

The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920)

The Mexican Revolution was a major armed struggle that started in 1910, with an uprising led by Francisco I. Madero against longtime autocrat Porfirio Díaz, and lasted for the better part of a decade until around 1920. Over time, the Revolution changed from a revolt against the established order to a multi-sided civil war, and finally ended after the Mexican Constitution was created in 1917.

U.S. Involvement in the Revolution

The United States' relationship with Mexico around this time was turbulent. For both economic and political reasons, the American government generally supported those who occupied the seats of power, whether they held that power legitimately or not. Prior to Woodrow Wilson's inauguration, the U.S. military focused mainly on just warning the Mexican military that decisive action from the U.S. military would take place if the lives and property of North Americans living in the country were endangered. President William Howard Taft sent more troops to the U.S.-Mexico border, but did not allow them to intervene in the conflict, a move which Congress opposed.

Two main motives were employed to rationalize potential intervention. These included a pervasive anti-Hispanic ideology to justify militarily imposing order on the 'chaos'. There was also pressure by American corporations who feared their interests would be jeopardized with Mexico's restructuring.

At the turn of the 20th century, United States citizens and corporations held about 27% of Mexican land. By 1910, United States investment in the country—such as land, railroads, mines, factories, etc.—had increased even more. This pushed President Woodrow Wilson to intervene in Mexican affairs because the revolution was negatively impacting the Mexican economy, thereby endangering United States business interests.

Ypiranga Intervention

The first time the U.S. sent troops into Mexico during the Mexican Revolution was in 1914, during the Ypiranga incident. When United States intelligence agents discovered that the German merchant ship Ypiranga was carrying illegal arms to Mexican President Huerta, President Wilson ordered troops to the port of Veracruz to stop the ship from docking. The United States forces then skirmished with Huerta's troops in Veracruz. The Ypiranga managed to dock at another port, which infuriated Wilson.

On April 9, 1914, Mexican officials in the port of Tampico, Tamaulipas, arrested a group of U.S. sailors — including at least one taken from on board his ship, and thus from U.S. territory. After Mexico failed to meet US terms, the U.S. navy bombarded the port of Veracruz and occupied Veracruz for seven months. Some argue that Woodrow Wilson's actual motivation was his desire to overthrow Huerta, whom he refused to recognize as Mexico's leader. The Tampico Affair did succeed in further destabilizing his regime and encouraging the rebels. U.S. troops eventually left Mexican soil, but the incident added to already tense United States–Mexico relations.

Pancho Villa Intervention and Border Clashes

An increasing number of border incidents early in 1916 culminated in an invasion of American territory on March 8, 1916. In this incident, Francisco (Pancho) Villa and his band of 500 to 1,000 men raided Columbus, New Mexico, burning army barracks and robbing stores. In the United States, Villa came to represent mindless violence and banditry. U.S. forces repulsed the attack, but 14 soldiers and ten civilians were killed.

In response, President Wilson sent forces commanded by General John J. Pershing into Mexico to capture Villa. Pershing's campaign consisted primarily of dozens of skirmishes with small bands of insurgents and Mexican Army units. Virtually the entire regular army was involved, and most of the National Guard had been federalized and concentrated on the border before the end of the affair. War would probably have been declared but for the critical situation in Europe.



Pancho Villa Expedition

This political cartoon depicts American attitudes towards the expedition over the Mexican border in pursuit of Pancho Villa.