Fighting on the Mexican Side

Gringo Rebels from the Saint Patrick's Battalion to the Wobblies

Fran Shor

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Even before taking office, the incoming Trump Administration began discussing the possibility of American military intervention in Mexico to suppress that country's drug cartels.

While shockingly brazen, it is not without precedent. The U.S. has a history of imperial intrusion in Mexico in the 19th and 20th centuries. There have also been instances where recent immigrants and U.S. citizens fought alongside Mexicans who opposed not only American intervention, but also sought to bring about a revolution.

From the Mexican-American War of the 19th century (1845–1848) to the Baja Revolution of the early 20th (1911–1912), gringo rebels aligned themselves with Mexicans to either combat the American military or to overturn the rule of Wall Street and its Mexican enablers.

During the Mexican War, a contingent of mostly recent Irish immigrants who had been recruited by the U.S. army, deserted the imperial invasion to join with the Mexican military defense. In the case of the Baja Revolution, members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), especially members of Wobbly locals in California, crossed into Mexico to become part of an insurgency to overthrow the dictator, Porfirio Diaz.

Although different circumstances and motivations compelled these gringo rebels to fight on the Mexican side, their commitments reveal insights into contesting imperialism and constructing revolutionary change.

The imperial expansion of the U.S. slave republic into Mexican territory was first realized with the establishment of the Republic of Texas in 1836. By the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1845, the Texas population consisted of 100,000 non-slave and 38,000 enslaved inhabitants. In that year, the War Department directed Gen. Zachary Taylor, a future U.S. President, and slave-owning plantation landlord and battle-tested officer of the genocidal Indian Wars, to leave Louisiana and encamp with thousands of troops to Corpus Christi, Texas, and from there go to Matamoros, Mexico.

Some of Taylor's soldiers deserted to Mexico. One of them was John Reilly, a former British soldier from Ireland who organized what became Saint Patrick's Battalion (or, in Spanish, the San Patricios) and fought alongside the Mexican army. Many members of the brigade were recent Catholic immigrants, primarily although not exclusively, from Ireland. Given the anti-Catholicism rampant in the U.S. and especially evident among Protestant military officers, Irish Catholic soldiers were targets for harsh treatment and discrimination. In addition, the Texas frontiersmen, known for their vicious campaigns against the Comanche and Mexicans, piled on their prejudicial hatred of Irish and Mexican Catholics.

By August 1846, Reilly had gathered over 200 San Patricios. Sickened by the attacks on civilians and encouraged by Mexican General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna to "come over to us" and experience true "Christian hospitality," the San Patricios became adept at deploying the limited supply of Mexican artillery in several critical engagements with the American military.

Their last battle in August 1847 at the Churubusco Monastery near Mexico City, led to the death and capture of the majority of the Battalion members. John Reilly was among them. While spared the death penalty (since his

desertion happened before the official declaration of war), he endured terrible torture, languishing in prison until the signing of the Treaty of Hidalgo in June 1848.

While denounced as traitors by the U.S. military and proponents of an imperial Manifest Destiny, Reilly and the Saint Patrick Battalion achieved grateful recognition for fighting on the Mexican side. Today, the Battalion is revered in both Mexico and Ireland although it is an unknown chapter in American history.

Their memory has been restored most recently in David Rovics' song honoring the Battalion; and their treason in its lyrics is one of his most requested numbers. There is a statue of Reilly in his birthplace of Clifden, Ireland and a bust of Reilly was placed in Mexico City's San Angel Plaza, courtesy of Ireland.

Although U.S. troops left Mexico City at the conclusion of the war, U.S. capital continued to spread its tentacles throughout Mexico. By 1900, US capitalists owned one-quarter of all arable Mexican land. By 1910, over half of all American foreign investment went to Mexico. Well-known robber barons, from Gould to Guggenheim to Rockefeller, controlled the country's railroads, mines, and oil.

From the late 19th through the first decade of the 20th century, Diaz, a corrupt and oppressive enabler of U.S. imperial interests, ruled Mexico with an iron hand. Resistance to the dictatorial regime came from several quarters.

Among the most radical critics of Diaz and U.S. capitalists were the anarchists Flores Magon brothers, Ricardo, Enrique and Jesus, with their newspaper, Regeneration, first published in 1900. While Ricardo, in particular, suffered imprisonment in Mexico and the U.S., the Magon brothers, nonetheless, attracted allies from among other U.S.based radicals and organizations, which sent 20,000 soldiers, nearly a quarter of the entire U.S. army to the Mexican border in California and Texas. Harrison Gray Otis, the notorious anti-union publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, and owner of thousands of acres of Mexican land, lobbied Taft to intervene in support of Diaz. However, other forces in both countries backed the Mexican bourgeois reformer, Francisco Madero, who eventually ousted Diaz in late May 1911.

As anarchists, Ricardo Flores Magon as well as the IWW were not interested in mere reforms. As Ricardo wrote in his "Manifesto to the Workers of the World" (reprinted in the Wobbly newspaper, *Solidarity*): "For more than four months the Red Flag has flown on the battlefields of Mexico, carried aloft by emancipated workers" who opposed the "continuance of social inequality, the capitalist system, the division of the human family into two classes–that of the exploiter and that of the exploited." The objective of those exploited argued Magon was to "expropriate the land and the means of production and hand them over to the people."

By the end of June 1911, with Mexican and U.S. troops arrayed against them, a number of the IWW contingent, including Joe Hill, managed to escape the clutches of the Mexican *federales* and the U.S. military. However, most of Hill's fellow Wobblies were not as lucky. They faced immediate arrest at the California-Mexican border.

Ricardo Flores Magon experienced intermittent imprisonment, finally dying in Leavenworth federal prison in 1922, a victim like many others, including the leadership of the IWW, of the charge of "obstructing the war effort," a primary component of the 1917 Espionage Act.

Nevertheless, the banner of Regeneration for tierra y Libertad (land and freedom) would inspire other Mexican revolutionaries, including Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Once again, the U.S. military intervened to attempt to forestall revolution and to protect oil interests. And, once again, gringo rebels aided their Mexican allies, either as soldiers in Villa's and Zapata's forces or among the IWW and anarcho-syndicalist oil workers. Mexico also became a refuge for anarchists like Sacco and Vanzetti fleeing from the World War I draft instituted in April 1917.

On one hand, given the history of U.S. imperial arrogance and Trump's own racism and misogyny, especially with a left-wing Jewish woman now occupying the office of the President of Mexico, such aggression from El Norte might come to pass.

On the other, we should take inspiration from those gringo rebels who fought on the Mexican side. If not actually taking up arms in defense of Mexico, the least we can do is resist any effort to militarily intervene in that country.

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