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Mexicans in Revolution, 1910-1946

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MEXICANS IN REVOLUTION, 1910–1946

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**MEXICANS IN
REVOLUTION**
1910 - 1946

AN INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM H. BEEZLEY &
COLIN M. MACLACHLAN

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The Mexican generation who made the world's first social revolution by defeating the regime of Porfirio Díaz and carrying out a critical social campaign for three decades has fascinated us for years. We have undertaken this concise history to incorporate new interpretations of the movement, provide an appreciation of the revolution as the nation approaches its centennial in 2010, and to respond to the scholarly disregard for revolutionary achievements. In recent years we have watched with dismay the dismissal of this revolutionary experience through the application of the misnomer "postrevolutionary" to the dynamic, essential programs during the years 1920–1946. (See "Reflections on the Historiography of Twentieth-Century Mexico," *History Compass* 5, no. 3 [May 2007]: 963–74.) We want this volume to restore vitality to the study of the revolutionaries and their programs.

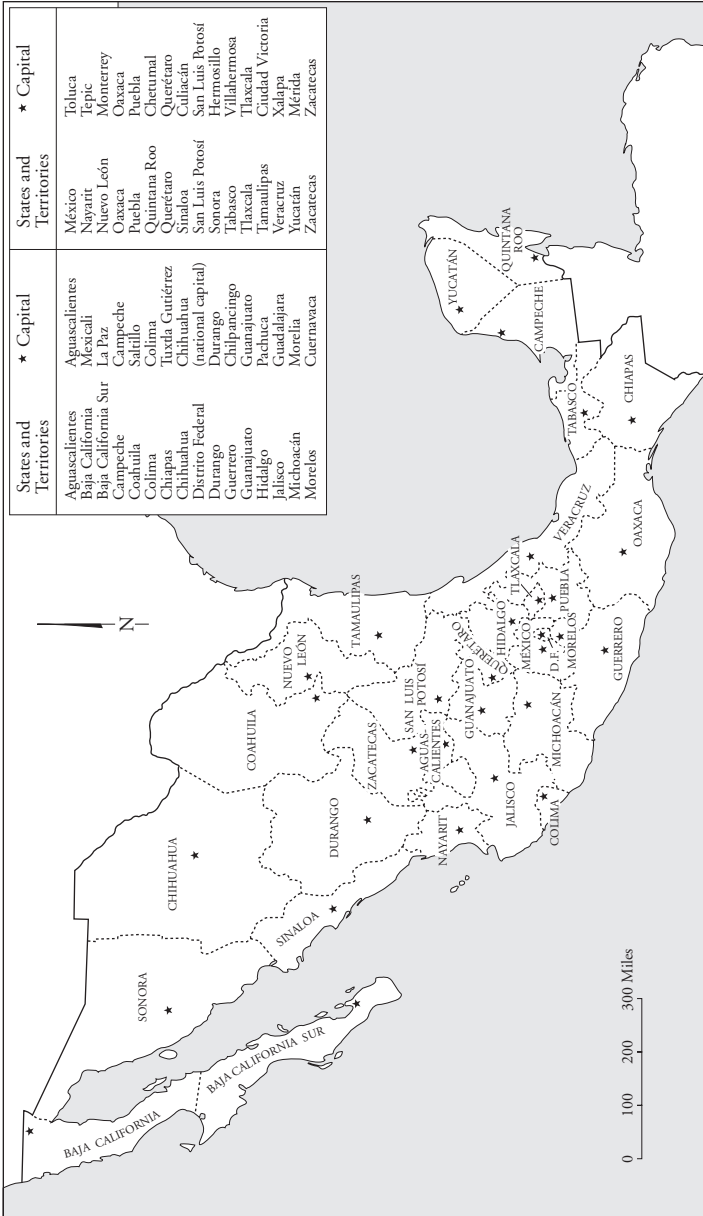
Colleagues and friends have contributed to our interpretation of these revolutionaries and their programs. Here we cannot thank all those who have contributed to our interpretations. We intend to thank them in person, if possible. We acknowledge those who have made an immediate impact on this work. For help with photographs we want to thank Cheryle Champion, the Marmolejo family, and Terri Grant at the El Paso Library. We express our gratitude to Ricardo Pérez Montfort, Carmen Nava, and Guillermo Palacios in Mexico City; Angela

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We dedicate this book to the memory of Michael C. Meyer and, as always, to Blue.

MEXICANS IN REVOLUTION, 1910–1946

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INTRODUCTION

Changing Times and Generations

Small bands of Mexicans initiated the world's first popular social revolution on November 20, 1910. These revolutionaries represented a cross section of ethnic and age groups, and came from all walks of life and levels of society. Nevertheless, for the majority of them, age and regional origins, more than class, employment, or ethnicity, stood out as their most striking characteristics. Despite a substantial number of young women, young single men from small provincial towns dominated the revolutionary forces. Some revolutionaries quickly learned the necessary military tactics, political strategies, and personal skills to survive, even to flourish. Slow learners perished or fled to Europe or the United States. Those who remained, perhaps as a result of vacancies created by death and exile, became the leaders who established significant national reforms. As a generation, they shaped the destiny of their nation across the twentieth century.

The revolutionaries, in general, were passionate about their compatriots to the point of death, optimistic to the point of being foolhardy, ambitious to the point of being reckless, and desperate to the point of having nothing to lose. Each of these characteristics had its origin in the successful programs of national development that had occurred in the previous regime under the direction of Porfirio Díaz. Proud of the nation's accomplishments, aware of opportunities, eager for success, and dismayed that they had not shared equitably in the nation's burgeoning

agricultural, mining, and industrial profits, these revolutionaries as a generation intended to open possibilities not only for themselves, but also for all Mexicans.

The revolutionaries fought for control of the nation, at first against members of the previous regime and then among themselves, in order to carry out initiatives to create a government responsive to the people, putting first the needs of the citizens, and controlling its own natural and human resources. They attempted to mold a new generation that would continue the revolution's efforts for the people into the future. Their campaigns included programs for land reform, worker protection, widespread literacy, and mandatory schools. They sought a better life with adequate housing, sufficient food, and public health measures, while eliminating the social, cultural and political intrusions of the Catholic Church and ending the hostility, prejudice, and brutality toward indigenous and poor Mexicans. Throughout the entire period they endured high levels of violence. As individuals, these young men claimed top military ranks, occupied leading political positions, demanded economic profits, and assumed elite social positions, often by marrying well. At the same time that they personally benefited, throughout the era from 1910–1946 this generation of revolutionaries sought to restore national honor by demanding respect from foreigners and pride from Mexicans of every class, gender, or ethnicity.

The revolutionaries shared unanimous commitment to the people and common dedication to national changes, but they disputed the priority of necessary reforms. Violence served as their idiom of discussion, resulting in a civil war in 1915 and 1916 in

the midst of revolution, and periodic rebellions throughout the era. Each major leader hammered out an agenda for reform that reflected the ambitions of his followers and his personal visions for their region and the nation. These statements of goals were shaped by the experiences of individuals and by the historical context of local communities. All of the plans for revolutionary changes reflected the successes and, at times, the excesses of the regime that preceded the revolution.

The Porfirian Context of Revolution

The roots of the Revolution reached back to the successful programs of the government of Porfirio Díaz and his regime, called the Porfiriato, that governed the republic from 1876 to 1911. This administration completed the national recovery from the French Intervention (the era of French occupation and constant fighting against them and Conservatives by Liberals led by Benito Juárez, 1862–1867) through the construction of social stability eliminating endemic banditry and political rebellions. Under these peaceful conditions, Díaz revived and expanded the national economy, generally raising the levels of prosperity in the nation. This administration introduced changes that commercialized agriculture, modernized mining, financed industries, initiated railroads, and enticed consumers. The national programs created substantial profits that resulted in increased prosperity in general, but they did so in a dramatically uneven manner. A few individuals obtained substantial profits, while the majority did not. A combination of opportunities brought advantages to those able to adjust to the new enterprises. At the same time, these economic changes exposed a large segment of the population to

demands that they did not understand nor could they meet in positive and productive ways.

Agriculturists shifted from subsistence to commercial crops with a market in the cities, Europe, or the United States. The change required practices that included the economies of scale, widespread irrigation, and mechanical processing, with labor demands that conflicted with customary practices. The transfer of land titles characterized the changes in agriculture and the amount of property converted from traditional village ownership to new commercial enterprises during the Porfiriato amounted to an astonishing 127,111,824 acres—well over half of the nation's arable lands. The owners of what today would be called agribusinesses seized the most fertile lands, conveniently located with access to both water and transportation. Mining, invigorated with new technology that made it more efficient, responded to a broader world market and new demands in both the United States and Europe. Railways extended markets beyond national borders. Labor contractors reached beyond regional pools to the nation as a whole. By the 1880s, workers even traveled along the rail network into the American Southwest. Textile, cigarette, and preserved food industries adopted the latest mechanical technology and inspired the beginnings of a modern working class. Set hours, repetitive tasks, and cash wages demanded adjustments that altered village life for workers who hovered psychologically between the industrial production and subsistent agriculture. Across the nation, available new products and imaginative business promotions together with an increasing number of individuals relying on wages and others with growing discretionary incomes combined to form expanding consumer markets in staple

and luxury goods. The result was the rise of an elite society that even included members of the middle class that adopted cosmopolitan fashions and diversions, including opera and sports.

Porfirian officials favored monopoly concessions as a means of attracting foreign capital to assume unknown risks, offering the hope of recouping the investment and the prospect of lavish rewards in a protected market. Railroad concessions had set the pattern as early as the government of Antonio López de Santa Anna in 1853–1855, although little actual rail construction took place under this first contract. During the Porfiriato, as railroad construction dominated popular attention, city residents also witnessed the introduction of additional technology, such as gas lighting, tramlines, and other advances often of cosmopolitan origins. Railroads quickly began hauling raw materials to the United States or to ports for shipment to Europe. Foreigners enticed to invest received generous terms that in retrospect seemed excessive, and their presence in high-profile projects obscured the participation of Mexicans in the process. Although bankruptcies abounded in the early days as foreigners failed to appreciate local obstacles or gauge the domestic and international markets, by the late 1880s foreign investors reaped amazing profits.

Ordinary Mexicans, who supplied the labor and raw materials, marveled that the future appeared mortgaged to foreigners. The trick was to assure that monopoly concessions did not reach a point that closed opportunities for the domestic entrepreneurs and excessively exploited domestic workers. Commercial crops and railroad development swept across the country, resulting in the new towns of Torreón and Gómez Palacios and

a mobile population of workers who labored in mines, built railroads, cut timber, and went home to grow crops.

In Mexico City, the past rubbed against the future, with the rich sequestered in the western neighborhoods with wide boulevards, modern houses, and fancy stores carrying all the latest items from Paris, New York, and London. In the eastern parts of the city ambitious peasants and poor workers lived amid the decaying, abandoned colonial buildings without sewers and only minimal access to potable water. During the rainy season mud and filth flowed together to create almost impassable streets and conditions ripe for disease. Infant mortality, nutritional problems, and premature death characterized the lot of this population.

The poor sometimes went hungry. The switch to commercial crops at times resulted in food shortages. Production dropped of beans, corn, and chili, the staples of the national diet, requiring the importation of corn for tortillas from the United States during bad harvests. Riots occurred in scattered locations throughout the republic during the period from 1900 to 1910. In the worst year, 1907, both commercial agriculture and mining slumped. Per capita corn production fell by 50 percent in 1907 from its 1877 level. Unemployed miners in the north roamed the streets. Workers left their jobs to protest wages and conditions at both the Cananea Consolidated Copper Company in Sonora and the Rio Blanco textile mills in Veracruz. They remained off the job until President Díaz ordered the military to break both strikes. These desperate conditions resulted from both national economic policies and international market depression.

During these years of economic disruption, national progress seemed threatened by the lack of vigorous leadership. As he aged,

Díaz turned to a smaller and smaller circle of younger, technocratic advisors, rather than developing a system of political recruitment. Increasing discomfort with the octogenarian Díaz's unwillingness to provide for an orderly transition troubled the political, economic, and social elites. The president's concession to allow the selection of a vice president (1904) resulted in the elevation of Ramón Corral, who was widely judged to be an unacceptable successor because of his ruthless policies against the Yaqui Indians in Sonora. The unwillingness of Díaz to deal seriously with the succession process alienated individuals, but most of them hid their opposition to his continuation in office behind customary smiles.

The journalist Ricardo Flores Magón became the most outspoken critic of the president's continuation in office, the small circle of political advisors occupying administrative positions, and the unimaginative and anti-labor economic politics. He and his brother Enrique organized the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM) that demanded an end to the Porfirian political and economic regime and a return to the liberalism of Benito Juárez. Facing government repression, the PLM fled first to San Antonio, Texas, and then St. Louis, Missouri, where in 1906, Flores Magón called for revolution, as his politics moved further toward anarchism. Eventually he was arrested by U.S. marshals, for violation of the century-old neutrality legislation, and after more than a decade of incarceration he died in the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas. Flores Magón became a symbol of anarchist resistance to both U.S. and Mexican industrial suppression of Mexican workers. Today he is recognized as a champion by the Chicano movement in the United States and by unions in Mexico.

Other opponents, including several talented and qualified individuals, wanted to replace President Díaz, but hesitated to confront the man who had become an icon of national progress. Journalist James Creelman's interview of Díaz for *Pearson's Magazine* in 1908 added even more uncertainty. In the course of the interview, the president indicated that he encouraged the formation of political parties, because he did not intend to be a candidate for the presidency in 1910. His statement set off a flurry of excitement across the nation, while the president himself focused on the centennial year of independence. He planned a celebration to demonstrate to the world that Mexico under his rule had become a modern country. It represented both a celebration of the man and what the world saw as his personal creation. The remarkable progress of the nation, presented to an audience ready to be impressed, obscured the reality that time had run out for the Porfirians.

Different kinds of candidates began to consider the presidential elections based on their convictions of how to preserve the international reputation, social tranquility, and economic expansion achieved by the Díaz regime. In the northeastern state of Nuevo León, General Bernardo Reyes believed that the Porfirian success rested on having a veteran military officer at the top. In the Veracruz region, General Félix Díaz, nephew of the president, proposed to continue the regime's longevity by having another Díaz family member as president. In Sonora, vice president and governor Ramón Corral found the Porfirian success in tough-minded administration, such as that of a frontier governor. In the capital city, the Científicos believed that the social

application of technology had maintained the regime, but remained uncertain of the individual candidate.

Two additional opinions on the actions necessary to preserve Porfirian achievements and arrange a smooth transition of authority appeared in book form. In Mexico City, the intellectual Andrés Molina Enríquez focused on commercial agricultural expansion with concomitant land consolidation of the 1890s as the greatest danger to the nation because it stripped property from small, subsistence farmers and reduced staple crop production. Molina Enríquez did not envision himself a presidential candidate, but his conclusions expressed in *Los Grandes Problemas Nacionales* became guiding principles for land reform programs for the first half of the twentieth century.

In Coahuila, Francisco, the youngest son of the powerful but ignored Madero family, stated in his widely circulated book on the presidential selection that the preservation of Porfirian successes would only be possible with the peaceful transfer of presidential power and that this could only occur through democratic elections. His arguments in *La Sucesión Presidencial en 1910* laid the basis for his presidential campaign.

A fractured society, a disgruntled, but silent elite, a desperate lower class, and a president who had ruled beyond his time marked the end of an era that took a decade to die (1901–1911). Most of the proponents of these different political positions acted with circumspection, waiting to see if indeed President Díaz had decided to step down. Within months, he allowed himself to be persuaded by various groups, including the circle of governors, to reverse his position and accept nomination for the presidency in the 1910 election. Lying in the weeds again allowed Corral to

become the vice presidential nominee (a concession by the eighty-year-old Díaz that he might not survive an entire term) and enabled the Científicos and others to maintain their positions in the Porfirian inner circle. On the other hand, General Reyes, in his designs on his presidency, had gone beyond the chain of command. Díaz, in short order, had Reyes traveling the globe to review military modernization programs. This assignment meant he would lack the required year's residence within national borders before elections. The president ignored Madero, whose reputation as a dilettante agriculturalist and committed Spiritualist were believed to discredit him.

President Díaz focused his attention during the summer of 1910 on the celebration of the centennial of national independence. Centennial ceremonies, in a series of celebrations across the country, marked the initiation of the struggle, and throughout the summer various events drew the attention of both national and international audiences, building to a climax on Independence Day, September 16. In the middle of these events, the elections in July occurred without incident and government officials reported that Porfirio Díaz had been reelected with an overwhelming number of votes.

For Mexicans in general, but especially those in the capital city, the late summer of 1910 brought the inauguration of new buildings, monuments, and institutions (including an insane asylum) to commemorate independence. The grand national celebration was held on September 16, with parades and speeches that drew official and unofficial visitors from Europe, the United States, Latin America, and Asia, particularly Japan. The centennial parades highlighted the story of Mexico's past, through the

stages of ancient Aztec glories, colonial civilizing efforts, and the Porfirian creation of a cosmopolitan nation. Through it all, the elderly president remained remote; the patriarchal patriot had seemingly become detached from daily activities, serving only as the national symbol. As the Díaz regime basked in the afterglow of the centennial celebrations, on November 20 insurrectionary battles erupted in distant Chihuahua and the revolution sputtered to life.

The first social revolution of the twentieth century had begun. The Russian, the Chinese, and the Cuban revolutions later lurched into existence in reaction to the old regimes in those countries. These revolutions drew on well-established socialist and subsequently communist philosophical responses to feudal, colonial, and imperial systems. Lenin, Mao, and Castro closed their societies behind the doors of ideology and promoted social changes driven by theories. The Mexican Revolution resulted from a decidedly different context and programs. The successes, not the failures, of the previous regime generated these revolutionaries. They took pride in their nation, its political stability, economic successes, and international reputation, but they wanted to share in its government, profits, and prestige. They recognized the opportunities for ambitious individuals and they wanted to see hard work and initiative rewarded. Once their struggle began, the revolutionaries eventually mobilized the majority of the nation's people in a campaign to make the good life lived by the Porfirian elites available to everyone. Despite staggering obstacles to implementing social changes (including the deaths of some two million individuals, about one in seven Mexicans), the revolutionaries never wavered in their commitment. Once in

power they adopted an empirical, practical, nonideological projects (unless one counts anticlericalism as an ideology), open to the social experiments by others. They built their programs on cosmopolitan pragmatism devised by foreign travel and innovative improvisation based on wartime experiences. This generation willed into law, if not completely into everyday practice, what before them had been unimaginable: the creation of a just, equitable, and good life for all Mexicans.

Suggested Reading on the Porfirian Regime

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