



The Mexican Revolution: A People's Revolt or a War Between Warlords?

The Mexican Revolution began in 1910 with a demand for political freedom. It soon became a struggle over land, labor, regional authority, and the future of the nation. Along the way, it also became a bloody contest among military leaders whose alliances changed and whose ambitions frequently collided.

Was it a genuine revolution or a struggle between warlords? It was a social and political revolution fought partly through rival armies and powerful regional leaders. Personal ambition shaped its course, but ambition alone cannot explain why so many ordinary Mexicans joined—or what they hoped to change.

Two figures became its most enduring popular symbols: Francisco “Pancho” Villa, commonly remembered as the “Centaur of the North,” and Emiliano Zapata, the southern agrarian leader. The nickname “Attila of the South” belonged to Zapata and originated as a hostile attempt to portray him as a destructive barbarian. It reveals as much about his opponents’ fears as about the man himself.

Timeline: From Rebellion to Constitutional Stability

- **1910:** Francisco I. Madero challenges Porfirio Díaz’s continued rule. Arrested before the election, he later escapes and calls for an uprising on November 20.
- **May 1911:** Revolutionary victories, including the capture of Ciudad Juárez, undermine the government. Díaz resigns on May 25 and leaves Mexico.
- **November 1911:** Madero becomes president. Zapata’s Plan of Ayala demands land restitution and rejects Madero’s failure to deliver meaningful agrarian reform.
- **1912:** Pascual Orozco rebels against Madero. General Victoriano Huerta helps defeat the uprising, with Villa serving on the government side.
- **February 1913:** During the Ten Tragic Days, a coup removes Madero. Huerta takes power; Madero and Vice President José María Pino Suárez are murdered.

- **1913–1914:** Carranza's Constitutionalists, Villa's northern forces, and Zapata's southern movement fight Huerta, although they do not share a single program.
- **April–July 1914:** U.S. forces occupy Veracruz. Villa's army captures Zacatecas on June 23. Huerta resigns on July 15.
- **Late 1914:** Attempts to reunite the revolutionary factions fail. Villa and Zapata align with the Conventionist camp against Carranza and Obregón. They enter Mexico City in December.
- **1915:** Obregón defeats Villa in major battles, including Celaya, shifting the military balance toward Carranza.
- **1916–1917:** Villa attacks Columbus, New Mexico. General John J. Pershing leads an American expedition into Mexico but fails to capture him.
- **February 5, 1917:** Mexico promulgates a new constitution addressing land, labor, education, and the relationship between Church and state.
- **April 10, 1919:** Zapata is assassinated in an ambush at Chinameca, Morelos.
- **1920:** The Agua Prieta rebellion breaks Carranza's government. He is killed on May 21. Villa accepts a settlement, and Obregón assumes the presidency in December.
- **1923–1928:** Stability remains fragile. Villa is assassinated in 1923, military rebellions continue, and the Cristero War begins in 1926. President-elect Obregón is assassinated in 1928.
- **1929:** The National Revolutionary Party (PNR) is founded to bring rival revolutionary factions into a common political organization. An agreement ends the principal Cristero uprising, and the government defeats the Escobar military rebellion.
- **1934–1940:** President Lázaro Cárdenas strengthens presidential authority, ends Calles's dominance, expands land reform, and nationalizes the oil industry. Revolutionary change increasingly proceeds through government institutions.
- **1940–1946 — Consolidation:** Manuel Ávila Camacho emphasizes reconciliation and national unity. In 1946, civilian Miguel Alemán Valdés succeeds him, and the ruling party becomes the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Regular presidential succession and civilian government increasingly replace contests among revolutionary armies.

The years 1910–1920 mark the revolution's principal military phase. Building a relatively stable political order took much longer, extending into the 1940s.

A Revolution Fought Through Rival Armies

The Mexican Revolution was both a struggle for social change and a contest among military strongmen. Personal loyalty and regional power shaped its armies; alliances often collapsed once a common enemy disappeared.

Yet ambition alone cannot explain the conflict. Land, labor, political participation, and national sovereignty mattered to ordinary Mexicans. Women sustained the armies as suppliers, nurses, and organizers, and sometimes fought or commanded troops. Villagers and workers pursued demands that exceeded any general's ambitions.

The revolution was real, but its leaders disagreed over its meaning, and victory did not guarantee fulfillment of its promises.

From Armies to Institutions

Stability emerged gradually. The founding of the National Revolutionary Party in 1929 created a framework for managing rival factions and presidential succession. During the 1930s, Lázaro Cárdenas strengthened presidential authority, expanded land reform, and nationalized the oil industry, advancing revolutionary goals through government.

Manuel Ávila Camacho emphasized reconciliation, and civilian Miguel Alemán Valdés's succession in 1946 marked a further shift away from rule by revolutionary generals. That year, the ruling party became the PRI.

This order brought greater continuity, but also party domination, unfair elections, and repression. Mexico's revolutionary struggles remained unresolved; increasingly, however, they unfolded through political institutions rather than competing armies.