

Memory and Oblivion Agustina Ramírez and María Zavala: Two Women And Two Wars in Mexico

Ana María Saloma Gutiérrez*

In general, people think that in wars, women play only secondary roles supporting the troops, cooking or washing clothes. In the best of cases, they are given technical tasks considered unimportant, reaffirming their traditional roles: acting as nurses, obtaining and filtering information, working as couriers or spies, doing propaganda, and acquiring sympathizers and resources. They are also imagined giving soldiers food, clothing, and ammunition, and, of course, satisfying emotional and biological needs either voluntarily or involuntarily, including entertaining the troops.

Despite the fact that the importance of these tasks and many others is underestimated, they have always been strategic for any army to be able to function. Nevertheless, women leaving the sphere assigned to them by tradition, that confined them to the world of the family and the home, has always been noteworthy: very often they have filled in for men in different jobs they left behind by going to the front. This was the case in the United States during World War II, for example, when the massive incorporation of women into production and the service sector became particularly important.

People also think that, exceptionally, some women have taken on roles considered exclusively reserved for men, like leading armies. The lives, for example, of women like the Pharaoh Hatshepsut or Boudicca, the leader of the Iceni, who led a revolt against the Roman legions stationed in Britain, or Queen Zenobia of the Palmyrene who defied the Ro-

man Empire, read as almost fantastic tales. However, women have always participated in wars both in the rearguard and on the front lines.

Historical narratives about women's actions are scarce. As historian Michèle Perrot has pointed out, to better understand historical processes, women and their activities visible have to become visible.¹ It is a complex task to recover the memory of women, their relationships with men, and their participation in society, not as simple spectators or victims, but as active people who make decisions and contribute with their actions to the construction and transformation of their societies.

Until recently, it was uncommon for historians to concern themselves with analyzing humanity's past identifying the relationships among economic, social, political, and cultural factors. Neither did they take the time to narrate what was going on among the so-called marginal groups (peasants, workers, slaves, women, children, the elderly, those with disabilities, ethnic or political minorities, or those with different sexual preferences). Only infrequently did historiography deal with what wars implied for the civilian population or the troops. Thanks to the theoretical perspectives proposed by Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Georges Duby, Eric Hobsbawm, and E. P. Thompson,² a whole new panorama has opened up to new themes, marginalized social sectors, and even the possibility of asking questions like: Why have women been invisible? What do wars imply for them? How do they live? How do they affect them?

Wars are one of historians' favorite topics. In their writings, men's activities occupy the foreground as military and political leaders. Nevertheless, in wars, endless numbers of

*Professor of the UNAM School of Philosophy and Letters History Department.



For Agustina, it was not enough to give up her sons to defend their homeland: she also asked to be allowed to follow the troops to care for the wounded, bury the dead, and be close to her family.

events have not been talked about and, if they were, most of the time they would testify to the tragedy they represented for their participants, usually ordinary people. These are the individual stories, or the stories of small groups, that make up the general histories. Among these specific narratives, I would like to share two that took place in Mexico. The first is that of Agustina Ramírez and her family, who fought in the War of the Reform (1857-1861) and the French intervention.³ The second is that of María Zavala, nicknamed “the Destroyer,” who participated in De La Huerta’s rebellion from 1923 to 1924.⁴ There is very little information or specialized work about these women, also the case of many others who helped build this country; this reveals the on-going existence of an interpretation of history dominated by a male outlook.

SILENCE

Silence is the name of a tango written in 1933 by Horacio Pettorossi, Alfredo Le Pera, and Carlos Gardel. The words tell of a mother who lost her five sons on France’s battlefields during World War I. It could also have been dedicated to

the mother of the five Sullivan brothers, killed in World War II, and to Agustina Ramírez, the mother of the 12 Rodríguez brothers who fell defending the Mexican republic.

Let us briefly remember the case of the Sullivan brothers, which prompted the United States to establish the policy that immediate relatives could not serve in the same unit. On January 13, 1942, the brothers George, Francis, Joseph, Madison, and Albert enlisted in the military and asked to serve together. They were assigned to a light cruiser, the USS Juneau, deployed to the Pacific. November 13, the first day in the Battle of Guadalcanal, was a tragic day for 680 men, among them, the five Sullivan brothers. Three of them died when the ship was torpedoed, and the other two fell into the sea and died a few days later. To this day, this story is registered as the largest family loss suffered in a single battle.⁵

ANNA AGUSTINA’S STORY

The story of Anna Agustina de Jesús Ramírez Heredia and her family is no less bitter than that of the Sullivan family. The events took place in nineteenth-century Mexico during the gloomy years when the country was immersed in constant internal wars, the product of power clashes between Liberals and Conservatives. As if the domestic problems were not enough, the nation also had to face conflicts with other countries, like the second French intervention.

Anna Agustina was the daughter of an indigenous couple from Puebla who had migrated to Villa de Mocerito, Sinaloa, where she was born September 1, 1813. Her father, José Margarito Ramírez, fought in the War of Independence with the Mexican army. In mid-century, the Liberals, headed by Ignacio Comonfort, decreed the Laws of the Reform (1856-1857), separating church and state. In response, the so-called Conservative political group expressed its opposition and proclaimed the Plan of Tacubaya, named after the town where the plan had been announced, and began the War of the Reform in 1857. Agustina’s husband, Severiano Rodríguez, was a soldier on the Liberal side. Unfortunately, he died in the Battle of Loma de Mazatlán, Sinaloa, on April 3, 1859, leaving Agustina a widow with 13 children to care for.

The War of the Reform had barely ended in 1861 with the Liberal victory and President Benito Juárez's entry into Mexico City when that same year internal disputes between Liberals and Conservatives erupted again. This time, however, they were accompanied by the foreign intervention sparked by President Juárez's moratorium on the foreign debt: England, Spain, and France signed the Convention of London establishing an alliance to intervene in Mexico. Once the three nations' fleets arrived in the port of Veracruz in 1862, negotiations began with the Mexican government. The English and Spanish came to an agreement with the Juárez administration and withdrew from the Gulf of Mexico; the French, however, decided to remain in the port and occupy the country.

The Liberal Juárez government's straits became even worse when the Conservatives, headed by José María Gutiérrez and Juan Nepomuceno Almonte managed to convince Ferdinand Maximilian of Habsburg to accept the crown as emperor of Mexico. Maximilian obtained the support of Emperor Napoleon III in the form of his troops in Mexico, and more soldiers to be sent to consolidate the occupation. Belgian and Austrian troops were added to the French occupying army, which advanced through Mexico as far as the state of Sinaloa.

President Benito Juárez sent out a call to defend the republic that was answered by Republican Colonel Francisco Miranda Castro, who was near Mocorito. The Sinaloa government issued a call for men to join the Mexican army. So, on a June morning in 1861, the widow Agustina Ramírez came to the colonel with her 13 sons to enlist the 12 oldest in the Republican army. Their names were Librado, Francisco, José María, Manuel, Victorio, Antonio, Apolonio, Juan, José, Juan Bautista, Jesús, Francisco—the second with that name—and Eusebio, the youngest, who did not join up.

For Agustina, it was not enough to give up her sons to defend their homeland: she also asked to be allowed to follow the troops to care for the wounded, bury the dead, and be close to her family. In the following years, from 1863 to 1866, all 12 of her sons fell in battle.

When the republic finally won the day, Agustina's life was not an easy one: to survive as a widow, she occasionally worked as a domestic servant. In 1869, she managed to get



María Zavala, "The Destroyer," on the railroad tracks (1915).

Casasola Photo Archive

The times that María Zavala lived in created circumstances that prompted a break with traditional roles, making many women take on tasks normally reserved for men; and her nickname, image, and activities broke with all the stereotypes of her time.

the state of Sinaloa to award her a pension of Mex\$30 a month, but she received it for only one year. She had to wait for the fourth Congress to get more economic support in the form of a single payment of Mex\$1 000. In 1873, Agustina petitioned for the state to continue paying her a pension; however, the local government transferred the matter to federal jurisdiction. Despite the fact that the federal Congress agreed to give her a pension of Mex\$150 a month, Agustina never received it: she died of a fever in Mazatlán, Sinaloa, February 14, 1879.⁶ In 1954, the Sinaloa state Congress acknowledged Agustina and her family's service to her homeland, declaring her an honored citizen and inscribing her name on the wall where Congress sessions.

THE DESTROYER

One very little-known figure is María Zavala, "The Destroyer." Despite the very little existing information about her, what there is would be enough to write a fascinating novel or film script: either would show us a fresh view of how unconventional women might have lived their lives

under war conditions in the second decade of the twentieth century.

Certainly, the times that she lived in brought with them circumstances that prompted a break with traditional roles, making many women take on tasks normally reserved for men. And María Zavala was a person whose nickname, image, and activities broke with all the stereotypes of her time.

The records that remain about María “The Destroyer’s” activities deal with her performance during the rebellion of De la Huerta (1923-1924), sparked by a break in the so-called “Sonora Family,” made up of Álvaro Obregón, Plutarco Elías Calles, and Adolfo de la Huerta. The break came about because Álvaro Obregón, as head of the group and president of the country, decided to support Plutarco Elías Calles in his bid for the presidency and not Adolfo de la Huerta. De la Huerta and his followers then decided to rebel. Zavala joined the rebellion; we still do not know her reasons or whether she joined voluntarily or under duress.

How many stories are waiting to be rescued to not only reconstruct an individual history, but to better understand the social processes of the past and overcome the predominantly masculine discourse of conventional historiography?

The information we have is that María carried out two very different kinds of activities inside the De la Huerta rebel group: she was a traditional healer, caring for the wounded using herbal medicine and prayer; she helped dying soldiers by anointing them with holy oils, a task the Catholic Church reserves for priests, that is, males; and she prepared the bodies of the dead for burial. And, on the other hand, she contributed to the cause by carrying out a rather more unconventional task, particularly for a woman of her time: she dynamited train tracks.⁷ This is probably how she got her nickname, The Destroyer.

If we look closely at María’s photograph, we will see a woman with enigmatic features, who could have been indigenous or mestiza with a pronounced indigenous heritage, a strong, almost virile face; large hands and feet; of medium height; wearing pants, a piece of clothing that at that time in Mexico was eminently masculine and very unusual for women to wear. She is seated on the train tracks, holding some plants in

one hand. In this photo, we can see one of her bundles wrapped in a shawl, but what it has inside is undistinguishable: is it dynamite?

The cases of Agustina Ramírez and María Zavala, The Destroyer, are just two of the many that have emerged down through Mexican history. We have some information about these two figures, but how many stories of men and women are hidden in the archives waiting to be rescued from oblivion to not only reconstruct an individual history, but, with that, better understand the social processes of the past and overcome the predominantly masculine discourse of conventional historiography? ■■■

NOTES

¹ Michèle Perrot, *Une histoire des femmes est-elle possible?* (Paris: Éditions Rivages, 1984).

² Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre were the founders of the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* (Annals of Economic and Social History), which lent its name to the Annales School of history. Among his many works, Georges Duby, one of this school’s outstanding members, and Michèle Perrot compiled *Histoire des femmes en Occident* (A History of Women in the West). Eric Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson belong to the Social History Current, which proposes the need to study all sectors of a society, the activities they carry out, and the relationships they establish among each other, doing what it calls “total history.”

³ The War of the Reform, also known as the Three Years War, lasted from December 17, 1857 to January 1, 1861. It ended with Benito Juárez’s entry into the nation’s capital. This armed conflict was fought between the two sides Mexican society was divided into: the Liberals and the Conservatives. [Editor’s Note.]

⁴ This rebellion was begun by Adolfo de la Huerta against President Álvaro Obregón and his hand-picked successor, presidential candidate Plutarco Elías Calles. [Editor’s Note.]

⁵ The information about the Sullivan brothers is from <http://historia.mforos.com/681756/5952082-los-hermanos-sullivan/>, accessed October 31, 2010.

⁶ Unfortunately, Agustina Ramírez lived her last days in poverty, supported only by public charity, and was buried in the Mazatlán, Sinaloa Public Cemetery potters’ field. See http://www.congresosinaloa.gob.mx/murodehonor2/agustina_ramirez.htm, accessed November 11, 2010. [Editor’s Note.]

⁷ John Mraz, “Más allá de la decoración: hacia una historia gráfica de las mujeres en México,” *Política y cultura* 1 (fall 1992), pp. 155-189, <http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/redalyc/pdf/267/26700112.pdf>.

FURTHER READING

Parcerro, María de la Luz, *Condiciones de la mujer en México* (Mexico City: INAH, 1992).
Scott, Joan Wallach, *Género e historia* (Mexico City: FCE/UACM, 2008).