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0521235162 - Revolution from without: Yucatan, Mexico, and the United States, 1880-1924

G. M. Joseph

Excerpt

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PROLOGUE

Yucatán receives a revolution

The Revolution appeared in Yucatán as something strange and exotic.

—Antonio Mediz Bolio

As the March morning broke full upon the white walls and dusty streets of their city, the people of Mérida braced themselves behind locked doors to receive their conquerors. Once again, Mexico was invading Yucatán.

The *huaches*, soldiers from the interior of Mexico,¹ had come earlier under Santa Anna in 1843 to “persuade” the secessionist sister republic to incorporate itself into a central Mexican nation. They returned on behalf of Juárez in 1867 to subdue the last remnants of Maximilian’s fading empire, which, appropriately, had found a final resting place in the Yucatecan capital. Now, in March 1915, as the city attempted to collect itself after a troubled night of siege, a Mexican army was about to confer the blessings of the Revolution upon the state of Yucatán.

That the Revolution had taken its time getting there – five years, to be exact – was not an accident. The Yucatán peninsula’s offside position, which permitted regular access only by sea, had traditionally isolated the state and its immediate neighbors, Campeche and the Territory of Quintana Roo, from the Mexican political mainstream. Beginning in 1910, this geographical isolation had made it difficult for home-grown revolutionaries to obtain news of the movement’s progress in the rest of the Republic.

A more compelling factor in the region’s isolation was the deep-seated reluctance of Yucatán’s rulers to join the revolutionary tide. The system of oligarchical rule, exploitation, and repression of the Indian masses that had flourished throughout Mexico under the Old Regime had gained an extended lease on life in Yucatán. Prior to the outbreak of rebellion in 1910, Yucatán’s entrepreneurial *hacendados* had constructed a multitiered coercive system that commanded the respect and envy of their counterparts elsewhere

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in the Republic. The toppling of Porfirio Díaz's thirty-four-year dictatorship at the national level had little effect on Yucatán, where local landowners could still count on the support of state and municipal constabularies, as well as their own private forces.² From 1910 to 1915, Yucatán's planter-merchant bourgeoisie, adapting skillfully to changing political circumstances, maintained a firm hold on the levers of political and economic power.³

Rarely did the tumultuous events at the national level find a resonance within the region. The local plantocracy dutifully celebrated Don Porfirio's eightieth birthday in September 1910, but few Yucatecans answered Francisco Madero's call to revolt against the despotic regime in late November. Throughout the Republic, Mexicans had watched Madero, a veritable David, stand up to the Porfirian Goliath, and thousands were encouraged or shamed into revolt. In Yucatán, several pathetic episodes of isolated rural protest flared up and expired in 1910 and 1911, but none was directly inspired by Madero's crusade to bring clean politics – "a real vote and no boss rule" – to Mexico. Madero's subsequent regime, fourteen troubled months (November 1911–February 1913) during which Mexico experimented with multiparty democracy for the only time in its history, brought only cosmetic changes to the Yucatecan political landscape, where Porfirian oligarchs conveniently transformed themselves into leading *Maderistas*.

The terrible spectacle of General Victoriano Huerta's betrayal of his president and Madero's murder in February 1913, which shook Mexico to its foundations and unleashed popular passions throughout the Republic, found no echo in Yucatán. Not only was there scarcely a ripple of protest, but the local rulers saw to it that their state won the dubious distinction of being the first to recognize Madero's assassin. The planters now called for peace at any cost and advised President Huerta to deal firmly with the rebels who had immediately opposed him, notably Emiliano Zapata's peasant Army of the South and the Constitutionalist forces in the north, led by Governor Venustiano Carranza of Coahuila. Like their counterparts elsewhere in Mexico, Yucatán's oligarchs had disapproved of Madero's gentle manner and meddlesome efforts to transform Mexico into a bourgeois democracy with freedom of speech and press and the rule of law. Moreover, they resented even the vague, modest promises of social reform that he had made to workers and peasants, perceiving that any tampering with the Porfirian Peace would ultimately give rise to anarchy.

But a restoration of Mexico's old social order was not possible

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in 1913–1914; the revolutionary tide was already too strong. More numerous and more militant than they had been in 1910, the nation's revolutionaries had also come to appreciate the shortcomings of Madero's political revolution. Almost instinctively, they regrouped under Carranza and Zapata. They intended to restore the constitutional order shattered by Huerta's coup, then implement urgent reforms in Mexico's factories and fields. Clean government was no longer a broad enough change; the revolutionary process would now go beyond the channels of regular politics. Revolutionary chiefs unwilling to entertain at least some formula for social renovation would lose out.

For the moment, Carranza's designation as First Chief seemed correct. A shrewd politician with roots in the old order, Don Venustiano Carranza had observed Madero's demise and learned the lessons of the immediate past. He was determined to dissolve the Porfirian bureaucracy and army while consolidating a strong central state, one that would *eventually* be capable of implementing change. Meanwhile, only revolutionary unity could defeat the usurper Huerta and also withstand the inevitable pressures on national sovereignty that the "Colossus to the North" would apply.

After eighteen months of struggling against the revolutionaries as well as U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's hostile administration, Huerta yielded to the rebels in July 1914. Yet even as they stood momentarily united in triumph – *Carrancistas* and *Obregonistas*, *Villistas* and *Zapatistas* – their internal divisions were painfully obvious. Almost four years after the declaration of Madero's rebellion, the configuration of revolutionary forces revealed Mexico to be a human mosaic with needs so different and often so contradictory that they virtually defied any immediate form of national organization.

Following the triumph over Huerta, two major parties – or better, two large, amorphous constellations of rival armies and bands – vied for control, each determined to manage and guarantee the future of the Revolution. On one side were the supporters of Carranza, a former Porfirian senator and *hacendado* and the founding father of the Constitutionalist movement. The *Carrancistas'* military strength lay in the Divisions of the Northwest and Northeast, led by General Álvaro Obregón of Sonora and General Pablo González of Coahuila, respectively. On the other side was the opposition to Carranza, grouped around Francisco ("Pancho") Villa, the onetime social bandit who had now become Mexico's most famous revolutionary. Villa, the "Centaur of the North,"

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commanded the Republic's largest, most successful fighting force, the Chihuahua-based Division of the North. Thus, like the *Carrancistas*, the *Villistas* were predominantly a northern movement, however late in 1914 they entered into a tenuous alliance with the *Zapatista* agrarians of south-central Mexico. The rivals also resembled each other in including within their ranks a variety of former *Maderistas*, ex-federal soldiers, and opportunists who changed sides with each shift in the Revolution's fortunes.

War between the two sides became inevitable in October 1914 when a convention at Aguascalientes of revolutionary leaders and their delegates to settle the conflict between Villa and Carranza only sharpened the animosity on both sides. There were personal tensions involved, most notably the First Chief's jealousy of Villa as a rival caudillo, but probably more important was Carranza's failure to define his position on fundamental issues, such as the agrarian question, the rights of labor, and the shape of the new political order. Northern cowboys, drifters, mule skinnners, miners, bandits, itinerant laborers and peddlers, refugee *peones* and plot holders, the *Villistas* were highly mobile, perhaps "more a force of nature than of politics."⁴ Yet as underdogs and outcasts of the great Chihuahuan expanses, they espoused a freewheeling brand of populism that clashed with Carranza's more gradualist, aristocratic notions of reform. When Villa attempted in July 1914 to obtain Carranza's approval of an agreement defining the Revolution as "a struggle of the poor against the abuses of the powerful" and committing the Constitutionalists "to implement a democratic regime . . . to secure the well-being of the workers; to emancipate the peasants economically, making an equitable distribution of lands or whatever else is needed to solve the agrarian problem," Carranza flatly declined.⁵

Like their *Villista* allies, the *Zapatistas* were also a popular movement. However, unlike the inchoate conglomeration of uprooted northern types that was *Villismo*, the *Zapatista* peasants were distinguished by their extraordinary political solidarity and local attachments. Isolated and impoverished, their traditional way of life imperiled, Zapata's agrarians stubbornly dug in, defining their purpose as the defense of their Morelos farms and villages.

The world view of the *Carrancista* leadership was alien to *Zapatistas* and *Villistas* alike and threatened them both. If the "popular" revolutionaries of *Villismo* and *Zapatismo* pursued the modest goals of the common man, *Carrancismo* aspired to greater things.

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The movement's generals, ideologues, and local chiefs were budding entrepreneurs who thought in national terms and carried out a deliberate, unequivocal strategy. Unlike the *Villistas*, who did a bit of plundering when the need or opportunity arose, or the *Zapatistas*, who fought to protect what was theirs, *Carrancista* generals sought the huge, socially acceptable fortunes that would fall to them as the legitimate future leaders of a new, modernized Revolutionary state. Having defeated the Old Regime, they would purge its bureaucratic vestiges completely, then organize their own political system, predicated upon sound principles of bourgeois reform and nationalism. Obsessed as they were with legitimacy and the forms of the modern nation-state, these "official revolutionaries" could not tolerate the anarchic style and regional orientation of their rivals.

Thus, when the *Villista-Zapatista* majority at the Convention of Aguascalientes decided to depose him as First Chief, Carranza disputed the authority of the decision, retreating with his depleted forces to Veracruz in November 1914. Although his enemies now controlled Mexico City and much of the Republic, Carranza refused to relinquish his claim to formal legitimacy. Immediately he set up his Constitutionalist government in Veracruz and, aided by a talented staff of intellectuals and politicians, promulgated a series of social reform decrees designed to win the support of nonaligned peasants and workers.

Although they held a military and political advantage late in 1914, the Conventionists – as the *Villista-Zapatista* alliance came to be called – quickly squandered it. The regionally based *Villistas* and *Zapatistas* communicated poorly with each other and found it difficult to coordinate movements of troops and supplies. Their lack of a national vision, of a plan to gain and hold state power, cost them dearly. Ironically, although their movement's origins and concerns were genuinely closer to Mexico's peasants and workers, the Conventionist leaders' failure to forge a clear national program that could unite the interests of rural and urban workers left the door open for Carranza's middle-class politicians, through skillful, opportunistic appeals, to separate the Convention from its natural allies. Among the troops that Constitutionalist General Álvaro Obregón used to launch an offensive against Villa early in 1915 were six "red battalions" of urban workers who had allied themselves with Carranza's government.

As a result of these domestic developments and President Wilson's decision to throw North American support behind Carranza

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– Villa and Zapata were obviously unacceptable to U.S. investors and policy makers – the balance of forces had abruptly shifted in favor of the Constitutionalists by mid-1915. By year's end, they would nullify the Convention as a military and political threat, reducing Villa and Zapata to defensive guerrilla campaigns in their Chihuahua and Morelos homelands. However, 1915 would be the bloodiest, most chaotic year of the revolutionary struggle, a “fiesta of bullets” according to a young journalist-participant.⁶ At Celaya in May, for example, Obregón employed trench warfare and withering machine gun fire to turn back a desperate charge by Villa's crack gold-shirted cavalymen. Thousands died or were maimed in the carnage. Intervals of peace were rare; cease-fires became events for local balladeers to sing about.⁷

Yet as *Obregonista* killed *Villista* and worker fought peasant, peace continued to rage in Yucatán. In fact, early in 1915 the southeastern portion of Mexico revealed itself to be a virtual vacuum of revolutionary activity.⁸ Riding the crest of an export boom, the planters increased their acreage in henequen fiber, and *campesinos* continued to labor like slaves on the plantations. While the rest of the Republic made war, Yucatán made money.

The local rulers had not forgotten how to accommodate new national bosses. Shortly after Huerta fell in July 1914, they provided a warm welcome to Carranza's military governor, Major Eleuterio Ávila, who was, in fact, a native son. Ávila sent a momentary shock through the peninsular bourgeoisie by reading a proclamation abolishing forced labor on Yucatán's henequen plantations, but after a series of anguished meetings among themselves and consultations with the agents of International Harvester, the monopolistic buyer of Yucatán's single crop, the planters found ways to bring their *paisano* (countryman) to his senses, and the decree was never enforced.⁹

By late 1914, then, Yucatán's rulers had managed to keep the Revolution at arm's length. Occasional flare-ups erupted and subsided in the countryside – as they had since 1910 – and discontented intellectuals continued to conjure up visions of the apocalypse in the cafés and salons of Mérida. But supportive conditions for a local revolutionary movement plainly did not exist. Only a military stroke administered from the outside could curb the political and repressive power of the *hacendados*, a fact they appreciated only too well. However, with Ávila safely under control, life in the peninsula returned to its normal rhythm, and the ruling elite began to believe it had weathered the revolutionary storm.

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As 1914 became 1915, the shifting configuration of national revolutionary politics created new possibilities in Yucatán. As Carranza and his finance minister, Luis Cabrera, became increasingly desperate for money to wage the Constitutionalist struggle against the *Villistas* and *Zapatistas*, a tighter control over Yucatán's rich henequen receipts became more desirable. When Ávila, now little more than the planters' errand boy,¹⁰ balked at Cabrera's stepped-up tax schedule, Carranza replaced him in late January 1915 with General Toribio de los Santos, a Mexican. The new governor made it clear immediately that he would not be bought and underscored the point by pressing a sizable forced loan upon the wealthiest planters and merchants. Then, playing upon traditional regional fears, he threatened to send Yucatecan soldiers out of the peninsula and announced his intention to activate Ávila's decree abolishing forced labor. De los Santos boasted to the First Chief that he had begun a campaign against "reactionaries," then taunted the *Yucatecos* that although their region "had not participated in the revolutionary movement . . . nor felt its effects," the Revolution would *now* come to Yucatán.¹¹

Stung by this first serious threat to its dominance, the oligarchy found its champion in ex-*Huertista* Colonel Abel Ortiz Argumedo, whom Ávila had appointed Mérida's military commander. Capitalizing on the discontent that de los Santos had created at virtually every level of regional society, Ortiz Argumedo united Yucatán's militia battalions behind him and ousted de los Santos and his *Carrancista* federals from the state in mid-February.¹² As de los Santos fled, he cut the telegraph wires linking Yucatán and Mexico City, a standard logistical tactic but this time infused with a special symbolic importance. For once again Yucatán was turned in upon itself, detached from Mexico and, as in the past, determined to remain so. In order to buy time, Ortiz Argumedo – now the governor and military commander of Yucatán – immediately pledged his loyalty to Carranza, then actively set about consolidating a separatist movement in the state. Moving decisively, Ortiz Argumedo declared the sovereignty of Yucatán and sent a commission to the United States to negotiate a fiber-backed loan, purchase arms, and explore the possibility of a North American protectorate – much as the Yucatecan state government had done in 1849.¹³ The big planters and merchants played an active role in encouraging the break with Mexico, contributing money to Ortiz Argumedo's war chest, and enlisting their sons in his state battalion.¹⁴

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However, roughly a month later, it was readily apparent to Yucatán's rulers that this latest separatist gambit – to be Yucatán's last – had failed. Infuriated by what he immediately regarded as a regional insurrection, Carranza quickly moved to bring Yucatán to heel. With much of Mexico still in the hands of the Conventionists, the First Chief could not afford to lose control of Yucatán's henequen riches, which, along with the customs duties of the port of Veracruz, produced the bulk of his government's income and financed the war effort. This time, as his agent of retribution Carranza chose Salvador Alvarado, one of his senior generals of division rank and the man who, next to Álvaro Obregón, was considered to be his foremost strategist and administrator. As Ortiz Argumedo rounded up what remained in the state treasury and sailed for Cuba, Alvarado's 7,000-man Army of the Southeast made short work of the *Yucatecos* – essentially an amateur band of students, merchants, and servants one-tenth the federals' size – in what amounted to skirmishes, with limited casualties at the town of Halachó and the hacienda Blanca Flor.¹⁵

So, with the Constitutionalists bearing down on the state capital that morning in March 1915, panic and terror gripped the *Meridianos*. Thousands fled, fearing destruction and pillage at the hands of the *huaches*. Revolutionary atrocities elsewhere in Mexico had been common knowledge in Yucatán, but now the stories abounded. Familiar images of miles of railroad track where each telegraph pole doubled as a gallows suddenly became horribly immediate. One eyewitness recalls:

The confusion heightened to such a degree that in those final moments one could say that there existed a "classless society": there was no aristocracy or plutocracy . . . only families who whispered prayers or made fervent supplications, imploring the saints to save their wives and daughters from the bestial instincts of the soldiers who would soon enter the city . . .¹⁶

Most fearful were the planters, who fidgeted in their town houses as they awaited Alvarado's entry into Mérida, believing that a reckoning was imminent. Many of them had already evacuated the city for the relative safety of their estates in the countryside. Several of the wealthiest members of Yucatán's oligarchy, known as the *Casta Divina* (Divine Caste), had left with Ortiz Argumedo on the steamer for Havana. Others had sailed for New Orleans or New York.¹⁷

However, as he waited with his forces outside the city, the invader did not seem anxious to play upon the fears that gripped

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General Salvador Alvarado. (From Gustavo Casasola, *Historia gráfica de la Revolución Mexicana, 1910-1970*, 2d ed., Mexico, 1973, vol. 5, p. 1675. Casasola, INAH.)

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the Yucatecan capital. To be sure, Carranza had given him a free hand. Tetchy, his patience exhausted, the First Chief had demanded the *Yucatecos*' immediate "unconditional submission," instructing Alvarado to "take whatever action against them you believe convenient" – provided henequen revenues were not jeopardized.¹⁸ Yet, Alvarado had already decided upon a strategy of leniency. Some days before, he had startled the residents of Mérida by deploying a string of airplanes – still very much a novelty in the peninsula – to leaflet the city, calling upon the *Yucatecos* to submit peacefully and explaining that he was coming to further the goals of the Revolution but would not infringe upon the rights of life or property.¹⁹ Moreover, he had already made good on his promise by personally intervening to save the lives of hundreds of middle- and upper-class youths who had been captured at Blanca Flor and Halachó and were awaiting a firing squad by order of the general's more impulsive subordinates.²⁰ Finally, Alvarado had chosen to camp on the outskirts of Mérida on the eve of 19 March and to take the city in broad daylight the following day, thereby avoiding any violence and looting that might result from a night-time occupation of an enemy town.²¹

A monumental task awaited Yucatán's conqueror. The regional poet Antonio Mediz Bolio, who would become Alvarado's friend and intellectual advisor, recalls the general's dilemma at the time he took control of Yucatán:

He found himself confronted by a land of tradition, whose internal life, sculptured drop by drop like a stalactite by the accumulation of centuries, was far removed and sheltered from the energetic reach of a revolution which had only just touched its borders . . .

The Revolution appeared in Yucatán as something exotic and strange . . . yet in spite of this, or perhaps because of it, Yucatán was one of the regions of Mexico where the Revolution was most urgently needed and would be felt most deeply . . . But first Alvarado would have to make the Revolution with his government, from above, for it could not issue from below. He would have to remake this society which, in many ways, still lived in the colonial period, and he would have to remake it down to its roots . . . He would have to be not only Yucatán's revolutionary governor but also its revolutionary mentor . . .²²

We now examine the formation of this regional society that had so stubbornly resisted the encroachment of Mexico's revolution.