

A Revolution in Mexico (Overview)

Prelude to Revolution

Mexico won its formal independence from Spain in 1821. Over the next 33 years, 44 different governments were put in place to achieve the aims of a very select group of citizens—generally large landowners or those with commercial interests. Each time a government seized power, it was amid great strife and often, great bloodshed. However, there was one consistent thread that ran through those turbulent years. The poor were getting poorer and their lives harder by the day. Private class interests had achieved such power that the government could do very little to curtail local abuses of **peasants** by landlords who sometimes acted as if they were kings in their own private kingdoms. By the eve of the 1910 presidential **election**, **revolution** was brewing throughout the various states in Mexico. The **Mexican Revolution of 1910** was unique in the 20th century because its driving force came from the peasants and other poor citizenry rather than the military or upper classes.



Many Mexicos

At the time of the beginning of the revolution, it could be said that there was not "one" Mexico but many, each with its own needs and classes of people. In the northern area, unrest in the border state of Chihuahua was due to discontent among the many laborers who worked on the cattle ranches and in mines. The legendary revolutionary leader and bandit **Pancho Villa** led an army of the poor, many of whom were former settlers and military colonists who wanted social change in the form of better wages, working conditions, education, and protection against greedy commercial or private interests.

In the southern Mexican state of Morelos, **Emiliano Zapata** led a peasant army of Yaqui Indians and Mexican sharecroppers who were revolting against the expansion of the huge sugar **plantations** that were systematically robbing smaller farmers of land and water rights. That continual dispossession of their land had fueled confrontations between the **hacienda** owners and the Indians for decades and led to widespread suffering. As a result, sweeping land reform as outlined in Zapata's Plan of Ayala was the thrust of the revolt in southern Mexico.

Peasant Armies Work Together

Liberal reform politicians were working to overthrow the government of **Porfirio Díaz** and called for a national revolt. Both Zapata and Villa responded by capturing important cities in their respective areas, which forced Díaz into **exile** and allowed a new government to be established that promised greater reform in many social areas. Unfortunately, the new government proved ineffective, so the revolution continued at various levels of intensity for several more years. In 1917, a new **constitution** was created that incorporated far-reaching labor and social reforms. It took until 1920, however, before Mexico was able to enjoy some semblance of stability in its government. More than 2 million people died during the Mexican Revolution, most of them poor farmers and laborers who had come together to fight or were simply caught up in the cross fire between revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries. For those who fought, the Mexican Revolution was a proactive movement powered by the powerless and set the tone for many labor-related movements throughout the 20th century.

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1. One of the side issues during the Mexican Revolution of 1910 was the immigration to the United States of Mexican nationals fleeing the conflict. A similar situation exists today with people fleeing conflict in Latin America. Should the United States offer relaxed immigration laws for people trying to escape violent conflict in their own countries?

2. Pancho Villa is a hero in Mexico even though some people in the United States considered him to be no more than a brutal criminal who was in the right place at the right time. Why do you think there is such a difference of opinion about him?

3. One of the reasons early attempts at social reform failed in Mexico was that although the government redistributed the land to peasants, it did not provide the education and training the peasants needed to be successful. Can you think of any examples in today's society where something similar to that situation might happen?
