The Economic Goals of Francisco “Pancho” Villa in the Mexican Revolution

Introduction

Francisco “Pancho” Villa is one of the most famous individuals in Mexico’s history. Villa has become a mythic figure since his involvement in the Mexican Revolution of the early twentieth century. The historian encounters difficulty in separating myth from fact, especially as Villa legends have grown throughout Mexico and the world since his death in 1923. Also problematic is that Villa himself relished and encouraged the propagation of disputed tales about his life. Historian Friedrich Katz in his detailed biography of Pancho Villa discusses this problem. Katz explains: “There are legends of Villa the Robin Hood, Villa the Napoleon of Mexico, Villa the ruthless killer, Villa the womanizer, and Villa as the only foreigner who has attacked the mainland of the United States since the war of 1812 and gotten away with it. Whether correct or incorrect, exaggerated or true to life, these legends have resulted in Pancho Villa the leader obscuring his movement, and the myths obscuring the leader.”¹

The following paper works through the Villa legends to discover the facts about his economic philosophies and goals. Understanding the economic aspects of Pancho Villa’s life will allow a greater comprehension of the economic causes and events of the Mexican Revolution. Specifically, I seek to answer the following questions: How did Villa’s early life affect his economic philosophy? What were Villa’s economic goals in the early years of the Mexican Revolution? What economic policies did Villa pursue as governor of Chihuahua?

What role did economics play in Villa’s break with Venustiano Carranza, and why was Carranza ultimately successful? How feasible was Villa’s economic plan? Hopefully this paper will provide better knowledge of the real Pancho Villa, as well as of the Mexican Revolution.

**Pancho Villa’s Early Life**

Pancho Villa’s early life significantly influenced his later economic plans for Mexico. These years are among the most difficult to document, as little record exists and this time has become the subject of much mythologizing. Despite these limitations, we can draw certain conclusions about Villa’s early years. Growing up in poverty and violence made him sensitive to the plight of Mexico’s poor. Never forgetting his background, Villa would later work to alleviate their suffering.

Pancho Villa was born in 1878 on the López Negrete hacienda in the state of Durango. His parents worked as sharecroppers, and named him Doroteo Arango. Villa’s father died when he was a young child, leaving Villa’s mother alone to raise and support five children. Villa experienced a youth of hard work and poverty.²

According to his memoirs, Villa began his life of rebellion in 1894 at the age of sixteen. On September 22 of that year, Villa returned home from working in the fields and found his mother weeping while his sister clung to her side. Agustín López Negrete, the hacienda owner, had attempted to sexually assault Villa’s sister. Enraged by this abuse, Villa grabbed his pistol and shot López Negrete three times. Knowing his life was in danger, Villa immediately fled to the mountains to hide.³

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Sexual exploitation of impoverished women by hacendados or other rich elites was common in early twentieth century Mexico. Villa loathed this violence against his family. He reflected: “My conscience told me that I had done the right thing. The master [López Negrete] . . . had tried to impose a forced contribution of our honor. The sweat of his serfs, the work of his serfs, our constant and tiring labor in order to enrich him, the master, was not sufficient for him. He also needed our women, his serfs; his despotism led to the profanation of our home.”

The brutal experience of being a sharecropper made Villa understand the struggles of Mexico’s poor. Villa spent the next several years of his life as a bandit in the mountains and deserts of Durango and Chihuahua, robbing travelers and evading pursuers. For protection, he changed his name from Doroteo Arango to Francisco “Pancho” Villa. His father, Agustín Arango, was the illegitimate son of Don Jesús Villa, a prominent gentleman of Basque descent, so he thus chose this title as his new name. Pancho Villa recognized the life of a bandit would be difficult, but he refused to submit his family or himself to abuse. He later told his mother: “It is my fate to suffer. . . . I’ll be the Number One bandit in the country before I’ll see my family dishonored.”

Villa’s years of banditry to 1910 remain difficult to document and shrouded in legend. In that time a Robin Hood myth developed about Villa, whereby he robbed the rich and gave the spoils to the poor. He continued to provide money for his family back at the López Negrete hacienda. Villa became mythologized as a hero of the poor in Durango and Chihuahua. He later claimed: “I had returned to the poor the money that the rich had taken from them.” The validity of these narratives is problematic to establish, but Villa’s later generosity as governor of Chihuahua lends some credit to the accounts. No doubt his admirers and Villa himself

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exaggerated his altruism. However, we can conclude that Villa from a young age sympathized with his fellow impoverished citizens, due to his own personal experiences with poverty.  

**Pancho Villa Joins the Revolution**

After many years in banditry and several failed attempts to escape this lifestyle, Villa bought a house in Chihuahua City. There he began hearing of the growing sentiment for revolution in 1910. He met Don Abraham González, a military leader and supporter of Francisco Madero, who was leading an effort to force President Porfirio Díaz from power. González became a mentor to Villa and inspired him to join the Mexican Revolution to fight for economic and social justice. Villa later remembered of this experience in Chihuahua City:

> There I had my first talks with Don Abraham González, now a martyr to democracy. There he asked me to join the Revolution and fight for the oppressed people. There I learned one night how my long struggle with the exploiters, the persecutors, the seducers, could be of benefit to others who were persecuted and humiliated as I had been. There I felt the anxiety and hate built up in my soul during years of struggle and suffering change into the belief that the evil could be ended, and this strengthened my determination to relieve our hardships at the price of life and blood if necessary.

Villa devoted himself to Madero and the revolutionary cause. “I heard the name of Francisco I. Madero for the first time. I learned to love and revere him for his unshakeable faith, for the Plan of San Luis, because he, a rich man, was devoted to the struggle for the poor and oppressed.”

Villa and González organized an army in Chihuahua to support Madero. Villa quickly gained fame through his military successes, most notably the capture of Ciudad Juárez in 1911. These victories in battle helped Madero oust President Díaz from office. In the fall of 1911, Madero became the first truly popularly elected president of Mexico in over thirty years. Consumed with the spirit of revolution, Villa distributed food to the wives and widows of his

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soldiers, illustrating his appreciation for their husbands’ war efforts.\textsuperscript{8} Pancho Villa remained loyal to President Madero, even as dissatisfaction grew among some revolutionaries with his governance. In a letter to Madero dated July 24, 1912, Villa proclaimed: “Yo soy hombre de convicciones firmes, y si no las han comprendido, hay que sufrir. Yo soy hombre que no estoy educado, pero el fondo de mi corazón tiene mucho que ver.”\textsuperscript{9}

In 1913 General Victoriano Huerta led a military coup and overthrew President Madero. Huerta had Madero murdered and installed himself in the presidency. He and his supporters repressed Maderistas throughout the country in an effort to consolidate their power. Villa denounced Huerta’s rebellion. The two men had served together as part of Madero’s forces and had viewed each other with mutual suspicion. Villa’s hatred for Huerta became more personal when his regime assassinated Don Abraham González shortly after seizing power.

In March of 1913, Venustiano Carranza, the governor of Coahuila, publicly condemned Huerta’s overthrow of Madero as unconstitutional. Carranza announced his Plan of Guadalupe, a program which called for the removal of Huerta from the presidency and the restoration of the constitutional process. Military leader Alvaro Obregón joined Carranza, as did Emiliano Zapata of Morelos, a revolutionary who led peasants in fighting for “land and liberty.” Villa committed himself to the Plan of Guadalupe, and continued as commander of the Northern Army. Carranza, Obregón, Zapata, and Villa determined to remove Huerta from power and restore the revolution.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., 46-53.


\textsuperscript{10}Venustiano Carranza, Ideología de Venustiano Carranza (Mexico, D.F.: PRI, n.d.); and Plana, Pancho Villa and the Mexican Revolution, 40-43.
Pancho Villa thus found himself fully involved in the Mexican Revolution. His early life made him aware of the suffering of Mexico’s impoverished. Villa supported Francisco Madero’s revolution because he thought it would lead to economic justice for Mexican citizens. He condemned General Huerta’s violent overthrow of Madero and attempts to establish a conservative military dictatorship. To further the cause of revolution, Villa joined a diverse group of individuals in supporting the Plan of Guadalupe. As the revolutionaries defeated Huerta, Villa consolidated his rule over the state of Chihuahua. In late 1913, he became governor and possessed an opportunity to put his revolutionary rhetoric into action.

Pancho Villa as Governor of Chihuahua

In December 1913 Chihuahuan leaders named Pancho Villa governor of the state. For the next several years Villa controlled Chihuahua and brought revolutionary reforms to the state. Chihuahua City especially served as his own personal kingdom. During these years Villa was at the height of his popularity, and legends, especially Robin Hood myths, about the man became larger than life. Villa hoped to expand his reforms from Chihuahua to the rest of Mexico. The historian’s task is to understand Villa’s real accomplishments and failures as governor of Chihuahua, and question how feasible his state policies would be if applied to a national level.

Villa faced serious challenges in bringing stability, much less reform, to war-torn Chihuahua. He employed his soldiers in civil and administrative roles to bring order to the state. Villa explained: “I appointed civil and military authorities and arranged for guarantees to create confidence and encourage work. It had already been necessary to stop the excessive looting.” He especially sought to provide for his soldiers, commenting: “These humble and lifeless men and those in our hospitals are the heroes of the war, not the learned men or the generals.”
Inspired by their bravery, Villa continued: “I resolved that if it was in my power to assure it, the people should never lose what they had won.” As governor of Chihuahua, Villa ensured that his forces were paid regularly and often redistributed money and goods confiscated from enemies to his soldiers. He continued providing financial assistance in the form of food or money to wounded soldiers or their widows.¹¹

Villa pursued various policies to ensure Chihuahua possessed an adequate money supply. He confiscated gold from several banks, such as the Banco Minero de Chihuahua, having little sympathy for the wealthy owners of these institutions. Villa opened gambling houses in the state to create tax revenue. He sold significant quantities of Chihuahuan cattle and cotton to the United States to raise revenue. To prevent international tensions from arising, Villa refused to confiscate or raise taxes on most foreign-owned properties. This inaction particularly pleased the United States. Most notably, Villa commissioned the printing of his own paper currency for Chihuahua to bring economic stability. He demanded that this money be accepted on equal terms as the Mexican peso, under penalty of execution for those who refused. The governor then created the Bank of the State of Chihuahua to control the printing of his money and extend limited credit.¹²

Villa required tribute from and expropriated haciendas. Targets for hacienda confiscation were those owners in Chihuahua who supported General Huerta. Villa’s plan was to keep the haciendas in state control until the revolution ended, in order to provide revenue for the government and military. Money from the expropriated land would be employed further as


assistance to widows and orphans of revolutionary soldiers. Villa promised to redistribute the haciendas amongst the population once the revolution ended in victory. Some of the more radical Chihuahuans criticized Villa’s reluctance to participate in immediate land reform, but the governor’s policy remained popular. In one particular instance, Villa ordered the public execution of an especially cruel hacendado who had been infamous for abusing his sharecroppers. He later explained his economic philosophy: “I have never stolen. . . . I have taken from those who had much in order to give to those who had little, or nothing. . . . It is the rich who steal because, having everything they need, they still deprive the poor of their miserable bread.”

Governor Villa enacted critical reforms to improve the quality of life of Chihuahua citizens. He provided welfare relief to the poor in the form of money, clothing, and food. He mandated a reduction in the state’s meat prices. Though having little schooling himself, Villa perceived education as crucial for empowering Mexican citizens. He appropriated vast sums of money to building over fifty schools in Chihuahua City. These educational initiatives were some of Villa’s greatest accomplishments. The governor improved the infrastructure of the state, which had been victim to battle damages. Importantly, Villa’s administration rebuilt the railroad south of Chihuahua City. The reforms further endeared Villa to his citizens.

In the short-term, Pancho Villa’s economic program as governor of Chihuahua was a success. The economy remained solid and balanced. He brought order and consolidated his rule over the state. His army remained fervently devoted to him, and he enjoyed immense popularity among the lower classes. Significant members of the middle class also respected and admired

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Villa’s governance. Villa’s economic policies became the foundation for the state of Chihuahua, and would last for several years, as long as he retained authority. Most importantly for Villa, his army was financially secure and ready for future combat.¹⁵

However, it remained to be seen if Villa’s economic program would last for the long-term, or if it could be initiated on a national level. As we shall see, events in the Mexican Revolution decreased Villa’s influence and eventually his Chihuahua program’s effectiveness. Added to these developments were serious doubts many Mexicans had about the feasibility of enacting Villa’s economic reforms on a national level.

**Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and the Break with Carranza**

By mid-1914, serious tension had grown between Pancho Villa and Venustiano Carranza. Villa questioned Carranza’s commitment to real revolutionary reform and worried he only sought power. Carranza viewed Villa in contempt as a simple bandit, and jealously saw him as a rival to his political ambitions. Villa had joined Carranza in support of the Plan of Guadalupe, but early in their relationship sensed tension between Carranza and himself. Villa remembered: “I saw that he distrusted me and was inclined to interfere with my freedom of action, from secret impulse or at the instigation of those around him.” He later warned Carranza’s supporters: “We will not permit our cause to suffer or go astray. If Carranza departs from his duty, we will punish him, and in less than a second make the reforms and enact the laws the people expect.”¹⁶

Villa and Emiliano Zapata, distrustful of Carranza, broke with him in late 1914 and joined forces. Zapata supported Villa’s economic programs, but went even further in agrarian reform, calling for real redistribution of land to the masses. Zapata insisted: “Con Carranza va la

revolución al abismo. Sin Carranza, que es el estorbo, se obtendrá la unificación revolucionaria, y con ella el triunfo definitivo, la anhelada Victoria del ideal reformista.” Villa and Zapata possessed great respect for one another. Villa reflected: “It is not chance but justice that I, Pancho Villa, who was persecuted as a boy and man by the rich and powerful, should come in person to unite the north and the south in their struggle for the cause of the poor. For Zapata embodies the struggle of men here as I do that of men yonder.” Zapata wrote to Villa as the two began their alliance: “Yo confío en su patriotismo, pues lo he considerado un patriota que se preocupa por el bienestar del pueblo.”

During the latter half of 1914, Villa and Zapata worked to gain control of significant portions of the country. By December, they possessed Mexico City and entered the capital to plan revolutionary reforms. Villa and Zapata hoped to create a tangible plan for economic and social relief, but they soon faced difficulties. Mexico City gradually moved into crisis as wealthy families fled the city due to fear of Villa and Zapata’s forces. Looters ransacked and occupied their empty houses. Organizing an effective government to administer the city and the country proved challenging, given the tumultuous times. Zapata demanded emphasis be placed on solving the agrarian problem. Villa was sympathetic to the peasants’ cause, but desired to put off this question until their victory was assured for fear of losing support of the United States. The developments caused Villa and Zapata’s efforts to stall.

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18 Guzmán, Memoirs of Pancho Villa, 377.
19 Osorio, La Correspondencia de Francisco Villa, 44.
20 Plana, Pancho Villa and the Mexican Revolution, 71-76; and Keen and Haynes, A History of Latin America, 282-84.
Meanwhile Carranza, who won the support of Alvaro Obregón, replenished his forces and worked to broaden support for his cause. He pursued the favor of peasants and workers by adopting token social reforms to his Plan of Guadalupe. Carranza restored some lands to villages, called for a minimum wage law, guaranteed the right of workers to unionize and strike, and suggested he supported women’s equality. He characterized Villa and Zapata as dangerous radicals and himself as a thoughtful progressive. Carranza at this time released a statement explaining: “I plan to make the laws I think necessary and carry out agrarian, labor, tax, judicial, municipal, religious, and military reforms and any other reforms the people want. . . . I will . . . print money; make loans; authorize expenditures; keep accounts of them; and take over properties.”

As Carranza consolidated his power and won wider support for his cause, Villa and Zapata faltered in their attempts to complete their revolution. In early 1915, General Obregón recaptured Mexico City, and Villa and Zapata were forced to flee. Villa momentarily regrouped and battled Obregón twice at Celaya, but exhausted and depleted forces ensured his defeat. Villa returned to Chihuahua defeated but determined to regroup and continue the revolution. He remained in control of Chihuahua and with his forces engaged in guerilla warfare against the Carranza regime.

As time passed by and Carranza gained more control over Mexico, Villa faced difficulties in ruling Chihuahua. Especially problematic was the devaluation of his printed paper currency. Villa kept frequent contact with Lázaro de la Garza, president of the Bank of the State of Chihuahua, regarding the value of his printed money. Carranza refused to authorize the legitimacy of Villa’s currency. To combat Carranza’s economic policy, Villa prohibited

\[21\text{Ibid.; and Guzmán, Memoirs of Pancho Villa, 385.}\]
Carranzan money from use in Chihuahua and strictly enforced the utilization of his own currency. However, Villa’s efforts could not prevent devaluation of his money, especially as the international community gradually recognized Carranza as Mexico’s legitimate leader.\(^{22}\)

In a devastating blow to Villa, the United States officially recognized Carranza’s regime in October 1915. Villa wrote in his memoirs that Carranza had been “trying to secure recognition from Washington by promising not to carry out the reforms the people wanted, and Mexican reactionaries in the United States were spending their money to defeat the Revolutionary cause.” Since his break with Carranza, the United States increasingly had viewed Villa as a radical, and feared his economic program would decrease drastically the profitability of American investments in Mexico.\(^{23}\)

Villa understood that U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s recognition of Carranza as leader of Mexico undermined his chances of pursuing vast revolutionary reform. At one time an admirer of President Wilson, Villa felt personally insulted. To obtain revenge, he began crossing the U.S.-Mexican border to attack Americans. A larger goal of his actions was to entice the United States to sending military forces into Mexico, and thereby undermine the authority of Carranza’s rule. Villa hoped this would lead to Mexican citizens rallying toward him. On March 9, 1916, Villa led his forces in an attack on Columbus, New Mexico, killing seventeen Americans.

The United States increasingly was being drawn into the Great War in Europe, and the Wilson administration had little desire to go to battle against Mexico. To punish Villa without appearing overly aggressive toward Mexican sovereignty, President Wilson dispatched 5,000

\(^{22}\)Lázaro de la Garza Archive, 1905-1939, Benson Latin American Collection, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

soldiers commanded by General John Pershing to assist Carranza in capturing Villa. Pershing spent a year pursuing Villa in the mountains and deserts of Chihuahua. Hiding on his own terrain and aided by supporters, Villa eluded Pershing and Carranza’s forces. After an exasperating year of chasing Villa, Wilson recalled Pershing and ended the pursuit.\(^{24}\)

While Villa successfully avoided capture, a year spent in hiding made him unable to focus on governance of Chihuahua and the larger revolution. His attacks on U.S. civilians undermined him internationally and further contributed to his violent bandit image. Meanwhile, Carranza continued to solidify his rule over Mexico, most notably through passage of the Constitution of 1917.

**Why Did Pancho Villa’s Economic Program Fail?**

Pancho Villa’s economic program failed for several reasons. Venustiano Carranza successfully rallied the Mexican public to support him and characterized Villa as a radical and violent bandit. Villa consistently lost power as Carranza solidified his control of Mexico. Villa achieved short-term success as governor of Chihuahua, but losing national power undermined his efforts to make his economic program permanent. Furthermore, many aspects of Villa’s reforms were not economically feasible for the long-term.

Carranza broadened his support among Mexico’s citizens while Villa and Zapata struggled to develop a government in Mexico City. Carranza already had the support of many in the middle class and some elites. He endorsed a minimum wage law and the right to unionize and strike to gain popularity among workers. He broadened his support among women by speaking of equal rights. Carranza often spoke in general terms and promised to bring order to

the country, which won him much acclaim. While he would become more conservative as
president, his acceptance of the liberal Constitution of 1917 solidified his power. The
Constitution of 1917 appealed to moderate sections of the population as being less radical than
the proposed reforms of Villa and Zapata, especially in regard to land redistribution.

Villa and Zapata’s inability to create a revolutionary government that would bring order
to Mexico further undermined their cause. They suffered from lack of time, as General Obregón
quickly forced them from the capital. Obregón’s defeat of Villa at the Battle of Celaya in the
spring of 1915 humbled Villa and caused him to lose political clout. While he continued to exert
control over Chihuahua when he returned from Celaya, Villa’s power gradually diminished as
Carranza established his national government. Villa’s printed money devalued, limiting his
ability to continue revolutionary reform. His army was depleted and exhausted and suffered
from decreasing morale due to loss in battle and poor economic times. Villa’s relationship with
the United States government cooled as he lost battles and his currency value declined. U.S.
President Woodrow Wilson’s extension of diplomatic recognition to Carranza’s rule significantly
undermined Villa’s authority, especially among supporters outside of Mexico. Villa’s attacks on
U.S. Americans damaged his reputation internationally, as well as with many Mexicans. A year
spent in hiding from Pershing’s forces loosened Villa’s political grip on Chihuahua and
prevented him from giving more attention to reforms. These events contributed to the decrease
in Villa’s power, and consequently the chances for his economic program’s success.

Villa’s economic program failed because its implementation was not feasible on a long-
term basis in the state of Chihuahua, much less the entire country of Mexico. Villa employed his
soldiers in civil and administrative positions in Chihuahua, but there was little chance of this
occurring on a long-term, national scale. To do so would require vast expansion of Villa’s army,
using members of other military outfits, who had little loyalty to Villa. The endeavor would be an administrative nightmare and expand the power of the military. Most Mexican citizens, having lived through General Huerta’s violent regime, had little desire for a military dictatorship. Villa’s financial system, based on the printing of huge amounts of paper money, worked well in the short-term, but as we have seen caused later problems. Expanded to a national level, Villa’s money would have to replace the peso, not a small task, or the nation’s entire currency would experience massive inflation. Villa’s practice of confiscating gold from banks could not be transformed on a national level, as this would cause investors to send their money out of the country, encourage lawlessness, and be disastrous for Mexico’s economy.

Public welfare measures might have been initiated nationally, but not at the high levels of spending or with the force Villa employed in Chihuahua. Winning broad political support for such reforms, especially among the middle and upper classes, would have been difficult for Villa. Providing pensions for veterans and their families, as well as food, clothing, and schools for the poor, would be a monumental task on the national level and require spending huge sums of public money. Failure by Villa to provide adequate welfare would undermine his support amongst the poor, but the wealthier classes were not likely to agree to massive spending on such programs. Villa ordered a reduction of meat prices in Chihuahua, but such measures simply were not feasible on a national level for a long period of time. Emiliano Zapata would have pressured Villa to endorse land redistribution, which Villa desired but never solved how to enact. Villa thus would have encountered tension from both sides over the issue of agrarian reform. As has been illustrated, many aspects of Villa’s economic program just were not feasible on a long-term national scale.
Conclusion

In 1920 General Alvaro Obregón overthrew President Venustiano Carranza, who had made numerous enemies with his autocratic style of rule as leader of Mexico. Carranza was subsequently murdered. Villa’s nemesis was dead, and the Chihuahuan revolutionary made peace with the new Mexican government. Villa retired to a brief peaceful life at a hacienda in Canutillo. He was murdered in 1923 under mysterious circumstances. Who assassinated Villa remains unknown to the present day.

Pancho Villa created an economic program designed to bring justice to Mexico’s impoverished citizens. He was a central figure in the Mexican Revolution. Villa achieved short-term success with his reforms in Chihuahua, but could not transcend his economic program to a long-term national triumph. This failure, as well as the man’s violence and personal vices, are part of the Villa legacy. However, they should not overshadow the worthiness of his attempt to change Mexico. Pancho Villa remains an inspiring figure for many Mexicans today because of his beliefs and actions. Villa described his economic philosophy best when he spoke at the Convention of Aguascalientes in 1914, explaining: “I want everything for the good of the people and the relief of the poor. . . . I want to see my country happy and safe, because I have suffered much for it, and I refuse to allow other Mexicans, my brothers, to suffer what I have suffered, or the women and children to suffer what I have seen them suffer in the mountains, the fields, and the haciendas.”

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Lázaro de la Garza Archive, 1905-1939, Benson Latin American Collection, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas.


Doroteo Arango Arámbula, better known as Francisco or Pancho Villa, was a Mexican revolutionary general. He was born on June 5, 1878 and little is known of his early life. According to his own version of his life story, at the age of 16 he shot an older man, the son of a big landowner, who had tried to rape Pancho’s younger sister, Martina. The origins of the song are obscure, but the Mexican writer Jose Joaquin Fernandez de Lizardi claimed the song was brought to Mexico from Spain by a captain of marines. Lyrics for La Cucaracha exist commemorating 19th-century conflicts in both Spain and Mexico, but the most famous verses were written during the Mexican revolution of 1910-1920. Included among the new lyrics were the most famous verse of all.