

The Ballad of Valentín of the Sierra

Anonymous

As the previous selection suggests, anticlericalism was a major theme in the Mexican revolution. Modernizing elites blamed the Roman Catholic Church for inculcating superstition and ignorance among the masses, and of meddling repeatedly in politics on behalf of reactionary elements. In 1926 President Plutarco Elías Calles began making serious efforts to enforce the anticlerical legislation contained in the 1917 Constitution. The most objectionable provision of that legislation, for Mexico's Catholic clergy, was one that required all clergymen to register with the government. In response to this initiative, the Church hierarchy called upon the clergy to shut down their operations and begin what was, in effect, a religious strike. In the west-central states of Michoacán, Zacatecas, and Jalisco, peasants took up arms against the government with the battle cry, "¡Viva Cristo Rey!" ("Long Live Christ the King!"). This bloody civil war, known as the Cristero Rebellion, raged for nearly three years. What follows is a corrido, a popular folk ballad that appears in scores of local versions, all of which reflect the sentiments of the Cristeros, particularly their loyalty to their village priests and comrades-in-arms. Without question the best known of the substantial repertoire of ballads devoted to the Cristero Rebellion, this corrido narrates the circumstances surrounding the 1928 death of one Valentín Avila in the sierra that joins the states of Jalisco and Zacatecas. Little is known of Avila's life or military career, though the manner in which he met his death has won this humble cristero virtual immortality.

I'm going to sing some verses
About a friend from my tierra [locality],
About the brave Valentín,
Who was shot and hung in the sierra.

I hate to remember
That cold winter's afternoon
When it was his bad luck
To fall into the Government's hands.



Cristeros. (From Enrique Krauze, *Plutarco E. Calles: Reformar desde el origen* [Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987]).

On the Fresno riverbank
Valentín met up with
The enemy *agraristas* of the valley
Who questioned him and took him prisoner. . . .

The federal general asked Valentín:
"How many men do you command?"
Valentín replied:
"The fifteen soldiers camped at the Rancho Holanda."

The general then asked him:
"How many men were in your company?"
"The eight hundred men
That Mariano Mejía brought through the sierra."

The general said to him:
"Valentín, tell me the truth.

If you tell me what I want to know
I'll give you two thousand pesos and your freedom."

Then the general said:
"I am prepared to grant you a pardon
if you will tell me
Where I might find the local priest."

Valentín promptly answered him:
"That I cannot say;
I'd rather you kill me
Than give up a friend." . . .

Before they shot him,
Before he went up the hill,
Valentín cried:
"O Mother of Guadalupe!
For your religion they will kill me." . . .

Fly, fly away, my little dove
Far from your mountain fastness.
Tell of these last rites
Paid to that brave man, Valentín.

Mexico Must Become a Nation of Institutions and Laws

Plutarco Elías Calles

President Alvaro Obregón fell victim to a Catholic zealot's bullet in 1928, after being elected to his second presidential term. His death raised the specter of a major political crisis, as ambitious politicians and military men primed themselves to fill the sudden power vacuum. Plutarco Elías Calles, the incumbent president, fully recognized the dangers of the moment, yet he remained remarkably calm. On September 1, 1928, he delivered before Congress the speech excerpted below, urging his fellow revolutionaries to seize the unwonted opportunity to effect a major transformation in the political life of Mexico. While Calles's apparent faith in the loyalty of the military was largely wishful thinking, and his repeated assertions of respect for the democratic process were hypocritical—he would himself dominate Mexican politics as behind-the-scenes strongman until 1934—the speech did indeed mark a crucial moment in the history of Mexican politics. It was a first step toward the creation of the National Revolutionary Party, which was supposed to be a broad and inclusive political vehicle, containing and channeling disputes toward constructive ends. The PNR would morph into the Mexican Revolutionary Party (PRM) during the late 1930s, and finally become the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1946. The PRI would control the presidency and most important political offices for the remainder of the twentieth century.

The death of the president-elect is an irreparable loss which has left the country in an extremely difficult situation. There is no shortage of capable men: indeed, we are fortunate to have many capable individuals. But there is no person of indisputable prestige, who has a base of public support and such personal and political strength that his name alone merits general confidence.

The general's death brings a most grave and vital problem to public attention, for the issue is not merely political, but one of our very survival.

We must recognize that General Obregón's death exacerbates existing political and administrative problems. These problems arise in large measure

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