conservatives who had risen in arms against him, Madero imprisoned most of them in Mexico City where they proceeded to join forces. On the morning of February 9, 1913, they mysteriously gained release from prison and led their troops to the National Palace. Indifferent to the plight of the capital's residents, they brought their battle to the heart of the city. Madero responded with General Huerta in charge. For 10 days, called the Decena Trágica, the city suffered machine-gun fire and shelling, looting, and panic and hunger. Civilian casualties were in the thousands.

Madero demanded to know from his general when the fighting would stop. The next day it did, because Huerta had switched sides. The U.S. ambassador appointed by President Taft, Henry Lane Wilson, in the interest of protecting American business investments, had negotiated the resolution of the battle. Throughout Madero's term, Wilson had meddled and even called for Madero's resignation—especially when the president decided to tax oil production. In a shameless instance of dollar diplomacy, Madero was arrested, forced to resign, and murdered. General Huerta became president.

The Social Revolution

The Mexican Revolution did not truly begin until the Madero regime ended. Until that point, most political changes had fulfilled the demo-

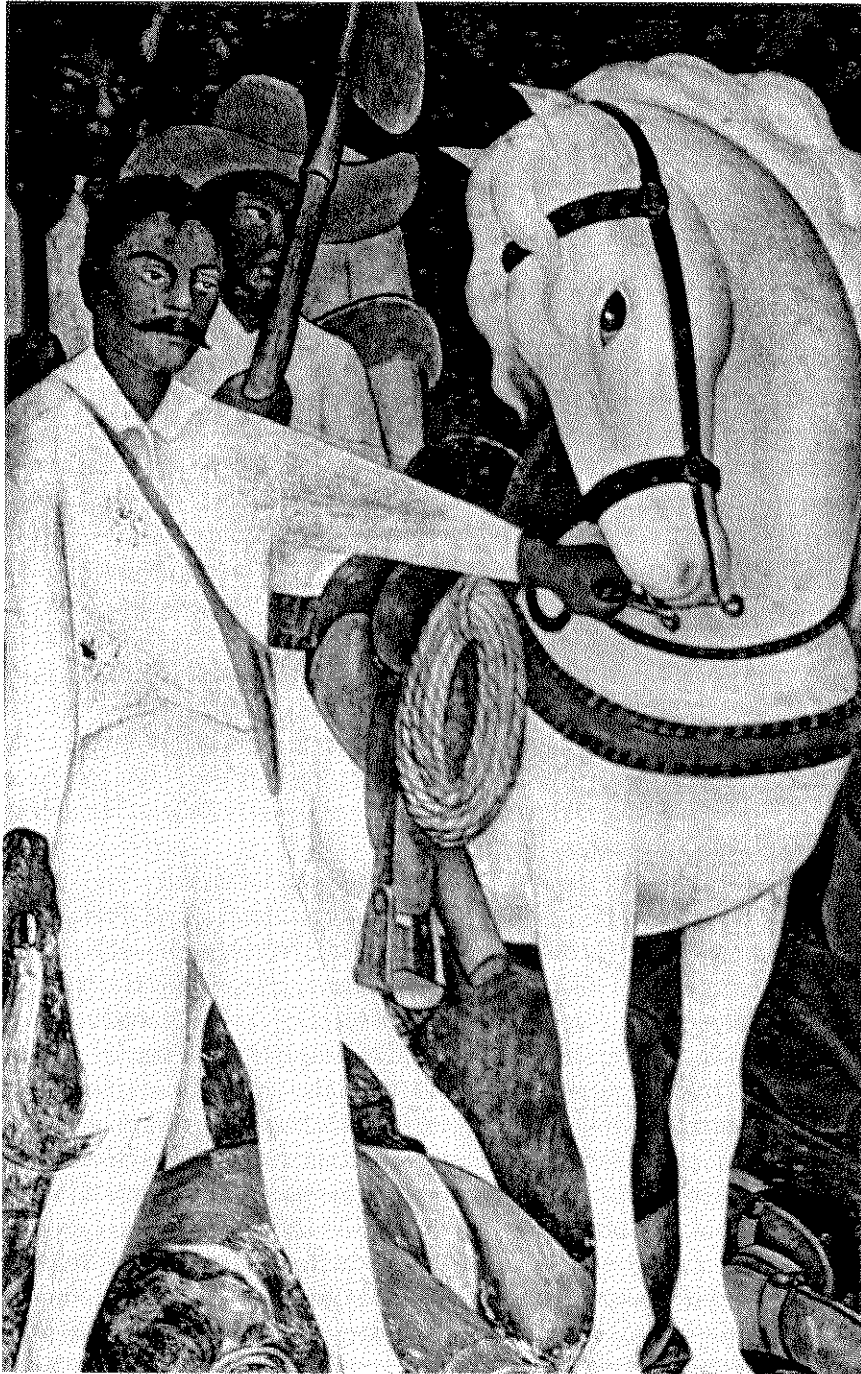
cratic values of the liberal middle class. Fighting had not been so drastic as to disrupt the economy. *Científicos* and foreign interests had influential allies in the Madero government.

With Madero's death the revolution intensified and swirled through the country like a tornado touching down to wreak havoc on the people and the economy while destroying enemies. Then feeding on its destructiveness, the violent winds would find new enemies—over and over again. For seven years, the factions would realign themselves, splinter, and gust ahead. When the dust settled in 1920, Mexico's institutional and intellectual underpinnings would be drastically changed from the preceding centuries. And the people who occupied the positions of power would be those who had been held in silence so long.

The breakdown of the racist class system that had presided in Mexico since the conquest can be seen in the personal histories of the revolutionary leaders, many of whom became presidents of the republic. Unlike previous Mexican power brokers, most were either mestizos or Indians from rural areas, and many were poor. Pancho Villa (1877–1923), the most colorful of the revolutionaries, was uneducated and was 25 years old before he could sign his name, yet he taught himself to read during a stint in prison. A bandit by trade, he was called Mexico's Robin Hood by the U.S. press. He fought the revolution, he said, for land reform and “so that every Mexican child could go to school” (Guzmán 1965, 393). Yet his impetuosity and cruelty—he gave free rein to Rodolfo Fierro, “the Butcher”—were as legendary as his daring and brilliance as a cavalry leader.

Emiliano Zapata (1879–1919) was a small landowner and horse trainer who had battled in court against the injustices of Díaz's land reforms to no avail. He was a trusted leader of his Morelos village and spoke the Nahuatl of his mostly Indian followers as well as the Spanish of politicians. In his Plan de Ayala, which called for the return of land illegally seized under Díaz and for the expropriation of lands, woods, and water from monopolists for the “majority of Mexicans who own nothing more than the land they walk on” (Meyer & Sherman 1983, 515), he articulated the agrarian issues that would be central to the revolution, issues that he would die fighting for under the banner *Tierra y Libertad* (land and liberty).

Although Zapata and Villa forced the basic issues of social reform, neither would assume political power. Others would, from similar backgrounds of poverty and political oppression. Victoriano Huerta's mother was a Huichol Indian, his father a mestizo. Although he made his way up through the army ranks by keeping the peace for Díaz



Emiliano Zapata, detail of a mural (1929) by Diego Rivera (Cortés Palace, Cuernavaca)

against the Yaqui in the north and the Maya in Yucatán, he was never truly accepted by the elite society of the Porfiriato. Álvaro Obregón was a mechanic and small rancher who had witnessed the awful confiscation of Yaqui lands in his home state of Sonora. Plutarco Elías Calles was an impoverished schoolteacher who did not own a pair of shoes before he was 16 years old. Lázaro Cárdenas had only three years of schooling and, at the age of 12, was the sole supporter of his family. He joined the revolution when he was a teenager.

The Defeat of Huerta

The array of personalities and shifts of power in Mexico is dizzyingly intricate. Yet the individuals and their causes—or lack of them—are well known to every Mexican schoolchild. Madero is the symbol of democracy; Zapata the symbol of peasants' land rights. Pancho Villa is the fearless leader of the cavalry charge. Movie stars clamor to play these war heroes; novelists describe the dehumanization of the long struggle; artists paint U.S. capitalists meddling in Mexican affairs; war songs have become Mexican folk songs. The events are integral to contemporary Mexican nationalism.

The first political setback of the revolution began with the opportunist Huerta. He defied the constitutional rights the Madero revolution had fought for and created a dictatorship (1913–14) with Porfirista support. With surprising shrewdness for a man who was not often known to be sober, he held on to the presidency for 17 long months—repeatedly using political assassination against those who criticized him. Huerta could not assassinate, however, the new president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, who refused to recognize his government of “usurpers” and who recalled Huerta’s ally, Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson. But Huerta could use renewed European support to threaten U.S. business interests.

What would destroy Huerta were the revolutionary armies that sprang up against him and the support they received from Woodrow Wilson. Outraged by the murder of a compatriot, Venustiano Carranza, a conservative governor of Madero’s home state, pronounced against Huerta on a platform similar to Madero’s and formed the Constitutional Army of the North, declaring himself the “first chief.” Other chiefs in the north, including Pancho Villa, Álvaro Obregón, and Plutarco Calles, signed on for the fight even if they were disgruntled by Carranza’s presumptuousness in naming himself their leader. President Wilson permitted arms to be shipped across the border to them; payment was made with cattle

stolen from the Terrazas clan. Emiliano Zapata had never stopped fighting and although he remained independent of the Constitutional Army, he forced Huerta to fight in the south as well as the north.

The revolutionary struggle resulted in the total militarization of Mexico. Huerta closed all businesses on Sundays so civilians could receive military training. The trains were preempted for military personnel, and the federal army grew from 50,000 to a quarter of a million troops. When the number of volunteers was inadequate, the poor were rounded up—outside a cantina, inside a jail—and tied up in a wagon for transport to the field. Huerta's programs supplied fresh recruits when they were most needed and were continued by others throughout the revolution. One-third of the budget went to Huerta's army.

Initially, Huerta was successful against the revolutionaries. In the south the Zapatistas were driven into the mountains, and their village

supporters were placed in concentration camps. In the north Carranza and Villa were pushed back. By 1914, Huerta controlled two-thirds of Mexico, the ports, and the vast majority of its population. The war effort was paid for by forced loans on businesses and taxes on oil—and church support that revived the old anticlericalism of the Juárez reform war. Debts were permitted by banks thanks to the financial backing of Great Britain and Lord Cowdray's Mexican oil interests.

Huerta's successes were reversed by the infusion of U.S. military aid in 1914. The competition over oil between Britain and the United States combined with the anti-Americanism of Huerta, moved Woodrow Wilson to openly support Carranza and his Constitutionalists. These armies of the north began taking cities from Huerta at the same time Zapata and his bands of guerrillas took over more areas in the south. The United States then intervened with its warships along the Gulf coast, attempting to force Huerta to resign.

The U.S. effort backfired when marines landed at Veracruz and thereby almost united all of Mexico behind Huerta. This insult to Mexico's sovereignty forced even Carranza and Zapata to denounce the invasion. Wilson agreed to permit some South American countries to mediate while he imposed an arms embargo at the port of Veracruz. The Constitutionalists, still supplied from the northern border, gained considerable ground in the fighting. In negotiations, Britain and the United States resolved their own disputes. The Huerta government was bankrupted and isolated. Huerta sailed into exile on July 20, 1914. On August 15, Obregón led the first troops of the Constitutional Army into the capital and Carranza, as first chief, proclaimed victory for the revolutionaries. The Porfiristas had been defeated once again.

WOMEN IN THE ARMY: SOLDADERAS

The army of the north, whether riding hard on the prairies or commandeering the trains, was like a massive migration of people. Women joined their husbands, often foraging for food and nursing the wounded, but also as *soldaderas* (women soldiers), slinging a rifle over one shoulder, a child on the other. When the federal government tried to banish women from its army, the troops threatened revolt.

*Popular among the troops was
Adelita
The woman the sergeant adored
Because she was as brave as she
was pretty
So even the colonel respected her.*

■
"Adelita," a revolutionary folk song



Yaqui Indian soldier of the Mexican Revolution (Courtesy of the Bancroft Library)