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The Mexican Revolution:

The Women Forgotten

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When most think of the Mexican Revolution and its participants, the picture is of women remaining solely at home, while the men proceeded off to fight. However, the truth is that many women chose to follow the revolutionaries, acting as cooks, nurses, consorts, and even soldiers; a number even elected to bear arms and fight alongside their male counterparts. In most cases, the women were usually either related or involved with the men who were fighting, while some were actually in positions of leadership over both the males and females, referred to as “capitanas” and “coronelas.”¹ These female ‘revolutionaries’ were called *Las Soldaderas* and, as Elena Poniatowska observed, “Without the *Soldaderas*, there is no Mexican Revolution – they kept it alive and fertile, like the earth.”² While not every man may have been receptive of the idea of women fighting alongside them, the fact remains that they made an impact on the struggle to establish a strong government of the people, in addition to making strides towards procuring additional rights and improved status within Mexican society.

Seemingly, Mexican women saw this revolution as a chance to make their voices heard and, as such, emerge as a totally unexpected participant in the fight which claimed many lives between 1910 -1920. The act of defying the cultural norms of the time and assisting in the cause to overthrow the oppressive leaders, Madero and Huerta, resulted in the creation of new Mexican females, ones “...who have lost fear, even have killed fear...”³ According to Alexa Linhard, this transformation resulted in the development of courage, but also had a negative effect of “...insensitivity, as exposure to the brutality of revolution and war bereaves fearless

¹ Linhard, Tabea Alexa. *Fearless Women in the Mexican Revolution and the Spanish Civil war*. University of Missouri Press. Nov. 2005: p.4.

² Poniatowska, Elena. *Las Soldaderas: Women of the Mexican Revolution*,” trans. David Dorado Romo. EBSCO. 2007.

³ Linhard, Tabea Alexa. *Fearless Women in the Mexican Revolution and the Spanish Civil war*. University of Missouri Press. Nov. 2005: p.2.

women of feelings and emotions.”⁴ In a way, the participation in the revolution possibly began preparing women to be better capable to bear the heavy responsibilities which would come with increased participation and recognition within society.

When it came to *Soldaderas*, it did not matter what class or social background they came from; there is evidence of both aristocrats and the poor participating in the Mexican revolution. Granted, it was the women who came from poorer lifestyles who were more frequently observed with weapons than the aristocratic females, but the richer women did their part through the use of speech; they “...were important advocates of an ideology of resistance and contributed to the development of revolutionary feminist consciousness.”⁵ In fact, some even believe that this verbal warfare initiated by the aristocratic females actually laid the foundation of the “...Mexican feminist movement of the 1920s and 1930s.”⁶ The fact that women from the upper classes spoke out in favor of this cause, shows that this issue was a widespread phenomenon throughout the country. In addition, the presence of aristocratic support most likely made the issue of basic female rights a more widely advertised and accepted issue among the diverse classes of Mexico.

While it is assumed by many that these *Soldaderas* only fought for the revolutionaries, it has been said that the federal army had a large amount of women among their ranks as well.

According to Andrés Fuentes:

While the most advanced armies of the world had abandoned the tradition of taking women along - France barred army wives from the ranks in 1840, Britain

⁴ Linhard, Tabea Alexa. *Fearless Women in the Mexican Revolution and the Spanish Civil War*. University of Missouri Press. Nov. 2005: p.1

⁵ Arrizón, Alicia. *'Soldaderas' and the Staging of the Mexican Revolution*. The MIT Press. Spring 1998: p.96

⁶ *Ibid*, p.97

as late as 1890 - in Mexico women and children accompanied the Federal army well into the twentieth century.⁷

It appears that both Díaz and the revolutionaries realized the importance of having females present; whether it was only for medical care, companionship, cooking, or actual participation in the fighting, their presence was important. The tradition of the women following the troops is a long-standing tradition in Mexico, but females never actually participated in the fighting until the Mexican Revolution. Although the women were present with the federal troops, they did not participate in the fighting like the revolutionary females; instead, the federal army developed a system with "...the men fighting and the women looking after the men."⁸ This type of system made a lot of sense because females were already used to caring for their spouses and cooking in the home, so the work assigned to them by the federal army was of a second-hand nature to them.

In the nineteenth century, the term *soldadera* described a female who packed up the kitchen and served in the capacity of a camp cook and/or nurse; there was never the thought of a women picking up a rifle until the 1900's. As observed by Victoria McCard, the Mexican Revolution resulted in a:

...disruption and insecurity of daily life...[and]...women took on new roles that blurred traditional gender distinctions: they learned to load and shoot rifles, and take part in battle, just like their men. Some even went so far as dressing like men and adopting male postures, thereby creating a new type of *soldadera*.⁹

This 'new' women would serve as a beacon of change within Mexican society with regards to the status of females. It showed that women were no longer willing to wait in the background

⁷ Fuentes, Andrés Reséndez. "Battleground Women: Soldaderas and Female Soldiers in the Mexican Revolution." *The Americas*. Vol. 51, No. 4. *JSTOR*. Web. Academy of American Franciscan History. Apr., 1995: p.530

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ McCard, Victoria L. "Soldaderas of the Mexican Revolution." *West Virginia University Philological Papers. Academic OneFile*. Web. West Virginia University. Fall, 2004: p.44.

for something to happen; they decided to take the matter in their own hands and to jump on the opportunities being opened up to them through the revolution.

Even though the 'revolutionaries' are referred to as a single group during the Mexican Revolution, the truth is that there were multiple armies under the command of Zapata, Pancho Villa, Carranza, and Obregón, all of which used females in one way or another; whether or not they had a strong respect for the *Soldaderas*, the fact remains that all of the male leaders found them to be an essential part of their forces. This truth held true regardless of whether the women participating in the war effort traveled with them or not. For example, the actual number of women who accompanied Zapata, also referred to as "Zapatistas," were in very small numbers. Instead, Zapata preferred to have the women assist from their homes and to prepare and send out food from there.¹⁰ Despite the lack of fighting on their part, these "Zapatistas" performed all the basic tasks of a *Soldadera* from the safety of their homes.

However, the system Zapata implemented wasn't perfect and resulted in rampant raping of village women because of the overwhelming desire of his men for sexual relations due to the lack of females in the camp.¹¹ One account involved "...a small village within two kilometers of Jojutla [where] the entire female population consisting of more than forty women was carried away by the rebels [Zapata's men]," and it soon resulted in a reputation which constituted little outside support for Zapata and his men from women in both the areas of food and medical care.¹² Zapata's decision to have little or no women followers proved to be a fatal mistake on his part. Throughout the Revolution, it became apparent that the men relied

¹⁰ Fuentes, Andrés Reséndez. "Battleground Women: Soldaderas and Female Soldiers in the Mexican Revolution." *The Americas*. Vol. 51, No. 4. *JSTOR*. Web. Academy of American Franciscan History. Apr., 1995: p.534-537

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.535

¹² Fuentes, Andrés Reséndez. "Battleground Women: Soldaderas and Female Soldiers in the Mexican Revolution." *The Americas*. Vol. 51, No. 4. *JSTOR*. Web. Academy of American Franciscan History. Apr., 1995: p.535

heavily on the support of the women, in feeding, medical care, and, also meeting their sexual needs.

Pancho Villa, on the other hand, had large numbers of women following his army, referred to as "Villistas," and the number of women and children present forced the army camps to transform into basically small communities.¹³ In 1914, it was observed that:

Villa's army trains, moving across the deserts, are the most picturesque of sights in this queer Mexican world. While the horses, supplies and munitions of war fill the inside, the seventeen thousand men, four thousand women, and about the same number of children, which compose the army, ride on top.¹⁴

It is apparent that Villa understood the importance of having women present, so much so, that he even allowed the *Soldaderas* to pick-up arms and fight alongside them; both Carranza and Obregón adopted this almost 'family-style' type of warfare as well.¹⁵ In contrast to Zapata, who was without much, if any, female support, the women serving Villa and other male leaders seemingly brought higher morale to the men and assisted them in ways almost unimaginable. The *Soldaderas* proved their worth in the Revolution just in the way that they seemingly caused the soldiers to work more efficiently and with a greater focus.

In a revolution, there tends to be a figure that steps forward and becomes the embodiment of the revolution and its ideals; the Mexican Revolution was no different for women. Two females stepped forward, namely Adelita and Valentina and, as observed by Shirlene Soto, they were "Two heroines of the Revolution...[and]...were considered 'the essence

¹³ Fuentes, Andrés Reséndez. "Battleground Women: Soldaderas and Female Soldiers in the Mexican Revolution." *The Americas*. Vol. 51, No. 4. *JSTOR*. Web. Academy of American Franciscan History. Apr., 1995: p.539

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 540

of Mexican femininity...¹⁶ Even though two heroines stood out at first, eventually, the Mexican women selected Adelita as the sole representative for their cause. The name 'Adelita' was used by many individuals during the revolution to refer to a women soldier and, as such, became a phrase used almost as often as *soldadera*.¹⁷

This icon of femininity is still alive today and "...in both Mexico and the U.S., Adelita is a symbol of action and inspiration, and her name is used to mean any woman who struggles and fights for her rights."¹⁸ If it had not been for the strength and courage of these two females stepping up to the plate, the battle for women's rights within Mexico may have fizzled out. In essence, the creation of the *Soldaderas*, and the reputation they developed for themselves during this time, were, in part, made possible by Adelita and Valentina because they gave a spark to the female hearts across the country and let them know that it was their time to make their voice heard in the Mexican landscape. The *Soldaderas* were more than just additional soldiers in the Mexican Revolution or nurses in the camps; they were also symbolically fighting for their own future within Mexico and establishing the precedence for the institution of basic, essential women's rights.

Many at the time wanted the present status quo of society to remain prominent, as evidenced by the use of Mexican folk ballads, referred to as corridos, which were used to remind females of their place within society. One such example was 'La Adelita:'

¹⁶ Soto, Shirlene. *Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman: Her Participation in Revolution and Struggle for Equality 1910-1940*. Denver: Arden Press- 1990.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Arrizón, Alicia. *'Soldaderas' and the Staging of the Mexican Revolution*. The MIT Press. Spring 1998: pps..90-91

...which helped to spread the word that while her bravery and revolutionary spirit might be worthy of glorification, the primary noteworthiness of the *Soldadera* was (still) as 'potential lover, girlfriend or wife of combat soldiers...' ¹⁹

In other words, Mexican women may have showed no shortage of bravery in fighting alongside the men in the revolution, however, their place in society was still delegated to that of a housekeeper and a loving spouse or consort, not as an 'equal' warrior on the battlefield. However, the overt opinions of men for women to remain at a societal status quo did not stop there. Some males looked at the highly important cavalry companies and argued that the "Slow-moving contingents of *Soldaderas* simply deprived cavalry units of their most precious asset: swiftness."²⁰ Basically, the males of Mexican society were trying to find any excuse they could to force females to remain at their current status within society; they apparently did not want to worry about potentially fighting women for jobs or other positions which had, up to that point, been traditionally male-dominated. Even worse, men feared that they would no longer exist as the leader or dominate figure in their household.

Although some of the men's concerns may have been true, the fact remains that women brought organization to the rebel forces, along with essential medical services. One such example was when:

...Doña Juanita, the mother of the revolutionary leader [Alberto Carrera Torres], took charge of the logistics of the operation [in the town of Tula]. She organized a squad for the purpose of obtaining food and ammunition and 'exercised authority in all administrative affairs.'²¹

¹⁹ McCard, Victoria L. "Soldaderas of the Mexican Revolution." *West Virginia University Philological Papers. Academic OneFile.* Web. West Virginia University. Fall, 2004: p.44.

²⁰ Fuentes, Andrés Reséndez. "Battleground Women: Soldaderas and Female Soldiers in the Mexican Revolution." *The Americas.* Vol. 51, No. 4. *JSTOR.* Web. Academy of American Franciscan History. Apr., 1995: p.528

²¹ *Ibid.*

Whether men liked it or not, *Soldaderas* proved to be a pivotal component to achieving victory in the revolution. Yes, they may have slowed down the forces, but, in the end, it didn't matter; they turned a supposed fault into a strength in the long run, as their presence helped save the lives of countless revolutionaries.

At the conclusion of the Revolution, women did not just automatically receive the rights they desired. The *Soldaderas* had to fight for it, rallied behind Mexico's first feminist, Hermila Galindo who "...insisted that women should enjoy the same rights and privileges as men, and that to achieve equality females needed a modern, relevant, and well-rounded education."²² Although the Revolution had opened the eyes of many Mexicans to the possibility of women gaining a higher position within society, there were still many who were of the opinion that there were certain activities which females should not participate in. For instance, it would not be until the mid-to-late 1940's that Mexico would finally give the right of suffrage to women.²³ Even though it might have taken a few decades after the Revolution for long-term changes to come about, the fact remains that, whether they knew it or not, the *Soldaderas* did make a difference and their sacrifices on and off the battlefield eventually led to expanded rights for all Mexican females.

When the 'new' *Soldadera* emerged on the scene during the Mexican Revolution, it signified a drastic shift in the societal image of women. It is evident from many records of the time that women were not only fighting in the Revolution to free Mexico from an oppressive dictatorial government, but that their intention was to also step out into the light, as it were, and let Mexico know that they no longer wished to be considered as lesser citizens. They showed great courage and determination in accompanying the men into dangerous, and potentially, life-threatening situations, evidently to demonstrate themselves as capable and

²² Macias, Anna. "Women and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920." *The Americas*. Vol. 37, No. 1. JSTOR. Web. Academy of American Franciscan History. Jul., 1980: pp. 66

²³ *Ibid.* p.68

resilient members of society; ones willing to put their lives on the line for the good of their country. The *Soldaderas* received much strife and criticisms as males tried to justify their superior standing over them within society, but in the end, the Mexican women persevered and eventually gained the respect of Mexican society as a whole, as well as, the basic rights which eventually evolved with it.

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