

Zapata Fights in the Mexican Revolution

The Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910, was a long and messy affair. Factions formed and reformed. One-time allies became enemies. Assassination of opponents served as a tool of politics. The underlying causes of the revolution included a growing gap between rich and poor and the fact that a small number of wealthy families owned the land, while most of the rural people had no land and were desperately poor.

The revolution began with a revolt against Porfirio Diaz, who had ruled as dictator since 1876. Revolutionaries formed armies and battled against first Diaz and then, when he fled, his successors. The first of those successors was Francisco Madero, a northern landowner and political moderate who was elected president of Mexico in November 1911.

Emiliano Zapata led an arm of the landless in southern Mexico. At first, Zapata and his followers sided with Madero, but they soon turned against him. The Zapatistas (as Zapata and his followers came to be known) demanded immediate steps to take land from the rich and distribute it to the landless. In December 1911, they set forth their political goals in the Plan of Ayala. This was named for the town of Villa de Ayala, in southern Mexico, near the village where Zapata had grown up.

Ayala, November 21, 1911

We who undersign, constituted in a revolutionary junta to sustain and carry out the promises which the revolution of November 20, 1910, just past, made to the country, declare solemnly before the face of the civilized world which judges us and before the nation to which we belong...,propositions which we have (formed) to end the tyranny which oppresses us and redeem the fatherland from the dictatorships which are imposed on us...

...The revolutionary junta...will admit no transactions or compromises until it achieves the overthrow of the dictatorial elements of Porfirio Diaz and Francisco I. Madero, for the nation is tired of false men and traitors who make promises like liberators and who on arriving in power forget them and (establish) themselves as tyrants...

As an additional part of the plan we invoke, we give notice: that (regarding) the fields, timber, and water which the landlords, (political leaders), or bosses have (taken over), the pueblos (villages) or citizens who have the titles corresponding to those properties will immediately enter into possession of that real estate of which they have been (robbed) by the bad faith of our oppressors...

In virtue of the fact that the immense majority of Mexican pueblos and citizens are owners of no more than the land they walk on, suffering the horrors of poverty without being able to improve their social condition in any way or to dedicate themselves to Industry or Agriculture, because lands, timber, and water are monopolized in a few hands, for this cause there will be (seized one third) of those monopolies from the powerful proprietors of them, with prior (repayment) in order that the pueblos and citizens of Mexico may obtain ejidos (communities in which people own land in common, as among native people in pre-Spanish times), colonies, and foundations for pueblos, or fields for sowing or laboring, and the Mexicans' lack of prosperity and wellbeing may improve in all and for all...

Regarding the landlords, political leaders, or bosses who oppose the present plan directly or indirectly, their goods will be nationalized (taken over by the government) and the two third parts which (otherwise would) belong to them will go for (compensation for) war, pensions for widow and orphans of the victims who (fall) in the struggle for the present plan...

Once (the revolution is) triumphant, ...a junta of the principal revolutionary chiefs from the different States will name a temporary President of the Republic, who will (hold) elections for the organization of the federal powers...

The principal revolutionary chiefs of each State will designate in junta the Governor of the State to which they belong, and this appointed official will convoke elections for the due organization of the public powers...

We are not (egotists intent on gaining power), we are (supporters) of principles and not of men!

Mexican People, support this plan with arms in hand and you will make the prosperity and well-being of the fatherland.

Liberty, Justice, and Law

Signed, General in Chief Emiliano Zapata; Generals Eufemio Zapata, Francisco Mendoza, Jesus Morales (and many more names)...

This is a true copy taken from the original. Camp in the Mountains of Puebla, December 11, 1911. Signed, General in Chief Emiliano Zapata.

Review Questions

1. Why did the Zapatistas dislike Porfiro Diaz and Francisco I. Madero?
2. What did the Zapatistas believe caused widespread poverty in Mexico?
3. How did the Zapatistas plan to eliminate poverty?
4. What does the word "nationalize" mean?
5. Why did the Zapatistas favor nationalizing the property of their opponents?
6. What type of government did the Zapatistas promise to establish if their revolution was successful?