One hundred years since Zapata and Villa took Mexico City—Part 2

The historical significance of the Mexican Revolution

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The Peasant Armies of the Revolution

The foreign carve-up of Mexico's resources and the economic developments that accompanied the expansion of transportation and industry shook the foundations of the hacienda-based feudalism that dominated the countryside and drastically intensified social tensions in pre-revolutionary Mexican society.

Though the growing railway network's primary role was to facilitate the export of goods and resources to the United States and Europe, the integration of the national economy resulted in a spike in land prices that forced hundreds of thousands of peasants into foreclosure. Few rural communities were untouched by the shifts in property relations that ensued, and by 1910, 90 percent of the peasant population was landless.

The spike in land prices cut two ways. On the one hand, members of the newly landless peasantry were forced either to move to the industrial centers and join the burgeoning working class, or to labor in rural export-driven commercial agricultural communities.

On the other hand, the vast majority of the land from which the peasants had been removed was purchased by foreign investors. As a result of the enclosure process of the 1870s and 1880s, over 130 million acres—27 percent of the total land surface of Mexico—came under the ownership of American investors alone. Census data from 1910 reveals that while the peasantry constituted 80 percent of the population, just 834 landowners possessed 168 million hectares of land.

The changes in land ownership exacerbated the already rapid deterioration in living conditions as new owners shifted away from food production. Between 1907 and 1910, per capita production of almost all staple crops dropped by between 1.5 and 3 percent. Famine and starvation grew rampant.

This process intensified the centuries-old struggle by the peasantry over the question of land. Although major peasant-led land seizure campaigns had taken place across the Mexican countryside since the early 18th century, the land seizures that began to take place with increased frequency and coordination in 1910 were of a qualitatively different character.

In 1910, Francisco Madero, a landowning aristocrat from the northeastern state of Coahuila, ran for the presidency of Mexico, challenging Porfirio Diaz's bid for a seventh term in office after ruling the country for nearly three decades. Diaz had him arrested before the election and secured his own re-election through massive vote fraud. Escaping from his captors, Madero fled to the United States, where he issued his Plan of San Luis Potosi. The plan called for an armed uprising to begin on November 20, and for the replacement of the Diaz regime with a liberal-reformist bourgeois government.

Madero's Plan of San Luis Potosi was tailored to creating a mass base for a movement that was dominated from the start by sections of wealthy landowners and industrialists. One section of the document called for granting workers the right to unionize, while another section promised to return peasant lands: "those who acquired [the land] in such an immoral way…will be required to return them to the original owners."

The plan met with widespread support amongst the peasantry and working class, which began to mobilize by the thousands against the Porfiriato. Madero was greeted by the population with enthusiasm, in a manner similar to the initial support that existed in Russia for Alexander Kerensky after the February Revolution. In the spring of 1911, Madero began a speaking tour across the northern part of the country and was received by large, elated crowds at each stop.

Mass organizations and defense committees sprung up throughout the country, with bands of peasants carrying out widespread land seizures. American properties were targeted in particular, and mines and haciendas were burned to the ground.

In the southern state of Morelos, Emiliano Zapata mobilized a large force of peasants and declared himself in favor of a peasant revolution, to be vaguely connected to the Madero uprising. In the north, Francisco Villa pledged his support for Madero and amassed an army comprised mostly of peasants but which included contingents of workers, especially miners.

By May of 1911, open confrontations developed between Madero and the peasant armies.

On May 13, Madero appointed a cabinet of landowners and figures from the Diaz regime. The provisional government rejected peasant demands for land redistribution and for the inclusion of peasants and workers representatives in the new government.

Villa's forces captured Ciudad Juarez in opposition to Madero's orders, while 4,000 peasants under the leadership of Zapata captured Cuautla in Eastern Morelos. On May 25, Porfirio Diaz resigned as president. The deposed president commented, "Madero has unleashed a tiger! Let's see if he can control it!"

The peasant armies grew in size as they seized new territory and took on volunteers from the countryside. By mid-1912, strikes by agricultural laborers had shut down the properties of American-owned rubber and henequen plantations. In Puebla, Mexico City and elsewhere, workers increasingly began to mobilize against the Madero government. Strikes spread amongst railroad workers, miners, textile workers, and craftsmen in the cities of Coahuila, Cananea, Orizaba, Guadalajara, Queretaro, Torreon, Tepic, Monterrey, Zacatecas, and Oaxaca. Thousands of workers fought pitched street battles against Madero police in Mexico City. The chargé d'affaires at the US embassy decried Madero's inability to handle "the unintelligent demands of the proletariat."

In February 1913, the American government intervened and forced the overthrow of Madero. Decrying the "immature Mexicans" and the

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"emotional Latin race," Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson supported a coup d'état led by general Victoriano Huerta, who had been employed by the government to crush anti-Madero revolts. His forces wantonly shelled Mexico City for ten days before placing Madero under arrest and killing him. Ambassador Wilson explained that the decision to overthrow Madero was made in order "to protect American interests."

That same year, Villa's armies in Chihuahua declared themselves in open revolt, while the Zapatistas rejected Huerta's efforts to bribe the Southern Liberation Army into conciliation. With the support of the American embassy, Huerta concentrated his forces on eliminating the Zapatista forces in Morelos.

The episode marks one of the most brutal in the revolutionary period. Speaking at a gathering of landowners in April 1913, Huerta announced a genocidal campaign to "reestablish order" in Morelos.

Huerta asked that the landowners support military invasion "without reserve" and said he would take "extreme measures, for the government is going, so to speak, to depopulate the state," because the people of Morelos were "all Zapatistas," and "it is necessary to clean out all such [persons], and you must not be surprised if perchance something abnormal happens, for the state of things demands procedures that are not sanctioned by law but which are indispensable for the national welfare."

The government began a vicious campaign of "resettlement" in Morelos, emptying villages loyal to Zapata and razing them to the ground. Hundreds of men were kidnapped from their fields and deported to Mexico City, where they were conscripted and sent to fight the Constitutionalist forces in the North. Huerta's General Juvencio Robles said: "What a nice place [Morelos] will be once we get rid of the *Morelenses* ! If they resist me, I shall hang them like earrings to the trees."

The fierce opposition waged by the peasants of Morelos to Robles' forces galvanized support for Zapata within Morelos as well as without. From Morelos Zapata shifted the center of his army's command to the state of Guerrero, and began consolidating his disparate armed forces into a centralized and professional army.

The wide base of support enjoyed by Zapata's forces was the product of the land seizures carried out by the army against "enemies of the revolution" under the Ayala Plan.

Issued three weeks after Madero's ascension to power in 1911, the plan was a simple document that demanded the "the fields, timber, and water" usurped by the "landlords, científicos, or bosses" be returned to the peasants and that the property of any of the latter who opposed the revolution be nationalized. The plan called for opposition to Madero—and later Huerta—but issued no call for the creation of a different form of government or class rule, insisting only that a junta of revolutionary leaders designate an interim president who would then organize new elections.

Though it galvanized popular support for the revolution amongst the peasantry, the plan was limited and remained petty-bourgeois in character on account of its failure to contain any proposal for the reorganization of society beyond land reform.

The Peasantry and the Constitutionalists

The Northern Division, under the command of Villa, developed over the course of 1913 into an ever-more independent military force. After having endorsed Madero's Plan of San Luis Potosi at the onset of the revolution, Villa broke with Madero and aligned himself after the latter's overthrow with the Constitutionalist forces supporting the Coahuilan landowner and nationalist Venustiano Carranza. Villa's call to support Carranza's Plan of Guadalupe in Spring 1913 placed him under the command of Carranza, whose Constitutionalist Army was constituted under the plan.

Unlike Zapata, whose Ayala Plan placed him in opposition to the Constitutionalists from 1911, it was not until the aftermath of the autumn 1914 Aguascalientes Convention that Villa finally broke with the liberal bourgeoisie. Villa's complicated relationship with the Constitutionalists in general and with future president General Alvaro Obregon in particular is an expression of the limited character of Villa's political approach.

Throughout 1913 and 1914, Obregon attempted to conciliate between the forces of Villa and the main Constitutionalist armies under the control of Carranza in the center of the country.

A renewed strike at Cananea and intensifying disagreements over the question of land distribution drove Carranza and Villa further and further apart. Over the months following the overthrow of Huerta in July of 1914, the soldiers of the Northern Division grew increasingly impatient over the failures of the Carranza government to deliver its promised land redistribution. Carranza, for his part, grew closer to the officials of the Porfiriato, appointing several figures of the *ancien regime* to positions of state power.

Despite the efforts by Obregon to maintain an alliance between Villa and Carranza, the logic of events was driving the two further apart. The liberal bourgeoisie was opposed to the demands raised by the peasants in the Northern Division, and agreement became impossible.

At the Aguascalientes Convention in October 1914, the arrival of Zapatista representatives was greeted with boisterous enthusiasm on the part of Villa's delegation. The convention brought the peasant armies of the north and south together on a common platform for the first time. Villa's delegation voted in favor of the Zapata delegation's proposal for strict adherence to the land redistribution component of the Ayala Plan.

The show of unity was met with disdain by the Carranzista Constitutionalists, who sought to protect the landowning aristocracy and to openly crush workers' strikes where they developed. The Carranzistas therefore rejected the outcome of the convention and an open break between the Northern Division and the Constitutionalists came shortly thereafter.

Despite Villa's ultimate break with the Constitutionalists, his repeated alliances with the bourgeoisie were an expression of the inability of the peasantry to wage an independent struggle for power. Although workers made up a minority section of the army, Villa's army retained a politically incoherent character that fell short of even Zapata's limited Ayala Plan.

The resolve of the peasant soldiers to carry out land seizures and to allocate property amongst the peasantry of the Mexican countryside gave the armies a mass base of support that spurred their rapid military advances toward Mexico City.

But despite the military heroism of its fighters, neither army at any point represented a vehicle for the socialist transformation of society. In an interview with the American socialist journalist John Reed in 1913, Villa, who had only recently learned to read, said: "Socialism—is it a thing? I only see it in books, and I do not read much."

As the events of December 1914 showed, in the absence of a revolutionary leadership of the working class, the progressive yearnings of the peasants for land and equality were subsumed by the platitudes and anti-socialist program of the parties of the bourgeoisie. The events in Mexico proved no exception to this historical law.

The Road to Xochimilco

In December 1914, the armies of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa together controlled the bulk of the country. From the North, Villa's Northern Division had secured major victories in the railway hub of Torreon (October 2, 1913), the northern border city of Juarez (November 15), Chihuahua City (December 8), and finally Zacatecas (June 23, 1914), where the routing of his army forced Huerta from power.

When the Northern Division marched into Mexico City on December 3, its forces met Zapata's Southern Liberation Army, which had chased the retreating Constitutionalists out of the city on November 24.

The Southern Liberation Army had fought a successful insurgency campaign in 1913 against the genocidal efforts by Huerta to stamp out peasant land seizures in the south-central state of Morelos. By early 1914,

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peasant soldiers under the command of Zapata had fought off government troops and had expanded the guerrilla war as far south as the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and as far north as Michoacán and Hidalgo. In the spring of 1914, Zapatista forces took Jojutla (early May) and Cuernavaca (early June), the latter located less than fifty miles from Mexico City.

After the fall of Mexico City, the Constitutionalist forces under the directorship of President Venustiano Carranza and liberal General Alvaro Obregon were isolated and spread out along the periphery of the country. The military and political leadership was forced to flee to the Atlantic city of Veracruz, which had been occupied by US military forces until immediately before the Constitutionalists arrived.

The central railroad system remained almost entirely controlled by Villa and Zapata, as did the overland weapons trade routes with the United States. Forced land seizures continued in those parts of the country recently liberated by the peasant armies. For the armies of Villa and Zapata, the final weeks of 1914 seemed to bring the end of the war in sight.

Yet, by the middle of 1915, Villa's armies had been routed and the Northern Division was flying north, suffering defeats in the first and second battles of Celaya (April 6-7 and 13, respectively), Trinidad (April 29-June 5), and Aguascalientes (June 20-July 10), retreating to Zacatecas and San Luis Potosi. After Mexico City changed hands during the middle of the year, Zapata's army surrendered the city to the Constitutionalists on July 11. The armies of the Mexican bourgeoisie would never again yield the city to the peasant armies over the course of the revolution.

Aside from guerrilla fighting based in the north and south, neither Villa's nor Zapata's army would again play a major political role in the revolution. When the working class came into open conflict with the Constitutionalists in 1915 and 1916, the mass peasant armies were no longer a major factor in the revolution.

To be continued

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