

¡Zapata Lives!

Dermot Sreenan

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ON THE FIRST day of 1994 a group calling itself the Zapatista National Liberation Army [EZLN] launched an uprising in the Chiapas State of Mexico. They are fighting the dictatorship of Carlos Salinas de Gortari and are calling for “free democratic government”. The first of January was the date upon which the North American Free Trade Agreement was to come into operation and there is a widespread belief amongst the mainly Indian EZLN that this will only lead to further poverty.

The Chiapas state in Mexico is one of the poorest areas. Almost 35% of the population is without electricity. Up to 50% of the land is still owned and controlled by a handful of large landowners. The EZLN proclamation states “We the dispossessed, number in the millions and we call be on our brothers to join us as the only way to avoid starving to death as a result of the insatiable ambitions of a dictatorship that has lasted more than 70 years...” The Mexican authorities have severely dealt with the EZLN. There have been summary executions of captured rebels and villages in the mountains near San Cristo’bal have been attacked with cannon and helicopters. As in all dictatorships the cry for democracy is met with brutal force by the existing powers.

FROM HIGHWAYMAN TO REVOLUTIONARY

The name of the rebels is inspired by the great Emiliano Zapata who played a very important role in the Mexican Revolution {1910–1921}. Zapata was an Indian from the Morelos region. He joined the army after being caught as a highway man. His other option was to be shot. After his release in 1910 he supported the Liberals and had to take to the hills when they lost the elections despite having more votes. He became the leader of an army of peasants and they fought and defeated the tyrant Don Porphyry. Then the liberal Francisco Madero came to power, speaking of freedom of the Press and democratic elections. Zapata published a charter which called for “Land and Liberty”. Despite many promises not much changed and eventually power struggles broke out again.

In the course of the following years Zapata in the south and Pancho Villa in the north defeated many power mongers who tried to grab the reins of power. Yet, despite many opportunities Zapata never took control himself. “A strong people do not need a government” he once said. He was influenced by the manifesto drawn up by Ricardo Flores Magon [Mexico’s leading Anarchist at the time, who was later to die in an American Prison].

ZAPATA’S MANIFESTO

In the manifesto issued by Zapata and signed by 35 officers in August 1914 he wrote “It (the country) wishes to destroy with one stroke the relationships of lord and serf, overseer and slave, which in the matter of agriculture are the only ones ruling from Tamaulipas to Chiapas and from Sonora to Yucatan”. Evidently there are some in Chiapas who still wish to destroy the relationship which Zapata spoke off 80 years ago. During the revolution the Zapatistas destroyed public papers, deeds, property transfers, titles and mortgages in the hope that the land would return to the only true owners, the people. In 1918 Zapata was lured into an ambush and killed.

The EZLN are named after a man who said “Hang onto your guns and they can never take the land away from you”. Today, in 1994, the EZLN are saying “We will not turn in our arms! We want justice not forgiveness nor alms!”

WHO ARE TODAY'S ZAPATISTAS?

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Zapata went to his grave believing the Mexican people were closer to justice but in 70 years the demands remain similar and revolutions must still be fought. After the Mexican revolution they got a government and still no democracy. The only way people can ensure freedom and democracy is by taking power for themselves and not placing it back into the hands of the politicians. This is one of the lessons that Zapata learned in his brave life.

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