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PREVIEW

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COUNTERREVOLUTION IN MEXICO: FELIX DIAZ AND THE
STRUGGLE FOR NATIONAL SUPREMACY 1910-1920

by

Peter Van Ness Henderson

A THESIS

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TITLE

"Counterrevolution in Mexico: Félix Díaz and the Struggle
for National Supremacy: 1910-1920"

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INTRODUCTION

Within the past two decades, an increasing number of scholars have focused their attention on the phenomenon of the Mexican Revolution for several reasons. First, the geographical proximity of Mexico to the United States, as well as the diplomatic and military conflicts between the two nations made Mexican history a natural target for North American scholars. Secondly, the Mexican Revolution appears to be the prototype of the democratic social revolution in Latin America. Finally, an abundant treasure of documentation and contemporary writing await the interested scholar. Unfortunately, only in recent years have scholars turned to the documents; with the end result that much of what has been written on the Mexican Revolution previous to 1940 serves only to mislead the interested reader and uncritical writer.

For many years, Mexicanists felt obliged to explain their ideas in terms of the so-called pro-Revolutionary school. As such, these writing devolved into polemics. In general, works of this genre eulogized the heroes of the Revolution, men like Francisco Madero and Venustiano Carranza, and denounced the men who constituted their opposition; soldiers such as Victoriano Huerta and Félix Díaz, and even so-called traitors like Pascual Orozco. With the exploration of newly discovered archives in recent years, or as more

Mexican families yield their ancestor's papers to interested scholars, some of the generalizations hypothesized by the pro-Revolutionary school have been increasingly questioned. Within the Mexican scholarly community, for example, the monumental Historia Moderna de México, compiled by Daniel Cosío Villegas and his colleagues at El Colegio de México, has sought to revise historical writing on the porfiriato.

Recent historical writings have sought to disprove the pro-Revolutionary school's simplistic attempt to divide Mexican revolutionaries into heroes and anti-heroes. Michael Meyer's biographies of Pascual Orozco and Victoriano Huerta, and Victor Niemeyer and Anthony Bryan's studies of Bernardo Reyes have all demonstrated in some respects these figures exhibited as much sympathy for Revolutionary aims as did Francisco Madero and Venustiano Carranza. Félix Díaz, denigrated for his revolts against Madero and Carranza, has also been castigated by the pro-Revolutionary school. Like the other so-called anti-heroes, however, Don Félix believed in social reform at least to the same extent as did Madero and Carranza.

Consequently, it appears that what divided Revolutionaries in the period after 1910 was simple power politics, rather than a disagreement over social goals. The national leaders, whether they were Francisco Madero or Félix Díaz, had their roots firmly entrenched in the Porfirian socio-economic system. After 1910, all capable political figures realized that the masses had become politicized to such a degree that a return

to the Porfirian system would be impossible. Instead, these national leaders sought to control the outcome of the Revolution, and to prevent, or at least limit, the extent of the social reform. Many politicians, like Carranza and Emilio Vásquez Gómez, for example, used agrarian reform as a political issue to attract necessary mass support, but once in office these men did everything possible to thwart the fulfillment of the lower classes' social demands. Carranza, for example, tried to prevent the implementation of the social revolutionary Constitution of 1917, the only positive step taken toward social reform during the first decade of the Mexican Revolution.

Félix Díaz, too, utilized these tactics to win lower class support throughout his revolutionary career. The nephew of the former dictator quickly learned that appeal to the Porfirian aristocracy would not enable him to regain a position at the head of the Mexican political system. Instead, beginning in 1912, Don Félix adopted several of the agrarian planks proposed by other political leaders. Although this preliminary step proved modest, at least in comparison to Emiliano Zapata's demand for agrarian reform, Don Félix slowly radicalized his program, as he became increasingly aware of the need for lower class support. By 1916, he had revised his program to such an extent that he appears to have evolved into a full-fledged agrarian reformer. Because of his background and his continued support from former Porfirians, it must be recognized that the entire agrarian reform platform

was a ploy for political support, and not a sincere expression of radical belief.

Another recent characteristic of Mexican Revolutionary historiography has been the examination of the secondary figures of the revolutionary period. The aforementioned study of Pascual Orozco, and a soon to appear biography of Abraham González, the maderista Governor of Chihuahua, are some of the first steps being made in this direction. Félix Díaz, in many respects played a secondary role during much of the Mexican Revolution. At first overshadowed by Bernardo Reyes as a counter-revolutionary leader, Don Félix later let himself be downtrodden by Victoriano Huerta, who in many respects usurped Don Félix's natural role as the leader of the former Porfirian aristocracy. Only in the latter stages of the violent revolution did he again emerge as the most significant Porfirian politician, but by that time much of his former support had died or fallen victim to advanced age. As a secondary figure, Félix Díaz has special importance, because his continual presence in revolutionary ranks from 1910 to 1920 lends a certain cohesion to the struggle that is otherwise is lacking.

A final interest in recent decades has been the exploration of regional history during the Revolutionary era. Instead of portraying the Revolution as a single organized struggle against a central government, Mexicanists have come to realize that the goals of the Revolution differed in each region. Even within states, regional differences affected the

Morelos from 1910 to 1920.

Mexican scholars, too, have become aware of the importance of regional studies. In the past decade, the Biblioteca del Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana has published a number of works of varying quality describing the Revolution in several states. Despite many inadequacies, Alfonso Francisco Ramírez's recent work, Historia de la Revolución Mexicana en Oaxaca, provides a basic outline of events in Oaxaca during the revolutionary period. Félix Díaz descended from a family which had long played a prominent role in oaxaqueño politics. Because of his father's role in signing the Constitution of 1857, the elder Díaz, even today, has his portrait hung in the gallery in the National Palace. Don Félix capitalized on his father's and his uncle's popularity in certain areas of the state, and this gave Don Félix a patria chica from which he could operate during much of the Revolution. A secondary objective of this study, therefore, will be to examine Don Félix's role in the complexities of Oaxaca politics during the early years of the Revolution.

outcome of various movements. Yet historians should have recognized this phenomenon much earlier. For centuries regionalism dominated the country, prompting Leslie Byrd Simpson to entitle his famous work Many Mexicos. Colonialists like William B. Taylor have pointed out that even basic institutions such as landholding differed greatly in various regions of the country. Although Porfirio Díaz superficially removed regional caudillos by subjecting them to a central authority during his long dictatorship, caudillismo enjoyed a renaissance during the Mexican Revolution.¹ In a time of chaos and confusion, centralizing agencies lost their control over the periphery, and many geographical entities generated their own caudillos, who remained loyal to their particular patria chica.

One of the first studies to explore the regional Revolution was Michael Meyer's work on Pascual Orozco. Throughout his revolutionary career, Orozco exploited his patria chica, the state of Chihuahua. Perhaps the most successful endeavor in the field of regional revolutionary history has been John Womack's prize winning book, Zapata and the Mexican Revolution. More than a mere biography of one of the better known revolutionaries, Womack's work examines the history of the campesino and the agrarian revolution that occurred in the state of

¹In this work, all foreign words will be underlined the first time that they appear.

CHAPTER I

THE PRIVILEGED YEARS: FELIX DIAZ AND THE PORFIRIATO

Death came quickly to the eighty-seven year old general. In the last four months of his life, Félix Díaz developed cancer, and the valiant revolutionary lost his final battle. Still, his biographer comforts his readers by stating that his subject, unlike another unsuccessful nineteenth century military figure, Antonio López de Santa Anna, did not die forgotten by his former adherents.¹ Several important porfiristas or their descendants attended the funeral, and Luis Licéaga himself pronounced the funeral oration. The old general must have felt gratified to have died where he had spent so much of active political career, in the state of Veracruz.

Félix Díaz had fought hard to spend the remainder of his life on Mexican soil. In 1934 he had hoped that the increasingly right-wing dictatorship of Plutarco Elías Calles would permit him to quit his foreign exile for native shores. For some reason, however, the Calles government refused Félix Díaz's petition to re-enter the country.² Perhaps the enmity

¹ Luis Licéaga, Félix Díaz, (Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1958) pp. 870-878.

² This information is contained in a classified document in the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. I utilized the card catalogue to determine the basic content of the document.

between revolutionary factions had not entirely healed, or maybe Calles resented Don Félix's role in the cristero rebellion. During his term as President, Calles sought to enforce the anti-clerical provisions of the Constitution of 1917. The clericals and ardent Catholics resisted government restrictions, and eventually an armed movement broke out under the slogan, "Viva Cristo Rey", hence the name cristeros.

Díaz's petition enjoyed more success under Calles's successor, Lazaro Cardenas. Cardenas's first goal as chief executive was to rid himself of Calles's influence, and gain control over the revolutionary party. Once he succeeded in this maneuver, he began to conciliate his opposition by inviting all former presidents to return to Mexico. Apparently, the conciliation scheme extended to more people than former presidents; Félix Díaz returned to his native land on April 19, 1937.

In the remaining eight years of his life, General Díaz refrained from any participation in politics. His instincts must have been aroused, however, when one of his old subordinates, Juan Andreu Almazán challenged Manuel Avila Camacho for the presidency in 1940. The elderly general had no desire to contest the strength of the revolutionary party, however, so he abstained from the political campaign. His

³Licéaga, Félix Díaz, p. 869.

only important activity was dictating his memoirs to José C. Valadés.⁴ While these accounts are not completely accurate, they offer some interesting insights into General Díaz's conception of himself and his role in the Mexican Revolution.

The retired General's activities during the remaining few years of his life reinforced his conceptions of his career as expressed in his memoirs. Friends had an extremely difficult convincing General Díaz to travel outside his adopted patria chica of Veracruz. In particular, Don Félix never expressed a desire to return to Oaxaca, his birthplace. No doubt the General's reluctance to visit this state stemmed from a sense of wounded pride. Díaz never effectively regained control of his homeland. Yet when he was born on February 17, 1868, his mother was the first lady of oaxaqueño society. His father, also named Félix Díaz, had achieved renown as a prominent republican during the struggle against the French intervention and Emperor Maximilian.⁵ As a reward for these services, Félix Díaz Dr. was elected Governor

⁴In the month of March, 1943, *Hoy* published a weekly series of articles entitled "Habla Félix Díaz". Apparently General Díaz never intended to publish his complete memoirs, because he gave his personal archive to Luis Licéaga, and entrusted this good friend with the biographical task.

⁵ To avoid confusion in the text, Félix Díaz Sr. will henceforth be referred to as Governor Díaz. All other titles or sobriquets refer to his son, the subject of this work.

of the state of Oaxaca. Both Governor Díaz and his brother Porfirio had sprung from humble origins, but advanced quickly through the military to positions of prominence. Unfortunately, little is known about the Governor's wife, but whatever her social antecedents may have been, the governorship carried with it, no doubt, social rewards for the family.

Apparently Governor Díaz ruled despotically. In particular, he alienated the fiercely religious Indian villagers of the Juchitán district who resented the governor's strong anti-clerical stance. In 1870, the juchitecos, led by Colonel Apolino Jiménez, revolted against the Governor. The liberal forces descended on the villages, and ravaged them, burning and looting. As a final insult, the Governor confiscated the image of the juchitecos patron saint, San Vicente.⁶ Governor Díaz's gesture was not appreciated even by the liberal President, Benito Juárez. Upon receiving a petition from the juchitecos, Juárez asked Governor Díaz to return the state to the village as a personal favor. Governor Díaz agreed, but as he later explained to the President, "to fit it in a box, it was necessary to saw it in two parts."⁷ Needless to say, the juchitecos were not pleased with the Governor's generosity,

⁶ Daniel Cosío Villegas, Historia Moderna de México: la Republica Restaurada: La Vida Política, (Mexico: Editorial Hermes, 1955) p. 664.

⁷ Ibid., p. 664.

and the district of Juchitán became the implacable foe of the Díaz family.

In 1871, preparations began for the abortive La Noria revolution. Tired with Benito Juárez's constant re-election to the presidency, disgruntled liberals sought to unseat the President by appealing for "Effective Suffrage and No Re-election". Because his brother was the central figure, Governor Díaz supported the rebellion. As Governor, he felt that he could raise substantial forces within his own jurisdiction. He underestimated the antagonism generated by the Díaz name in certain areas of Oaxaca, however, as the district of Ixtlán, also in the Sierra region, refused to follow their Governor's orders. Instead, the serranos, led by Colonel Fidencio Hernández and Colonel Francisco Meixueiro, resolved to defend the Juárez government. Only after a combination of forceful actions and soothing words did Porfirio Díaz manage to persuade some serranos to join him.⁸ As the New Year approached, disaster seemed more imminent. Throughout the state of Oaxaca, the juaristas managed to defeat the Díaz brothers. When all possibility of victory vanished, the brothers resolved to flee to sanctuary.

On January 6, 1872, Governor Díaz, making a separate escape, arrived at the coast. Unfortunately, the only large

⁸ Cosío Villegas, Historia Moderna: Restaurada, pp. 645-648, 660.

ship in the vicinity had sailed the day before, and now only a small sloop could be rented. Governor Díaz was too ill to travel by water, however, so the party sought another escape route.⁹ These circumstances offered the juchitecos an opportunity for revenge. Rounding up his men, Colonel Apolinio Jiménez tracked down the fugitives despite contrary orders from the Juárez government. All accounts agree that the juchitecos brutally murdered the Governor.¹⁰ With this disastrous loss, the La Noria rebellion collapsed in the state of Oaxaca.

Did the failure of the La Noria rebellion have any consequence in addition to making Félix Díaz Jr. an orphan and thereby dependent on his Uncle Porfirio? In one respect, the La Noria rebellion clearly demonstrated that Oaxacan society was not monolithic. The state was rather sharply delineated into two sections; the europeanized population living around Oaxaca City, and the Indian world of the Sierras. Even though Félix Díaz had ties with important leaders in both sections, he would never manage to unite the two. Two

⁹ Ibid., pp. 663. James Creelman, Díaz: Master of Mexico, (New York: Appleton and Company, 1911) p. 320 offers the explanation that unfavorable winds forced the Governor's party to return to the woods. Since Cosío Villegas's account is so richly embellished, the author chose to follow it in this instance.

¹⁰ Carleton Beals, Porfirio Díaz: Dictator of Mexico, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1932) p. 183 claims that the Indians "stripped off the soles of his feet, forced him to march till he dropped, then killed him with sticks and stones." Beals, however, tends to be overdramatic and inaccurate.

of the most prominent leaders of the Revolution in Oaxaca were the sons of Francisco Meixueiro and Fidencio Hernández. Just as their fathers had been important liberals at the local level, so their sons led the later Revolution in the Sierras. Consequently, not all of the Mexican Revolution can be viewed as a massive social upheaval; in some areas, particularly Oaxaca, the traditional leaders managed to retain their political positions. Whatever the other results of the rebellion, Félix Díaz was left at the mercy of this uncle's fortunes during his early years.

Félix Díaz spent these early years in Oaxaca City, where his tender years doubtless sheltered him from his uncle's political world. In 1882, however, the temporarily retired President Díaz sent for his young nephew, and enrolled the boy in the prestigious Colegio Militar in the national capital. According to his biographer, young Félix was an apt pupil, and he was graduated as a military engineer at the age of twenty. While in school Félix Díaz learned strict discipline, achieving the distinction of a school record unblemished with demerits.¹¹ Immediately following his graduation from the military academy, he was commissioned a lieutenant in the corps of engineers.

An American citizen who had resided for many years in

¹¹ Licéaga, Félix Díaz, p. 13.

Mexico offered one of the best descriptions available of the young man Díaz. The writer, Edwin Emerson, felt that Félix Díaz displayed his Indian ancestry quite markedly. The young man appeared small and dark, with a tendency towards plumpness. His dark brown eyes constantly shown, and his regular white teeth gleamed. As his numerous portraits and photographs show, he wore his hair relatively short, and his carefully groomed mustache appears prominent as well. Still, the outstanding characteristic of the young man was his extreme seriousness; intimate friends remarked that they had never known Félix Díaz to laugh.¹² Mr. Emerson also noted the resemblance between nephew and uncle. Their physical similarity convinced many gossips that Porfirio had fathered Félix Díaz. Emerson felt that Félix Díaz was flattered by this story, and consequently never squelched it.¹³ There seems to be little evidence, however, to substantiate this slur. Porfirio Díaz seems to have been rather circumspect about his affairs, and if documentary evidence can be believed,

¹² Edwin Emerson to William Jennings Bryan, June 21, 1913, Records of the Department of State Relating to the Internal Affairs of Mexico, 1910-1929. (Microcopy No. 274), 1910-1920, reel 26, 812.00/7929. Hereafter this series will be cited as RDS with appropriate information.)

¹³ Edwin Emerson to Bryan, June 21, 1913, RDS, reel 26, 812.00/7929.

Governor Díaz was scarcely impotent.¹⁴ In any case, President Díaz did not permit the graduate to loll idly. Almost immediately, Félix Díaz was assigned to the recently formed Comisión Geográfico Exploradora.

In the next ten years, young Díaz participated in the mapping of San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas, and Veracruz. The young officer's knowledge of the terrain of Veracruz must have proven an invaluable aid during the latter stages of his rebellion against the Carranza government. In addition, Lieutenant Díaz worked with the Indians of Papantla, Veracruz, where he helped other government employees restore certain lands to the Indians.¹⁵ The early activity may account for some of Félix Díaz's ability to win lower class support in Veracruz during an extended period of the Mexican Revolution. While a member of the Geographical Commission, the dictator's nephew formed other important ties with the state of Veracruz.

During this period, Félix Díaz met a stunning young woman from the city of Veracruz. Her father served as a member of the Chamber of Deputies, so obviously the girl moved in high circles.

¹⁴ Innumerable women during the porfiriato claimed that Governor Díaz had fathered a child by them. For the sake of modesty, the illegitimate children claimed their parentage, and then applied for economic assistance. See Jesús Avella to Porfirio Díaz, February 6, 1909, Colección General Porfirio Díaz (Microcopy, University of the Americas) reel 256, #001847. Hereafter this series will be cited as Arch PD with information. See also Antonio Díaz to Porfirio Díaz, November 11, 1908, Arch PD reel 254, #015575, which provides another example.

¹⁵ Licéaga, Félix Díaz, p. 14.

At last, Isabella Alcolea agreed to marry the young officer, and her father, Leandro Sr. agreed.¹⁶ The match cemented Félix Díaz's connections with the upper crust of Mexican society. Isabella proved to be an excellent wife for young Félix. She remained devoted to him throughout their long lives together, and forgave her husband for his several amorous escapades with other women. Furthermore, the distinguished Alcolea family provided Félix Díaz with the support of the cream of veracruzano society.

Promotions came slowly to young Félix during these long years on the Geographical Commission. In 1892 he had been advanced to a Second Class Captain, but it took him eight years to ascend any further. Possibly President Díaz wanted to test his young nephew, to be certain that he would be properly groomed for a more important office. At any rate, once Félix Díaz achieved the rank of Captain First Class in 1900, promotions rapidly came his way. Named as a member of the General Staff of the President at the turn of the century, within a couple of years Félix Díaz had become the chief of this august body. The young man, however, was ambitious, and thus rose quickly within the porfirian bureaucracy.

As a trained engineer, Félix Díaz proved useful as a

¹⁶ Edwin Emerson to Bryan, June 21, 1913, RDS, reel 26, 812.00/7929.

technical consultant. Early in his career, the young man held the post of Technical Engineering Inspector for the Ferrocarril de México y el Pacífico, and later, he was appointed Comisario Inspector de Ferrocarriles. In addition, he retained his link with the professional world by joining several scientific societies in Mexico.¹⁷ Félix Díaz also held another important title, that of President of the Colegio Militar. Probably to lend him sufficient prestige for this office, Porfirio Díaz promoted his nephew to Brigadier General on March 8, 1909.¹⁸ Although he temporarily resigned this office, Félix Díaz was restored as President of his Alma Mater, and was serving in this position just prior to the outbreak of the Madero revolution.¹⁹ Because of this important post, Félix Díaz must have enjoyed some influence in military circles. Yet the position possibly inspired professional jealousy on the part of several of Félix Díaz's colleagues, particularly Joaquin Beltrán, who took great pride in the professionalism of the Military College. Whatever the significance of this office for the young man's future, his most important office under the

¹⁷ Licéaga, Félix Díaz, p. 15.

¹⁸ For Félix Díaz's promotions, see Licéaga, Félix Díaz, pp. 14-15.

¹⁹ Invitation from the Colegio Militar, August, 1910. Centro de Estudios de la Historia de México, Condumex, SA. This invitation is a separate document contained at the library in Condumex, and is not part of any special collection.

porfiriato was that of Inspector-General of the Police in Mexico City.

On May 22, 1904 the dictator's nephew accepted his new position in the porfirian bureaucracy. Apparently, the police, like other repressive institutions throughout Mexico, succeeded admirably in keeping Mexico City relatively free from crime. As one observer stated, "No foreigner ever visited Mexico City during the Díaz days who did not come away with the most favorable impression of the grace, bearing, politeness, and efficiency of its police."²⁰ Yet according to a prominent porfirista, Ramón Prida, Félix Díaz scarcely occupied himself with his duties, which were left in the capable hands of Celso Acosta, a good friend.²¹ Abundant evidence supports Prida's contention. One individual came to the Municipal Palace on three separate occasions, and never did locate the Inspector. Other officials informed the harried man that their chief held office hours from five to six P.M. daily, but the gentleman waited in vain.²² Thus, it appears that the Inspector delegated his duties to capable

²⁰ Rudolph W. Smith, Benighted Mexico, (New York: John Lane Company, 1916) p. 102.

²¹ Ramón Prida, De la Dictadura á la anarquía, (Mexico: Ediciones Botas, 1958) p. 250.

²² Francisco Martínez Santana to Porfirio Díaz, July 7, 1909, Arch PD, reel 261, Legajo 34, #011166.

trusted subordinates.

Another characteristic which gained Félix Díaz the admiration of many of the elite was his extreme loyalty to friends and those who had served him well in the past. For example, one employee of the police department was dismissed because of vague accusations. Since the man had served faithfully for thirty years, the Inspector reinstated the man as soon as he had served his sentence. Ramón Corral, the científico Minister of Gobernación and the Vice President as well, who possibly had instigated the original arrest, refused to permit the reinstatement.²³ Still, the dismissed official must have felt grateful that his superior had defended him against the wishes of the ruling circle. Yet Félix Díaz's activities as Inspector General did not always seem so noble. In particular, rumors of corruption in the Police Department filtered into the streets. Even Porfirio Díaz once questioned his nephew about an expensive twenty-five peso gift that one of his common policemen had bought for a Christmas present. Given the nature of the Inspector's economic activities in Mexico, however, it is hardly surprising that his subordinates engaged in corruption as well.

While foreigners praised the regime effusively for pro-

²³ Hermano Chávez to Porfirio Díaz, January 31, 1911, Arch PD, reel 261, Legajo 34, #011166.

²⁴ Porfirio Díaz to Félix Díaz, January 20, 1908, Arch PD reel 246, Legajo 33, #000031.