

Phi Alpha Theta Pacific Northwest Conference, 8–10 April 2021

Craig J. Verniest, Seattle University, undergraduate student, “The Manifestation of Total War in the Mexican Revolution”

Abstract: The concept of total war is typically conceived of as the entirety of a nation’s or other belligerent’s resources and the spheres of non-combatant, civilian-centered life being drawn into the conflict. Total war also includes the methods of warfare being conducted with the intent of exhibiting complete destruction on an enemy’s forces and moral. Although total war in the Mexican Revolution is not typically, if ever, discussed in its historiography, I am arguing that the Mexican Revolution exhibited implementation of total war in its warfare, and therefore should be discussed in its historiography to similar degrees as that of the political and social aspects of the Revolution, which are generally focused on to a much greater degree. The form of total war exhibited in the Mexican Revolution manifests in three primary aspects: extreme, unnecessary violence perpetrated by and against the combatants of a conflict, the failure-either intentional or unintentional-to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants in the warfare, and the often-coerced involvement of civilian resources, supplies, and lives in the conflict, resulting in great resource, material, and psychological drain on non-combatants.

The Manifestation of Total War in the Mexican Revolution

Craig J. Verniest

La Decena Trágica, or the “Ten Tragic Days”, was a period of extreme violence and wanton destruction that occurred in México City between February 9 and 19, 1913. This event occurred in the midst of the wider seven-year armed conflict of the Mexican Revolution, specifically during the military coup instigated by counterrevolutionary forces intending to overthrow the reformist-minded government of Francisco I. Madero, who had led the call for populist revolt in 1910 and succeeded in being elected president in 1911. As described by a *New York Times* article from February 12, 1913 covering the third day of violence, “Fleeing citizens cut down. For hours big guns and rapid fires sweep streets of the capital. Witness of the fighting says bodies cover streets where fighting occurred. Shells wreck big buildings... The food supply in the capital is low. There is no milk or bread to be obtained, owing to the military activity in the city and the outskirts.”ⁱ The depiction of these events provided by this article offers perfect examples of the existence of total war both in the specific event of *la Decena Trágica* and in the Mexican Revolution as a whole. Due to the constraints of this paper, I will focus solely on the events of *la Decena Trágica* for this analysis, but actions exemplifying total war can be seen throughout the duration of the Mexican Revolution, to the point that I argue the Revolution should be viewed as a conflict of total war proportions.

Despite the wealth of material on the subject, scholars of the Mexican Revolution have typically failed to categorize the Revolution in terms of total war conditions. Today, “total war” refers to a mass armed conflict that is “unrestricted in the weapons used, the territory or combatants involved, and/or the objectives pursued,”ⁱⁱ as well as involving the “complete mobilization of civilian and military resources and manpower for the war effort.”ⁱⁱⁱ To prove the existence of total war during the Mexican Revolution, this paper will focus on the utilization of extreme and unnecessary violence by and against combatants, the perpetration of violence—

either intentional or unintentional—against non-combatants, and the involvement or appropriation of the civilian resource supply for the war effort and the resulting toll it had on resources and civilians.

Developing the Concept of Total War

The Hague Convention

First, one has to have an understanding of what exactly total war is, particularly of how the concept was conceptualized at the time, to better understand how total war was thought of then and how it can be applied to this conflict. The Hague Convention of 1907 is used to develop this understanding. The Hague Convention was an international convention intended to define “the laws and customs of war on land” and bind all signatory nations to adhere to its code of conduct;^{iv} the convention from 1907 was used to revise the earlier 1899 First Hague Peace Conference, which itself had been used to amend the laws and customs of war established by the Conference of Brussels in 1874.^v The Hague Convention defined certain methods of warfare as illegal: given that these actions are defined as illegal, and thereby unjust, warfare, they constitute actions of total war. These methods included “treacherously” killing or wounding opposing combatants, killing or wounding combatants who have surrendered, the utilization of “arms, projectiles, or material calculated to cause unnecessary suffering,” and the “destruction or seizure of the enemy’s property.”^{vi} Although what constitutes “treacherous wounding” or “unnecessary suffering” was not exactly defined, numerous instances in which one or more of these methods occurred in *la Decena Trágica* will be used to show how excessive violence used between combatants, as well as violence against non-combatants, occurred throughout the event. Additionally, articles 25, 28, and 46 state that “attacks and bombardments of towns, villages, dwellings, or buildings which are undefended are prohibited”, that pillage of any place under any

circumstance is prohibited, and that family rights, human lives, and private property must be respected and are prohibited from confiscation.^{vii} These articles allude to the forced involvement of the civilian sphere of life in a conflict, providing rules that were violated during *la Decena Trágica* and the Mexican Revolution as a whole.

Background

Beginning of the Mexican Revolution

The Mexican Revolution began on October 5th, 1910 with the proclamation of the Plan de San Luis Potosí by Madero. Madero delivered the call for revolution with the intent of overthrowing the presidency of Porfirio Díaz, a former general in the Mexican Federal Army who had ruled México almost without interruption for 35 years. Díaz—whose presidency and governmental regime was referred to as *El Porfiriato*—ruled México essentially as a dictator, instituting extensive economic and political policies that helped to industrialize and modernize México's economy and centralize the local, state, and federal governments under Díaz's influence. These policies also served to exploit the labor of the urban working classes and rural, indigenous-based peasantry while benefitting México's economic elite and Western imperial interests, in the manner of the neocolonialism that characterized much of Latin American politics and economics at the time. Additionally, Díaz was able to rule unopposed for so long largely because of his utilization of “carrot-and-stick” measures, negotiating political support, coveted positions in government, and economic benefits for politicians he approved of, while demoting, removing from power, or otherwise pressuring those who wouldn't submit to his influence. Díaz also enjoyed great support from the military, due to his history as a renowned general, his scaling down of the military establishment to those generals who curried his favor, and the military's inherently reactionary nature.

Madero achieved a popular revolution upon the pronouncement and promulgation of his Plan de San Luis Potosí in late 1910, primarily gaining his support from *serrano* movements in northern México, like those of Francisco “Pancho” Villa and Pascual Orozco in Chihuahua, which followed the traditions of past rebellions by focusing on enhancing local autonomy, advancing agrarian and economic reform, and combatting the centralization of government propagated under *El Porfiriato*. He also gained additional support from *agrarista* movements in the south—like that of Emiliano Zapata—, which, also following previous trends of rebellion in the region, were focused almost exclusively on land reform and achieving greater land repatriation for peasants. Madero and those who answered his call succeeded in overthrowing Porfirio Díaz in May 1911, with Madero elected as president of México in the elections that followed in November.

Although the second full year of revolution in México saw Madero’s advancement of the political reforms he’d promised with the Plan de San Luis Potosí, it was also marred by growing discontent with his lack of substantial economic and social reform, his inability to commit to either of the more conservative or radical elements vying for his support, and his decision to disband the revolutionary groups that helped him achieve power and instead rely on the military leaders and Federal Army that had fought against them. Thus, numerous rebellions emerged with the intent of overthrowing Madero and assuming control of the Mexican government. These included Emiliano Zapata’s *agrarista* rebellion, which turned on Madero to continue its fight for expanded agrarian reform; Pascual Orozco’s *Orozquista*’s, which also turned on Madero due to Orozco’s discontent with Madero’s failures in advancing radical policies and the lack of recognition he felt he received in helping overthrow Porfirio Díaz; and reactionary rebellions led by various conservative leaders, such as Bernardo Reyes—a former general in Porfirio Díaz’s

army and one-time political ally of Díaz—and Félix Díaz—Porfirio Díaz’s nephew—, who despised the reformist ideals espoused by Madero and the more radical revolutionaries involved in the overthrow of Porfirio Díaz.

La Decena Trágica

Widespread civil discontent turned to terrible violence in February 1913 with *la Decena Trágica*. Following failed rebellions in August and October 1912, respectively, both Bernardo Reyes and Félix Díaz were incarcerated at Lecumberri prison in México City. Due to the continued influence of *Porfirismo*—the ideological doctrine of Porfirio Díaz and his *científico* advisers—amongst the military command, they were able to plan and institute a coup with the assistance of many of the military forces stationed within the city.^{viii} The coup commenced on the morning of February 9, with an attack on the National Palace by a force of rebel Federal soldiers led by Díaz and Reyes. The attack was ultimately a failure, resulting in the death of Reyes and the forced retreat of the remaining rebel Federal forces to *La Ciudadela*, an old arsenal a mile and a half away from the National Palace.^{ix} Over the next ten days, much of the fighting would occur in this area. This first battle and the subsequent fighting in “The Tragic Ten Days” reveals instances in which non-combatants were either intentionally or accidentally targeted by the warring factions, as well as examples of destruction of civilian property and excessive violence perpetrated between combatants.

Articles from three different news outlets, as well as historian Alan Knight’s *The Mexican Revolution, Vol. I*, will be used to analyze the events of *la Decena Trágica*. These are the Mexican-based *Regeneración*, created by “los Hermanos Flores Magón,” three reporters during the period of *El Porfiriato* who were well-known for their opposition to Porfirian politics and censorship of the press and their socialist and anarchist beliefs; the Mexican-American *La*

Prensa, published in San Antonio, Texas and which shows a more favorable bias towards the reactionary forces in its coverage of the events; and the U.S.-based *New York Times*, which doesn't reveal a clear bias for either side in the conflict, but could hold a more conservative bias, given the U.S. government's support for Porfirio Díaz and the economic interests of American investors and businessmen in México at the time. A *New York Times* article published on February 10, 1913 provides a description of the outbreak of fighting in front of the National Palace on the first day of *la Decena Trágica*, stating that "In this engagement, more than 300 persons were killed. Most of them were non-combatants. A large crowd had gathered around the palace, and into the assemblage both sides fired."^x This version of the events is supported in the article from *La Prensa*, which reported that, "The assaulting troops gave several charges over the crowd that witnessed the fight, resulting in various deaths and injuries... In the battle that the belligerents sustained in front of the Palace, it is calculated that there were around 200 deaths."^{xi} Despite the differences in overall death toll, both accounts are further confirmed in Alan Knight's analysis: "For some ten minutes the Zócalo became a battlefield: Reyes was shot dead along with 400 others, many of them civilian bystanders."^{xii} These accounts ultimately conclude that both the military rebels under Díaz's command and the Federal soldiers under Madero committed violence against a non-combatant populace, a trend in the warfare that would be repeated throughout the rest of the Revolution.

Additionally, fifteen military cadets and their commanding officer, General Ruiz, who had joined Félix Díaz in the attack on the National Palace, were captured and summarily executed by General Victoriano Huerta, who Madero appointed to head the Federal defense against the rebels.^{xiii} Though the execution of captured foot soldiers and lower officers occurred in the first phase of the Revolution, the execution of a high-ranking and well-known general like

Ruiz represented an escalation in the brutality of the warfare of the Mexican Revolution,^{xiv} a shift which would be seen throughout the following phases of the Revolution. The execution of 16 captured combatants by a Federal officer also represents a clear violation of Article 4 of the Hague Convention, which states that “[prisoners] must be humanely treated.”^{xv} These instances of deadly combat between soldiers and civilians caught in the crossfire provide insight into how the Mexican Revolution would reach conditions of total war, foreshadowing much of the escalation in violence and brutality that would be seen in the following days and years.

The third day of fighting in *la Decena Trágica* saw the combatants continuing to commit acts of superfluous violence amongst themselves and against non-combatants, this time with the added element of destroying civilian property. A *New York Times* article covering the fighting noted that during the attack on *La Ciudadela*, “Heavy artillery were used on both sides, and the firing was directed without regard to the non-combatants in the streets or to the property of foreigners. The government losses are heavy. One estimate is over 1,000 killed and wounded [soldiers]. This is probably conservative. The loss among non-combatants is also heavy.”^{xvi} Articles from both *Regeneración* and *La Prensa* further reaffirm this form of close quarters combat within the city and the destructive effect it had on civilian life. *Regeneración* states that, “Transformed into crazy [persons], into brutes, the men of the [Federal] army have divided into two bands and, spewing thousands of grenades and cannonballs, have left México City in ruins and murdered thousands of men, women, and children,”^{xvii} while *La Prensa* expresses “With the bombardment of *La Ciudadela*, many private residences have been destroyed, causing the deaths of countless persons.”^{xviii}

These articles could be taken as sensationalistic, with the intent of embellishing their narratives in order to serve either their own biases or the interests of their leadership; however,

Alan Knight's description confirms the authenticity of these accounts, noting that "On the morning of 11 February, government forces opened the attack on the *Ciudadela* with a massive artillery barrage (to which the rebels replied in kind) followed by waves of infantry; there were over 500 casualties, including many civilians."^{xi} Therefore, the use of heavy artillery in such confined quarters as city streets indicates a clear intent to injure and murder as much of the enemy as possible. Article 23 of the Hague Convention declares the use of arms, projectiles, or materials calculated to cause unnecessary suffering to be prohibited,^{xx} and the use of artillery in this scenario certainly fits that bill. Furthermore, the evidence gleaned from all four accounts indicates that these weren't mere accidental killings of a few non-combatant bystanders, but that both the Federal Army and the military rebels under Díaz's command showed an explicit lack of care in securing the safety of nearby non-combatants, resulting in the deaths of many innocent people.

The article from *La Prensa* also observed that, after the artillery barrage on *La Ciudadela*, "The city is found without lighting and a panicked terror overcomes the inhabitants. The electric streetcars don't circulate, and only the ambulances working to collect the dead and injured pass through the streets."^{xxi} Instances like these are further corroborated by the passage from the *New York Times* article cited in the introduction, which noted severe drops in the food supply throughout the capital by the third day of fighting, and Alan Knight's account: "Shells were lobbed across the city centre, machine-gun fire raked chic residential and commercial streets. The lamp-posts leaned, and festoons of telegraph wire draped themselves across deserted plazas. Rubble and corpses strewed the streets, and between them dodged 'Buen Tono' vans, acting as makeshift ambulances... Fresh food became scarce, prices shot up, and some people—it was later said—dined on dog and cat."^{xxii} The failure of the city's electricity, the deteriorating

food supply, and the loss of other civil sources reveal how the strain on civilian resources became a central theme during *la Decena Trágica*, a theme which would be repeated and even amplified as time went on and the Revolution intensified.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this particular event of *la Decena Trágica* and the wider conflict during which it occurred exists as an example in which the concept of total war manifested on multiple levels. Through the examination of the degree of violence utilized by combatants, the failure to differentiate between combatants and non-combatants in warfare, and the complete absorption of civilian resources and other areas of life, it becomes apparent that the Mexican Revolution was an armed conflict unrestricted in its methods of combat, in its willingness to impose violence on non-combatants, and in its ability to drag the entirety of civilian life into its fronts. There are numerous reasons as to why the Revolution escalated to a conflict of total war proportions, including the greater implementation of heavier weaponry and more brutal military tactics and the extended duration of the Revolution. However, after examining various sources, it becomes apparent that one of the biggest factors in producing total war in the Revolution was the ideological differences that existed between the various revolutionary forces and the counterrevolutionary elements that opposed them.

In the case of *la Decena Trágica*, it was each side's contrasting ideology and their differing beliefs in governing Mexican society that largely led to the deterioration into total war. Both Reyes and Felix Díaz had attained military and political power during Porfirio Díaz's rule, and therefore retained much belief in the Porfirian order of society and much opposition to views that challenged this order. When Madero's coalition of reformist-minded revolutionaries rose up to overthrow *El Porfiriato* and bring change to Mexican society, Reyes and Díaz viewed their

movement and the new government as invalid, believing them to be enemies of the correct manner of governance and order for the country. As such, they engaged in revolt themselves, and committed to defeating Madero as swiftly and absolutely as possible, in order to return civil order to the country. On the other side, Madero had led the charge against Porfirio Díaz and spent the better part of a year engaged in open revolt, fighting for the return of democracy and fair elections, elections that had just won him the presidency himself. To have his success followed by Porfirian rebels attempting to overthrow him and bring back—in Madero's eyes—the style of dictatorship he had just fought to bring down, meant the potential ruin of everything the revolutionaries had struggled so hard to gain. Thus, Madero committed to crushing the rebels as quickly and fully as they had with him. It was a power struggle, that is certain, but it was a power struggle involving differences in sets of motives, forms of governance, and ideas over the future of Mexican society. This form of power struggle would be repeated throughout the subsequent phases of the Mexican Revolution, in the case of the year-long civil war from 1913-1914 between Victoriano Huerta's counterrevolutionary Federal Army and Venustiano Carranza's Constitutionalist forces, and the second civil war from 1915-1917, involving Carranza's and Álvaro Obregón's Constitutionalist and the Villa and Zapata-led Conventionalists.

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Notes

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- viii Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution, vol. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 480-483.
- ix Knight, 482.
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- xiii Knight, 483.
- xiv Knight, 483.
- xv “Laws and Customs of War on Land (Hague, IV),” Article 4.
- xvi “Madero spurns offer”, 1.
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- xx “Laws and Customs of War on Land (Hague, IV),” Article 23.

xxi "El epilogo," 1.

xxii Knight, 484.

