

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 202

“1919 - Mexico”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Mexico kept out of the Great War, but political violence continued to torment the country until 1924, when for the first time in forty years, a Mexican President left office peacefully.

It may seem like a small boast, but it was a sign that something in Mexico has definitely changed.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 202. 1919 - Mexico.

We're going to return to Mexico today. We did a few episodes covering the unfolding Mexican Revolution, beginning all the way back in 1910 and episode 55. That was, let's see now, three years, seven months, and 23 days ago, by my calculations, so perhaps a brief refresher is in order.

I talked about Latin America last week, and in passing I mentioned that at the beginning of the twentieth century and following the revolutions against Spanish rule in America, the largest economies of the former Spanish colonies developed into stable constitutional republics. I'm thinking particularly of Chile and Argentina. The most obvious exception to this rule is Mexico, which over the last decades of the 19th century and into the first decade of the twentieth was led by one strongman, Porfirio Díaz, an era of Mexican history often called the Porfiriato; in English we might say the Porfiriato.

Díaz changed the Mexican constitution to allow himself to run for more than one term as president and packed the Mexican Congress with his political allies. He was able to control Mexico, more or less, for about 34 years with his network of powerful regional political bosses. Díaz was a pragmatic ruler who hewed to no particular ideology; people described his ruling style as *pan o palo*, bread or the stick. In other words, his message to the landowners and

wealthy elites of Mexico was, play ball with my regime and you will prosper; refuse and you will get the other thing.

Díaz's rule ushered in a period of rapid economic growth, a key feature of which was expansion of the rail network. Previously, Mexico had had only one rail line, which ran between the capital, Mexico City, and Veracruz, Mexico's most important port. The Porfiriato oversaw the construction of many new rail and telegraph lines, which helped link the country together. Mexico is a rugged land, difficult to travel through or ship goods through, which also accounts for Mexico's decentralized, federalist political orientation, with local regions accustomed to going their own way with minimal oversight from Mexico City. And also banditry, of which there was plenty.

The railroads changed everything. They made a more centralized government possible, opened up trade, and made banditry a more challenging line of work. Railroads also tied the Mexican economy to the US economy by making it easier and cheaper to ship exports to the US. US investment poured into Mexico, along with British and French capital. Much of this investment went into the railroads and mining and petroleum extraction. In the sparsely populated north of the country, large haciendas raised cattle for export to the US. We've already seen how big a role wealthy northern hacienda owners, or hacendados, played in the Mexican Revolution.

Mexico's economy was primarily about agricultural products and minerals produced for export, the common Latin American pattern, as we saw last week. But because of the political situation in Mexico, the benefits of Mexico's economic growth flowed almost entirely to one class of people: supporters of the Porfiriato. The common people of Mexico saw their own incomes and standard of living stagnate.

This economic disparity, brought on by a corrupt political system, would cause Mexico to suffer in two ways. First, industrialization in Mexico lagged behind other Latin American economies, especially Brazil and Argentina. Wealthy Mexicans had capital to invest, and some were investing it in factories, but that brings us to the second problem: Mexico lacked the urban working class necessary to keep the factories running. Because of the political repression, Mexico was less of an immigrant destination than nations like the United States or Canada or Argentina. A nation with political repression and political and economic power reserved to a small elite is not an attractive environment for a would-be immigrant.

The immigrants who did come were primarily from Spain, the United States, Cuba, and Central America, along with a few Europeans, mostly French, German, British, Italian, and Russian, and a few from Asian countries, China, Japan, and Korea. But many of these immigrants to Mexico who did well for themselves didn't stay. More attractive opportunities drew them to other nations, particularly the United States. Those who did stay were the ones who were struggling. Working-class immigrants might have aided the Mexican economy by providing industrial workers as they did for the US and Canada and Argentina, but those immigrants also came with

aspirations to build better lives for themselves and with socialist ideas about reforming the economy to better the lot of the working class. These ideas and aspirations ran head on into the iron rule of Porfirio Díaz.

Although German immigrants to Mexico did manage to get an excellent beer industry up and running, one that flourishes still in our time, and I think we can all agree that was a good thing.

By 1910, the year the Mexican Revolution began, less than one percent of the population of Mexico was foreign born. Compare this to 11% in Canada, 15% in the United States and 30% in Argentina. And when the Revolution began, leading to violence and economic decline, many in this small number of immigrants found it preferable to leave Mexico for a more stable and prosperous home, often the United States.

You know what happened next. Porfirio Díaz ran for reelection in 1910, challenged by the well-meaning, if a little flaky, Francisco Madero. Díaz won a fraudulent election and Madero led a revolt to overthrow him, though Madero himself was soon betrayed by one of his generals, Victoriano Huerta. Huerta would likely have built himself a new Porfiriato, but he was in turn overthrown by a loose coalition of rebels loosely led by Venustiano Carranza and aided by a US military intervention at Veracruz.

Once again we see the familiar revolutionary pattern. Revolutions are composed of disparate groups who have their own ideas about what they want. The one thing they have in common is a powerful conviction that the current government has got to go. Once it goes, the one principle that unified the various revolutionary factions goes with it, and they fall into bickering with each other. And when I say “bickering,” I mean, “civil war.”

Although his opponents included such beloved and charismatic figures as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, the winner of the civil war was Venustiano Carranza. And here lies a bit of an historical mystery. Carranza was no one’s definition of “beloved” or “charismatic.” He was the only one of the contenders to lead post-Revolutionary Mexico who was not himself a military commander. He had never led soldiers into battle. He was the titular head of the revolt against Huerta because he said he was, and somehow he made that stick. He was the first prominent political figure in Mexico to come out against Huerta, so you have to give him that one.

Carranza himself was a member of the wealthy landowning class, like Francisco Madero. And like Madero, his grievance was the grievance of his class. The Porfiriato had played favorites among the oligarchs of Mexico. Liberals like Madero and Carranza wanted democracy, by which they meant all the wealthy oligarchs of Mexico should have a say in the government. Madero fell because he failed to understand that the movement that had supported him and carried him to the presidency was looking for more ambitious reforms. At the very least, they wanted some of the injustices of the Porfiriato, like land confiscations, reversed. And social reforms for peasants and laborers, reforms of the sort that had been impossible under the Porfiriato.

Carranza at least understood that much, although he was unenthusiastic about it. He had amended his own Plan of Guadalupe to add some moderate reforms like increased independence for the judiciary, support for organized labor, and a degree of land reform, and that was enough to hold his coalition together.

Carranza and his supporters were able to beat back challenges from more radical reformers like Zapata and Villa. In early 1917, a constitutional convention drafted a new Mexican constitution, and a few months later, Carranza cruised to election as the first President of Mexico under this new constitution.

And that's where we left off the last time we talked about Mexico. Except that I should add that the new Mexican Constitution was, for its day, a radical document. Until this time, constitutions were understood to be documents that laid the ground rules for how governments were chosen and how they operated. This constitution added provisions that explicitly addressed social issues, including articles guaranteeing public, secular education, limiting the influence of the Catholic Church, guaranteeing workers' rights, prohibiting monopolies, and, significantly for Mexico's strained relations with the United States, Article 27, which subordinated private property rights to the nation, opening the door to land reform, and which declared all natural resources to be national property. This was hugely important to the US because many US businesses had purchased mining rights in Mexico during the Porfirate, and the new constitution appeared to be laying out a legal basis for nationalizing those mining interests.

You know the song that says "everything old is new again?" Reserving mineral rights for the state rather than for the owner of the property was actually a longstanding Spanish legal tradition going back to the Middle Ages. It was the law in the Spanish Empire and it was only during the Porfiriato that Mexican law changed to follow the US model of extraction rights belonging to the landowner. The 1917 constitution merely reverted to the older legal tradition.

But that was not how it looked to the US government and the business interests that owned extraction rights in Mexico, or thought they did. Remember that the Russian Revolution is unfolding even as the new Mexican constitution is being put into operation. After the Bolsheviks took over in Russia and the US reacted to the takeover with the Red Scare beginning in 1919 (which we'll look at next week), many in the US saw Article 27 not as a reversion to old traditions, but a radical break with the natural order of things and an ominous sign that Mexico was following Russia into communist anarchy. Carranza never would come to terms with the US, but this was not because he was some kind of radical, eager to use his new Presidential powers to expropriate US mining interests and large haciendas toward the goal of implementing the long sought-after land reforms and reducing the enormous disparities of wealth that had developed under the Porfiriato. Quite the contrary.

Carranza had not been closely involved in the drafting of the constitution. It laid out a much more radical future for Mexico than the one he envisioned. He simply took the view that Mexico

wasn't ready for so much change so fast and allowed the government's new powers to lie on the table, unused.

So 1917 did not see any revolutionary change in Mexican politics. It did not upend the class structure or mark any major reforms. It was perhaps no more than a shift in power from one group of elites to another. There would be no land reform. Haciendas confiscated during the fighting were often returned, or handed over intact to Carranza's allies.

Dissatisfaction with Carranza's government grew, and multiple armed insurgencies, the leftover embers from the firestorm that was the Revolution, flickered back into life. I won't trouble you with the names of all of them, I'll just mention two with whom you should already be familiar. In the state of Morelos were Emiliano Zapata and his followers, still fighting his crusade on behalf of the peasants, and in the north was Pancho Villa, who had eluded the US Punitive Expedition. By this time, Villa had grown to hate Carranza with the fire of a thousand suns and was fully prepared to rebuild his army from scratch and come back to retake Mexico City.

Only, that would never happen. Revolutions don't continue until everyone is satisfied. Revolutions often sputter to a halt after only modest changes. There comes a point when all the fighting and bloodshed, all the hunger and deprivation and destruction become too much. And Mexico had reached that point. Villa himself was as feisty as ever, but he was practically the only one left.

Zapata was another story. Zapata and his movement had never accepted the Carranza government, and he kept attempting to build revolutionary coalitions with anti-government forces in other parts of Mexico through 1917 and 1918. There were none, or rather, none strong enough to coordinate with Zapata in any meaningful way. Still, the Zapatistas were a force to be reckoned with in the state of Morelos, and within that state, they had gone a long way toward implementing Zapata's demands for land reform and peasant rights. But 1918 saw the flu pandemic strike Morelos, just like everywhere else, reducing Zapata's forces. In early 1919, General Pablo González, the commander Carranza had appointed to deal with the Zapatistas, hatched a scheme wherein one of his subordinates would pretend to defect, meet with Zapata, and kill him on April 10, 1919. Zapata was 39 years old at the time of his death.

The year 1920 brought with it the end of Carranza's term of office, and if the Mexican Revolution stood for anything, it stood for the principle that Presidents do not get to run for reelection. The leading candidate to replace him was the former revolutionary general, the man who defeated Pancho Villa, Álvaro Obregón. Now Obregón had served for a time as Carranza's war minister and had been involved, much more than Carranza had, in drafting the new constitution, which, by the way, Obregón supported much more enthusiastically than Carranza did, and he made sure everyone knew it, especially the labor unions and the peasant organizations, and anyone else who felt betrayed by Carranza. He left government and retired to his hacienda, confident in his position. His revolutionary credentials were second to none. He

was more popular than Carranza, and Carranza surely wouldn't dare try for re-election, so Obregón was content to bide his time until the summer of 1919, when he declared his candidacy for President the following year. He built on his already impressive political base, reaching out to the now-leaderless Zapatistas and even to his former adversary Pancho Villa, who had no reason to love Obregón, but plenty of reasons to hate Carranza, so he signed on, too.

This was not at all the ending Carranza had in mind for his administration. He supported Ignacio Bonillas, the Mexican ambassador to the United States as his successor, with the idea that Bonillas would be merely a figurehead and Carranza would continue to control the country from behind the scenes. If you remember all the way back to episode 55, you will recall that Porfirio Díaz relied on this same tactic back in 1880, before he'd gotten brazen enough to run for reelection himself. So Carranza was following the well-blazed trail toward another Porfiriato.

The only problem was Obregón's enormous personal popularity, which was likely to win the 1920 election regardless of how hard Carranza tried to tip the scales. So Carranza tried to tip the scales in the most extreme way possible, ordering Obregón arrested on trumped-up charges of plotting an insurrection, which forced Obregón into hiding.

This totally backfired on Carranza when the northern state of Sonora, Obregón's political base, in the persons of Governor Adolfo de la Huerta and military chief Plutarco Calles, rose up against Carranza and denounced him for violating the constitution. Pablo González, the man behind the assassination of Zapata, turned on his former commander and attempted to arrest him, forcing Carranza to flee Mexico City for Veracruz in a replay of what he'd done back in 1914. That time, against all odds, he had been able to regroup and return to the capital in triumph less than a year later; this time the ending would be far less triumphant and far more ignominious. He never made it to Veracruz. He was caught and killed, or killed himself to avoid capture, depending on who you believe.

Thus was cleared the way for Obregón to be elected President virtually unanimously in 1920. By this time, even Pancho Villa had given in, now that the hated Carranza was out of the picture. He agreed to lay down his arms in exchange for a hacienda for himself and his cadre of most loyal soldiers.

[music: Castro, "El Atole" from *Aires Nacionales Mexicanos*]

Obregón was a far more pragmatic and compromising leader than Carranza. He finally resolved the ongoing guerilla war in Morelos by putting Zapatistas in control of the state government and allowing them to implement most of the Zapatista program legally. Obregón was far more labor friendly than his predecessor and implemented a degree of land reform, although not the kind of sweeping mass expropriations that the most radical Mexicans wanted to see. The Mexican economy by this time was in shambles, and Obregón, like most elite Mexicans, viewed the hacienda system as the most efficient and profitable method for raising export crops and digging Mexico out of the economic hole the Revolution had put it in. In this view, handing out small

tracts of land to subsistence farmers was exactly the wrong thing to do, because it would take that land out of export production, at a net economic loss to the nation.

The biggest foreign policy challenge facing Obregón was the United States. The US government was still angry over Article 27 and wanted any mineral interests purchased by US businesses prior to the implementation of the new constitution to be “grandfathered in” and for the Mexican government to continue to honor them. Only then would the US be willing in return to recognize the Obregón government. A deal along these lines was finally worked out in 1923.

And not a moment too soon. With his own term as President drawing to a close, Obregón endorsed Plutarco Calles as his successor, much to the annoyance of Adolfo de la Huerta, who figured it was his turn. Pancho Villa, who had kept to his hacienda and out of politics for the past few years, began making noises about supporting de la Huerta, and was murdered soon after. It’s unclear exactly who killed Villa and it’s possible his murder resulted from some personal quarrel rather than political disagreements, but what do you think? At the very least, it was incredibly convenient timing for Obregón and Calles, as de la Huerta soon began his own uprising against the planned succession. But Obregón now had the support of the United States government and access to arms and the uprising was put down. Calles was elected President, and Obregón went back to his hacienda.

This was the first time in forty years, since 1884, that one elected Mexican President peacefully surrendered the office to an elected successor, and that is no small achievement. Does it mark the end of the Mexican Revolution? That depends on where you want to draw the line. There would be one more serious outbreak of political violence in Mexico during the Calles presidency, sparked when Calles went further than Obregón was willing to go in enforcing the new constitution’s tight restrictions on the Roman Catholic Church in Mexico, leading to an uprising among religiously devout rural peasants and tacitly supported by the Church, which is known as the Cristero War, which lasted about three years until an agreement was brokered by the US ambassador to Mexico, under which the government made some concessions to the Church, in exchange for the Church ending its support for the uprising.

Most historians would draw the line at the election of Obregón in 1920 as marking the end of the Mexican Revolution. This has the advantage of making a nice, neat period of 1910 to 1920. That decade saw Madero overthrow Díaz, Huerta overthrow Madero, the constitutionalists, a loose alliance theoretically led by Carranza, overthrow Huerta, then the alliance dissolve into a civil war that ended with Carranza in control of the country, followed by the overthrow of Carranza.

That decade also saw about two million Mexicans die as a result of the political violence. Hundreds of thousands more died in the influenza pandemic, and hundreds of thousands beyond that emigrated, mostly to the United States, to escape the conflict. Then add in a couple hundred thousand more killed in the Cristero War. After that, you can try to tally up the damage to the Mexican economy.

As we look back over the panorama of early twentieth century Mexican history, two questions come to mind: *Why call it the “Mexican Revolution?”* and *What does it all mean?*

Why the Mexican Revolution? I mean, why do we even call it that? Some things changed, yes. A lot of things didn't. Were these changes “revolutionary?” Enough to justify calling it a “revolution?” How do you draw a line between “turmoil” and “revolution?”

We don't have to think of it as the “Mexican Revolution.” We could call it the overthrow of a dictator, a coup, an uprising against a new dictator, a civil war, and a second uprising, followed by a prolonged period of gradually fading political violence as order was eventually restored.

I guess that's too many words. How about this: “Mexico experienced ten years of political instability.” Or twenty. Your mileage may vary. In many other times and places, that's exactly what we would call a series of events like the Mexican Revolution: “a period of political instability.”

So does that mean that the term “Mexican Revolution” is just branding? An attempt to dress up an embarrassing phase of Mexican history to make it more palatable? If not, what exactly does it mean? What was revolutionary about the Mexican Revolution?

To dig into this question, we have to consider the inchoate idea we call “national identity” or “national character.” Nations have distinct identities. To be British, for example, is distinct from being Swedish, and not only in the obvious ways of having lived one's life on this island versus that peninsula, or of speaking English versus speaking Swedish, although language is part of it. National identity is a collection of customs and cultural traits and political and social values. I think we all understand this intuitively. If I say “English,” for example, a certain collection of behaviors and principles and values come to mind at once. One could praise the English by pointing out noble traits like respect for democracy and deference to the rule of law. One could tease the English by pointing out eccentricities like chip shops or a certain aloof humility. Or if you wanted to be nasty, you could accuse the English of a superior attitude toward foreigners or football hooliganism.

#NotAllEnglishPeople.

You know what I mean. I'm not going to bother with further examples, but I could easily come up with different but comparable sets of traits for Germans or Americans or Chinese or Nigerians. You know I could.

But where do these traits come from? That's a question we seldom think about. We simply accept them as a fact of life, like “Great Britain is an island,” or “My hair is turning gray.” There's no “why.” It just is.

But in the case of national identity, that's a false construction. National identity exists because the people of a nation create and develop an identity by consensus, and pass it on to their

descendants. A nation's identity is constructed and maintained. And it can be changed when enough people want to. The elite of a nation, its political and cultural leaders, play a major role in this process, although not an exclusive one.

It is in some sense a secular religion, a set of beliefs that bind those who accept it into a community. And a national identity is no small matter. People take up arms for it. They fight and die for it.

A cynic might look at this and conclude that I'm saying that national identity is a scam. It's a con game we all play on each other, in order to dupe our fellow citizens into behaving in ways we find congenial. I am reminded of Ralph Waldo Emerson's claim that society is a conspiracy against its own members.

The less cynical way of considering this is to think of national identity as a social contract. It asks the individual for a certain degree of conformity, but it offers in return a more peaceful and harmonious community.

A nation's history helps shape its national identity, but it isn't only the objective historical facts, it's also the interpretation of those facts. Understanding the American Revolution, the French Revolution, or the Mexican Revolution is essential to understanding the national identities of their respective nations. But revolutions are large, complicated, and messy affairs. Afterward, nations pick and choose from their revolutionary past which lessons to embrace and which examples to disregard.

And so it is with the Mexican Revolution. In the 1920s, describing the events of the previous decade as "The Mexican Revolution" was a conscious effort by a battered, exhausted and impoverished nation to draw a line and declare the turmoil over. It was an expression of a national commitment that the future would henceforth be different from the past.

The difference between a "decade of turmoil" and a "revolution" is that a revolution is revolutionary. It introduces a new ideology. It changes things. More than that, the deaths, the losses, the sacrifices are not in vain if they make Mexico a better nation. And so it was that in 1920, interim Mexican president Adolfo de la Huerta arranged the first celebration of Francisco Madero's rebellion ten years earlier, embracing the Revolution as part of the Mexican identity.

No longer will Presidents be re-elected. Yeah, that one's a given. But more than that, the Mexican state is bigger than any one President. Mexican government may still be oligarchical, but it's a new kind of oligarchy that embraces not only wealthy landowning elites with European ancestry, but also leaders of peasant organizations and labor unions.

By redefining Mexico, the Revolution gave the nation a new sense of purpose. It allowed it to stand up to its neighbor to the north. The United States may have intervened in the Revolution, more than once, but the gringos never made it to Mexico City and Mexico remains proud and

free. Remember that under the Porfirate, Mexico was wide open to US businesses and US investment. Without the Revolution, Mexico might have been reduced to an economic dependency of the United States, a kind of extra-large banana republic in the mold of Guatemala or Cuba. Post-revolutionary Mexico wasn't afraid to stand up to the US, to defy it. Indeed, in the years to come, Mexicans will sometimes adopt images of Lenin and the Russian Revolution as acts of defiance against the Colossus of the North. And in return, the political right in the United States will often accuse Mexico of closet Communism, an absurd charge, but one that will be repeated until the end of the Cold War.

And beyond that, the idea of the Revolution brought with it a new sense of unity through this new national identity. Revolutionary leaders like Villa and Zapata had moved the concerns of the common people, the mestizos and the indigenous Mexicans, onto the national agenda. The new Mexico would be more than the successor state to New Spain. It would also be the successor to the Maya and Aztec nations. The caste system inherited from the Spanish would be broken; in the veins of Mexico now flows the blood of three nations. The very idea of Mexico has become something new. And if that's not revolutionary, I don't know what is.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Katherine for making a donation, and thank you to Tom for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Katherine and Tom help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so thank you all for that. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention farther north still, for the first of four episodes about the situation in the United States. Did you know that in 1919 and 1920, the United States was on the verge of Bolshevik revolution? Actually, it wasn't, but tell that to Attorney General Mitchell Palmer. The Red Scare, next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In 1919, a 24-year old Italian immigrant named Cesare Cardini arrived in the United States. He was already an experienced chef, having learned fine cuisine in his native Piedmont in Italy, and he had three brothers who had already emigrated to North America. One ran a hotel in California, the other two were restaurateurs in Mexico City.

Cesare Cardini himself moved to Sacramento, California, where he took the name Caesar Cardini and went into the restaurant business himself. Later he moved to San Diego. Prohibition was in effect in the US at this time, but Cardini spotted an opportunity across the border in

Tijuana, Mexico. He opened a restaurant there, which could offer not only fine food but alcohol and gambling, both of which were legal in Mexico and banned in the United States. Cardini's restaurant attracted a well-to-do American clientele from southern California, including the elite of the rapidly growing motion picture industry.

But the day Caesar Cardini became immortal was July 4, 1924, Independence Day in the United States, and mobs of rich Americans from Hollywood celebrated their patriotism by slipping down into Mexico to drink cool martinis at Cardini's Tijuana restaurant on a hot, sweltering July afternoon.

Funny thing about hot weather, though. It makes people want to eat salads. And though business was booming, the restaurant was rapidly running out of salad ingredients. But Cardini rose to the occasion. He created a new salad on the spot, made up of the ingredients he still had on hand: romaine lettuce, olive oil, lemon juice, garlic, croutons, and parmesan cheese. He added in Worcestershire sauce and a coddled egg to add some extra interest, and would have the ingredients brought to your table on a cart, where the salad was tossed right in front of you, topped off with a twist of freshly ground black pepper, added at the end with a dramatic flourish.

This would become the restaurant's new house salad. Maybe it was the recipe, maybe it was the showmanship in the presentation, but his customers were delighted. Soon Caesar's Salad was all the rage among the movers and shakers of Hollywood. And in the Roaring Twenties, Hollywood celebrities were becoming the trendsetters for all America, and soon Caesar's Salad was in demand everywhere.

After the Second World War, Caesar Cardini retired from the restaurant business and went into the production of bottled salad dressings. He passed away in 1956, at the age of 60, but his line of bottled salad dressings is still sold under his name to this day.

[music: Closing Theme]