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The Mexican Revolution: Peasants, Reform, and the Making of Modern Mexico

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Fall of Porfirio Díaz and the Outbreak of Revolution, 1910–1911
- **Chapter 2** Francisco I. Madero: Liberal Reform, Popular Hopes, and Political Crisis
- **Chapter 3** Huerta’s Coup and the Fragmentation of Revolutionary Authority
- **Chapter 4** Pancho Villa and the Northern Theater: War, Governance, and Banditry
- **Chapter 5** Emiliano Zapata and the Agrarian Insurgency of Morelos
- **Chapter 6** Peasant Councils and Local Power: Juntas, Cabildos, and Community Law
- **Chapter 7** Land Seizures and Occupations: Everyday Forms of Revolutionary Justice
- **Chapter 8** Revolutionary Militias, Local Institutions, and the Making of Order
- **Chapter 9** The Constitutional Process: Debates, Delegates, and the Politics of Law, 1916–1917
- **Chapter 10** The Constitution of 1917: Land, Labor, Church, and the New Legal Frame
- **Chapter 11** Carranza, Obregón, and the Contest for National Hegemony, 1917–1920
- **Chapter 12** Demobilization, Clientelism, and the Consolidation of Regional Power
- **Chapter 13** Women and Revolution: Soldiers, Organizers, and Social Change
- **Chapter 14** Urban Workers and Labor Movements: Unions, Strikes, and Revolutionary Demands
- **Chapter 15** Education, Culture, and Reform: Schools, Teachers, and National Identity
- **Chapter 16** Implementing Agrarian Reform: Ejidos, Redistribution, and Local Conflict
- **Chapter 17** Law in Practice: Agrarian Courts, Property Disputes, and Legal Pluralism
- **Chapter 18** The Calles Era: Political Engineering and Party Building, 1924–1934
- **Chapter 19** Lázaro Cárdenas and Radical Reform: Land, Oil, and State-Led Transformation, 1934–1940
- **Chapter 20** Rural Development and State Intervention: Credit, Infrastructure, and Extension
- **Chapter 21** Memory, Myth, and the Popular Imagination of the Revolution
- **Chapter 22** Comparative Regional Studies: Morelos, Yucatán, Jalisco, and Chihuahua
- **Chapter 23** International Context: U.S. Policy, Foreign Investment, and Transnational Influences
- **Chapter 24** Political Biography as Analytical Tool: Reading Leaders to Read Social Change
- **Chapter 25** Legacies and Limits: How the 1910–1940 Revolution Shaped Modern Mexico

Introduction

This book examines the Mexican Revolution not simply as a sequence of battles and changing presidencies but as a complex social and institutional transformation that remade rural life, legal orders, and state power between 1910 and 1940. Combining political biography with grounded grassroots histories, the narrative follows prominent leaders—Madero, Villa, Zapata, Obregón, and Cárdenas—while keeping peasant councils, land seizures, and local forms of justice at the center of analysis. My argument is that the Revolution's most durable outcomes were not only the acts of great men but the institutional practices—ejidos, agrarian courts, militias, and municipal councils—that mediated everyday life and created the foundations of Mexico's twentieth-century political order.

The book is organized around two interlocking priorities. First, it reads the Revolution through political biography in order to trace how national projects of reform and the personalities who led them shaped policy and rhetoric. Second, and equally important, it privileges grassroots actors and collective practices: peasants who organized councils, who seized land by night, who forged alliances across municipalities, and who contested new laws in local courts. Bringing these two lenses together shows how top-down reforms and bottom-up occupations interacted—sometimes reinforcing each other, sometimes colliding in ways that determined the character of postrevolutionary institutions.

Methodologically, the study draws on a wide range of sources: archival records from municipal and agrarian courts, contemporary newspapers and manifestos, oral histories collected in rural communities, and the rich secondary literature of Mexican historiography. Where possible I juxtapose district-level case studies with national policy debates so readers can see the texture of implementation—how a constitutional article became a contested practice in the fields of Morelos or the ranches of Chihuahua. Throughout, attention to language and rhetoric clarifies how revolutionary ideas—land to the tiller, social justice, and national sovereignty—were translated into legal forms and local actions.

The chapters are arranged chronologically but often open outward into thematic analysis. Early chapters reconstruct the collapse of the Porfirian order and the multiple uprisings of 1910–1914, highlighting how different regional logics produced distinct revolutionary agendas. Middle chapters follow efforts to institutionalize change: the 1917 Constitution, the creation of agrarian courts, and the slow, uneven process of ejido creation. Later chapters treat consolidation under Calles and the more radical reforms of Cárdenas, while tracing the cultural, legal, and political legacies that persisted into mid-century Mexico. Interspersed are focused studies of women's participation, labor mobilization, education reform, and the international forces that influenced Mexican choices.

A guiding concern of the book is to assess both the achievements and the blind spots of revolutionary reform. Agrarian law and the ejido system redistributed land and

created new forms of rural tenure, yet implementation was partial and uneven; local elites often mediated reform in ways that limited its egalitarian potential. Likewise, revolutionary institutions expanded state presence in the countryside while producing new forms of clientelism that shaped electoral politics for decades. By placing social movements and institutions in conversation, this book seeks to explain how the Revolution simultaneously dismantled old orders and produced new constraints.

I wrote this book for readers who want a comprehensive yet accessible account of the 1910–1940 revolutionary period—students, scholars, and informed general readers. Each chapter aims to combine narrative clarity with analytic depth and to foreground the voices of those who made the Revolution on the ground. My hope is that by recovering both leaders and led, and by tracing the pathways from land seizures to constitutional clauses to agrarian policy, the book clarifies why the Mexican Revolution remains central to understanding Mexico’s modern political landscape.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Fall of Porfirio Díaz and the Outbreak of Revolution, 1910-1911

The year 1910 dawned in Mexico with an outward show of stability, yet beneath the veneer of progress, a tempest was brewing. For more than three decades, General Porfirio Díaz had presided over Mexico, a period known as the Porfiriato. He had seized power in 1876, ironically, on a platform of "no re-election," only to become one of Mexico's longest-serving strongmen, maintaining his grip through a blend of political maneuvering, intimidation, and the astute use of the federal army.

Díaz's regime, characterized by its motto of "Order and Progress," ushered in a period of significant economic modernization. Foreign investment, particularly from the United States, flowed into the country, spurring the construction of an extensive railway network, revitalizing the mining industry, and developing the oil sector. Cities acquired modern amenities like paved streets, electric lights, and tram systems, and Mexico's credit rating became the envy of Latin America.

However, this prosperity was not evenly distributed. The benefits of the Porfiriato largely accrued to a small elite of wealthy landowners, industrialists, and foreign investors. The vast majority of the Mexican population, particularly in rural areas, experienced deepening poverty and exploitation. Land ownership became increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few powerful families and foreign entities. By 1894, land companies owned a fifth of Mexico's total landmass, and by 1910, some estimates suggest that 95% of peasant villages had lost their communal lands.

The dispossession of land forced many peasants into wage labor on vast haciendas, often under conditions akin to serfdom. Their traditional ways of life were disrupted, and their livelihoods imperiled. Furthermore, the shift in agricultural production from staple food crops like corn and wheat to more profitable export crops like rubber, coffee, and sugar led to increased food prices, further burdening the impoverished populace.

Industrial workers, though generally faring better than their rural counterparts, were denied the right to form unions, and strikes were frequently met with brutal force by government troops. Wage disparities were stark; for instance, Mexican railway laborers in 1910 earned significantly less than their American counterparts. This created a growing sense of grievance and resentment across various social strata, from the dispossessed peasantry to the burgeoning working class and even segments of the middle class who felt excluded from political and economic advancement.

Political liberties were severely curtailed under Díaz's authoritarian rule. The press was muzzled, political opposition suppressed, and elections were rigged to ensure his continued tenure. Local political bosses, known as *caciques*, controlled elections and maintained public order, effectively bypassing the principles of the 1857 Constitution. This closed and dictatorial political system, coupled with rapid, yet uneven, economic transformation, created a volatile atmosphere.

It was against this backdrop of widespread discontent that Francisco I. Madero emerged as a formidable challenger to the aging dictator. Madero, born into one of Mexico's wealthiest landowning families, was an idealistic liberal educated in France and the United States. He harbored a strong appreciation for democratic ideals and social justice, and by 1903, he became politically active, criticizing the widening gap between rich and poor and the repression of Díaz's critics.

In 1908, Díaz, in an interview with an American journalist, made a seemingly innocuous statement that he would welcome the democratization of Mexican political life and might not seek re-election in 1910. This statement, though quickly walked back, ignited a flurry of political activity. Madero, having previously penned "The Presidential Succession of 1910" which advocated for democratic reforms, saw an opportunity. He formed the Anti-Reelectionist Party and embarked on a vigorous campaign, gaining widespread support across the country.

Madero's popularity, however, proved to be a threat to Díaz's iron grip on power. As the 1910 presidential election approached, and it became clear Madero might actually win, Díaz had him arrested on a falsified charge of plotting armed insurrection. With his main opponent behind bars, Díaz declared himself the winner of the fraudulent election, securing his eighth term in office.

Madero, however, was not easily silenced. After being bailed out of jail by his wealthy father, he escaped to the United States, specifically San Antonio, Texas. From exile, on October 5, 1910, he issued the Plan of San Luis Potosí. This political manifesto declared the 1910 elections null and void, proclaimed Madero as provisional president, and, most importantly, called for an armed revolt against Díaz's regime to commence on November 20, 1910.

The Plan of San Luis Potosí, with its central slogan of "Effective Suffrage, No Re-election," appealed to a broad spectrum of Mexican society. It articulated the grievances of the Mexican people, emphasizing the need for democratic reforms, an end to authoritarian rule, and crucially, land reforms to address agrarian injustices. It served as a crucial catalyst, mobilizing diverse groups—from middle-class liberals seeking political representation to landless peasants yearning for social justice.

While initially, few immediately heeded the call for rebellion on November 20th, the

appeal resonated deeply. Throughout late 1910 and early 1911, armed bands began to spring up across Mexico, first in the northern states and then spreading to the central regions. The elderly Díaz's "rusty military apparatus" proved surprisingly unable to contain the spread of this guerrilla warfare.

In the north, figures like Pascual Orozco and Pancho Villa emerged as prominent rebel chiefs, leading forces that gained significant victories against the federal army, most notably in Chihuahua. Meanwhile, in the southern state of Morelos, Emiliano Zapata, whose community had suffered severe land dispossession, led a powerful agrarian insurgency, articulating demands for the immediate restoration of land to dispossessed communities.

Madero, who had initially been defeated in a battle at Casas Grandes, soon returned to Mexico from Texas and assumed leadership of the growing revolutionary movement. The revolutionary forces, a patchwork of diverse regional movements, continued to gain momentum. In April 1911, Madero, Villa, and Orozco launched an attack on Ciudad Juárez. Despite some hesitation from Madero regarding negotiations, Villa and Orozco pressed on, capturing the city on May 10, 1911.

The fall of Ciudad Juárez proved to be a decisive blow to the Porfirian regime. Faced with a rising tide of opposition and an inability to suppress the widespread uprisings, Díaz's advisors urged him to resign. On May 21, 1911, the Treaty of Ciudad Juárez was signed, formally requiring Díaz to step down. Four days later, on May 25, 1911, Porfirio Díaz formally resigned the presidency and departed Mexico for exile in Europe, bringing an end to his 35-year dictatorship.

An interim government was installed, and Madero was poised to become president after what was expected to be the freest election in the country's history. However, the departure of Díaz did not bring immediate stability or an end to the revolutionary fervor. The decision to retain the existing Federal Army and demobilize the various revolutionary forces deeply disappointed many who had fought to overthrow Díaz. The hopes and expectations of the disparate groups who had rallied behind Madero were immense and often contradictory, setting the stage for further conflicts and betrayals that would plunge Mexico into a decade of even greater upheaval.

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