

Women in Battle

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The 1910 Mexican Revolutionary War is described as a man's war, but *Las Soldaderas* would disagree. Friedrich Katz, Author of *The Life of Pancho Villa*, writes that "the Mexican Revolution was not only a man's but a women's revolution."¹ *Soldaderas*, also known as *Adelitas*, participated in the war as members of both the Federal and the Rebel armies. They would travel with the soldiers as camp followers and assist them with whatever they might need. Additionally, there were groups of women that took up arms and fought alongside their male counterparts, some even became generals. At the time of the war, it was clear that they were two separate groups of women, but as time went on, they were umbrellaed under the term, *soldadera*. These *soldaderas* challenged traditional marianismo gender roles. The Mexican public called them masculine, loose, and sexualized them. The *Soldaderas* efforts were devalued by being overly romanticized in songs, poems, and paintings. It is the intention of this paper to bring into light the significant roles that the *soldaderas* played during the revolution. To achieve this, *La Soldadera* will need to be broken into three parts: The female camp follower, the female fighter, and the romanticized version of the two.

Women on the battlefield are nothing new for any nation. For Mexico, it can be traced back to the days of the gods, such as the ancient Aztec Mother Earth Deity, Toci. In the codex Maliabechiano, she is shown holding a broom made of medicinal herbs to represent her healing abilities. Toci's attire represents fertility and rebirth, and lastly, the black dots on her cheeks, the blackened lips, and the shield she carries in the opposite hand all represent war and battle. According to ancient Aztec beliefs, when a woman was pregnant, she became a warrior, and while she was in labor, she was in battle. The mother's midwives would gather around her and ask Toci

to protect her while she fought; at the end of successful births, all would gather and congratulate the mother for fighting a good fight.² Even the God of War, Huitzilopochtli, would often pray to Toci and ask for her to send warriors. Queen Izabella of Spain would dress in full battle armor to check on the status of her army and the Castilian women that were brought to the Americas came with that image of their Queen. Over time, women's roles became more domesticated and less "war leaders." Yet, Mexico's history of women's positions in war would explain why they were one of the few countries that prolonged the banning of women on the battlefield.

The 1910 Revolution began when the presidential candidate, wealthy landowner and banker, Francisco Madero, began to threaten the Diaz regime. Fearing defeat Porfirio Diaz arrested Madero and some of his supporters, which were made up of Mexicans from around the nation, most of whom were a part of the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM).³ While Madero's supporters were protesting, he escaped prison and fled to San Antonio, Texas. However, before he left, Madero published the Plan de San Luis Potosi on October 5, 1910. The document promised democracy, federalism, worker's rights, agrarian reform, and it called out the Mexican government and Diaz. The document mobilized PLM radicals and Mexicans who opposed the Diaz regime and began the decade-long revolution. As men joined either the Federal army or the Rebellion, most women in Mexico had little choice in deciding which side to fight in. Their allegiance hinged upon which side the men in their families supported. There was also the unfortunate few who were forced into a side by the army themselves.

It is important to break down the term *soldadera* to better understand their roles in the war. *Soldadera* in Spanish translates to female soldier, but it was also a term used by Spanish Conquistadors to refer to servants that soldiers would hire to get them food, clothes, or anything else they might need. A *Soldada*, or *sold*, was the pay that a soldier would receive for their work,

regardless of their gender.⁴ So, by definition, a *soldadera*, was a servant (such as a camp follower) and a *soldada* was a soldier. Latin American History Professor Elizabeth Sala's book, *Soldaderas in the Mexican: Myth and History*, goes into detail on the history of the *Soldaderas* in Mexico starting long before the Revolution. Salas explains that there were various factors as to how and why a woman would end up in either the camps or the battlefield during the revolution.

Conscription required many men to join the federal army which in turn caused many women to join. Most of them were wives who didn't want their husbands to "share the hardships."⁵ However, most wives who followed their husbands, did so because of women's social expectation to be submissive and dutiful. In a 1912 interview, American journalist John Reed spoke with an unnamed *soldadera* from Villa's army on her experience. She explained that her husband, Filadelfo, expected her to follow him into battle after the murder of Pancho Madero, even though she was pregnant. When she questioned her husband about why she had to go, he responded with, "Shall I starve then? Who shall make my tortillas for me but my woman?"⁶ Men who did not have wives like Filadelfo, searched for a *soldadera* to be their faithful servant in the way a wife would be. Unfortunately for Filadelfo, on their journey up north to the battlefields, his wife lost their baby due to dehydration.

Mexico's poor economic state during the Revolution sent many men and women in search of low-wage work. When armies began to appear, they not only saw an opportunity to work but a chance at freedom and independence. Both Federal and Rebel armies lacked an official commissariat and as a result, women rushed to accept these work opportunities. Women became in charge of "food and other services to the lower ranks composed of Indians, vagrants, prisoners, and poor men."⁷ Andres Resendez Fuentes, author of the article, *Battle Ground Women*, explains that women treated their time in the camps as a business. It was believed that some of the best

soldaderas carried baskets filled with simple foods, a decorative tablecloth, plates, and other feminine decorative touches and charged men for meals. The wives who stayed behind in the camps while their husbands were off fighting offered their cooking services to the remaining soldiers. Chepa Moreno, a Yaqui woman, and former federal *soldadera* worked with her husband in a hacienda; the 1911 Slave Emancipation left Moreno and many Yaqui people in need of new employment. After moving to Mérida in search of work, Moreno began to sell tortillas to the nearby Federal army.⁸

Additionally, women who voluntarily joined the federal army as camp followers did so out of security. Within the battle camps, women had a better chance of obtaining work and food than they would in towns. These entrepreneurial women knew how to exploit the soldiers for money. For a price, soldiers purchased the *soldaderas'* services; some worked as camp mothers, others offered sexual services, and a few became wives. Aside from those few that did marry, the freedom of movement appealed to the *soldaderas*. They were free to leave and find a camp with soldiers who paid them more. Conversely, soldiers could also separate when they wanted to find a *soldadera* who offered them a better bargain. There were also *soldaderas* that joined to serve as nurses. Most worked with the White Cross, Mexico's version of the Red Cross, which was formed as a volunteer infirmary and relief services established to care for those wounded in combat.⁹

Many of the *soldaderas* in the Federal and Rebellion Army, did not join of their own free will. During what Fuentes refers to as "the Second Wave," revolts in the north and south were beginning to become a problem for the Mexican government. To keep up with the revolts, the self-appointed president, Victoriano Huerta, increased his standing army to 150,000 men.¹⁰ Press gangs descended into towns and forcibly enlisted any men capable of fighting. Consequently, women were not spared and were also forcibly taken to the army alongside their husbands, sons, and

brothers. Both Federal and Rebel Army soldiers were known for abducting women from towns and forcing them to work at their camps as *soldaderas*. Women who were abducted, abandoned, or sexually assaulted had little to no other option other than to follow.¹¹ Some Mexican women went as far as covering their hair when soldiers were nearby to avoid the possibility of abduction.

On December 12, 1913, the United States Newspaper, *Perth Amboy Evening News* ran a segment on the Mexican Revolutionary War and how the US was readying their troops at the borders; in the bottom corner of the newspaper was a small article, "Daring Women Fighters of Mexico."¹² According to the article, it is believed that there were a little under 500 women who carried muskets. (Different reports claim over 500, but due to poor record-keeping, it is hard to be sure which ones are correct.) There are several reasons for women becoming *soldadas*, or female soldiers. Famously, Rosa "La Coronela" Cocadilla took over the command of her husband, Officer Pedro Casa, upon his death.¹³ Additionally, women joined to not be far from their husband or lovers, others believed in the war's cause," and a few have gone under fire to get revenge." Marie Sanchez was a wealthy Castilian woman whose brother was shot and killed by the Federal Army. Giving up the comforts and luxuries that her home provided, she went to the army and asked to take her brother's place so that she could get revenge. The Perth article speaks of the Federal army officer's unnamed wife who led the Constitutionalists into battle while riding alongside her husband.

While rare, if the *soldadas* registered in the army's roster and proved themselves in battle, female soldiers could climb up the ranks and become *coronelas*.¹⁴ Spying was another way for *soldadas* to prove themselves. Fuentes writes of ploys to have *soldadas* enter the enemy's camp and intermingle with their *soldaderas* since they were made up of "precious networks of information."¹⁵ A front-page story in the May 14, 1914th edition of the United States', *The Day*

Book, details how Mexican women worked as spies to gather information from the States.¹⁶ The article pointed out that many of these women were educated in the United States, and thus were, “far better equipped mentally than most officers.” Women were not suspected of being spies because of their gender, which added to their strength as spies for the government. Opinions were mixed, as some applauded their bravery, while others believed battlefields were not a place for women. In 1910, the anarchist newspaper *El Regeneracion* published Ricardo Flores Magon’s article, *A La Mujer*, which summarized Mexican women’s expected role stating, “your duty is to help man; to be there to encourage him when he vacillates; stand by his side when he suffered; to lighten his sorrows; to laugh and to sing with him when victory smiles.”¹⁷ The article encourages men to pick up arms and join the rebellion, but does this by appealing to women. Men are fighting for their [women’s] freedom; all you must do is cheer for him from the sidelines.

The Mexican revolution is one of the most well-documented wars in Mexican history. However, little attention is given to one of its most important participants, women. Alicia Arrizón’s 1998 article, “*Soldaderas*” and the Staging of the Mexican Revolution, points out how the song (*corridors*), art, and movies portrayed the women of the Revolution. “La Adelita” is one of the most popular songs of the Revolution Era. As to who *La Adelita* was or if she was a real person is still up for debate, however, Arrizón believes it to be a woman from Durango who was a part of the Maderista movement.¹⁸ The song was used to refer to the women who were a part of the Revolution and thus as popularity grew, *Adelita* and *Soldadera* came to hold the same meaning. Arrizón explains that the song expressed a male’s soldiers’ sensitivity and vulnerability by expressing his love. Additionally, it portrayed the *soldadera*, or the *Adelita*, as love-struck women, waiting for their men: “Don’t cry anymore, my beloved Adelita...don’t make me suffer anymore.”

The *Adelita* was an idealized representation of marianismo, a feminine and loving Mexican woman.

On the other hand, movies like the 1934 *La Cucaracha* have portrayed women as loud, masculine, and loose. Photographs that were taken during the Revolution were believed to have been the closest to a realistic portrayal of who the *soldaderas* were. Yet even those could be altered to give a false reality. In 1914, *La Ilustracion Semanal* printed a series of photos in hopes to distract the population from the rising death toll. A caption that accompanied a photo read, “The Michoacana women, so punished by the bands of Jose Ines Chavez Garcia, prepare themselves to defend their towns.”¹⁹ The photo would become a popular representation of what a *soldadera* looked like. The women in the photo most likely were camp followers, but it is highly possible that this photo, and many like it, was staged. Their dresses were too long and hair too neat to give a realistic representation of both *soldaderas* and *soldadas*.

Women of the Revolution from both the Federal and Rebel army have been grouped together and labeled jointly as *soldaderas*. *Corridors*, books, photos, and movies have mentioned them, but have failed to show their audience what a *soldadera* truly did. Instead, they glorified the actions of men, such as Pancho Villa, the Revolution’s Hero; interestingly enough, not publishing Villa’s vehement hatred of the *soldaderas*. In 1916, Villa captured about eighty or ninety *soldaderas* and children at a railroad station in Chihuahua, when a shot hit Villa’s head, believed to be one of the *soldaderas*, he demanded that they tell him who fired the shot. When no one answered, he ordered his men to kill them all.²⁰ It was not until more modern times, that people from both in and out of Mexico attributed the *Soldadera* to that of strength and bravery. In the United States, *Chicano* civil rights groups used the image of the *soldadera* to attract more female members, who then referred to themselves as *Adelitas*. Taking on a symbol of Mexican feminine

strength rather than one of obedience appealed to young feminists. The *soldadera* was not a woman who stood on the sidelines, she joined the battle to both help and fight. Soldaderas and Soldadas live on today.

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