

¡Viva la Revolución! The Mexican Revolution at 100

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Viva la Revolución! Part 1

THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION, which began in 1910 and ended in 1940, transformed Mexico. During the course of those 30 years, tens of thousands of men and women fought in battles in many regions of the country to end the Porfirian dictatorship and to determine the course and goals of the revolution that had overthrown it. In a nation of 15 million, a shocking one million were killed while two million migrated to the United States to escape the violence (many of them subsequently returning), a movement which established the paths of future migrations. [1]

As a result of the revolution, the nation's fundamental economic institutions were transformed as the basic agricultural production unit, the hacienda, was abolished and the foreign-owned oil industry was nationalized. The nation established public schools, recognized labor unions, and distributed land to peasant villages and indigenous communities. The revolution, in which women had participated as both followers and sometimes political and even military leaders, would also begin to break the hold of both indigenous and Spanish Catholic patriarchy, though the full realization of women's rights would be a longer process. [2]

After intense political and military struggles in the 1910s among various rival political, economic and social groups, the working class and the peasantry were ultimately defeated and subordinated to new masters. There emerged a new ruling elite which promoted a more modern state, a renovated capitalist economic system, an original nationalist ideology, and a new official culture. Yet even as

that new elite consolidated its power in the 1920s and 1930s, the workers' and peasants' experience of revolutionary struggle and the lessons learned from their earlier defeat, together with the appearance of new revolutionary ideologies and methods, left a legacy of radical populism influenced by socialism, and led to new agrarian reform, labor, democratic and socialist movements.

While the revolutionary state consolidated and institutionalized itself — eventually creating the notorious oxymoron of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) — nonetheless in the 1920s and '30s and throughout the 1940s and 1950s small revolutionary outbursts occurred. By the 1960s, the country had been utterly transformed by both the successes and the failures of the revolution, meaning that a new set of social issues and conflicts had arisen and a new left appeared with the goal of organizing a new revolution in Mexico.

Porfirio Díaz: The Dictator

We cannot begin to enter into the important discussion and debate about the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1940 and its significance without first providing a basic narrative of events. The revolution began as an attempt to overturn Porfirio Díaz, the hero of an earlier revolution turned dictator. During the 19th century, Mexico's Liberals, who wanted a free market capitalist country like England or the United States, battled the Conservatives, who wanted a country more like Spain with its monarchy, powerful Catholic Church, and feudal hierarchy.

Díaz fought alongside Mexican President Benito Juárez, on behalf of the Liberals, and then against the French intervention brought on by the Conservatives. When the dust of 20 years of warfare settled, Díaz had emerged as a leading general and then became president in 1876. Thirty-four years later, he was still in the presidential palace in Mexico City, a city which he remade in the image of Paris, with great department stores, elegant apartment buildings with mansard roofs, and a new Palace of Fine Arts modeled after the Paris Opera. In Porfirian Mexico City the bourgeoisie rode in carriages and motor cars through the streets, while workers trudged between factory and barrio, and the Indians were banned from the parks and pushed off the sidewalks.

Once a revolutionary general, Díaz had become a reactionary. Despite his Liberal principles, he reestablished peace with the Catholic Church and with the defeated Conservative elite. He surrounded himself with a group of financiers and businessmen who called themselves in positivist jargon *Los Científicos* — the scientific ones — men who protected and enhanced their haciendas and promoted the economic development of Mexico through the encouragement of foreign investment.

Before Díaz, the country had been dominated by centrifugal forces and tended to fly into pieces: Guatemala flying off in the South, Texas toward the North, and the Yucatan Mayans fighting for independence in the Southeast. Díaz bound the country together with the railroads built by the Americans and the British, which held Mexico together like the steel bands around the wooden staves of a barrel, and with his army and police.

Díaz encouraged investment in the railroads and other industries with some trepidation, once remarking, "Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States." Yet there seemed no alternative, so he threw open the doors to U.S. investors such as Guggenheim, Rockefeller and then ASARCO which bought mines throughout the North of the country, to men like the American Edward L. Doheny and the British Lord Cowdray who discovered oil on the Gulf Coast, and to the International Harvester company that controlled the henequen plantations of the Yucatan. William Randolph Hearst bought an enormous ranch in Chihuahua, the Wrigley family controlled the chicle for their chewing gum. To counterbalance the American corporations in Mexico, Díaz encouraged the British and French to invest, as the Germans watched with envy, looking for an opening. It was a

dangerous game.

With his army of Federales and his rural police force, the Rurales, Díaz protected the hacienda owners as they took land from the villages until most peasants had been reduced from small proprietors to day laborers. Díaz crushed his political opponents, suppressed the labor unions, and waged war on and defeated the Yaquis and other indigenous groups, selling some into slavery. The foreign-owned railroads carried Mexico's wealth to the United States and Europe, and carried the army and police to suppress the restive and rebellious among those from whom the wealth had been taken. [3]

Díaz approached 1910, the anniversary of the Mexican Independence Revolution of 1810, making elaborate preparations to see his long rule celebrated and lauded as the culmination of Mexico's history. Things would turn out otherwise.

The Failed Anarcho-Syndicalist Revolution

The Mexican Revolution may be said to have begun as a critical movement within Liberalism itself. Liberalism in that era meant the bourgeois state's parliamentary democracy and the capitalist free market, but it also meant the critical tradition of the Enlightenment. Developing that critical strain, the brothers Enrique and Ricardo Flores Magón established the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM), which at first criticized the Porfirian dictatorship for its lack of democracy and rights but then developed an anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist ideology that found favor among the laboring classes. The PLM led its followers in the working class in a series of strikes and uprisings against the dictatorship in 1906, but in all cases were defeated.

Persecuted by Díaz, the Flores Magón brothers fled to the United States, but there were jailed by the administration of William Howard Taft as a favor to the dictator. A later PLM attempt to seize Baja California — in alliance with the Industrial Workers of the World and soldiers of fortune — would lead to the accusation that the Floresmagonistas had led an American invasion of Mexico. [4] Although the PLM as an organization thereafter was unable to influence the future course of the revolution, its former followers became leaders in other revolutionary factions and its ideas of worker and peasant power continued to inspire many throughout the revolutionary period and long after.

While Mexico's opposition developed a radical critique of the regime and started to elaborate a vision of an alternative, as has often been noted there was no revolutionary theory and no revolutionary party of national scope, at least not in the same sense as there were in Europe at the time. While one could find revolutionary movements of national scope, intellectual depth, and great social breadth throughout Europe — socialist in the North and anarchist in the South — in Mexico, largely because of the country's relative economic backwardness, revolutionary ideas were common only in some regions, tended to be less developed, and had much less of an organized following. Moreover, as in Europe, America and Asia, nationalism tended to overwhelm socialism and reformism worked to dilute it.

The Opening of the Democratic Revolution

The Mexican Revolution began in 1910 as a struggle between two sections of the country's capitalist class: the oligarchy of old wealth around Porfirio Díaz on the one hand, and a new modernizing bourgeoisie particularly strong in Northern Mexico on the other. Francisco Madero, scion of a

wealthy landholding family which also possessed mines and factories, inaugurated the revolution. Madero, whose section of the Mexican bourgeoisie had been largely excluded from Porfirio Díaz's ruling circle, hoped to create a bourgeois democracy in which the interests of hacienda landlords and industrialists from both the old oligarchy and the modernizers might be reconciled.

When in 1908 James Creelman, a U.S. journalist, published an interview with Díaz in which the dictator suggested that Mexico was ready for democracy and that he might step down, Madero decided to run for office. A spiritualist mystic who believed he was destined to lead the struggle to transform Mexico, Madero wrote *The Presidential Succession* (1908), and, challenging the dictator's practice of fraudulent elections, adopted as his slogan "Effective suffrage and No Reelection." In April 1910 the Anti-Reelectionist Party nominated him as its presidential candidate. [5]

While he talked principally about political democracy, Madero also raised the idea of agrarian reform, and it was that which brought the country's rural masses to his side. Madero's movement was soon swelled with people who saw in his campaign not only a chance for the political democracy that they sought, but also an opportunity to struggle for more fundamental social change. When he said "democracy," everywhere the peasants heard "land." No sooner had Madero's campaign begun, however, than Díaz changed his mind about a democratic opening and in June of 1910 ordered Madero arrested and jailed.

With the help of his wealthy and politically connected family, Madero escaped to San Antonio, Texas, then returned to Mexico and issued his manifesto, the Plan of San Luis Potosí. The Plan laid out his vision of political democracy — emphasizing the issue of no reelection — and called upon the Mexican people to rise up in revolution on November 20, 1910. Unable to wait for the appointed hour, some rose up on November 18, opening a period of 10 years of tremendous violence and destruction followed by 20 years of revolutionary transformation of Mexico.

While Madero himself personally led an attack on Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, he was primarily a political rather than a military leader. It was his allies, principally the armies of Pascual Orozco, Francisco "Pancho" Villa and Emiliano Zapata, who soon defeated Díaz's army. In May 1911, after Madero's forces captured the important border town of Ciudad Juárez, the opposing sides signed a treaty as Díaz left for France and an interim president took power. Madero entered Mexico City in triumph on June 7, 1911, but his bourgeois democracy soon came into conflict with the peasants and their desire for land.

From Democratic toward Social Revolution

The outbreak of the revolution in November of 1910 changed the entire scenario throughout much of the country. Tens of thousands of Mexico's 15 million inhabitants, longing for democracy and also wanting economic and social justice, began to rally to the revolutionary cause. Suddenly, as in all such revolutionary upheavals, new leaders appeared seemingly out of nowhere, raising armies out of the ranchos and villages which came out marching and riding, singing and shooting.

In the North, Francisco "Pancho" Villa and Pascual Orozco led bands of small farmers, ranch hands, miners and railroad workers, while in the South the horse trainer Emiliano Zapata headed up an army of peasants reduced to day laborers who during the Díaz regime had lost their land to the sugar plantations. Other revolutionary leaders, however, particularly in the northern states of Sonora and Coahuila — Álvaro Obregón, Plutarco Elías Calles, and Venustiano Carranza — were, like Madero, part of a modernizing capitalist class, wealthy ranchers, farmers and mine owners, who wanted a greater voice in government for their segment of the country's bourgeoisie.

Following the overthrow of Díaz, Francisco de la Barra, a member of Mexico's old elite, served

briefly as president, giving the old régime an opportunity to reorganize. In the country's first free elections, Madero was elected president and assumed power in November 1911, though as head of what remained of the Porfirian state. More anxious to placate his enemies than to advance the program of his allies, he filled his cabinet with Díaz supporters. Still he faced immediate rebellion on the right, when in December 1911 Bernardo Reyes, one of Díaz's generals, led a rebellion based in Nuevo Leon. Less than a year later, Madero faced another right-wing rebellion in the Gulf state of Veracruz led by Félix Díaz, nephew of the deposed dictator.

Madero's new government also failed to please the masses to his left. While Mexico's bourgeoisie wanted to turn back the tide of revolution before it threatened their haciendas and mines, the plebeian revolutionaries wanted land, labor unions, public schools, and greater control over the country's resources, which were largely in the hands of foreign capitalists. When Madero temporized on the issue of agrarian reform, Emiliano Zapata broke with the new government and issued the Plan de Ayala, a manifesto demanding that hacienda land be turned over to the peasant communities. He called upon his armed followers to take the land from the hacienda owners and distribute it among their communities.

By November of 1911, Zapata and his troops were at war with Madero's government. In the North, Pascual Orozco also broke with Madero after being requested to lead his troops against Zapata. Orozco's followers — mine workers, railroad workers, and ranch hands — wanted better working conditions, in particular wages paid in cash not scrip, demands Madero had neglected. With the emergence of these mass, armed movements of peasants and workers, the broad outlines of the Mexican Revolution's great themes suddenly appeared.

While Madero sought a democratic revolution that would create a parliamentary democracy and greater power for Northern capitalists, the soldiers who made up the revolutionary armies in the field wanted land above all. Orozco and Villa in the North provided the great battalions of the revolution, but Zapata's movement provided the dominant idea: immediate agrarian reform, or, in his words, "The land to those that work it" taken and held by men with rifles in their hands. Second, in what would be the country's last great battle with the Catholic Church, the demand for free, public, lay education also became central.

Third, the mostly anarchist-led labor unions, which had been suppressed under Díaz, fought for their prerogatives, too, insisting on the right to organize and to strike, and demanded protective legislation for workers. Fourth, and the dominance of foreign corporations in Mexican industry and agriculture — particularly in mining and petroleum — led the opposition to the conclusion that the natural resources of Mexico should belong to its people. Those four issues — land, unions, education, and ownership of minerals and oil — would be at the center of the revolutionary struggle for the next three decades.

U.S. Intervention and Carranza's Revolution

Madero's weak government and its failure to suppress the revolts that had broken out against it in the North and the South worried both Mexican capitalists and foreign investors. They feared that Madero would be swept from power by the workers and peasants who had turned against him, leading to chaos or some more radical revolution.

Those considerations led U.S. President William Howard Taft's ambassador to Mexico, Henry Lane Wilson, working with the European ambassadors and members of the Mexican military and political elite, to organize a coup d'état to overthrow Madero. There followed what are known as the "ten tragic days" of fighting in Mexico City during which Lane's counter-revolutionary movement

captured and murdered Madero. Following a meeting at the U.S. Embassy, General Victoriano Huerta became the new president of Mexico.

While he headed a counter-revolutionary movement, Huerta and his backers recognized that he could not turn the clock back. He offered reforms to the revolutionaries, and persuaded some of them, such as Pascual Orozco, to go over to his side. He promised Orozco and his working-class followers an end to the hated *tienda de raya*, the company store. At the same time, Huerta mobilized the most brutal repression of Emiliano Zapata's Liberating Army of the South.

Huerta's regime, mixing counter-revolution and reform, would prove too shallow and too unstable to survive, as throughout the country many of the same forces that had risen up against Díaz now rose up against Huerta in the revolution's second great upheaval, one that churned up whole new layers of rebels.

A new broad revolutionary movement developed. Venustiano Carranza of Coahuila, the son of a middle-class rancher who had been educated in Mexico City to become part of the political elite, would emerge as the principal figure. He had once led a ranchers' rebellion against Díaz's choice of governor at the turn of the century, but despite his involvement in that brief revolt, he made peace with the dictator. Later, however, he became disgruntled after the dictator declined to choose him as candidate for the Senate. Carranza then joined Madero's rebellion.

After Madero's murder, Carranza stepped forward to replace the martyred president as the leader of the modernizing capitalist rebellion in the North. On March 23, 1913, Carranza issued the Plan de Guadalupe which promised a return to the Mexican Constitution of 1857, but dropped all references to the social reform program that had been sketched out in Madero's Plan de San Luis Potosí. Once he took on the role of *Primer Jefe* (First Chief), Carranza would be distinguished by his determination to build a new state to replace the one that was being demolished in the course of the revolution.

Fighting against Huerta were a number of revolutionary leaders, though not all of them had signed on to Carranza's political program. With Orozco having gone over to Huerta, Pancho Villa now became the leader of the largest revolutionary armies in the North, the Division of the North, with its famous cavalry, *los Dorados*, the Golden Ones. In the state of Sonora in the Northwest, Álvaro Obregón, a wealthy farmer, and Plutarco Elías Calles, a former bartender and school teacher who under Madero's government had risen to become a local police commissioner, led large forces.

Finally, Zapata's Liberating Army of the South in Morelos, operating independently, remained the champions of the country's peasantry. These revolutionary generals and their followers would decide the future of the Mexican Revolution.

While Huerta had initially come to power as a result of the coup organized by U.S. Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson, he soon fell out of favor with the newly elected government of President Woodrow Wilson. (The two Wilsons were not related.) Huerta, it turned out, had been drawn into the orbit of the British government through its new ambassador to Mexico, Lionel Carden, an out-spoken critic of Woodrow Wilson.

Carden worked to protect Lord Cowdray's oil interests in the Gulf Coast and so President Wilson, fearful that Huerta would promote British interests above those of the United States, ordered the U.S. occupation of the Mexican ports of Veracruz and Tampico to prevent the arrival of a German ship carrying arms to Huerta. At the same time, President Wilson facilitated arms shipments to Pancho Villa in the North. The combination of the revolutionary movement in Mexico and the U.S. intervention soon led to the overthrow of the Huerta government. By July 1914, Huerta had been

forced to resign the presidency and left the country for exile.

The Revolution Divided

The overthrow of Huerta, however, did not lead to a new revolutionary government. Quite the contrary, in 1914 the Mexican Revolution now divided into two rival currents: one bourgeois and the other plebeian. Carranza's Constitutionalist forces aimed to create a new nationalist state which could provide stability for both the modernizing Mexican bourgeoisie and foreign investors, while the Conventionists, led by Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, desired to carry out the democratic and social reforms demanded by the country's peasants and workers. The Mexican Revolution would revolve for the next five years around the struggle between those forces which sought to construct a new a capitalist state and those leading a plebeian revolution which sought land reform, labor unions, and schools.

The names of these groups — Conventionists and Constitutionals — derived from two major conferences held by revolutionary leaders. The Convention, though originally called by Carranza for Mexico City, eventually took place in Aguascalientes in October and November of 1914 and was dominated by Villistas and Zapatistas. Practically the first order of business was to turn its back on Carranza and elect Eulalio Gutiérrez president. Villa was made commander-in-chief and immediately went to war against Carranza.

By mid-December Villa and Zapata occupied Mexico City, their troops sipping coffee in the elite Sanborn cafe. The two revolutionary generals, heading armies of ranchers, peasants, and workers failed, however, to consolidate their power. Villa's army returned to the North, while Zapata's peasants made their way back to the South. The old Porfirian state had been destroyed, but the plebeian forces failed to create a new political party or a new state in their own image. Carranza would quickly move to fill that political vacuum.

The Constitutionals would win the civil war in large measure because they understood the significance of the labor movement, which was not only a force in every major city, but also on the railroads, on the docks, and in the mines. Urged on by Obregón and Calles, Carranza negotiated an agreement in 1914 with the anarchist Casa del Obrero Mundial (House of the World Worker). The Casa agreed to back Carranza's government in exchange for government support for the unions. Some of the anarcho-syndicalists rejected the agreement and went off to join Emiliano Zapata and his peasant revolution, but other unions provided Red Batallions which would be used to fight him.

Carranza's pact with the unions divided workers from peasants, and initiated a long history of state tutelage of organized labor. The superiority of Carranza's forces was soon demonstrated. At the Battle of Celaya on April 13, 1915, General Álvaro Obregón won a decisive victory over Villa, and from then on the Constitutionals dominated the military struggle that would, nevertheless, last another five years.

At the same time, Woodrow Wilson's government, which had been supporting Pancho Villa, broke with him. [6] Contemplating the possible entry of the United States into the First World War which had broken out in Europe, on October 19 Wilson decided to recognize Carranza as the ruler of Mexico. Carranza's forces now had an overwhelming military advantage, though they could not defeat the revolution's left wing unless they had sufficiently broad support within Mexican society.

With his opponents on the run, Carranza called a constitutional convention in the city of Querétaro for September 1916. His intention was to have the assembly ratify the liberal Constitution of 1857 and eliminate or update some of its more antiquated sections. When the convention convened,

however, Carranza found that his more conservative delegates, numbering around 80, were outnumbered by over 130 radicals.

While Carranza's armies had been successful in defeating the forces of Villa and Zapata, they had not been able to defeat their program which had seeped into the Constitutionalists' own camp. While Carranza and his delegates represented the interests of wealthy land owners and industrialists, many of the other delegates were generals leading plebeian armies who would be satisfied with nothing less than profound economic, social and political reforms embodied in a new constitution.

Carranza and his advisors soon recognized that if the revolution was to be brought to a conclusion, they would have to yield — at least on paper — to the plebeian demands, or the revolutionary forces would fracture once again. The heated debates and negotiations of the convention lasted six months and finally produced a new Constitution which settled in law — if not in fact — the principal issues of the revolution.

Article 27 provided for the breakup of the haciendas and the distribution of land to peasant and indigenous communities, and all declared that the subsoil of Mexico belonged to its people. Article 123 gave workers the right to organize unions and strike, and created protective legislation. Article 3 ended the Catholic Church's control of education, creating free, lay public schools, while Article 130 virtually banned the church from Mexican politics and society. In May of 1917, Carranza became the new Mexican Republic's first president.

Controlling Labor: The Sonoran Dynasty

Carranza's forces continued to make military gains, most important the capture and assassination of Emiliano Zapata on April 10, 1919. Meanwhile, however, the Sonoran generals — Obregón, Calles, and Adolfo de la Huerta (not to be confused with the counter-revolutionary Victoriano Huerta) — who stood to the left of Carranza, had lost confidence in the First Chief. On April 23, 1920, they promulgated a new revolutionary manifesto, the Plan de Agua Prieta, rallying most of the revolutionary generals to their side. The struggle was now between the wealthy capitalists and the petty bourgeois radicals.

On May 21, 1920 the rebel forces captured and killed Carranza in the village of Tlaxcalantongo, and General Obregón took power, finally ending a decade of constant warfare and establishing a new revolutionary government. Obregón became president, holding office from 1920 to 1924 when he was succeeded by his comrade-in-arms Plutarco Elías Calles, who presided over the nation from 1924 to 1928. With virtually identical politics — one writer has called them the two-headed president — they worked to establish the new state's social and political basis. [7]

Much of the Porfirian bourgeoisie having fled the country and with the rest of the capitalist class politically disoriented and demoralized, Obregón could count only on the revolutionary army for support as he took power, but he recognized that that was too narrow a basis for building a new state and for controlling the society. He therefore set about subduing and subordinating the labor unions and peasant organizations and turning them into the new regime's social support. With Zapata dead, Obregón negotiated with the remaining Zapatista leaders the distribution of land to their followers in the state of Morelos, thus eliminating what had been one of the principal problems of his predecessors. Then, working with and around the imperial ambitions of Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), he worked to transform the old anarcho-syndicalist labor movement into business unionists.

Luis N. Morones of the Regional Confederation of Mexican Labor (CROM) would become one of

Obregón's most stalwart backers, and Obregón and later Calles would help him to defeat the anarchist and the new Communist union movement. Obregón chose the radical Conventionist intellectual José Vasconcelos to become first regent of the University of Mexico and then Secretary of Education, and Vasconcelos in turn would hire the Communist painter Diego Rivera to decorate the National Palace and the Department of Education.

Finally, in order to prevent the United States from overturning the new revolutionary government, the two governments signed the Bucareli Accords, a treaty in which Mexico agreed to pay war claims and debts to the United States and promised not to expropriate the foreign oil companies. The Mexican Revolution — though still not over — would have an eight-year truce during which it would begin the process of reconstruction, while the balance between state-building and the plebeian demands for reform continued to remain fluid and unresolved.

After only eight years of relative stability, however, the assassination of Obregón in 1928 and the arrival of the Great Depression in 1929 would threaten to return Mexico to the violence and destruction of the previous decade.

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Viva la Revolución! Part 2

WHILE THE MOST violent stage of the Mexican Revolution was over by 1920, the country faced a series of new crises in the 1930s. The era opened in 1928 with the assassination of former President Álvaro Obregón, killed by a Catholic militant opposed to the secularizing Revolution in the formerly officially Catholic country.

Obregón, who had served as president from 1920-24, had thrown the country into political panic by announcing that he would run a second time for the presidency. Since the Revolution had been fought to end Porfirio Díaz's decades-long practice of presidential self-succession, that move had outraged many. While the Catholic assassin had been apprehended, some believed that Luis N. Morones, head of the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) and one of the regime's main backers, had been the intellectual murderer in order to advance his own ambitions. The Obregón assassination shook the new revolutionary regime to its foundations, threatening to throw the nation back into civil war.

Outgoing President Plutarco Elías Calles, Obregón's principal collaborator in the ruling Sonoran Dynasty, as the ruling group was known, moved decisively to prevent the political crisis from leading to a new period of conflict. In 1929, Calles summoned the country's political elite from every state to create a new revolutionary party that would have the social support and the political legitimacy to rule the country.

The National Revolutionary Party (PNR) brought all of the various revolutionary factions into one political organization, subordinating to a large degree their regional, social or personal interests to the goals of national stability and capitalist reconstruction. The PNR was, however, principally a

fusion of factions and a party of political functionaries without a broad base of support.

The Bonapartist State-Party

The re-organization of the ruling party sparked the last great rebellions of the period. In the northern state of Sonora, Gonzalo Escobar led a quickly defeated rebellion from within the Sonora Dynasty. Calles' new government also soon entered into conflict with the Catholic Church and with its parishioners in the western states of Jalisco and Zacatecas. The Cristiada (or Cristero War) as the rebellion came to be called, which saw armies as large as 50,000 men in the field against the revolutionary government, lasted from 1926 until its final gasp in the early 1930s.

Catholic peasants, some of whose very mixed goals included both the restoration of the Catholic Church and a Zapatista-style land reform, were put down by Calles and his leading General, Joaquín Amaro, using the most brutal methods. [8] Over one million Mexicans fled the violence, as many as had fled during the violent years of the Revolution itself, most to the former Mexican territory that had become the U.S. Southwest.

During the period from 1920-28, Obregón and Calles had been the Bonapartist bicephalic strongman of the Mexican Revolution, the caudillo-in-duplicate who had been able to rise above and become relatively autonomous from all of the country's social classes, as they created the new state. With the creation of the PNR, the individual Bonapartist leader gave way to something new: a Bonapartist party-state. Calles modeled the new regime in part after Benito Mussolini's fascist government in Italy, trying to fit the Mexico Revolution into Italy's counter-revolutionary institutions. While three men — Emilio Portes Gil, Pascual Ortiz Rubio and Abelardo L. Rodríguez — would serve as presidents between 1929 and 1934, Calles was the power behind the throne during this period, which came to be known as the *Maximato*.

Although the United States and most foreign investors declined to invest in Mexico, the economy, initially devastated by the Revolution, had begun to grow again in 1916 and continued through 1926. The new revolutionary state of Obregón and Calles worked in the 1920s to rebuild the foundations of a capitalist economy: the banking system, state finances and taxation, customs and duties, as well as agricultural policy and industrial relations.

The country's bourgeoisie, however, resisted the state's attempt to dominate the economy, just as workers resisted the capitalists and landlords. All of this made the re-establishment of the capitalist economic order extremely difficult. Progress was slow and the world economy's vicissitudes only exacerbated the problems. [9]

The U.S. stock market crash of 1929 detonated the Great Depression that spread around the world and also engulfed Mexico. Some sectors of the Mexican economy had already gone into crisis. The oil industry had taken a downturn in 1921, partly a result of conflicts between the state and the foreign oil companies, and partly a result of the exhaustion of existing wells. In 1927, even before the Crash, the Mexican economy in general began to stagnate; by 1929 it was in decline. With the crash, the prices of metals — among Mexico's most important exports — also fell precipitously. Mexico's Great Depression lasted roughly from 1927 to 1932. The fact that many Mexicans lived from subsistence agriculture meant that the world-wide economic depression affected them less. By 1933, the economy began to recuperate; this revival would form the basis for the social movements and political changes of the 1930s. [10]

Post-Revolutionary Social Movements

While the most violent stage of the Mexican Revolution had ended by 1920, the coming to power of the new revolutionary government under the leadership of the Sonoran Dynasty raised the hopes and aspirations of millions. Consequently, the 1920s saw the growth of widespread movements of peasants, workers and the urban poor, some attempting to push the revolutionary state to realize their dreams, others concluding that it was nothing more than a new capitalist state and working to overthrow it.

The most powerful agrarian reform movements developed in the western state of Michoacan and in the Gulf State of Veracruz. The labor movement was most militant and radical among industrial and service workers in Mexico City, the railroad workers, and the petroleum workers on the Gulf Coast and docks of Veracruz and Tampico. The left also led an important rent strike by the urban poor in Veracruz. While the new state promoted its own labor union federation — the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) — and attempted to take control of the various peasant leagues, many of the most radical workers gravitated to the anarchist General Confederation of Workers (CGT) and some to the new Mexican Communist Party (PCM).

The struggles between the state and its official unions and the radicals was brutal and bloody, and by 1924 President Obregón and CROM leader Luis N. Morones had succeeded in crushing the railroad unions, the anarchist street car workers in Mexico City, and marginalizing the CGT. Small groups of radical workers, however, survived in all of the important industries and urban centers. With the economic recovery, they began to organize and take action.

Calles, the Jefe Máximo of the Revolution, continued to pull the strings of the three presidential puppets during the difficult and tumultuous 1928-33 period. Still seeking stability, his rubber stamp legislature lengthened the presidential term to six years; he then sought a candidate who would serve as his front man for the 1934-40 period. Various rival revolutionary generals jostled for the position, but in the end Calles chose General Lázaro Cárdenas. Cárdenas, originally from Michoacan, had come up through the Constitutionalist ranks and had served not only in the revolutionary, but also in the post-revolutionary conflicts. Calles had absolute confidence that Cárdenas would be his loyal minion. He was wrong.

Lázaro Cárdenas' Struggle with Calles

Though Calles' backing and the PNR political machine would ensure his election, in the pre-election period Cárdenas traveled throughout Mexico meeting with peasant and Indian communities, talking with workers, and visiting towns and cities. Following his election, to Calles' surprise, Cárdenas began to exert his presidential authority, constructing his own ruling group, reorganizing the commanders of the military districts into which the country was divided, and developing relations with labor unions and peasant leagues. Cárdenas took up the banner of social reform and even began to talk about a socialist Mexico.

The new dynamism in the Mexican government and the change of direction toward the left brought responses from all sides. Nicolás Rodríguez, a former Villista and Escobarista, organized los Dorados, the Golden Ones, to fight against a feared Communist-Jewish takeover. The Communist Party, having, by the early 1930s, established a small but solid organization in Mexico, also denounced the Cárdenas government. Then in their radical "third period," the Communists called for the government's revolutionary overthrow. The Dorados and the Communists engaged in fights in the streets of Mexico City, but Cárdenas ignored both. [11]

More importantly, however, Calles himself began to organize to remove Cárdenas from the presidency, as he had in the past imposed and deposed others. When the newspapers reported that Calles had accused Cárdenas of promoting "individual differences" among the revolutionaries and encouraging social chaos, the President called Calles an enemy of the revolutionary government and of the Mexican people; he encouraged a great popular mobilization in support of his administration.

The labor movement rallied to his defense. One important supportive figure was Vicente Lombardo Toledano, formerly the house intellectual for Morones and the corrupt CROM unions. He had broken free, visited the Soviet Union and returned to Mexico a staunch ally of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. Strangely enough, although serving as Stalin's agent in Latin America and Mexico, Lombardo Toledano declined to join the Communist Party.

The Communist Party, meanwhile, having left its "third period" and entered the Popular Front period, also rallied to support Cárdenas. They played an important role in several of the industrial unions. Fidel Velázquez, one of the principal leaders of the Mexico City unions, also brought those unions into the pro-Cárdenas column. Throughout the country peasant leagues rushed to support Cárdenas in his struggle with Calles. Most strategically, Cárdenas was able to maintain the support of most of the generals of the Mexican Army.

During 1935 and 1936, the peasant leagues joined together in what would later become the National Confederation of Peasants (CNC) and the labor unions formed the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM). With the Army, the CTM and the CNC supporting him, Cárdenas ordered Calles arrested and deported to the United States in 1936, along with many of his supporters. The Mexican people by and large enthusiastically supported this destruction of the old political machine that had dominated the government for 16 years. They hoped Cárdenas would fulfill the Revolution's promises.

With the reins of power now firmly gathered in his hands, Cárdenas began to set a new direction. Through a series of dramatic actions taken between 1936 and 1940, Cárdenas would fulfill many of the goals of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, transforming Mexico into an altogether different country than it had been in the days of Porfirio Díaz. At the same time, he would broaden and deepen the structures of the state-party, through the "politics of masses," drawing workers, peasants, the self-employed and public employees into the party.

Cárdenas encouraged the organization of unions, but insisted that industrial workers, peasants, and other workers each have their own separate organizations. Thus industrial workers had the Mexican Confederation of Workers (CTM), peasants' the National Confederation of Peasants (CNC), and the self-employed and the public employees' the National Confederation of Popular Organizations (CNOP). Cárdenas then reorganized the ruling party, changing its name to the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM), based on the four constituent groups: the CTM, CNC, CNOP and the Army and other armed services. The new party had deeper roots and a far broader reach than Calles' PNR, providing the regime with greater strength, stability and flexibility.

The organization of the party thus excluded the Mexican bourgeoisie, except for some of the generals who had in the course of the revolution used their positions to acquire land, create business partnerships, or in other ways enrich themselves. Still most of the capitalist class remained outside. Thus the state-party continued to have a Bonapartist character, rising above all the classes. The state itself, however, necessarily established relations and negotiated with capitalists as it developed the banking system, industry and agriculture.

While Cárdenas proved to be a political genius, Mexico remained a fractious society. Conservatives feared the transformation of Jacobin nationalism into what seemed to be evolving into a kind of

Mexican socialism. Many generals resented the incorporation of the Army into the ruling party. Various regional leaders resisted Cárdenas, and some contemplated revolt. Given the tenuous nature of his political superiority, Cárdenas' political strategy required that he continue to push forward in order to keep the right off balance.

From the left Cárdenas had nothing to fear. The Communist Party, with few exceptions, supported Cárdenas' policies. They would have preferred that Cárdenas create an actual political front and parliamentary coalition in which they could participate as a party, but when that failed to happen, they were happy enough to simply endorse the president's policies.

Cárdenas established a kind of political partnership with Stalin's man, Vicente Lombardo Toledano and let the Lombardistas and Comunistas play a leading role in the labor movement. The Secretariat of Education became peopled with Communist officials and PCM leaders held some few posts in some other government departments, all completely dependent on Cardenas' good will.

The Great Reforms

With much of popular society now organized into labor unions and peasant leagues, brought together in the Party of the Mexican Revolution with its slogan "For a Socialist Mexico," Cárdenas now undertook to deal with the central issue of the Revolution: land reform. The worldwide depression and consequent failure of many haciendas made the elimination of that ancient economic institution easier than it might otherwise have been. Within just a few years Cárdenas distributed 45 million acres of land to peasants throughout Mexico, about a tenth of that land taken from U.S. or other foreign owners.

Carrying out this great agrarian reform met resistance from local political leaders, landlords and their gunmen in many states. This required federal intervention on numerous occasions. Cárdenas encouraged the organization of agrarian defense leagues, distributing arms to those local militias that were sometimes incorporated into the Army. The agrarian reform thus provided the occasion for Cárdenas to remove resisting conservative opponents.

The Cárdenas government distributed hundreds of times more land in the mid- to late-1930s than all of the previous revolutionary governments. Land was given to male members of peasant or indigenous communities in the form of ejidos, state-leased land to be held in perpetuity by them and their descendents, based on the principle of usufruct, Zapata's old slogan: the land to those who work it.

On the coasts land was distributed to villages of fishermen and their families. While thought of as being "collectively owned," ejido land was held in the form of individual parcels belonging to the male heads of families. When family lines died out, left, or for some serious offense were removed from the communities, the land was to be redistributed among remaining members.

The distribution of land to the peasantry who still made up the vast majority of Mexican society made Cárdenas a hero in his home state of Michoacan, in the La Laguna region in the north, and, for that matter, virtually throughout the country. The agrarian reform cemented the foundations of the new Party of the Mexican Revolution and of the state that it ruled, and established Cárdenas' reputation for generations to come. He was referred to as "Tata" or father, and was seen as the new father of his country, or better, the father of a new country.

With the labor unions and peasant leagues having been recognized, and the land having been distributed to the peasants, Cárdenas was now able to take on the greatest revolutionary challenge:

the British- and U.S.-owned oil industry. Mexico's oil industry, located on the Gulf Coast, was dominated by Royal Dutch Shell and Standard Oil, the two largest and most powerful petroleum corporations of the era. Both the United States and Great Britain were world powers looming on Mexico's northern border and nearby in Central America and the Caribbean, their possessions protected by fleets of battleships and cruisers.

Mexico's concerns about foreign intervention were well founded. It had, of course, lost about half of its territory to the United States in a series of wars and concessionary treaties between 1836-54, and had been invaded and occupied by France with British complicity between 1862-66. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries the United States had seized Cuba and Puerto Rico from Spain, taken Panama from Colombia, and been involved in long-term occupations in Haiti and Nicaragua. Just as the Romans had once called the Mediterranean "mare nostrum," so too the Americans had come to consider the Caribbean to be "our lake."

The United States had invaded Mexico twice during the Mexican Revolution, once by sea in Veracruz on the Gulf Coast in 1914, landing 3,000 occupying troops, and a second time by land in Chihuahua in 1916 when General "Black Jack" Pershing led 4,000 Marines on a failed expedition to capture Francisco "Pancho" Villa.

After the adoption of the Mexican Constitution of 1917 with its Article 27 proclaiming that the people owned the country's subsoil, foreign powers became increasingly worried that the government would seize the foreign-owned oil industry. Throughout the 1920s U.S. fleets and troops had been mobilized on Mexico's borders in order to intimidate its government.

Nationalization of the Oil Industry

Cárdenas calculated, correctly as it turned out, that with Europe about to be embroiled in World War II and the United States likely to be drawn into the war, the great powers would not be prepared to undertake a new war in Mexico.

The occasion for the nationalization of the oil industry was presented by a conflict between petroleum workers and the foreign companies. Mexican oil workers had been organizing since the 1910s, initially facing repression from the oil companies and the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, and later dealing with the vacillating support of the revolutionary federal and state governments. Radical labor activists from the Industrial Workers of the World, the anarchist General Confederation of Mexican Workers, and later the Mexican Communist Party had always been at the center of these efforts both in the oil fields and on the docks.

Once Cárdenas came to power, the oil workers received more constant support from the government in their organizing efforts and by 1935 succeeded in bringing all of the regions workers together into the Mexican Petroleum Workers Union (STPRM). During the mid-1930s, oil worker strikes against the foreign-owned companies grew, leading to conflicts overseen by the Federal Labor Board (JFCA) and the Secretary of Labor. In 1936 the STPRM, now backed by the new Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), struck, its total economic demand amounting to 14 million pesos.

The foreign-owned companies responded by saying that they could not afford to pay such a sum. The conflict then became a matter for the Labor Board and the Federal government, and the company was forced to open its books. The government found that the company could easily pay such a sum but the companies decided to take the matter to the courts. On March 1, 1938 the Mexican Supreme Court ruled that the companies could and must meet the workers' demands.

On March 18, 1938, with the companies still refusing to pay, President Lázaro Cárdenas went on the radio and nationalized them. He agreed to pay the companies what they had estimated to be the

value of their property. Since this estimate was for tax-paying purposes, it was an amount far below their real value. To pay the compensation, Cárdenas called upon all Mexicans to go to their local government offices and contribute. Tens of thousands of Mexicans came, from little children with their pennies to wealthy women with their gold necklaces and earrings, each giving what they could in order to control their own oil and their own country. [12]

Cárdenas had foreseen correctly: With Europe about to go to war and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt involved in assisting the Allies, the oil companies were left in the lurch.

“Socialist” Education

Cárdenas also dealt with the other major issue of the Mexican Revolution: education. Before the Revolution, the Catholic Church provided education for Mexico’s people. But the Catholic school system was largely confined to major cities, reached only a small percentage of the population, and its curriculum was intellectually wanting. In 1920 Álvaro Obregón named left-wing philosopher José Vasconcelos the first rector of the Autonomous University and then Secretary of Education, and the country’s educational transformation began. [13]

Vasconcelos held the view that the Mexican government should educate and uplift Mexico’s masses through literacy campaigns to teach the Spanish language (at the time a large percentage of the Mexican population in rural areas still spoke only their indigenous languages) and should base the curriculum on European, especially Spanish, literature. Vasconcelos and his literacy brigades would throw cheap government editions of Cervantes, Dante and Homer into the trunks of their cars and head out to rural villages to teach Indian communities Spanish.

School teachers in Mexico in the post-revolutionary period played a key role in Mexican urban and rural society. During the Revolution the school teacher was often the secretary and intellectual advisor of the railroad worker or peasant turned leader of a revolutionary band. Sometimes the teacher was the leader. After the Revolution teachers often served as shop stewards or lobbyists, so to speak, of the illiterate or monolingual indigenous-language speakers in the countryside.

When peasants had a grievance, they often took it to the teacher to write up. Sometimes they asked the teacher to serve as their spokesperson. And when the landlord or governor sent his pistoleros to respond to the grievance, the teacher was often hanged alongside the leader of the village. In the cities, the school teachers’ unions and other organizations stood on the left wing of the labor movement, although generally under Communist tutelage.

When Cárdenas came to power, he too wished to continue the program of uplift in the rural communities and to support those teachers who fought for agrarian reform alongside the peasants. Calling for “socialist education,” Cárdenas and the Communists whom he had put in charge of the Secretariat of Education shared the notion that Mexico’s teachers should challenge religion — what they called “obscurantism and fanaticism” — as well as teach the Spanish language and Mexico’s mestizo cultural values, increase the productivity of rural areas, and turn peasants and workers into stalwart defenders of the revolutionary government.

The attempt to implant socialist education in rural Mexico failed for many reasons. The conservative right wing increased its attacks on teachers as atheists, Communists and libertines, killing many. Yaqui and Nahuatl indigenous groups rejected the education program out of hand in order to protect their own language and culture. While some mestizo communities embraced the program to promote democracy and equality in their regions, by and large the “socialist” education project failed, although the power of the Secretary of Education bureaucracy and control over teachers and

many communities increased.

The Revolution is Dead: Long Live the Revolution!

The Mexican Revolution that began in 1910 had by 1940 been completed and in many ways fulfilled. The great issues of the Revolution — distribution of land to the peasants, recognition of labor unions, nationalization of the oil industry, and creation of a national system of free, public, lay education — had all been realized, finally, under the Lázaro Cárdenas government. Cárdenas also rebuilt the Mexican state on a much broader basis. The Mexican state would prove to be both durable and resistant to the military dictatorships that swept over much of Latin America in the period from 1964 to 1984.

Cárdenas created a paternalistic, benefactor state which he believed could and would provide land, jobs, and justice to the Mexican people. The state would stand as the arbiter between the new modernizing capitalist class that had come to power, and the workers and peasants who sought living wages and education. Workers and peasants now had unions (although those unions became increasingly dependent upon the party and the state) and peasants had land (but the land too was dependent on the Agrarian Bank and government officials).

When workers got jobs in the state-owned oil company or railroad, they joined the unions affiliated with the state-party, and automatically became members of that party. Similarly, peasants on the ejido became members of the CNC and thus of the party, and so came to be citizens of a sort of state within the state.

Adolfo Gilly has suggested that Cárdenas and the cardenistas believed that the revolutionary state served as a bridge between indigenous and peasant communalism and the socialist future toward which the world was evolving. [14] In reality, however, the reforms of the Cárdenas era laid the basis for an expansion of industrial capitalism, of the working class, and of the service sector and middle classes, that is to say, for the full flowering of a modern capitalist society, with all of its class contradictions.

During subsequent decades, even as the paternalistic aspect of Mexican government continued to expand through the nationalization of other industries and the establishment of social programs such as the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS), the national health plan, the capitalist class came to play a larger role within government, the economy, and society. Still the Mexican Bonapartist state continued to exist, evolving into what Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa called “the perfect dictatorship,” a government which, without military dictatorship, could exert control over every aspect of Mexican society.

By 1968, when the Mexican military killed hundreds of students marching for democracy at Tlatelolco, it had become clear that the old Mexican Revolution was over, and that another Mexican Revolution loomed on the horizon. The Revolution Is Dead! Long Live the Revolution!

Dan La Botz

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Footnotes

- [1] One million migrated during the violent years of the revolution between 1910 and 1920 and another one million migrated during the Cristero Rebellion, the war between the Mexican government and the Catholic Church between 1928 and 1934.
- [2] Mexican women would not win the right to vote in national elections until 1953 and could not vote in a presidential election until 1958.
- [3] James D. Cockroft, *Mexico: Class Formation, Capital Accumulation, and the State* (New York: Monthly Review, 1983), passim; John Mason Hart, *Empire and Revolution: The Americans in Mexico since the Civil War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), passim.
- [4] Lawrence Taylor, *La gran aventura en México* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1993), Vol. I, Chapter 2 "La Ofensiva Magonista," 139-256.
- [5] Francisco Madero, *The Presidential Succession in Mexico* (New York: P. Lang, 1990), [1908].
- [6] Adolfo Gilly, *La Revolución Interrumpida*, Mexico City: el Caballito, 1971.
- [7] Manuel Aguilar Mora, *El Bonapartismo Mexicano*, Mexico, Juan Pablos Editor, 1982.
- [8] Jean Meyer, *La Cristiada*, (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1973). Meyer argues that the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy did not lead the Crisitada which was a popular rebellion, part of which moved to the left.
- [9] Enrique Krauze, Jean Meyer and Cayetano Reyes, *La Reconstrucción económica* (Mexico: Colegio de Mexico, 1977), passim; María del Carmen Collado Herrera, *Empresarios y políticos, entre la Restauración y la Revolución 1920-1924* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 1996), passim.
- [10] Sergio de la Peña and Teresa Aguirre, *De la Revolución a la Industrialización* (Mexico: UNAM, 2006), 63-69.
- [11] Raquel Sosa Elízaga, *Los Códigos ocultos del Cardenismo* (Mexico: Plaza y Valdés, 1996), 60-61.
- [12] Lorenzo Meyer, *México y los Estados Unidos en el conflict petrolero (1917-1942)* (Mexico: Colegio de Mexico, 1968), 301-346.
- [13] Vasconcelos was in the 1910s a supporter of the Convention that included Francisco Villa and Emliano Zapata and by the 1920s a self-proclaimed socialist, though by the 1930s and 40s he became very rightwing and sympathetic to fascism.
- [14] Adolfo Gilly, *El cardenismo, una utopia mexicana* (Mexico: Cal y Arena, 1994), 405.