

Pancho Villa

An Agrarian Statesman

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Francisco (Pancho) Villa is one of the most remembered and best known men in the history of twentieth century Mexico, particularly of the 1910 armed movement. Born June 5, 1878 in Coyotada, Durango, his parents worked as sharecroppers on the haciendas of one of Durango's great landowners. According to Arnaldo Córdova, this experience led Villa to the conclusion that Mexico's fundamental problem was land, particularly the concentration of land in a

few hands. Because of this, in the revolution, he always showed great concern for making decrees, proposing agrarian reform laws and putting them into practice: a key example of this was the General Agrarian Law, written in 1915.

THE MAN

Events forced Villa to run away from his birthplace and live outside the law, a circumstance that would separate him from his mother and brothers (his father

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was already dead). He joined a group of bandits and changed his name from Doroteo Arango to Francisco Villa; he never had the opportunity to go to school. Perhaps this was what made him practically a fanatic about the importance of education.¹ Villa scholar Friedrich Katz tells us that despite his scant education, he was not without ideology and that his set of ideas was not by any means limited to his hatred of the oligarchy.²

Villa was strong of body and did the rough work of the countryside.³ A paradigmatic trait of his personality from his youth, according to Francisco Almada, was that he was energetic and violent, and never allowed himself to be humiliated by anyone.⁴ His experience with exploitation and being on the run from the law nurtured in him an enormous resentment against the rich as his enemies and the enemies of the others of his class.

He was a man of contradictory feelings, charitable, loving and respectful at the same time that he was capable of having all prisoners of war executed during his time as a revolutionary. When living in the city of Chihuahua, he had schools built and housed street children in boarding schools. According to historian Enrique Krauze, he also created a fund to give scholarships to needy children.⁵

The general neither drank nor smoked, but he was famous as a ladies' man. In fact, using fake priests and judges, he "married" several different women. But he never forgot the children he had with them, and supported and raised them. Villa would be remembered, then, for his controversial personality, changeable, indomitable, going from wrath to sentimentality from one moment to the next.

As governor of Chihuahua, he occupied himself with organizing the public administration; he confiscated the property of Victoriano Huerta supporters, founded the Bank of Chihuahua, had paper money printed and, although he only spent a month in office

(from December 8, 1913 to January 8, 1914) he continued to govern through the military governors he appointed after him.

His ability to understand, help and defend common people earned him recognition as a revolutionary who supported laws and improvements for the inhabitants of Chihuahua and nationwide.

THE MILITARY MAN

Villa received his first military training as a forced recruit, escaping to live as a fugitive. Later, he joined the forces of Don Francisco I. Madero, where he rose to the rank of colonel. His military activities were greatly aided by the experience he had garnered as a fugitive from the law. Repentant of having participated in the insubordination of Pascual Orozco's in February 1912, he published a manifesto and joined the government forces, concretely the Division of the North, under the command of General Victoriano Huerta, where he was appointed brigadier general. However, he had serious clashes with Huerta and was on the verge of being shot, when he was saved by Madero's brothers. After this incident, Villa was imprisoned in Mexico City, where he escaped and fled to the United States. He later returned to raise an army to fight Huerta, who had assassinated President Madero and Vice President José María Pino Suárez in February 1913. In 1914, after many battles in the constitutionalist army, Villa was named division general. In April of that year, conflicts broke out between Villa and Venustiano Carranza, the head of the Constitutional Army, because of statements the latter made about the U.S. occupation of Veracruz. A short time later, in September 1914, Villa withdrew his recognition of Carranza as head of the Constitutional Armies.

THE AGRARIAN STATESMAN

Arnaldo Córdova says that Villism's essence and ideal rest on the rural poor's profound need for land, an unleashed natural force, and a vague utopia of the future Mexico. With secular roots, although perhaps fresher and younger than those of Zapatism, the needs expressed

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by Villism were not limited to the demand for land, although that was the basis for all the rest.⁶

The agrarian reform was the central, recurring theme both of Villa's public statements and of his government newspapers. The press was very important to him: General Villa himself encouraged the foundation of several newspapers like *Vida Nueva* (New Life) and *Periódico Oficial* (Official Gazette) because he recognized the enormous power of the written word. According to Katz, Villista newspapers constantly reported on agrarian reform measures taken by revolutionary officials in other parts of Mexico.

General Villa's dream was to give land to the uprooted of the North who, without leaving the army, would give a new meaning to the homeland, as he conceived of it. Córdova quotes an interview with John Reed in which Villa said, "All over the Republic we will establish military colonies of veterans of the revolution. The state will guarantee them land to till and will establish industries to give them work. They will work three days a week, and hard, and the other three days they will receive military instruction."⁷

The General Agrarian Law is probably one of Villism's most important agrarian documents. It was proclaimed in León, May 24, 1915, and signed by Francisco Villa, commanding general of operations of the Conventionalist Army.

The law has 20 articles and several introductory remarks. These remarks state that Mexico's source of wealth is its land, concentrated in very few hands and much of it uncultivated. For this reason, the poor need to take up arms to remedy the situation and distribute it equally. Among the law's important articles are Article 1, which states that peace and large tracts of privately-owned land are incompatible; it asks that the states fix the maximum size of what will be called private land, an amount that cannot be exceeded except in certain

cases indicated in Article 18. Article 3 declares that it is in the public interest to break up the excess land of all large tracts. Article 4 announces the expropriation of lands around indigenous towns. Article 6 announces the expropriation of springs, dams and all other water resources. This law was not ratified or put into practice since Villa's military defeat meant the decline of Villism.

In essence, these and many other articles of the law are a reflection of an ideology that centered on and favored the people, the poor and the marginalized. This was a very important facet of General Villa that shows his qualities as an agrarian statesman. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Education was of primary importance for Villa. Many of his political acts demonstrate this: he founded schools and was of particular help to the school of nursing in Chihuahua; he also insisted that children should go regularly to school.

² For more about Friedrich Katz's research on Villa, see *Imágenes de Pancho Villa* (Mexico City: Ediciones ERA-Conaculta-INAH, 1999) and *Pancho Villa* (Mexico City: Ediciones ERA, 1999).

³ He bought and sold cattle in the city of Chihuahua. However, given his lack of education, he did not hesitate to steal cattle at the first opportunity, something for which he was roundly criticized.

⁴ Francisco R. Almada, *Gobernadores del estado de Chihuahua* (Chihuahua, Chihuahua: Centro Librero la Prensa, S.A. de C.V., 1980).

⁵ Enrique Krauze, *Francisco Villa. Entre el ángel y el fierro* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987, p. 42). He was perpetually concerned about children; besides educating them, whenever he had the chance to be with them, he treated them very tenderly.

⁶ Arnaldo Córdova splendidly explains the ideals of Villism in different works, like *La ideología de la Revolución Mexicana. La formación del nuevo régimen* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales-UNAM, 1988).

⁷ These military colonies, as conceived of by General Villa, were not accepted by some of his followers and unfortunately they were never created. The closest thing to them was the organization of his hacienda, Canutillo, in his last years. Arnaldo Córdova, op. cit., p. 159.