

# 3 1920–1928

*“Political domination involves historical definition.”*<sup>1</sup>

DURING THE 1920s, successive Mexican governments turned to *la Revolución* for legitimacy. *La Revolución*, as they received it, was indispensable but incomplete. The *voceros de la Revolución*, increasingly a part of the government bureaucracy, still worked on interpreting and defining the great event of their age. The Sonorans and their *voceros* provided two innovations in the continually developing discourse of memory. First, *la Revolución* was transformed into government (“*la Revolución hecha gobierno*”) and was thus perceived as permanent and ongoing. Second, *la Revolución* was unified by a “revolutionary family” in which feuds would be forgotten if not entirely forgiven. The Sonorans worked to unify opposing revolutionary factions present and past and began to heal the wounds of memory. By 1928 *la Revolución*, under construction since 1911, was largely complete but for a few flourishes and some fine touches.

The Agua Prieta rebellion in 1920 brought to power at the national level the Sonorans, a regional branch of the Constitutionalist–Carrancista movement led by Obregón, Adolfo de la Huerta, and Plutarco Elías Calles. The Sonorans’ newly obtained anti-Carranza credentials, and Obregón’s reputation as a more radical politician than Carranza, facilitated the pacification of the country. Rebel groups long opposed to Carranza, such as the Zapatistas, seconded the rebellion. Interim president de la Huerta negotiated an agreement with Francisco Villa by which the rebel caudillo recognized the new government and in return was granted a hacienda, permitted an armed guard, and given a pension. Former Maderistas and Convencionistas who could not stomach Carranza, including José Vasconcelos and Francisco Lagos Chazaro, identified with the movement. “The death of Carranza,” Vasconcelos wrote in 1920, “has been like a wave of peace. Carranza’s disappearance has been enough for the enemies of yesterday to seek reconciliation; for all Mexicans of every opinion to once again feel like brothers.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, the future secretary of education called upon “all of the intellectuals of Mexico to leave your ivory towers to sign a pact of alliance with the Revolution.”<sup>3</sup>

Conciliation in the present was applied to the past. The Sonorans began the forging in official memory of the “Revolutionary Family,” a term coined (or more likely popularized) by Obregón. The ambivalence that Carrancistas had held toward Madero and the Maderistas disappeared under the Sonorans. Madero once again became the unequaled revolutionary hero and Obregón his legitimate political heir. “To be Obregonista today,” Vasconcelos remarked, “is the same as having been Maderista yesterday.”<sup>4</sup> The Agua Prieta rebellion represented the “continuation of the popular movement initiated by Madero.”<sup>5</sup> Congress made November 20, 1920, a “day of national celebration,” and officials visited the tombs of Madero and Pino Suárez every February 22 on the anniversary of their assassinations. Madero’s Plan of San Luis Potosí was again commemorated, while Carranza’s Plan of Guadalupe was officially forgotten.<sup>6</sup>

In the new revision of official memory, Carranza and Carrancismo were reduced to an unfortunate deviation: “the tragic interim of the Carrancista period during which the values of *la Revolución* were transmuted and for a time defeated.”<sup>7</sup> Obregón believed the Reaction had smothered and de-revolutionized Carranza. Calles, in a 1924 analysis of recent history, noted that Carranza “tried to turn away from the goals of *la Revolución* and was brought down as a result.”<sup>8</sup> Carranza was often presented as an instrument of the Reaction and a traitor to *la Revolución* and was even placed alongside Díaz and Huerta in the national pantheon of despots. In this revision, it was Obregón who “consummated the victory of the Revolution in 1914.” Finally, not even the achievements of the Constitution of 1917 were credited to Carranza: its agrarian and labor reforms were said to have been achieved by revolutionaries of good faith “in spite of the howling and stubborn manipulation of Carrancismo.”<sup>9</sup> One marker of the new reordering was the 1921 renaming of Mexico City’s Calle Jesús Carranza, which showed that even the surname, in this case attached to the former president’s brother, was anathema.<sup>10</sup>

“Recently,” Luis Olivares Sierra informed Juan Barragán in 1923, “Carrancistas have not been looked upon very favorably.” This was, he continued, because “a majority of our old friends have joined de la Huerta.”<sup>11</sup> Adolfo de la Huerta, who had rebelled against Obregón’s impending imposition of Calles as his successor in 1923, similarly informed Barragán that “most Carrancistas like Generals [Manuel] Diéguez and [Cándido] Aguilar are with us.”<sup>12</sup> The defeat of the De la Huerta rebellion further enhanced the power of Obregón and Calles and further tarnished the repu-

tations of the Carrancistas. At the end of his term, however, in a conciliatory gesture Obregón awarded a pension to the children of Carranza because "Venustiano Carranza gave eminent services to *la Revolución* and to the nation." Julia Carranza and her brothers rejected the pension in a letter to Obregón that was signed, "Your loyal enemies."<sup>13</sup>

Zapatismo was finally accorded revolutionary status in official memory in the 1920s. High government officials attended the commemorations of Zapata's assassination, held in Cuautla and Cuernavaca every April, to praise the "apostle of agrarianism." Historical rehabilitation was such that the Porfirian-era iconoclast Francisco Bulnes in 1923 claimed that there existed "a cult of Zapata among revolutionaries."<sup>14</sup> In March 1923, President Obregón proclaimed in Cuernavaca that "the men of Morelos are, without a doubt, the best representatives of one of the ideals that came from the marrow of *la Revolución* and that is the agrarian ideal."<sup>15</sup> The Zapatistas returned the favor. At the first Congreso Nacional Agrarista (National Agrarian Congress) in June 1923, former Zapatista Soto y Gama praised Obregón as "the executor of the ideas of Emiliano Zapata." Before Zapata's tomb in April 1924 presidential candidate Calles declared that "this revolutionary program of Zapata, this agrarian program, is mine."<sup>16</sup> At that same ceremony former Zapatista Manuel Carpío sealed the bargain: "we have here today a man who will follow the road begun by the martyr Zapata: General Calles."<sup>17</sup>

The Magonistas, similarly, were retroactively incorporated as official actors in *la Revolución*. In 1922, Congress paid homage to Ricardo Flores Magón (who had died in a prison in the United States on November 21, 1922) and agreed to return his remains and to fly the national flag at half-mast. In the congressional chamber, Deputy Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama proclaimed that Flores Magón "is, for all of us, the teacher, the true founder, the intellectual author of *la Revolución Mexicana*."<sup>18</sup> For her part, Maria Flores Magón refused to permit the Mexican government to transport her husband's remains from Los Angeles and instead accepted the offer of transport by the Railroad Workers Alliance.<sup>19</sup> The national government honored Flores Magón when his body was returned to Mexico City hoping, his brother Enrique Flores Magón explained, "to win the love of the people."<sup>20</sup>

"The noble figure of Felipe Angeles," Francisco Madero's friend and a Villista general, was also rehabilitated in official memory in the early 1920s since he, like Emiliano Zapata, had been a victim of Carrancismo. It was,

however, Angeles the Maderista and not Angeles the Villista who was remembered and honored.<sup>21</sup> Official memory of Villa and Villismo under the care of the Sonorans during the 1920s differed little from that of the Carrancistas. Villa the instrument of the Reaction—"that terrible Genghis Khan"—became Villa the large landowner—"a comfortable bourgeois"—in the early 1920s.<sup>22</sup> Villa's assassination in July 1923 did little to soften the remembrance by Obregón and his followers.<sup>23</sup> In an address in 1927, Obregón said that the Reaction in 1914 "provoked a new betrayal within the ranks of *la Revolución*, and it was then when, headed by Francisco Villa, the hordes of that false revolution attempted to snatch away the rights and liberties of the people."<sup>24</sup>

Villa was a legend even before his death, and *corridos* following his assassination tended to idealize the image of the heroic caudillo. Villa was portrayed as a fighter for justice with no personal ambitions. In "The Death of Francisco Villa," the caudillo was even described as benign: "Villa always the loyal soldier, / always good and sincere, / came to revenge the betrayal / that came to Madero."<sup>25</sup> In popular legend and the reminiscences of still loyal ex-Villistas or admirers such as Ramón Puente, Elías L. Torres, Rafael Muñoz, and Teodoro Torres, Jr., the Villista counter-memory persevered and even thrived.

Former Carrancistas defended their absent leader and his place in history against the disparagement of the Sonorans. General Marciano González of Nuevo León proclaimed at the 1923 convention of the Partido Cooperativo (Cooperative Party), "I was, I am, and I will always be proudly Carrancista, and I am convinced that the black moon of the imposition of Bonillas will not darken the great work of Carranza."<sup>26</sup> Carrancistas still bucked the Madero cult. For Ygnacio Urquijo, for example, Carranza represented "the most noble historical figure in our history. Superior to Madero in character and in administrative skill."<sup>27</sup> Antonio Islas Bravo argued that "it was not anti-reelectionism that overthrew General Díaz, but *la Revolución*."<sup>28</sup> Thus, a Carrancista counter-memory, one deprived of a popular legend, arose in the 1920s to keep alive the revolutionary credentials of the First Chief.

During his term as president, Obregón added little to the discourse that framed the new official memory of *la Revolución* in the early 1920s. Like Madero and Carranza when they achieved power, Obregón generally referred to the revolution in the past tense, as the armed struggle that had

concluded and triumphed. The Reaction, however, while defeated by *la Revolución*, nevertheless still existed in the present tense, still opposed revolutionaries, revolutionary principles, and the revolutionary government. The revolution for Obregón was primarily destructive, whereas his government marked the beginning of the reconstruction of Mexico. Obregón, like Carranza before him, did see a causal relationship between *la Revolución* and his government: it was a government that emanated from *la Revolución*. And, of course, "the Program of the Revolution," if not the revolution itself, was alive and well in the present.<sup>29</sup>

The Obregón administration's most important effort to shape national memory came with the 1921 commemoration of the centennial of the achievement of independence. The regime put considerable time and money into this affair, which emphasized Mexico's revolutionary origins, its native roots, and mestizo character. The commemoration also produced dissension concerning the heroic or reactionary role of Agustín de Iturbide, the royalist officer who obtained Mexican independence in reaction to a liberal revolution in Spain. Nevertheless, by emphasizing the traditional themes of Mexico's liberal synthesis, but also events for workers and "the people" in general and downplaying the role and significance of religion in the commemoration of national history, the regime sought to encourage a spirit of revolutionary nationalism among Mexicans.<sup>30</sup>

During Obregón's presidency, the national government assumed little responsibility for the remembrance of revolutionary martyrs and anniversaries. Instead, rituals of commemoration in the early 1920s were organized by associations of citizens. The Pro-Madero Group (Agrupación Pro-Madero), for instance, organized the commemorations of November 20 and February 22.<sup>31</sup> Government officials attended, spoke, and laid floral wreaths, but they left the organizing of the events to others. As *El Demócrata* noticed in November 1922: "there was no official ceremony at all."<sup>32</sup> Political parties and labor unions also got into the act: the Constitutionalist Liberal Party commemorated the deaths of Benjamin Hill and Felipe Ángeles; the National Agrarian Party (along with the state government of Morelos) commemorated the assassination of Zapata; and the Federation of Labor Syndicates, along with the Mexican Labor Party, commemorated the assassination of the Yucatecan socialist Felipe Carrillo Puerto.

Obregón, a practical man little given to ideas and symbols, did not need to give much importance and emphasis to establishing a legitimizing

official memory of *la Revolución*. He was, as Linda Hall explains, "the primary revolutionary hero, the embodiment of the Revolution." Obregón represented the unity of history and biography: the legitimacy of his authority and his government, therefore, was self-evident.<sup>33</sup>

Obregón's successor, Plutarco Elías Calles, on the other hand, possessed no such advantage. While his revolutionary credentials were excellent, he was not the Caudillo of the Revolution and, even more, was thought "totally lacking in charisma."<sup>34</sup> To a degree far greater than Obregón, Calles needed to justify his authority, and he sought that justification in *la Revolución*. As a result, Calles made several important lasting contributions to the official memory of *la Revolución*. First and foremost, he reactivated the transcendental and reified revolution in order to construct the permanent revolution that inhabited the past, present, and future. "The Revolution has placed in my hands," Calles proclaimed during the 1924 presidential campaign, "the sacred banner of a program of social reforms."<sup>35</sup> Second, the national government did not simply follow or even emanate from *la Revolución*, rather *la Revolución* became the government and the government was *la Revolución*: "la Revolución hecha gobierno," the Revolution becomes government.<sup>36</sup>

It is interesting to note the degree to which Obregón by 1927 was following the lead of Calles in viewing *la Revolución* as an ongoing enterprise. "The spiritual revolution, the constant revolution," he proclaimed in San Luis Potosí in 1927, "this can never end while good and evil exist." A year later, during his presidential campaign, the Caudillo of the Revolution stated, "we must never think that the revolutionary effort has won a final victory, because our struggle against the reaction will exist for as long as man is on earth."<sup>37</sup>

It was during the Calles presidency that the national government began to assume greater responsibility for commemorating *la Revolución*. The Ministry of Government, in cooperation with the Pro-Madero Group, for example, organized the ceremonies commemorating the assassinations of Madero and Pino Suárez in February 1925.<sup>38</sup> Beginning in 1926 celebrations were organized by the Official Committee of Patriotic Commemoration (later called the Organizing Commission of Civic Ceremonies), which was established by the municipal government of Mexico City.<sup>39</sup> Commemorations during the Calles presidency were becoming relatively non-sectarian: the government participated in ceremonies praising Madero,

Carranza, Zapata, Flores Magón, and Carrillo Puerto. Calles himself, quite unlike Obregón, rarely criticized or disparaged any of the major revolutionary caudillos, including Villa.

From the beginning of the Calles administration, Callistas pressed for the unification of all revolutionaries, "those of today and yesterday." Miguel Yépez Solórzano, a member of the Mexico City government, lamented the "deep divisions within the breast" of the Revolution and called for "solidarity and cohesion of the social class that directed *la Revolución* in Mexico."<sup>40</sup> In his New Year messages to the Mexican people in 1926 and 1927, President Calles urged citizens to "forget grudges."<sup>41</sup> Obregonistas had begun the process of historical reconciliation and Callistas intended to continue and complete that process.<sup>42</sup>

The most striking statements of history made during the Calles presidency were certainly "the sermons in fresco."<sup>43</sup> What later came to be known as the great mural movement, the core of a Mexican cultural renaissance, began in 1921 during Obregón's presidency under the patronage of Education Minister José Vasconcelos. Artists were commissioned to paint walls to reflect Vasconcelos's philosophical idealism. David Álfaro Siqueiros drew up a "social, political, and aesthetic declaration" in 1922 for the Syndicate of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors to guide the mural painters. This manifesto proclaimed:

We repudiate the so-called easel art and all such art which springs from ultra-intellectual circles, to destroy bourgeois individualism. We hail the monumental expression of art because such art is public property. We proclaim that this being the moment of social transition from a decrepit to a new order, the makers of beauty must invest their greatest efforts in the aim of materializing an art valuable to the people, and our supreme objective in art, which is today an expression for individual pleasure, is to create beauty for all, beauty that enlightens and stirs to struggle.<sup>44</sup>

The "greatest public revolutionary art of this century" had assumed its full ideological aesthetic (revolutionary nationalism with a nod to Marxism) by 1923 or 1924.<sup>45</sup> At this early date the murals "were considered to occupy the forefront of Mexican artistic and intellectual life."<sup>46</sup> Surprisingly, the

mural movement had no ideological guidance from the Ministry of Education or any other part of the government. The manifesto of the syndicate, furthermore, was less revolutionary than simply avant-garde and of little guidance concerning subject and message. The muralists had been influenced by the *voceros de la Revolución* and through their art joined their ranks. This public art—Octavio Paz calls it "the painted apologia of the ideological dictatorship of an armed bureaucracy"—became a significant element of the Revolutionary Tradition.

Although a number of artists participated in the movement, the intense David Álfaro Siqueiros, the melancholy, one-armed José Clemente Orozco, and Diego Rivera—"the court painter to the Mexican government"<sup>47</sup>—produced the best-known and most explicitly didactic historical murals. The first revolutionary (in content) murals were Siqueiros's *Burial of the Worker* and *Call to Liberty* in Mexico City's Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, the country's most important secondary school. Rivera's work particularly glorified and romanticized *la Revolución* as a peasant and worker's revolution and frequently portrayed Zapata and Zapatismo in the most positive light. His biographer Bertram D. Wolfe observed that Rivera "painted what the Revolution should be, what it should become."<sup>48</sup> Orozco painted in a monumental style that especially suited the reified revolution:

What this treatment does to history, to real events such as departing to fight a revolution, is to turn it into a natural (that is, of nature), inevitable, and timeless event, or not an event at all but a condition about which humans can do nothing to change since the condition is made of them and vice versa, to the point that it is impossible to determine cause, effect, motivation, or the possibility of human agency. History happens because it does, because it is no different than nature, and nature no different than people. This is myth-making of a subtle but powerful sort.<sup>49</sup>

Rivera's frescos at the new Ministry of Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP) building in Mexico City and the National Agricultural School at Chapingo, executed between 1923 and 1928, constitute an epic portrait of *la Revolución*. The new Mexico was a land of proud and unbowed peasants and workers. *The Liberation of the Peon* depicts heroic sacrifice in the revolutionary struggle, while *The New School* reveals one of the

objectives of struggle and sacrifice. Other objectives, such as revolutionary justice in *Death of a Capitalist* and *The Festival of the Distribution of the Land*, and progress in *The Mechanization of the Country*, are also vividly presented. One of the most striking mythic statements, *The Blood of the Revolutionary Martyrs Fertilizing the Earth*, is found at the chapel at Chapingo. This panel presents two martyred heroes, Zapata and the Zapatista ideologue Otilio Montaña, buried in red shrouds beneath a fertile cornfield.<sup>50</sup>

Orozco's frescos at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria in Mexico City and the Industrial School (Escuela Industrial) in Orizaba, Veracruz, completed between 1923 and 1926, are monumental scenes that tell of the tragedy of the revolutionary struggle. *The Rich Banquet* has dissolute plutocrats enjoying themselves while workers fight one another. The critic Salvador Novo has said that Orozco's pictures aimed to awake in the spectator "an anarchistic fury if he was penniless, or if wealthy, to make his knees buckle with fright."<sup>51</sup> Orozco's most optimistic fresco in Orizaba is *Social Revolution*, a scene placed over a doorway and showing peasants and workers, rifles slung over their shoulders, building the new Mexico. Even here, however, tragedy is not far away. In the side panels below the builders are huddled women, crying, showing fear, with one wiping the face of an exhausted soldier.<sup>52</sup> *The Trench*, Orozco's most famous image, shows two men who have fallen and one on his knees, a revolutionary trinity against a red background. Art historian Leonard Folgarait reads the picture as a sequence of the falling poses of one man: "an armed soldier dies in battle, which leads to a state of spiritual purity and immortality, and finally is given new life, starting to rearm (the gun belt returns), starting to rise, about to come out from his shroud. The Revolution lives."<sup>53</sup>

*La Revolución* as defined by Callistas embraced three great episodes: the Maderista struggle of 1910, the reform of the constitution or "Magna Carta" in 1917, and the implementation of the revolutionary program after 1920, which embraced the current regime. There were setbacks, in 1913 and 1923, "by corrupt and ambitious men."<sup>54</sup> The great enemy of *la Revolución* in Calles's writings and speeches, still dangerous and treacherous in the mid-to-late 1920s, was the Reaction. In 1924, Yépez Solórzano called for a war to the death against the "pirates of public opinion."<sup>55</sup> Calles nearly obliged. The following year he forced Nemesio García Naranjo into exile when the former Huertista denigrated *la Revolución* in a series of newspaper articles. Law professor Educardo Pallares, another critic, lost his posi-

tion at the national university partly because to him "the word *revolucionario* . . . is the term that divides."<sup>56</sup>

Calles viewed Mexican history as "a hundred years of civil war against a Proteus-like oppressor who is now Spaniard, now the clergy."<sup>57</sup> According to Calles, the Reaction, "hiding behind the mask of religion," once again had thrown the country into civil turmoil when the Church repudiated the revolutionary Constitution of 1917 and the government required compliance with that statement of fundamental law. In fact, the Cristero rebellion of the late 1920s developed into a massive peasant insurgency that rivaled the Zapatista movement in intensity and size. Official commemorative discourse, of course, never made such a comparison and, then and later, essentially ignored the episode.<sup>58</sup>

During the Calles presidency, Obregón and his followers made the necessary political preparations and constitutional modification to return the great Caudillo to office in 1928. Obregonistas warned that Mexicans faced the unhappy choice of "Obregón or chaos." The reelection campaign, however, polarized politics and irritated the wounds of memory that Calles had tried to heal. On the anniversary of Madero's assassination in 1926, Federico Cervantes, an old Villista, praised the Apostle Madero and his true successor, Obregón, and condemned Carranza's "use of the dictatorial 'hard line'."<sup>59</sup> Carranza's attempt to institute a civilian regime in 1920 appeared to opponents, on the other hand, as a legitimate effort to combat militarism. In November 1926 the antireelectionist bloc predicted that Carranza "will win his last battle in spite of death."<sup>60</sup> Antonio Islas Bravo, one of those opponents and a congressional deputy, was particularly disturbed by Maderista ("members of the Perpetual Veil of Madero") support for tyrants like Villa in 1914, Obregón in 1920, and—worst of all—Obregón in 1928. "After 1910 [the Maderistas] rabidly embraced militarism. Without a doubt the Maderistas today are not behind *la Revolución* as they were in 1910."<sup>61</sup> The national convention of the new Anti-reelectionist Party in June 1927 was as pro-Carranza as it was anti-Obregón: "the name of Carranza received applause, vivas, and cheers when it was announced."<sup>62</sup>

This new irritation of the wounds of memory reflected growing political uncertainty and disorder. The internal order "seemed to be just on the verge of breaking down in mid-1927."<sup>63</sup> The government was fighting one of the largest popular rebellions—the Cristero rebellion—in Mexican history, a struggle that ultimately claimed 90,000 lives. In October 1927

two of Obregón's closest comrades-in-arms launched a rebellion against Obregón and Calles in an attempt to prevent the reelection and, as they saw it, the establishment of a new dictatorship. The rebellion faltered on the first day and was followed by a murderous purge of enemies of the regime. "After the bloody purge of 1927 no candidate had even the slightest chance against Obregón. . . . In this climate, the undisputed election of Obregón on July 1, 1928 was no surprise to anyone."<sup>64</sup>

Two weeks later José de León Toral, a Catholic fanatic, shot and killed the president-elect. The country's political establishment was stunned. "And now what? Everyone, it seemed, asked themselves."<sup>65</sup>