

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 115

“Let Them Raise Hell”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In July of 1914, just days before the outbreak of the Great War, the Mexican dictator Victoriano Huerta, the man who had betrayed and murdered President Francisco Madero, had been driven out of Mexico City by a coalition of revolutionary forces.

The rebel leaders had agreed on the need to depose Huerta. Now that he was gone, though, they would find that they agreed on little else. And Huerta was already plotting his return.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 115. Let Them Raise Hell.

It's past time we checked in on the doings in Mexico. We last visited Mexico in episode 94, which ended just as Victoriano Huerta had fled the country.

But here's the thing about revolutions. A revolution happens when a critical mass of people—political parties, interest groups, classes, military units—agree that the existing regime needs to go. But a revolutionary coalition might agree on the need for the old regime to go while disagreeing profoundly on what should replace it. It is often easy to paper over these disagreements during the revolution, especially when the old regime is trying to kill you; that's hardly the time to open a debate on whether the new government should be a socialist republic or a constitutional monarchy or whatever. But once the victory is in hand, it is no longer possible to pretend.

And so it was in Mexico in July of 1914. A coalition of four revolutionary leaders had ousted Huerta. We've met them all already: three of them had power bases in three contiguous Mexican states in the north of the country: Venustiano Carranza, Álvaro Obregón, and Pancho Villa. The fourth came from the state of Morelos, in the south: Emiliano Zapata.

Carranza had been the Governor of Coahuila and was the only one of the four who wasn't a military leader. He was a political figure, the son of a wealthy landowning family and,

unsurprisingly, the most politically conservative of the four. At the beginning of his revolt against Huerta, he had laid out the Plan of Guadalupe, stating his goals. The short version is that Carranza wanted to restore the Constitution and return to democratic elections. Hence his faction called themselves constitutionalists, although they are often known as *carrancistas*, the followers of Carranza.

Obregón had been a Madero supporter who had demonstrated a gift for tactics that won him many battles. When the government of the state of Sonora refused to recognize Huerta and signed on to the Plan of Guadalupe, Obregón was appointed chief of the Sonoran military. Zapata was a mestizo from the south who led what amounted to a peasant uprising against first, Porfirio Díaz, then Madero, then Huerta. I talked about Zapata at some length already; suffice it to say that, as the leader of a peasant revolt, he was after more than constitutionalism. Zapata and his followers wanted to see land reform and a better deal for the poor rural peasants, who were mostly mestizo and Native American. Zapata had never signed on to the Plan of Guadalupe; his alliance with the *carrancistas* was purely one of convenience.

And that brings us at last to Pancho Villa, whom we've also already met, but he's going to play a major role in today's episode, so let's get better acquainted. José Doroteo Arango Arámbula was born on June 5, 1878. It's hard to know what to say about his early life, because his family was poor, there's little in the way of documentation, and later he would tell a lot of tall tales about his background. It appears his parents had been sharecroppers on a large hacienda in the state of Durango. In 1894, at the age of sixteen, according to one story, he murdered a wealthy hacienda owner in retribution for the rape of his sister, then he fled into the mountains where he joined up with a gang of bandits.

The police finally caught up to him in 1902, when he was 24 years old. As we have already seen, it was a common practice during the Porfiriato to draft young troublemakers into the Federal Army. This same thing had happened to Emiliano Zapata, but Arango was able to escape the Army and flee into the state of Chihuahua, where he took the name he would be best known by, Francisco Villa, or "Pancho" for short. There are conflicting explanations for how he chose this name.

By the time he reached the age of thirty, he seems to have been looking for ways to put banditry behind him and take up a more respectable trade, as is often the case with young troublemakers, once they become not so young. In 1910, when Francisco Madero challenged Porfirio Díaz in the presidential election, Villa became a Madero supporter. Madero's campaign against Díaz helped put things in perspective for Pancho. His lifelong struggles against the wealthy, the hacienda owners, and the Porfiriato now had a political context. What Mexico needed was more democracy, more equality, more land reform, and less Porfirio Díaz.

And that brings us to the events of episode 55, our first episode on the Mexican Revolution. In brief, Francisco Madero ran against Porfirio Díaz in the 1910 presidential election, Díaz had

Madero arrested, Díaz won the election, and Madero fled to the United States and called for armed revolution to restore a democratic government to Mexico. A 29-year old middle class businessman named Pascual Orozco organized anti-Díaz resistance in the state of Chihuahua and Pancho Villa was one of those who answered the call. Villa proved himself an able, even wily, commander who defeated the Federal Army in several battles, taking control of most of the state, including, by January 1911, the strategic border crossing at Ciudad Juárez, allowing Madero to return to Mexico in triumph. Díaz fled the country four months later.

But Madero's liberal constitutionalism failed to satisfy his more radical supporters, who had wanted to see land reform and to break the iron grip that wealthy creole landowners had on the country. Among the revolutionary leaders who turned on Madero were Emiliano Zapata and Pascual Orozco. But Pancho Villa remained loyal, even though he later claimed that he had expressed his disappointment in Madero to the President's face, telling him, "You, sir, have betrayed the revolution."

Huerta and Villa worked together to defeat the rebellion and forced Orozco to flee to the United States. But then they had a falling out. Villa was imprisoned for insubordination, but escaped and also fled to the United States. Huerta then turned on Madero, overthrew him in a coup, and had him murdered. Villa returned to Mexico in 1913 with seven followers and took up the fight once again, this time against Huerta.

That brings us to the events of episode 94, our second episode on the Mexican Revolution, in which the three revolutionary leaders of the north, Villa, Obregón, and Carranza, and one in the south, Zapata, successfully overthrew Huerta, with an assist from the United States, which had occupied the city of Veracruz and thus deprived Huerta's government of the tariff revenues from Mexico's most important port.

To Villa, these other guys were johnnies-come-lately, while Pancho Villa had been fighting for the revolution from the beginning. When he'd returned from his exile, the revolutionaries in Chihuahua quickly named Villa provisional governor of the state. He'd raised an army and set to the task of overthrowing Huerta. He also put into practice his ideas for reform by imposing heavy taxes on the haciendas, robbing trains, confiscating gold from the banks, and seizing food for distribution to the poor. Villa's soldiers, unlike most, actually got paid salaries, and it is even said that Villa maintained a butcher shop where confiscated cattle were taken to be slaughtered and butchered, so that the meat could be distributed to hungry peasants.

All of this made Villa immensely popular with the common folk, as you might expect, and attracted international acclaim as well. President Wilson, among others, compared him to Robin Hood. It is during this period of the revolt against Huerta in 1913 and 1914 that Pancho Villa rose from being merely an exceptionally skilled and charismatic revolutionary commander to the status of celebrity. The socialist American journalist John Reed traveled with Villa for four months and published a series of articles in the US extolling the Mexican revolutionary hero.

Hollywood film studios sent camera crews to film Villa's exploits as they were happening. These short films are early examples of what would later be called newsreels, and what we today might think of as short documentaries.

More unusual was Villa's special arrangement with the US filmmaker D.W. Griffith in 1914. Griffith sent a crew to Mexico and produced a feature-length film called *The Life of Pancho Villa*, at about the same time he began work on *Birth of a Nation*. *The Life of Pancho Villa* included scenes of live combat and some reenactments performed by Villa and his soldiers for the benefit of the cameras. Villa was reportedly paid \$25,000 and half of the profits for his participation in the project, money which went to fund the revolution. I am sorry to say it appears no copies of this film have survived.

All this notoriety is part of the reason why Pancho Villa is the most recognized name from the Mexican Revolution in the United States, maybe in the English-speaking world. The rest of the reason...well, we'll come to that. For all his celebrated ability and generosity, though, it has to be said that the man could be ruthless, even cruel. He married several women, without bothering to divorce any of them in between. There are several stories of Villa shooting people dead for trivial reasons, including one case where he murdered a widow who had come to confront him over the killing of her husband.

So Pancho Villa makes for a complicated historical figure, but there's no controversy about his skill as a military leader. He and his army, which Villa called the Division of the North, were the strongest and most effective of the revolutionary forces. In episode 94, I mentioned Villa's capture of the town of Zacatecas, on the road to Mexico City, as a key moment in the Revolution. Villa took Zacatecas against the orders of Carranza, who didn't like Villa any more than Villa liked him and did not want the bandit general to be the first commander to reach Mexico City. Carranza had ordered Villa to halt his advance on the capital, Villa went ahead and took Zacatecas anyway. It's a key railroad junction and silver has been mined there since Aztec times, and that silver production was important to Huerta's government. But Villa's insubordination moved Carranza to cut off coal supplies to Villa to prevent him advancing any farther, and so it was Álvaro Obregón who accepted Huerta's surrender at Mexico City on August 15, 1914. Carranza entered the city in triumph on August 20.

[music: "Marcha de Zacatecas"]

As far as Venustiano Carranza was concerned, what should happen next was already laid out in his Plan of Guadalupe that he had set out 19 months ago. The Plan stated, and I quote, "When the Constitutionalist Army occupies Mexico City, the citizen Venustiano Carranza, First Chief of the Army, will be in interim charge of the Executive Power....The interim president of the republic will call for general elections as soon as the peace has been consolidated, handing over power to the citizen who is elected." That was the plan from the beginning. Obregón had signed onto it. Villa—well, Carranza thought he'd had Villa onside, though by this time it must have been clear

that Villa was a loose cannon. Zapata—well, Zapata had never actually agreed to the plan. To Carranza, the Zapatistas were just a bunch of peasants, not to be taken seriously.

It was clear there were deep divisions in the revolutionary movement. The four leaders, Carranza, Obregón, Villa, and Zapata, agreed to a convention in an attempt to settle their differences peacefully. The convention began in Mexico City, but moved to a more neutral site, the city of Aguascalientes.

Carranza and his supporters smelled a rat and boycotted the convention, which would be dominated by Villa supporters. The Zapatistas were late arriving, but by the time they did, their leader had decided that he saw eye-to-eye with Villa. The convention declared itself sovereign, meaning *it* was now the voice of the nation. The meeting at Aguascalientes was no longer about the best way to get the fifty-year old constitution up and running again; it was now about starting over.

Aguascalientes means “warm waters” in Spanish, and things were definitely heating up. For Carranza, the convention had overstepped its authority, and he refused to recognize it. For Villa and Zapata, Carranza was setting himself up to be another Díaz, another Huerta. And so, the convention appointed its own interim president and demanded Carranza’s resignation. This demand was delivered to Carranza in Mexico City personally by Álvaro Obregón.

Carranza replied that he was willing to resign, provided certain conditions were met. Two of his conditions were that Pancho Villa surrender command of his forces and leave Mexico and that Emiliano Zapata do the same.

Well, that wasn’t going to happen. The convention merged the revolutionary armies into a single Conventionalist Army under the command of Pancho Villa, and it marched on Mexico City.

And so began the next phase of the Mexican Revolution, between the Conventionalists and the Constitutionals, as Carranza’s side liked to call itself. On December 6, 1914, the Conventionalist Army, now some 60,000 strong, marched into Mexico City with Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata at its head. Carranza and his supporters, including, crucially, Álvaro Obregón, who had changed sides, they fled for Veracruz.

The Convention’s interim President, Eulalio Gutierrez, invited Villa and Zapata to a celebratory banquet at the National Palace the next evening. This moment right here is the high point of both of these men’s careers, and right now it looks like everything is going their way. There’s an iconic photograph of this moment, of Pancho Villa gleefully sitting in the gilded presidential chair, with Emiliano Zapata at his side. I have posted this photograph at the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com, if you’d care to take a look. The story goes that Villa offered Zapata his own turn to sit in the chair, but Zapata declined, saying, “I didn’t fight for that. We should burn that chair.”

Now, I know this is hard to follow, because there is so much is going on in the second half of 1914, including a world war, but recall that the Americans have been occupying Veracruz. This occupation helped oust Huerta, but none of the revolutionary factions welcomed it, at least not publicly. The Wilson Administration liked the sound of Carranza's moderate liberal constitutionalism and recognized him as the leader of the Mexican government at the ABC negotiations that led to the US withdrawal from Veracruz in November. The *gringos* moved out and the *carrancistas* moved in.

This still left Villa and Zapata in control of the capital and with a larger army. On the face of it, you might be tempted to conclude that Carranza's career is just about over, and the conventionalists have taken control. But you would be wrong. The conventionalists control Mexico City, but the *carrancistas* control Veracruz and its tariff revenues. And that will prove to be more important. A year from now, in December 1915, Carranza will be in control of most of the country and Pancho Villa will be on the run. But this will only come about after a year of bloody war, and war's partners, death, famine, and pestilence. The year 1915 would be an unhappy one for Mexico, with a civil war raging over the fate of the nation. Elsewhere, the Great War was raging, and it was inevitable perhaps that the two should become intertwined.

[music: "Himno en Honor de Aguascalientes"]

The former President of Mexico, and now its deposed dictator, Victoriano Huerta, had been living in exile in Spain since August of 1914, but he still had supporters in Mexico, including his one-time enemy Pascual Orozco. By early 1915, as we have seen, the German government has gotten pretty fed up with Woodrow Wilson and the Americans. The Americans made high-minded proclamations of neutrality, but they cheerfully sold munitions to the Triple Entente. They carped endlessly about the German U-boat blockade of Britain, but allowed the British to blockade their trade with Germany with scarcely a word of protest.

The turmoil of the Mexican Revolution would be hard for the Americans to overlook. Woodrow Wilson, though, had soured on intervention after Veracruz. He wrote to his Secretary of War, "[T]here are in my judgment no conceivable circumstances which would make it right for us to direct by force or by threat of force the internal processes of what is a profound revolution, a revolution as profound as that which occurred in France. All the world has been shocked ever since the time of that revolution in France that Europe should have undertaken to nullify what was done there, no matter what the excesses then committed."

In a speech before the Democratic National Committee, Wilson asserted that he had always been "[a] man who really believed down in his heart that a people had the right to do anything with their government that they damned pleased to do, and that it was nobody else's business what they did with it. That is what I believe. If the Mexicans want to raise hell, let them raise hell. We have got nothing to do with it. It is their government; it is their hell. And after they have raised enough of it, it will sit so badly on their stomachs that they will want something else...and make

a government that will stay put, but unless you let them have it out, they won't have a government that will stay put.”

That was the Democratic Party view. Prominent Republicans wanted to see America assert itself, most prominently, and most predictably, Theodore Roosevelt. Large American businesses had investments in Mexico, notably oil magnate Edward Lawrence Doheny's Mexican Petroleum Company and mining magnate Daniel Guggenheim's American Smelting and Refining Company. These businesses and their employees in Mexico were regularly getting robbed by revolutionaries moonlighting as bandits to raise money for the cause, or bandits pretending to be revolutionaries and taking advantage of the lawlessness, take your pick. Mexican bandits occasionally even crossed the border to commit robberies on US soil.

The Guggenheims and the Dohenys of America pined for the good old days when Porfirio Díaz kept a steady hand on the tiller and never got in the way of an honest businessman out to make a few bucks. Maybe Victoriano Huerta could fit that bill.

He certainly fit the bill for the Germans. Woodrow Wilson's stubborn resolve to remain aloof from the Mexican Revolution just might melt away at the prospect of the hated Huerta back in power in Mexico City. And of course, a second and more involved American intervention in Mexico would keep the Americans busy in North America and unlikely to intervene in the Great War in Europe. It would also consume American munitions in America and make them less likely to show up on the Western Front.

And that brings us to the 36-year old Franz von Rintelen. He was a German banker who spoke good English and was knowledgeable about the United States and Latin America. He had lived in New York City for three years, from 1906 to 1909, when he was still in his twenties, representing Germany's second-largest bank, Disconto-Gesellschaft. In that time, he had worked his way into New York society, becoming a must-have guest at dinner parties and even wrangling a membership in the New York Yacht Club. Next he spent a year in Mexico and in South America, returning to Germany in 1910. When the war began, he was called up for the German Navy, which assigned him to Intelligence and prepared him to be sent to America.

Von Rintelen had seen the United States up close and was impressed. He believed, even more strongly than his superiors in the Navy, that what the US did or didn't do in the Great War just might determine the outcome.

But before he left for America, he visited General Huerta in Spain, in February 1915, with an offer from the German government. Germany was prepared to assist Huerta in reclaiming the presidency of Mexico.

On April 3, von Rintelen arrived in New York City, traveling under an assumed name, Emil Gasche, and a forged Swiss passport. Once in Manhattan, he opened up two business offices under two other assumed names, E.V. Gibbons and Frederick Hansen. He was also Franz von

Rintelen again, when it was convenient, such as when he dropped by the New York Yacht Club to reconnect with old friends.

Von Rintelen's assignment was to interfere with the shipment of munitions from the United States to the Allies in Europe. He would use a variety of means, which would be funded by infusions of cash from the German and Austrian intelligence agencies. One of his dummy companies bought up American-manufactured smokeless powder and then burned it to create a shortage. Another one of his companies made an unsuccessful bid to purchase a DuPont factory that manufactured munitions. He set up the Labor's National Peace Council, a labor front organization created to sow dissension and provoke strikes in American munitions plants.

He spent a half million US dollars on that last project, most of which went to David Lamar, an American con artist whose specialty was phony investment schemes, earning him the nickname "The Wolf of Wall Street." It appears that Lamar out-conned von Rintelen, and most of the German money spent on the labor council project ended up in Lamar's bank account.

Von Rintelen was also involved in a plot to place time bombs aboard cargo ships carrying munitions from New York to Europe. These bombs were manufactured aboard *Friedrich der Grosse*, the Norddeutscher-Lloyd passenger liner that had been interned in New York harbor since the outbreak of the war. The bombs were loaded into the ships by sympathetic Irish-American dock workers; the idea was that the bombs would go off while the ship was at sea, they would start fires in the cargo hold full of munitions, which would force the crew to throw the munitions overboard to save their ship.

But von Rintelen's biggest project was the restoration of Huerta to power in Mexico. It was also his most public, and Huerta's arrival in the US was setting off alarm bells here and in Mexico. The last thing Woodrow Wilson wanted to see was his hated enemy Huerta back in power in Mexico City. And in Mexico, neither the constitutionalists nor the conventionalists wanted to see Huerta come back...unless his return was in the form of an extradition to stand trial for the murder of Francisco Madero.

But Mexico was enduring an ugly civil war, and there were those who thought only a strongman like Huerta could end the violence and banditry and bring stability back to the country. And those wealthy Americans who had investments in Mexico, like the Dohenys and the Guggenheims, they felt that way too.

But it wasn't only the Germans who had covert agents in neutral America, which brings me to Emanuel Voska, a 40-year old ethnic Czech, born in Prague, who had been expelled by the Austrian government twenty years ago for involvement with socialists. Voska had emigrated to the United States and he done pretty well for himself. He owned a marble quarry in Kansas and was making good money, a lot of which he had spent building a network of anti-Austrian ethnic Czechs in the USA called the Bohemian Alliance. He kept his group in touch with the Czech nationalist Tomas Masarik, who organized expatriate Czechs in the Allied nations to provide

intelligence to the Allies and assist them in defeating Austria, to the end of enlisting Allied support in the creation of an independent Czech and Slovak state.

Voska managed to infiltrate Czech-Americans into German and Austrian diplomatic missions in the US. They would gather information about German and Austrian covert operations and pass it along to Voska. Voska in turn passed the information on to British intelligence. His information was good, and the British grew to rely on him. The British also tipped off Colonel House, on one of his peace missions, to German covert operations in the US. House passed the warning on to Woodrow Wilson, but Wilson was at this stage reluctant to pursue it, not wishing to provoke a diplomatic tussle with Germany.

That changed in May of 1915, after the sinking of *Lusitania*. A week after the ship went down, on May 14, Wilson instructed his Treasury secretary and son-in-law, William McAdoo, to have the Secret Service keep an eye on German and Austrian diplomats. In Washington, the Secret Service tapped the telephones of the German and Austrian embassies and stenographers took notes on every call. In New York, the New York Police Department tracked German diplomats, in cooperation with the Department of Justice. Eventually, they began to take an interest in one "Frederick Hansen."

Von Rintelen and Huerta met regularly at the Manhattan Hotel to plan Huerta's return. And the Bohemian Alliance had someone in the room next door, listening in. They had an agent at the German Embassy who scheduled these meetings by day, and then passed the dates and times on to the Bohemian Alliance by night.

Huerta asked the Germans to purchase arms in the US for his followers in Mexico, and requested that some of these be delivered to points on the Mexican coast by German U-boats. In return, he pledged to make war on the US after he was restored to power. Whether Huerta really meant to do this is debatable. We can only be sure that he really wanted German aid, and the Germans really wanted to believe him.

Ammunition was duly purchased, eleven million rounds worth. The Germans deposited funds in banks in New York, Havana, and Mexico City for Huerta's use. Porfirio Díaz's nephew, General Felix Díaz, was recruited to lead a force in the south of Mexico that would rise up in coordination with Huerta's return. But the General was informed that he couldn't expect any help from the German Navy until *after* he declared his war on the US.

On Friday afternoon, June 25, 1915, the New York Giants hosted the Boston Braves, at the Polo Grounds and shut them out, 5-0, in front of a crowd of about 3,500 fans. Pol Peritt got the win, his fourth of the season so far. One of those fans in attendance at the Polo Grounds that afternoon was Victoriano Huerta. Afterward, he boarded a westbound train. He had told everyone that he was on his way to visit the Panama-Pacific International Exposition being held at San Francisco that year.

Over sixteen million people visited the Exposition altogether, so on the face of it, it didn't sound suspicious that Huerta would want to be one of them. But thirty hours later, on a cool Saturday evening in Washington, the new Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, got an urgent phone call from his office. Victoriano Huerta had unexpectedly changed trains in Kansas City, and had boarded a train headed south, for El Paso, Texas. The State Department already had an agent on the way to the station to meet Huerta in El Paso when he got off the train. But then what?

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks to all of you for listening. I'd like to especially thank Rob for making a donation, and thank you Neil for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you'd like to become a patron, or just make a one-time donation, visit our website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to the topic of the Great War and examine how the war is affecting the political and economic situations in the major powers, with a particular look at how the British deal with a shortage of volunteers. I'll Make a Man of You, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I should say a few more words about the Panama-Pacific Exposition, since it came up in this week's episode. It was a world's fair, constructed in what is now the Marina District in San Francisco, and meant to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal, but for San Franciscans, was also seen as the city's comeback from the devastating earthquake of nine years ago. Unfortunately, the Great War broke out during the preparations, which meant the fair didn't get as many international exhibits or visitors as its organizers had hoped.

You may recall I mentioned in episode 52 that the world's first transcontinental phone call was made between New York and San Francisco in the lead up to the Exposition. The call was made by none other than Alexander Graham Bell to Thomas Watson. They recapitulated their famous "Mr. Watson, come here. I want you," conversation from 39 years ago.

The Liberty Bell was taken from its perch in Independence Hall in Philadelphia and made a cross-country tour by rail to be exhibited at the fair. The American sculptor James Earle Fraser, who had just a few years earlier designed the new US five-cent coin, the famous Indian Head Nickel, sometimes called the Buffalo Nickel, contributed what is probably his most famous sculpture, *End of the Trail*, a moving image of a Native American man on horseback, his head hung low.

Most of the buildings constructed for the exhibition were meant to be temporary, but the Palace of Fine Arts was reconstructed and it still stands in San Francisco to this day.

[music: Closing War Theme]