



## BACKGROUND & HISTORY

### MEXICO BEFORE DÍAZ

For 300 years after Hernán Cortés initiated the so-called fusion of indigenous and European histories into “one history”<sup>1</sup>, Mexico was largely administered by rulers from the Spanish peninsula, appointed by the Crown. Independence in 1810 severed the link to Spain and was followed by years of volatility, civil war, and the eventual loss of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California to the United States. The French invasion of the 1860s briefly returned Mexico to European rule under the monarchy of the Austrian archduke, Ferdinand Maximilian of Hapsburg until the legendary reformer, Benito Juárez, overthrew and executed the emperor, establishing liberalism and securing Juárez’s place as a national hero.

By the mid-nineteenth century, traces of the industrial revolution had barely reached Mexico—just enough to establish a share of factories governed by sparse protective legislation regulating workplace safety and child labor. Street vendors lived cheek-to-jowl, hawking foods, crafts, rosaries, and a variety of other goods, while a tiny merchant middle class resided in houses above their stores without adequate water supply.

In the 55 years after Independence, the Mexican presidency changed hands 75 times, creating

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1 Steve J. Stern, “Paradigms of Conquest,” 1.

virtually no possibility for continuity of policy. This, of course, changed when a coup brought Porfirio Díaz to power in 1876. The period of Díaz's effective control over Mexico, known as the Porfiriato, would last the next three decades.

## **PORFIRIATO**

While the Porfiriato was marked by Díaz's slogan, "Order, Liberty, and Progress," the benefits of modernization were principally enjoyed by foreign capital and members of national and regional oligarchies. Sustained economic growth envisioned by Díaz's technocrats was no help to the rural poor, who suffered the emergence of debt peonage as communal ejido lands were transformed by law into the expansive haciendas of the rich.

Railroads directly led to the expropriation of land. The Porfiriato oversaw the construction of 25,000 miles of rail—nearly forty times that which existed before Díaz's presidency.<sup>2</sup> While this obviously improved transportation, it also caused a land grab in rural areas, closing off the plains and marshes that had traditionally supplied local villagers with access to fish, game, and reeds for basket-weaving. Through these and other expropriations, one percent of Mexico's rural families came to own 85 percent of the land.

Despite immense growth in Mexico's largest cities, including the emergence of a fledgling urban middle class, the plight of the urban poor remained largely unchanged throughout the Porfiriato. Laborers toiled through twelve hour shifts, seven days per week, without pension or compensation for accidents occurring on the job. The masses eked out an existence in unsanitary housing on inadequate diets—most without visiting a doctor during the course of their entire lives. Life expectancy remained constant at about 30 years and infant mortality averaged 30 percent. The poorest barrios of Mexico City were so bad that some suggested they be burned to the ground.<sup>3</sup>

Civil and political rights were limited during the Porfiriato. Periodic regional elections were manipulated in favor of candidates supported by Díaz, the press was carefully censored, and praetorian government forces repressed labor movements in central and southern Mexico. Despite these challenges, revolutionary ideology fomented in the north as middle class northerners gained economic power without corresponding political power. Proximity to the U.S. border provided northerners access to arms, supplies, and democratic ideals like effective suffrage and a living wage. Proximity to the U.S. also meant that there was a substantial physical distance between discontent northerners and the center of Díaz's repressive reach.

## **THE MADERO PRESIDENCY**

2 Osgood Hardy, "The Revolution and the Railroads of Mexico," 249-250.

3 Michael C. Meyer, et. al, *The Course of Mexican History*, 450-51.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the northerner Francisco I. Madero came to signify opposition to another term of Porfiriato when he wrote *La sucesión presidencial en 1910*, sharply attacking Díaz's perpetual rule. When Madero ran against Díaz in the 1910 elections, he was imprisoned and eventually released to San Luis Potosí, where he boarded a train bound for the United States. Díaz was elected to yet another term.

In San Antonio, Texas, Madero drafted his revolutionary plan, declaring the election illegal and calling for uprisings to begin on November 20, 1910. The first shots were fired in Puebla, two days early, when a dissident politician and his family started a firefight with Mexican police. In the week that followed, rebel groups composed of people from all corners of Mexican society formed in the north. Some who took up arms were drawn to Madero's liberalism; many had never heard of Madero.

Revolutionaries turned Díaz's railroads against him. Three major lines of rail stretched north-south through Mexico, facilitating speedy transportation for troops and supplies in the war against the federal government. In May 1911, Madero's forces, commanded by Pascual Orozco and Francisco "Pancho" Villa made effective use of the railways and defeated government troops at the Battle of Juárez, effectively causing Díaz's resignation and securing a Madero presidency. The revolution, however, had just begun.

Upon taking office, Madero learned that the revolution had profoundly different meanings for different people. In the south, Emiliano Zapata demanded the immediate restoration of pueblo lands that had been seized during the Porfiriato. When Madero failed to adequately address the principally important issue of land reform, Zapata initiated an armed rebellion that spread from Morelos, to Guerrero, Tlaxcala, Puebla, and into the Federal District.

In the north, Orozco called for the immediate nationalization of Mexico's railroads, coupled with social reform, including a ten-hour workday, restrictions on child labor, and improved wages. When Orozco amassed an army that marched toward Mexico City—humiliating Madero's troops in a series of battles—Madero dispatched Villa and Victoriano Huerta to put down the uprising.

Meanwhile, disgruntled career officers in Veracruz aligned themselves with Porfirio Díaz's counterrevolutionary nephew, Felix, demanding promotions. With the assistance of the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Díaz secretly associated with Huerta and arranged for a military coup. Huerta betrayed and arrested Madero and members of his cabinet and assumed the presidency. Madero and his vice president were murdered in cold blood on their way to the penitentiary. The Huerta dictatorship was underway.

## THE HUERTA DICTATORSHIP

In the north, the Governor of Coahuila, Venustiano Carranza, joined by Villa and the Sonoran Álvaro Obregón openly rebelled against Huerta. Their Plan de Guadalupe denounced the regime and named Carranza as interim president of Mexico upon Huerta's defeat. The plan had no proposal for any type of social reform whatsoever. In the south, Zapata, still concerned with land reform, arrested and executed Huerta's peace commissioners, who had been sent to secure his allegiance. Huerta responded by censoring the press, assassinating political opponents, and increasing the size of the federal army fivefold through forced conscription of the indigent masses.

Somewhat ironically, the U.S., which had operated through its ambassador to install Huerta, elected a new president who “watchfully waited,” refusing to recognize the legitimacy of Huerta's regime. In the spring of 1914, Mexico's erroneous arrest of a group of U.S. sailors who had wandered onto a restricted dock in Tampico led, through a series of strange events<sup>4</sup>, to the U.S. naval occupation of Veracruz and the killing of hundreds of Mexicans, including many noncombatants. Thus, in the face of significant economic and military pressures on numerous fronts, Huerta resigned on July 8, 1914.

## THE MEANING OF THE REVOLUTION

As Madero had learned earlier, the revolution meant different things to different people. This became a familiar pattern. As Octavio Paz later put it, “The inability of the Mexican intelligentsia to formulate the confused aspirations of the people in a coherent system became obvious as soon as the Revolution ceased to be an instinctive act and was established as a regime.”<sup>5</sup>

After Huerta's resignation, the revolutionary alliance quickly fragmented as the Villistas, Zapatistas, Carrancistas, and Obregonistas espoused differing strategies and set forth contradictory designs for post-revolutionary Mexico. While the revolution began—superficially—as a unified rebellion against the Porfiriato, and later against the hated Huerta dictatorship, the absence of these shared enemies exposed the sharpest divides between the rural peasantry of southern Mexico, who pushed for immediate reform of Mexico's antiquated land system, and the revolutionaries of the northern frontier, who valued political autonomy above all else.

Yet there was little agreement even within these groups.<sup>6</sup> The diverse group that had defeated Huerta was comprised of agrarian workers, miners, professionals and intellectuals, artisans, middle-class farmers, and businessmen. While one Mexican saw land reform in terms of commu-

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4 For a synopsis of this incredible story, see Don M. Coerver and Linda Hall, *Tangled Destinies: Latin America and the United States*, 64.

5 Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, 145.

6 Charles C. Cumberland, *The Meaning of the Mexican Revolution*, vii-viii.

nal land ownership, another envisioned small private holdings, and still another expected only efficient agricultural production. To others, the aim was to remedy labor injustice, or to simply overthrow Mexico's dictators and reinstitute the aspirational constitution of 1857.

These differences were symbolized perfectly at the 1914 Aguascalientes Convention among revolutionary leaders when the Villistas and Zapatistas broke from Carranza's constitutionalist agenda. This led to the legendary battle of Celaya where Obregón's machine guns, entrenched behind barbed-wire barricades, cut down Villa's feared Division of the North, presaging Villa's ultimate defeat.

## **THE REVOLUTION COMES TO AN END**

In March of 1917, Carranza was elected president of a severely volatile Mexico racked by a shattered banking structure, agricultural shortages, and years of internal war. The fight against the Zapatistas raged on in Morelos. When Zapata penned an open letter to Carranza, sharply attacking Carranza's oppression, greed, and "magnificent pretext," the president responded by successfully ordering Zapata's assassination at the Hacienda de Chinameca. But Carranza followed Zapata to the grave shortly after when Obregón initiated yet another armed movement against the president and marched on Mexico City. After Carranza's death, Obregón was elected president of Mexico on September 5, 1920.

Unlike his predecessors, Obregón was well-respected with a broad political network. He used these connections to secure a period of stability and political reform. He signed a peace agreement with Villa and reconciled the ideological differences of most groups of Mexican society. Ten years of war were over.

## **IMPACTS OF THE REVOLUTION**

Obregón's broad support foreshadowed the development of the official party of the late 1920s, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario. This party evolved into the present-day Partido Revolucionario Institucional, which would aggressively promote the image of the revolution to dominate Mexican politics for the next 70 years.

## **SYMBOLS OF THE REVOLUTION**

The Mexican Revolution bred national and international icons. Villa became a world famous symbol of social revolution when he was photographed galloping alongside his troops toward the camera in 1914. Meanwhile, Zapata ascended to legendary status in Mexico and beyond by demanding the restoration of pueblo lands after Díaz's resignation. Today, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation has taken his name to symbolize its anti-NAFTA movement in the southern state of Chiapas.

Perhaps one of the best-known emblems of the revolution within Mexico is “La Adelita,” one of several hyper-patriotic ballads celebrating the revolution's brave and desirable soldaderas. In *Photographing the Revolution*, the book associated with this exhibit, John Mraz suggests that every researcher of Mexican photography has heard of a little old lady living in a distant place who insists that she is “Adelita.” These *viejita-adelitas* typically offer as evidence a blurry, reproduced photo of a woman standing on the platform of a train.<sup>7</sup>

While the revolutionaries themselves have been characteristically romanticized, this is certainly not the universal approach. For instance, *Los de abajo*, Mariano Azuela's widely acclaimed, contemporary-revolutionary novel, lays bare the brutality of the peasant armies of Villa, Carranza, and Obregón. Azuela's revolutionary protagonists murdered, raped, and pillaged their way through Mexico's countryside as corrupt federales did much of the same.<sup>8</sup>

There is certainly a cynical element to the revolution's depiction. Marxists essentially treat it as a palace feud that ultimately betrayed the workers who took up arms. To some, it was Martín Luis Guzmán's “festival of bullets,” indifferent to human suffering. Perhaps others still find truth in Paz's description of a character-dominated subconscious-reality where Villa still gallops through the north; Zapata still dies at every popular fair; Madero still appears on the balconies, waiving the Mexican flag; and Carranza and Obregón still travel the countryside, “causing the women to flutter with alarm and the young men to leave home.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, symbols and interpretations of the meaning of this cataclysmic event in Mexican history remain endless.

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7 John Mraz, *Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons*, 240-45.

8 Mariano Azuela, *Los de abajo*.

9 Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, 145.