



Villa and Zapata: A History of the Mexican Revolution

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Recounting the decade of bloody events that followed the eruption of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, Villa and Zapata explores the regional, international, cultural, racial, and economic strife that made the rebels Francisco (Pancho) Villa and Emiliano Zapata legends. Throughout this volume drama colludes with history, in a tale of two social outlaws who became legendary national heroes, yet—despite their triumph and only meeting, in 1914, in the Mexican capital—failed to make common cause and ultimately fell victim to intrigues more treacherous than their own. 16 pages of black-and-white photographs bring this gripping narrative to life. "McLynn ... tells it so well ... you can hear the strains of the Mexican patriotic standard 'Zacatecas' as you read it."—Austin American-Statesman "An admirably clear account of the chaos of revolution, its rivalries and bloody struggles...."—The Spectator "Informative and insightful ... feels less like a history than a great story, as exciting as a Saturday serial Western."—Publishers Weekly

Villa and Zapata: A History of the Mexican Revolution Details

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From Reader Review Villa and Zapata: A History of the Mexican Revolution for online ebook

Daniel says

with barely any mention of Ricardo Flores Magon or his PLM (save for one or two paragraphs), I found this history to be sorely lacking. But it was fascinating to learn about these two figureheads of the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Mike says

Brilliant! Before I started this book, I had a general working understanding of the Mexican Revolution and a basic idea of both Villa and Zapata. For 400 pages, this was a page turner. The descriptions and revelations of both Zapata and Villa and how their lives played out in the context of the Mexican Revolution were terrific. Highly regarded for anyone interested in the Mexican Revolution.

F.R. says

The Mexican Revolution is a subject I knew very little about before I picked up this tome. Therefore the challenge of the book was to give me a detailed account whilst never underestimating the depths of my ignorance. Undoubtedly it was successful on both counts.

Focusing on the dual stories of the passionate rogue Villa (who fought in the North) and the humourless son of the soil Zapata (who fought in the South), McLynn takes the readers through the many twists and turns of the Mexican Revolution. This is a history of big characters – indeed a lot of the less famous players in the revolution are also incredibly memorable – spreading violence through a wide landscape. (Be warned this is a bloody book, with the number of fatalities seeming head spinning at points.) It is though a human story and McLynn brings to life the worlds these men lived in, and shows why they felt the need to do what they did.

Villa and Zapata only met twice, and that over a three day period. The book charts how they got to that moment, with the whole of Mexico there for the taking, before falling back to banditry and guerrilla warfare in the hills. It is a snapshot of history, one which doesn't really offer any hints as to the legacy the revolution has on Mexico today, but as snapshots go it is vivid and alive.

(Of course one shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but my edition is illustrated by a very expressive photo of the two men. Villa looks ebullient, with Zapata withdrawn and somewhat suspicious. Obviously there weren't many shots they could choose from, but the cover does seem an excellent summing up the men's personalities.)

Anna says

I blithely started reading 'Villa and Zapata' thinking it would be fun to learn about a revolution I had no familiarity with at all. As I got into it I realised that, a) when you know practically nothing about the history of a country, much more concentration is required to understand what was going on, and b) Mexico's revolution could just as accurately be described as a decade of bloody and unremitting civil war. As a consequence, I found this book very interesting and informative, as well as hard work and depressing. McFlynn manages to clarify the complex dynamics of the various factions, however the majority of the book reads as a military history. A succession of battles with escalating death tolls characterises the events of 1910 to 1920 and all the major figures ended their lives with multiple massacres under their belts. As the title suggests, Villa and Zapata are the focus and their extraordinary lives are vividly evoked.

This is not just a 'Great Man' history, though. McFlynn also explores the relationship between America and Mexico at the time (fraught), the impacts of WWI on Mexico (surprisingly economically positive), and the political philosophy of Zapatismo (Zapata being the only figure who really had such a thing). It may sound silly, but one particularly strong aspect of the book was conveying just how huge and diverse a country Mexico is. For someone like me who is familiar with reading about revolutions in much smaller Western European countries, this was a striking aspect of the Mexican Revolution. McFlynn comes to the conclusion that Villa and Zapata's movements ultimately failed because neither wanted to rule Mexico, alone or together. Each was ultimately most concerned with his own region. In some ways I was surprised that neither turned around and declared regional independence, however I assume there were reasons in the earlier history of Mexico why this was not considered an option.

One aspect of the revolution that I felt wasn't given its due in 'Villa and Zapata' was the role of women. The fact that a lot of women fought in the factional armies comes up several times, however the only women who merit actually being named in the narrative are relatives and mistresses of the major male figures. All the leaders of factions either raped and murdered women themselves, or encouraged their soldiers to do so, or both. I felt that the female fighters deserved more attention, although I assume less documentary evidence of who they were and what they did probably survived. That always seems to be the way. Nonetheless, the book does do justice to the impact of the revolution on the population at large and their waxing and waning loyalties to various figures. It is not a happy tale, though. At the end, McFlynn has to specifically explain what changed as a result of the revolution, as superficially it exchanged one autocrat for another after a decade of vicious war that absolutely devastated the whole country and killed up to a million people. I wouldn't call the whole thing enjoyable, however once I worked out who was who it was fascinating.

Simon Wood says

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I presume Frank McFlynn is a workaholic of Stakhanovite proportions. The range of subjects, both historical and biographical, and the number of books he has written is astonishingly large. Nor is he limited to a particular period, or place, as is testified by the diversity of his output which includes books on the Norman Conquest, the Young Pretender, Napoleon, the 1756-63 Franco-British War, the opening of the American West and Henry Morton Stanley. In "Villa and Zapata" he sets himself the task of telling the history of the Mexican Revolution with the focus on two of its principal participants, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata.

The Revolution kicked off in 1910 with an insurrection by the high-pitched, vegetarian theosophist Francesco Madero. Madero was essentially a Liberal, and aimed to over-throw Porfirio Diaz, the dictatorial ruler of Mexico since 1876. Having achieved this, not least with the military efforts of Pancho Villa, Madero

turned out to be a remarkably weak ruler, and before long was assassinated by the deeply unpleasant General Huerta, and Mexico was plunged into a decade long war motivated in part by ideals, and in part by personal ambitions.

McLynn strikes a good balance between telling the story of the Revolution and the story of his two main protagonists. Zapata is by the far the more impressive of the two, his peasant revolution in his home state of Morelos is described by McLynn and the constant pressure, and the many dilemmas Zapata faced, in trying to ensure its survival are evocatively detailed. Villa is a much more volatile character, often brutal, then compassionate, a remarkably versatile guerrilla fighter who went on to fight large scale battles in a crude and crass manner.

The regional diversity, and the accompanying pressures they exerted on events, are well detailed. McLynn also covers the international context, in particular that of the United States, and its many interventions, including the landing in Vera Cruz and the invasion of Northern Mexico in order to hunt Villa down; the many battles fought in the course of the Revolution, including the campaigns of pacification, and some of the singular aspects to the fighting including the use of dynamite and locomotives as weapons of war. McLynn has also included some remarkable photographs of the era, in particular those of Emiliano Zapata, which are eerily haunting. The maps unfortunately, despite a thank-you in the preface for his map-man, are far from brilliant.

Frank McLynn tells the story of the Mexican Revolution in an energetic prose, that is always readable, and hard to put down. Out the handful of McLynn books I've read this is the most satisfactory; if it has a fault, it is probably that he appears a little over confident of his opinions, though he does lays the evidence before the reader when he is giving those, and in general they seem reasonable. Well recommend for those interested in Revolutions, or Latin America.

Gayla Bassham says

Really interesting narrative history of the Mexican revolution, focusing on Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. The book is riveting because McLynn really brings all of these historical figures to life. Highly recommended.

Rachel Jackson says

The Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 is one of those events in history that I'd heard about vaguely but never with much detail, despite Mexico being next-door neighbors with the United States. Somehow still, despite being interested in the modern Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) indigenous movement, I never knew anything about its namesake, Emiliano Zapata. I picked up *Villa and Zapata: A History of the Mexican Revolution* hoping to change that and learn more about the man who inspired this movement that I very much support today.

Against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution, Zapata and his equally infamous pseudo-partner-in-crime Pancho Villa became legends for the feats of guerrilla warfare and resistance they championed during that tumultuous ten-year period. Frank McLynn's book uses these two men as the main players (along with Madero, Obregon, Carranza, etc.) who were constant presences throughout the years of the war and strife

caused by the uprisings. Both Villa and Zapata had strong influences in their years of activity, for wildly different reasons: Villa was a fairytale hero of sorts, a swashbuckling adventurer with a charismatic appeal and a taste for action; Zapata was a more reserved, calculated man determined to fight for his ancestral home and the peasants who lived there.

Knowing that I support the EZLN, it's not difficult to deduce that I was a fan of McLynn's portrayal of Zapata, for the most part; I found his character and personality to be much more compelling than Villa's. Although both men were similar in certain ways, in particular many of their vices for womanizing and violence, and how they became somewhat paranoid, delusional cult of personality leaders toward the end of their lives, Zapata's narrative seemed much more in tune with the ideals of the revolution. However, McLynn seemed to favor Villa in his own book, focusing more on Villa than he did on Zapata. I realize that both of these men are surrounded by myth and legend, so some of the true events and stories of their lives might not be the most reliable, and information is limited. But I was disappointed that Zapata was put on the backburner when his movement seemed to be the stronger of the two men's.

Still, Zapata is just one man of many in the story of the Mexican Revolution, and McLynn does a fine job in detailing the chronology of that decade-long event. From the initial overthrow of the Diaz dictatorship to the disappointment of Madero's policies to the brutal regimes of Huerta, Carranzo and Obregon, McLynn tells a captivating story of the chaos that Mexico was plunged into during this period in time. I had no idea that Mexico was filled with so many different ideologies, topographies and economies, all of which contributed greatly to the upheaval in that decade—of course all large countries are diverse, but McLynn described the differences from one region of the country (for instance, Sonora or Chihuahua to Morelos and Veracruz) so adeptly that it put the setting into much more context for me.

Villa and Zapata was certainly a good primer for basic information about the Revolution. There were many people, places and events to follow, but even as someone barely in the know about the Mexican Revolution at all, it was a fairly simple and interesting read. I found myself shocked by some of the things McLynn describes, not only the barbarism from the guerilla warriors, but also some of the actions of the U.S. military when the violence and war came too close to the U.S.-Mexico border. It's a subject rich with information and what-if possibilities in history, and I feel much more knowledgeable about the history of Mexican politics and revolution, especially as a backdrop for the entire 20th and 21st centuries.

Spencer says

It was a bit of a challenging read for me. Mexican history, written by a Brit with occasional British slang or colloquialisms—e.g. cocked a snook—and the fact that I know very little about Mexican history. The Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 was brought about primarily by the fact that President Porfirio Diaz, ruling from 1876-1911 could not come up with a succession plan. Approaching 84 he was exiled to Paris one year into the revolution, and a chain of Presidential changes that would last for twenty years was on.

The story is told through the point of view of the guerilla fighters, who were from the rural areas, with emphasis on Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, who were considered "Social Bandits". They were very colorful characters, had little military training or formal education, but they were cunning, bold and at times ruthless. They were the right people for the right time in Mexico's checkered history. Neither one ever commanded more than 20,000 troops at a time, and they spent the bulk of their time recruiting fresh troops, as the attrition rate was quite high. Machineguns were finally going into mass production, their technology had been greatly improved, and they were playing a very significant role in modern warfare. Villa and Zapata were two of the early adapters of dynamite for warfare. Hand grenades, barbed wire, accurate rifles,

and even a few airplanes were seen in this primitive area.

Mexico was a very Macho country in the first decades of the twentieth century. Men ruled, especially in the countryside where the guerillas fought. Women followed the troops, primarily for companionship. Evening sounds were frequently punctuated by sounds of childbirth, as well as loud sounds of conception. Villa and Zapata were judged to be "Serial Polygamists"—getting married on a Friday night and walking away on Monday morning as bachelors.

The war did not affect everyone in Mexico. The Urban areas, which had only 20% of the population at the time, was relatively untouched. And though the court system and the constitution did enjoy some enhancements, the major accomplishment was that of significant agrarian land reform.

The American Expeditionary Force that invaded Mexico in May of 1916 was an interesting episode. General Pershing took a force of 7000 troops 350 miles into Mexico, ostensibly to capture Pancho Villa, who was inexplicably conducting raids against American border towns. He received worldwide attention for these daring and foolish acts. Hollywood was even making movies about him, in which he enthusiastically participated. The search lasted for 7 months with no success and 500 American deaths. When the US pulled the last man from Mexico in January 1917, it was time to send the seasoned troops off to Europe for our entry into the Great War. Germany was not too worried about the US entry into the war, for they were a force that couldn't even defeat a Mexican bandit, according to German commanders

There were never more than 100,000 troops in uniform at any one time, but because of the high attrition rate it has been estimated that more than 1.5M troops died. Firing squads were a daily occurrence. Summary killing at point blank range on village streets was routine. It was common practice to "take no prisoners"—thus killing all captives. Those that were released were let go with the understanding that they must not return to battle. To ensure that this didn't happen one of their ears was cut off, making them marked men. I had to keep reminding myself that this was taking place in the Western Hemisphere in the 20th century, and yet it was so savage. Very few of the leading characters died in bed. Assassinations were *de rigueur* for most of them.

The book was too long in my opinion. My review of the events of the book took me to Wikipedia, which was much more clear as it was not cluttered with so many place names and personalities.

Bill Zarges says

Actually read about 14 pages. Just couldn't get interested in the author's style

Hancock says

This is a very good popular history of the Mexican Revolution. Ostensibly it is well researched based on the thirty two pages of sources. It would have earned five stars except for the following failings.

* It's 400 pages contain not one footnote.

* The use of hyperbolic descriptions: "By the beginning of 1917 the revolutionary energy in Morelos was on surge power." P. 88.

* Bizarre author opinion or unreferenced comment by a source: "This psychological peculiarity of many despots... is in fact more indicative of a fragmenting personality in an uneasy relationship with outer reality."

* Frequent use of idiom that may be incomprehensible to some readers: "Magaña finally ran Villa to earth in November.... P. 246. Based on the context I believe that the author tried to communicate that Magaña was finally able to meet Villa in November.

* Frequent use of Latin and French words and phrases and obscure literary references.

* The occasional use of cheap devices that attempt to retain the reader's attention like the following line that ends one chapter and, ostensibly, encourages the reader to continue reading (p. 312): "Nobody would have guessed that he [Villa] was about to launch an endeavor that would make him front-page news across the world."

Jefferson Coombs says

I learned from this book. I came to respect Zapata more and Villa less. Interesting read.

Alex says

Pretty good. The book's main weakness is that it tries to be both a biographical narrative **and** a historical overview of the Mexican Revolution. True to its title, I know, but sometimes the details of Villa's and Zapata's lives only line up well with one or few events of the revolution in a given time, making some sections of the book flow better than others.

Rica says

This is a historical non-fiction book packed with an incredible amount of detail, but it reads like a novel. It is clear that the author spent a significant amount of time researching his subject, and was able to mold those details into a fascinating read. In the Conclusion Frank McLynn compares the Mexican Revolution to the Iliad, and it really was an epic tale!

Mike Nemeth says

Francisco "Pancho" Villa and Emiliano Zapata were two of the most colorful revolutionaries of their time. They both were impressive horsemen, military strategists and womanizers. But they took on the

establishment to improve the lot of their countrymen. Mexico back in 1910 under strongman Porfirio Diaz was backward almost to the point of medieval Europe. Debt peonage still existed, where poor workers were forced to work to repay debts that ever could be repaid. The hacienda system prevented the rest of the country from moving forward economically, and the haciendas' rivalries with communities over land threatened to remove all independent collective ownership. Author Frank McLynn uses Villa and Zapata to tell the tale of the Mexican Revolution, which stretched a decade and tore up the country and made heroes and villains of a lot of its leaders. The tale is much like a telenovella. McLynn writes the stories not like a stodgy academic but more like he's telling the story around a campfire. It's an adventure novel. The main characters are tragic heroes. We know they die at the end. But Zapata and Villa are truly amazing in their ability to survive. Zapata wanted rural land reform and created the Plan of Ayala, explaining his vision. He wanted to end the inability of the common man and woman to better themselves. Villa wanted land reform as well. He wanted a place to settle down and make a living, perhaps as a butcher. In 1915, had the two a better idea of how to work together, they could have run the country. But neither wanted ultimate power. They just wanted change. In the end, both were betrayed. Both got exceedingly paranoid and more savage in their battles. But the book makes it clear how far Mexico had to go and why now it's still trailing other countries. Neither of these two won the war.

Maximilian Gerboc says

I've always been fascinated by the Mexican Revolution, but apart from some major ideas, I was admittedly ignorant of the details, largely due to the complex enormity of the struggle. This is a very good book because it gets into the preludes to the Revolution as well as the nitty gritty of the Revolution itself, all while being quite readable. For anyone who is interested in this era of Mexico's history (or contemporary Mexico, as the Revolution still echoes in many of the country's current events), I recommend this book. My only complaint is bad editing - typos and inconsistencies in basic spelling of Mexican names are peppered throughout.
