

where the providential evacuation of Veracruz by the Americans gave the embattled Carranza government a temporarily safe foothold. (It has also been argued that the Americans deliberately left a large arms cache in the port, in order to assist the Carranza cause. This is unlikely: the Americans disliked the stiff-necked nationalist Carranza, finding Villa more congenial and compelling, and it seems probable that such matériel as they left was the result of cock-up rather than conspiracy—another episode in the long history of US forces mislaying military hardware on their extensive global travels.)

### The war of the winners: rationale

The scene was thus set for the final big bout of civil war (1914–15), one which, in contrast to the two previous bouts (1910–11, 1913–14), involved rival revolutionary forces, substantially similar in make-up and character. This raises a key question: what was the stake? And, by implication, a necessary counterfactual: how would Mexico have been different if, instead of the Carrancista victory which actually happened, Villa and his allies had won? There are three principal interpretations.

First, it could be argued that this was a simple battle for power between rival—yet similar—factions led by ambitious caudillos. In that sense, it did not matter much who won. While there is some truth to this interpretation (ambition and factional loyalty counted for a lot), it is by no means the whole truth. If more was at stake and the outcome did matter, the question arises: how did the factions differ—in terms of class, of ideology, of region, or of other criteria? And what did these differences imply regarding the military and political outcome? A standard interpretation, which also contains a modicum of truth, sees Villa—and his lukewarm ally Zapata—as popular leaders of peasant forces who offered a radical alternative, in contrast to Carranza and Obregón, who represented 'bourgeois' or 'petty-bourgeois' interests, thus a moderate or conservative political option. It is certainly true that

Villa and Zapata were, individually, men of the people, from peasant stock, in which respect they differed from the ex-Porfiriano *político* and landowner Carranza. (Obregón, a modest ranchero, was not so different. He also belonged to the same generation as Villa and Zapata, while Carranza was twenty years older.)

However, we must look beyond the background of a few prominent leaders. If we consider programmes, ideologies, and social support, the differences fade. The Zapatistas, it is true, were dogged agrarians, committed to land reform; but they were secondary allies of the Villistas, who were clearly the major players in the partnership. Yet the Villistas sponsored no sweeping land reform, and their official manifestos were no more radical than those of the Carrancistas—some of whom, like Salvador Alvarado, Plutarco Elías Calles, Francisco Múgica, and Lázaro Cárdenas, clearly stood on the left of the revolutionary spectrum. Indeed, when it came to labour reform, the Carrancistas had the edge: while both sides promised to improve the lot of urban workers, it was the Carrancistas who, early in 1915, struck a formal alliance with the radical Casa del Obrero Mundial ('House of the World Worker'), which led to the creation of the 'Red Battalions'—working-class detachments who fought, and fought with distinction, under Carrancista leadership.

The Carrancistas were also more strenuously anticlerical (so clerical/Catholic cities like Guadalupe clearly preferred Villa to Carranza), while the US, as well as the majority of foreign observers, came round to the view that Villa was the best bet, since he was a battle-hardened caudillo who seemed more amenable than the stubborn First Chief. So, the leftist American journalist Lincoln Steffens concluded, since Wall Street favoured Villa, Carranza deserved support.

If, in terms of personnel, the Carrancista camp included genuine radicals, there were also prominent Villistas who in no sense stood for popular power, still less socialism: José María Maytorena,



member of a prominent Sonoran landed family; Manuelito, a rancho-rebel from the Huasteca, an ally of the Anglo-American oil companies; and several members of the well-to-do Mexican family, who latched on to Villa because Carranza and his followers were hostile. Thus, if we take a broad view—beyond the leadership of the rival factions—it becomes difficult to discern a clear class or ideological split. We find radicals, moderates, conservatives, as well as bourgeois, petty-bourgeois, and petty leaders in both camps. In many cases, the Villista-Carrancista division appears to have been largely tactical: the two sides, the state of Tlaxcala, for example—were substantially similar in terms of social make-up and ideology. One final point is key: Villa's forces were, on paper, more formidable, seen as the likely winners of the impending conflict. Time-servers and opportunists—including a few ex-Federal officers—therefore went with Villa.

If clear class or ideological differences are hard to establish, that means that the conflict was meaningless, that a (counterfactual) Villista regime would have looked the same as the actual Carrancista/Obregonista one which emerged? Not necessarily. The Villista coalition was a loose, sprawling entity, embracing a wide range of social, ideological, and regional components, from Zapatistas on the Left to clerical, business, and ex-Federal Army interests on the Right. Furthermore, Villa's central control was partly by choice, tenuous. The alliance with Zapata produced an effective joint military action. Self-styled Villistas in the centre and south waged their local wars under a political flag of convenience. The very size of the Villista coalition made it unwieldy and decentralized.

Furthermore, while Villa—like Zapata—had plenty of smart, educated advisers who urged national policies upon him, his inclination was to focus on Chihuahua and the centre-north, without producing a blueprint for national government. (Zapata even more clearly, retreated into Morelos, happy to attend

cockfights, father children, and preside over a radical local land reform.) The Carrancistas, in contrast, ran a tighter ship: their coalition, though smaller, was more centralized, with Carranza at the political helm and Obregón in control of the army (an army built around a strong Sonoran core). The Carrancistas rolled out a blueprint for centralized rule: they cut a deal with organized labour (hence, the Red Battalions); they confiscated church assets; they adopted a stern nationalist attitude towards the US (which contrasted with Villa's relaxed compliance); and they dispatched politico-military expeditions to the distant south-east—Yucatán, Oaxaca, Chiapas, states hitherto peripheral to the national revolution—in order to establish central control, to extract revenue, especially from Yucatán's profitable henequen industry, and to bring the benighted south—as they saw it, sometimes in racist terms—into the progressive revolutionary fold. Carrancista 'proconsuls', such as the Sonoran Salvador Alvarado, sent to govern Yucatán, were embodiments of the Carrancista/Sonora/northern commitment to centralized national government, which would ram through radical—land, labour, and anticlerical—reforms, even in the face of local opposition.

Thus, irrespective of the relative radicalism of the warring factions, a key point of difference was the Carrancistas' commitment to centralized rule, which contrasted with the Villistas' relaxed tolerance of regional and sectoral heterogeneity. We can hypothesize that a counterfactual Villista regime, while it would certainly have accommodated some radical pockets (such as Zapatismo), would also have coexisted more happily with conservative and Catholic interests (in Jalisco, Oaxaca, the Huasteca), and would have been less likely to enact the kind of state-building and nationalist reforms which came about thanks to the Carrancista/Sonoran victory (see Chapter 6). The question in 1914–15 was not whether Mexico would go down a mythical road to radical socialism under Villa rather than (petty-?)bourgeois reformism under Carranza; it concerned, rather, the nature of the state and its relation to both civil society and foreign interests.



## The war of the winners: denouement

The outcome was determined in a series of major conventional battles fought in the Bajío region of centre-west Mexico in the spring and summer of 1915: Celaya, León, and Aguascalientes. Extensive fighting occurred elsewhere, notably at El Ebanero, where the Carrancistas successfully defended their control of the oil region inland from Tampico, using trench-warfare tactics typical of the Western Front. But the key encounters in the Bajío involved the principal armies of Villa and Obregón—both experienced, well-organized revolutionary forces, possessed of stout morale and numbering about 50,000 in total, the Villistas enjoying a distinct but not overwhelming advantage. Such major conventional battles needed constant supply by train (so, railway communications were key to the campaign as it unfolded); the Villistas enjoyed access to the US border, while the Carrancistas could import by sea to Veracruz. Though both sides faced occasional shortages, the outcome was not determined by the supply of munitions; nor did it reflect broad public opinion (which seems to have leaned to Villa or even active social support (the Carrancistas fielded some 600 armed workers—the Red Battalions—who fought effectively, but their participation did not determine the outcome).

The result, rather, depended on Obregón's superior generalship backed by a sound logistical system: his ability to supply and deploy his army as it advanced north into hostile Villista territory and his military skill—perhaps genius—in the choice of terrain and tactics. Villa, who in 1913–14 had won his battles against armies of Federal conscripts, now faced a fellow-revolutionary who was a better general, leading confident, well-organized troops. At Celaya, Obregón stationed his forces among the canals and irrigation ditches outside the city, where his infantry, including machine-gunners, could cut down repeated Villista cavalry charges. Again at Trinidad/León—the key battle—and the final

Villista defeat and debacle at Aguascalientes, the Carrancistas resisted successive, impetuous attacks, before going on to the offensive and winning the day. Villa was advised to temper these rash and repetitive tactics, but he paid little heed. In war as in politics he had his own way of doing things—he was no plebeian puppet—but his swashbuckling approach, a sharp contrast to Obregón's cerebral generalship, proved disastrous when it came to conventional battles involving World War I military technology.

## The Carranza government: challenges and responses

By the end of the summer of 1915, Villa's army was broken and Villa himself was reduced to hit-and-run campaigns in the far north and north-west. Thanks to Obregón, Carranza had won; and his victory was franked by US diplomatic recognition in October. Preoccupied with events in Europe, the Wilson administration thus resolved—reluctantly—to endorse Carranza: a decision which Villa, hitherto tolerant of US interests, understandably saw as a perfidious betrayal. His scattered forces took reprisals against Americans, killing some seventeen at Santa Ysabel, then launching a violent, if futile, raid on the US border town of Columbus, New Mexico. The attack—the first foreign armed incursion on American soil since 1812—inevitably provoked a US military response (1916 was an election year, when Woodrow Wilson sought, and won, re-election).

Resisting red-blooded demands for a full-scale invasion, Wilson sent the so-called 'Punitive' Expedition into northern Mexico, its mission to pursue and eliminate Villa (see Figure 5). It failed. Villa, intimately familiar with the terrain, eluded pursuit; meanwhile, the expedition caused serious tensions with the new Carranza government, while endowing Villa, whose popularity was fast dwindling, with an aura of macho patriotism. But neither





5. Uncle Sam tries to discipline a wayward—and suitably swarthy—juvenile—Mexico, while Cuba, the Philippines, Nicaragua, and Panama, who are all the better (and the whiter) for having had the treatment, look on approvingly.

Wilson—aware that America's entry into the European War might be imminent—nor Carranza, governing a prostrate country, could countenance a full-scale war and, early in 1917, the expedition was withdrawn, its mission unfulfilled.

Villista raids and US intervention were not Carranza's only headaches. Zapata and his allies fought on, despite severe military repression. The south, chafing under the imposed 'proconsular' rule of northerners, remained restive and, under the leadership of local elites, the state of Oaxaca briefly seceded from the Federation. More broadly, conservative interests—landlords, ex-Federal officers, provincial elites, and foreign business—lent support to Don Porfirio's nephew, Félix Díaz (last heard of fleeing from the wrath of Huerta in 1913), who became the figurehead of a swathe of loosely counter-revolutionary (so-called 'Felicista') forces, chiefly in the south. These rebel forces, combined with a plague of mercenary banditry, severely compromised the regime's control of the country.

Apart from such armed challenges, Carranza headed the bankrupt government of a ravaged economy and a war-weary people. The flood of paper money produced hyperinflation, with all its attendant social consequences: a minority with access to hard currency (via exports) prospered, while the majority had to contend with depreciating paper and, eventually, a barter economy. Rich families, already threatened by land and labour reform, saw their fortunes evaporate, their property being seized or snapped up by parvenus with access to gold, dollars, or political power. The geographical mobility provoked by the Revolution—extensive campaigning, migration, and the flight of refugees to cities like the capital—was complemented by enhanced social mobility, the product not just of political renovation, but also socio-economic upheaval.

The labour movement, decisively boosted by the Revolution, now fought defensive battles to maintain falling living standards; the Casa's pact with Carranza soon came under strain, the Red Battalions were disbanded, and, when a general strike was called in Mexico City in August 1916, the government broke it by force. Meanwhile, the economy reached its nadir, a year or two after the fighting had peaked. The railways, still under military control, were in a parlous state and the banks' assets had been seized by a desperate government. Some export sectors—such as oil and henequen—remained buoyant, helped by wartime demand, but staple production slumped and dearth was widespread; 1917, historically celebrated as the year of the new Constitution, was known at the time as the 'year of hunger'. Armed conflict, material hardship, and spatial mobility also fostered disease, typically typhus—the classic disease of warfare—and, in 1918, the Spanish influenza pandemic, which, striking a war-weary and malnourished population, killed perhaps a quarter of a million Mexicans (this in addition to half a million victims of revolutionary warfare). Oral accounts of the Revolution remind us that, for many contemporaries, this was a time, not of joyful political advance, but rather of desperate struggle for subsistence.



Collective war-weariness helped the fragile regime survive. And bandits might defy the state, but they could not overthrow it. Meanwhile, Carranza and his allies struggled to survive and forge a new revolutionary legitimacy amid the ashes of the old regime. We know, with hindsight, that they succeeded—even quite decisively—but at the time this could not be foreseen. The infant Carrancista regime operated on two levels, displaying something of a schizoid character which would endure for decades in Mexican politics. Informally, the 'Constitutionalists' relied heavily on military force and repression; they controlled the police as best they could, and, in the noisy nursery of infant political parties (the single official revolutionary party did not emerge until 1929), they promoted their own people and marginalized their enemies—including revolutionaries who had backed the wrong horse in 1914. Graft and corruption were common, facilitated by state control, or regulation, of large swathes of the economy: banks, railways, and some productive assets, such as the henequen of Yucatán or the booming oil industry, which was subjected to tighter control and heavier taxation. Madero's old dream of consensual liberal democracy was never realized. At the same time, however, Mexico's new leaders needed to garner popular support, to live up to—or, at least, not systematically traduce—the rhetorical claims to social reform and popular emancipation.

## The 1917 Constitution

The creation of a new Constitution was therefore a key goal, which would legitimize Carranza's administration, while setting out the Revolution's social-reformist stall. The condition of the country hardly allowed fair and free elections; furthermore, Mexico's new masters were determined to ensure that they controlled the Constitution-building process. Political enemies—Villistas and Zapatistas, as well as old Porfiristas—were proscribed and the Church, increasingly aggrieved by Carrancista anticlericalism, played no part. The *constituyentes* (elected representatives) who gathered at Querétaro in late 1916 were, therefore, Carrancistas

to a man (and they were all men). However, the Carrancistas themselves were not of one mind. Carranza himself sought a rapid return to constitutional rule, envisaging a new charter that would roughly replicate that of 1857 (moderate, liberal, democratic, mildly anticlerical, with a smidgen of social reform thrown in).

But Carranza was out of step with popular demands and even with his own more radical allies, such as Obregón. The moderate draft which the First Chief and his chosen ideologues presented was mauled, amended, and substantially radicalized. The resulting Constitution of 1917 retained the political architecture of 1857 (a liberal-democratic federal and presidential polity), but acquired radical provisions debarring the Church from politics and primary education, while providing generous provisions for workers (Article 123: the 'Magna Carta of Mexican labour') and, most significantly of all, declaring, in Article 27, the 'social function of property', which gave the state the power to override private property rights in order to restrict/regulate foreign investment and enact sweeping land reform. Oddly, amid the long and loquacious debates held at Querétaro, Articles 123 and 27—the social provisions which made the Constitution one of the most radical of its time—were noddled through in haste, while the anticlerical measures provoked fierce debate—roughly, between moderate liberals and radical *comecuras* ('priest-eaters'), who had come to regard the Catholic Church as the Revolution's greatest enemy.

Carranza, though hardly enamoured of the radical document which emerged, at least had his Constitution and could thus be elected constitutional president, in an anodyne and closely controlled poll. At the same time, a new Congress, embodying the diverse currents of (Carrancista) opinion was elected, soon showing itself more than ready to defy the president's shaky authority. But, for all the radical rhetoric of Querétaro, reforms were slow in coming. While there had been an extensive *de facto* land reform during the years of armed upheaval, Carranza was reluctant to validate such measures (especially where they were



the work of Zapatistas and other enemies) and, during his short presidency (1917–20), he stalled on agrarian reform. Indeed, in some cases he sought to restore land to erstwhile property-owners. But he could not halt the agrarian movement, which now began to adjust to the new dispensation, as armed revolt gave way to semi-legal politicking. The labour movement, too, saw few immediate benefits; but plenty of Carrancistas (among them Obregón and Calles) were fully aware that the unions were promising political allies who should be cultivated rather than repressed.

Fortunately for Carranza, the economy was now fast recovering helped by wartime demand for Mexican oil, minerals, and henequen. After the disaster of 1917, harvests picked up, as well as consumer demand. By 1920, the economy had recovered its prerevolutionary level, affording a solid platform for the next administration. The clear consensus was that Obregón, the great Napoleonic victor of the Revolution, would head that administration. Carranza, again, showed himself to be out of touch. He attempted to impose his preferred, but unpopular, civilian candidate, provoking widespread military opposition. Carranza fled the capital and, en route to Veracruz, was slain—or, perhaps, committed suicide. Obregón was elected president and inaugurated what would be known as the 'Sonoran dynasty', a regime which carried the stamp of its north-western origins. The last violent change of government in the long revolutionary cycle had happened; thereafter, though political conflict continued, the state would never again suffer armed overthrow. The Revolution was here to stay.

## Chapter 6

# The Institutional Revolution: The Sonoran dynasty (1920–1934)

### A politico-economic overview

During the decade of armed revolution, events—revolts, coups, battles—came thick and fast; since they were both cumulative and consequential, they demand, and have received, narrative treatment. After 1920, as political stability was painfully achieved, it becomes possible to adopt a more thematic and structural approach, focusing on the main features of the new revolutionary regime as it evolved. However, things still happened: serious military revolts and a bitter war between Church and State in the 1920s; then, the external shock of the Great Depression of the early 1930, which had a powerful impact on the course of the now institutionalized Revolution. This chapter will therefore focus on the evolution of the Revolution—the Revolution in power—during the 1920s. Then Chapter 7 will examine how the Depression produced a lurch to the left and the last great reformist administration of the revolutionary period, that of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40).

The overthrow of Carranza in 1920 was quick and relatively bloodless. Carranza died and many of his closest supporters escaped into exile. But the fundamentals of the regime remained much the same: in effect, the rebellion clarified the situation by allocating power to those who had won the Revolution—the