Mexican Revolution

The Mexican Revolution is considered one of the first great social upheavals of the twentieth century. The military phase of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20) started in 1910 with the insurrection led by Francisco I. Madero as a reaction to the politics of Porfirio Díaz. General Díaz had seized power in a coup in 1876 and was the president of Mexico for three decades (1876-1911), called the *Porfiriato.* Díaz stabilized the country and headed to a period of modernization and economic growth. However, the cost of modernization was the use of brute force, the manipulation of elections, and the suppression of basic rights such as freedom of the press. In addition, only a select elite of mainly European descent, the *hacendados*, owned large estates, had access to education, and became wealthy, while the majority of Mexicans were landless, illiterate, and lived in utter poverty.

Francisco I. Madero, a wealthy landowner and businessman educated in Europe and the United States, was chosen as candidate for the Anti-Re-electionist party in order to bring democracy to Mexico. Díaz imprisoned him so that he would not be considered a candidate in the 1910 presidential elections. Soon after escaping to the United States border, Madero realized the only way to defeat Díaz was to call his fellow Mexicans to arms. The revolution broke out on November 20, and by the late spring of 1911, Pascual Orozco and Francisco Villa’s troops captured Ciudad Juárez. Díaz could see this was the end of an era and consequently agreed to his resignation in the *Treaty of Ciudad Juárez*, sailing away to Europe afterwards. With Díaz out of the picture, León de la Barra became the interim president (May to November 1911).

When Madero arrived in Mexico, acclaimed by the multitudes, Emiliano Zapata was among those who witnessed his appearance. Zapata’s mission, as leader of the farming community of Anenecuilco (Morelos), was not only to overturn the disentailment (*desamortización*) of communal lands that had happened during the Porfiriato but also to return these lands to the peasant communities. Madero asked him for patience, since he wanted to carry out an agrarian reform democratically. Madero was elected president on November 6, 1911, but his democratic reforms were considered insufficient. Criticism of and revolt against the new government ensued, and Madero was overthrown by a military coup in Mexico City on February 9, 1913. General Victoriano Huerta became the new president, while both Madero and his vice president José María Pino Suárez, were assassinated.

Revolutionary leaders did not accept Huerta’s dictatorship because he imposed order at the expense of freedom. Coahuila’s governor, Venustiano Carranza, a passionate Madero supporter, rebelled against the new regime, finding support in the governors of Chihuahua and Sonora. Francisco (Pancho) Villa and Alvaro Obregón assumed the military leadership of the anti-Huerta movement in the north with the *Plan de Guadalupe.* In southern Mexico, Zapata rebelled against Huerta because he did not believe lands were going to be returned to the villages of Morelos. Overwhelmed by the increasing power and victories of the Constitutionalists in the North and the Zapatistas in the South, as well as by the meddling of the United States, Huerta resigned on July 8, 1914.

The years after Huerta’s ouster were the most chaotic and closest to anarchy of the revolution. In 1914, First Chief Venustiano Carranza extended an invitation to all revolutionary factions to attend the *Military Convention of Aguascalientes*. During the convention, there was an obvious animosity between the more moderate Carranzistas and Obregonistas, on the one side, and the more radical Zapatistas and Villistas, on the other side. Civil war erupted, and Alvaro Obregón used the military strategies of World War I to defeat Villa. Carranza, the First Chief of the Constitutionalist Army, assumed the presidency in 1917. The president sent troops to Morelos and took many Zapatista towns, killing thousands of innocent civilians. Carranza also commanded the killing of Emiliano Zapata, who died in 1919. In 1920, Alvaro Obregón declared himself in revolt, and Carranza fled the capital and was killed. More than a million people died or fled into exile during the Mexican Revolution. Women suffered enormously during this period, but they also had the opportunity to contribute to the revolutionary army as the famous *soldaderas* or *Adelitas*.

The Constructive Phase of the Revolution (1920-40) started with the election of Alvaro Obregón as president of Mexico and the rebuilding of the country. Obregón won the election with popular support and implemented the constitution as well as important domestic reforms. He is especially admired for creating the Ministry of Public Education and naming José de Vasconcelos as Secretary of Education. This ministry expanded education to the rural areas and reconstructed national pride and identity through the arts. Another chapter of the revolution closed in 1923 when Pancho Villa was assassinated. With Zapata and Villa dead, the moderate side of the revolution triumphed. After the liberal rule of General Plutarco Calles, the Cristero Rebellion, and the assassination of Obregón came the election of Lázaro Cárdenas. President Cárdenas moved the revolution to the left, especially in terms of agrarian reform. By 1940, one-third of Mexicans had received land. Cárdenas distributed more land than had all his predecessors combined and therefore fulfilled a major promise of the revolution.

The end of the Mexican Revolution is still debatable. Some experts accept 1940 as the end date, while others consider the end to be the year 2000, when the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) lost the hegemony it had kept since 1929. Many Mexicans still perceive the Revolution as an unfinished process that has not yet fulfilled the quest for modernity. On the one hand, Mexicans have yet to overcome the strong inequalities between social classes and races that ignited the Revolution. On the other hand, Zapata and Villa remain alive in popular memory and are recalled whenever anti-democratic practices are discussed.

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