



# MEXICO AT THE HOUR OF COMBAT

Sabino Osuna's  
Photographs of the  
Mexican Revolution

Edited by Ronald H. Chilcote



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# THE OSUNA COLLECTION

## A New Chapter in War Photography

by Tyler Stallings

The Osuna Collection provides a rare occasion for reflection on collective memory. Here one finds more than four hundred glass-plate and acetate negatives of a pivotal time in the evolution of one country's identity—the Mexican Revolution. The fact that the collection is largely focused on a single event demands from the viewer a serious consideration of both the event and the role of the archive in the telling of it.

Today much of the collection could be placed in the category of photojournalism and its subset of war photography. Accounts of the history of the latter (e.g., Hodgson, 1974; Lewinski, 1978; Brothers, 1997; Howe, 2002) tend to start with Roger Fenton, Jean-Charles Langlois, and Léon Méhédin in the Crimean War (1853–1856) and Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner during the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865). Then they skip to World War I and go on to give special attention to the Spanish Civil War, a war that galvanized the Western world into taking sides because it was one of the first in which civilians and cities were targets. This was also the first war for which the Leica camera—with its fast shutter speed, its portability, and its cartridge of 32 frames—was available to allow photographers to get close to the action. In effect, war photographers became fellow combatants, and thus they had to choose the side from which they “shot.” The Mexican Revolution remains a missing chapter in these scholarly works.

In the early 2000s there were several works focused on photography of the Mexican Revolution (e.g., Lerner, 2002; Debroise, 2001; Ortiz, 2003), and in 2010 museum exhibitions were mounted on the basis of this research in connection with the bicentennial of the nation and the centennial of the Revolution. Both the books and the exhibitions drew upon the 500,000-image Archivo Casasola, covering the years 1900 to 1940, which is housed at the Instituto Nacional de

Antropología e Historia's Fototeca in Pachuca, Hidalgo (see Lara Klahr, 1986; G. Casasola, 1960 [1942]; Elliott, 1986; A. Casasola, 1984; 1992; Maawad et al., 1997). Recent in-depth research on the Archivo Casasola has indicated that nearly five hundred different photographers are represented in it in addition to its namesake, Agustín Víctor Casasola. Additionally, “while cataloguing the Casasola Archives, [the archivist Ignacio Gutiérrez Ruvalcaba] . . . found evidence that Agustín Casasola had erased the names of the actual photographers from thousands of negatives and substituted his own” (Hamill, 2003: 16, citing Gutiérrez, 1996). It has been suggested that this was a result of a history of photographers' not being credited in the press as a matter of course and/or of Casasola's recognizing that it was important to create a single brand in order to compete with the foreign photo news agencies pouring into Mexico during the Revolution. As Georg Gugelberger points out elsewhere in this volume, some of Osuna's photographs are in the Casasola collection and show evidence of erasure of their origin.

In contrast to the situation with the Archivo Casasola, the provenance of the Osuna photographs is for the most part clear. It is a major advantage here that the original negatives instead of prints are in hand. Thus the Osuna Collection provides the opportunity for an unobstructed view of the Mexican Revolution through one person's eyes. Additionally, the fact that it is housed in a university special collection not too far from the Mexican border but still in the United States is a reminder of the two countries' shared history.

### War Photography before “Embedding” of Journalists

Because their equipment was bulky, slow, and limited to one image at a time, early war photographers could never capture any action. Their territory was either before or after the battle. For this reason one finds a plethora of portraits of soldiers at rest and of barren battlefields. Up until the twentieth century, the photographer in war was less a witness than a portraitist. The historian Olivier Debroise (2001: 164, 167) tells us, for example, that

in March 1846, following the annexation of Texas, war broke out between the United States and Mexico and attracted a number of itinerant daguerreotypists. They were not “photojournalists” in the modern sense of the word, but daguerreotype portraitists who happened to be operating near the fields of battle. . . . It reflects the nature of the business in that early stage of its existence:

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searching out a clientele, in this case a captive one—the soldiers, far from their families and desirous of sending their portraits home.

This distance existed not only between the war and the photographer but also between the populace and the war itself. As Peter Howe (2002: 16) describes it, “war became a sort of tourist attraction. Wealthy Europeans on the Grand Tour of the Continent would ‘take in’ a couple of battles whenever possible, and some even took photographs. The horror of war was thus reduced to the same level of experience as visiting the pyramids or the Parthenon.”

The Mexican Revolution coincided with advances in technology such as the regular use of halftone blocks in popular journals (beginning in the early 1890s) and the ability to transmit images phototelegraphically, and this contributed to an increased use of photographs as a way to tell its story. By 1910 “there were seventy-four photographic studios in Mexico City, and perhaps three hundred in the country, receiving the business of rich and poor, peasants and landowners, office and factory workers, professionals, soldiers, children . . . lots of children . . . entire families” (Debroise, 2001: 173).

Before the Revolution, Mexico was less a nation than a backward state in which Mexico City reigned and distributed land to a wealthy class that ruled the outlying areas as if they were occupied colonies. In this respect, as the Revolution progressed “it was important for Mexicans to see Mexico photographed . . . as an attempt to comprehend the forces that had brought the nation to armed conflict in 1910 and to an extended and continually transforming resolution of its meaning” (Folgarait, 2008: 2). The images that have dominated the representation of the Mexican Revolution, however, have been mainly of two revolutionaries: Pancho Villa, charging through the countryside on horseback and representing the northern front, and Emiliano Zapata, with a stern look and a huge sombrero worn as a badge of honor, representing the South. Historians have tended to use these compelling images simply as illustrations of their texts. Caroline Brothers (1997: 15) has argued, in contrast, that “photographs should be recognized as historical documents in their own right, an acceptance that requires exposure to the same methodological rigour readily accorded other historical artefacts. Above all, their context must be respected, since it is within their context that inheres their meaning.” In this essay a few select photographs from the Osuna Collection will be treated as visual embodiments of political and social values rather than as illustrations for historical scripts.

### Osuna’s Position

Osuna worked in Mexico City, primarily as a portraitist. The settings for the photographs in the collection that can be attributed to him are mainly in the capital. The primary subjects are those who were in power at the time, whether Díaz, Madero, Huerta, or Carranza. In the streets, his attention is focused mainly on the Federales.

Many of the Osuna photographs cover the period 1910–1914 (although the collection contains images dating to 1908 and up into the 1970s), and from its focus on skirmishes in the city it can be assumed that Osuna was covering La Decena Trágica (the Tragic Ten Days) in which Victoriano Huerta conspired with Félix Díaz (Porfirio Díaz’s nephew) to get rid of President Francisco Madero, who had initiated the Revolution with his march from Texas into northern Mexico. Osuna’s roving eye does not mean that he was ambivalent about the Revolution, nor does the fact that the focus of two-thirds of the photographs is on federal troops imply that this was the side where his allegiance lay. These features can be found in the Archivo Casasola, too. What they signal is the constraints imposed on photojournalism by the political situation: the president stood for the nation and therefore could not be criticized. John Mraz (1997: 5), the noted historian of the uses of photography, cinema, and video in recounting the histories of Mexico and Cuba, comments as follows:

There is no evidence of the intentionally denunciary documentary photography that can be seen in the images of Jacob Riis or Lewis Hine in the United States; and it appears that no such imagery developed in the rest of Latin America. The Revolution led photojournalists to embalm aspects of social ferment for perhaps the first time. . . .

However, the press (as glimpsed through the Casasola archive) essentially continued to corroborate the political interpretations of whatever regime was in power in Mexico City and to whom the advertising of opposition gains in the countryside was anathema. There are unusual photographs, such as the repression of *The Mexican Herald* for its criticism of the overthrow of Francisco Madero during the “Tragic Ten Days,” but in general the images of the Revolution that most dominate are those of federal troops in the Mexico City train station and the different ruling cliques, whether Maderistas, Huertistas, Zapatistas, Villistas, or Carrancistas.

More than likely, Osuna, along with many professional photographers of his time, used the German single-lens reflex



Francisco “Pancho” Villa after dismounting from his horse. (No. 18)



Waiting for orders. (No. 37)

Graflex camera. It did not need a tripod (though because it was heavy one was probably used more often than not), so if light conditions were good portability was an advantage. This would have allowed for some degree of capturing the moment rather than just its remains.

### Photographic Neoclassicism

In the photograph of Pancho Villa that is No. 18 in the collection, “Francisco ‘Pancho’ Villa dismounting from his horse,” Osuna’s training as a portrait artist is apparent. Although it is not in his studio, the image is clearly composed. In this it calls to mind the pioneering work in the 1920s of the German photographer August Sander, who “adapted the traditional method of carefully arranging portraits to the new photographic task of documentation” (Misselbeck, 2005: 20). Although his photographs are seemingly straightforward and fortuitous, their undoubted staging suggests that Sander was alluding to an inner, more elusive quality—in essence, the creation of a persona. Today this notion is commonplace among highly regarded conceptual photographers such as Jeff Wall and Cindy Sherman, and the composition of this photograph suggests that Osuna may have had something like it in mind.

Here Villa is represented at an early stage of his revolutionary career. His pith helmet and tailored clothes reflect the spirit of Madero, the instigator of the Revolution (Debroise, 2001: 179). Later he would don scruffier backcountry attire in keeping with his being a revolutionary for the “people.” He is at the center of attention in the composition. A swath of space has been cleared so that his body is in full view. He is among friends. In fact, most are boys who look at him as he looks at them. They see a hero; he sees future revolutionaries. Adult men are present, but they are behind the horse, as if their time were past. However, hovering just above all their heads is Villa’s personal train car. It fills the skyline, suggesting that no men may escape the Revolution or, at least, Villa’s attention. Though he is relaxed, Villa is clearly in control of himself and, by extension, of those surrounding him. His arm rests on the horse’s saddle, while his hand grasps a saddle buckle, ready to mount his horse at any moment—ready for action, ready for revolution. The uprising overtaking the country, existing outside the frame of this image, is accentuated by the bullets in his belt, the only sign of armament and the blood to come later.

In photograph No. 51, “Felicistas in the YMCA,” the gun on the tripod is at the near center of the picture. Federal troops surround it, as if in service to this machine. Bullet holes

are evident in the glass panes above their heads, which bisect the image vertically, while the mounted gun cuts across the horizontal plane. In other words, violence is everywhere, at every turn, whether on the *x* or the *y* axis of life in the capital city.

As in most of the images in the Osuna Collection in which soldiers are in position to shoot, one does not see the subjects upon whom they are going to fire. Since most of these types of photographs in the collection identify the soldiers as Felicistas, it can be assumed that they are firing upon rebels, but the point is that we do not see them. The troops are preparing to shoot, and the longer one looks at their images the more their bodies and their guns seem to merge into one. In this Osuna captures perfectly the machine-like anonymity of soldiers and war.

The composition is reminiscent of the work of the influential Neoclassicist French painter Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). The images David painted referred to the classical world of ancient Greece and Rome, and his themes were courage, bravery, loyalty, and war. Paintings such as *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), *The Death of Socrates* (1787), *The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789), and *The Death of Marat* (1793) were all metaphors for loyalty to the French Revolution, betrayal by fellow revolutionaries, and the consequences of upholding one’s ideals in the face of opposition. In all of these works, there is near perfection of composition, sharp colors with chiaroscuro, and a sculptural quality to the figures, which seem almost to have been carved in relief. Osuna’s best compositions seem to owe a debt to David. Napoleon III’s invasion of Mexico could not have helped but leave some sort of Francophile influence, and as a photographer Osuna must have been aware that photography was invented in France and may have been familiar with the portrait photography of Félix Nadar and the Paris street photography of Eugène Atget. However, whereas David wanted to communicate a sense of heroism with uplifted swords in *Oath of the Horatii*, for example, by forming a triangle with a clear apex, Osuna forms a triangle with the soldier on the right, with gun at a diagonal resting above the heads of the two soldiers kneeling at a gun pointed out the open window. Here the triangle of heroic triumph is one not yet attained. Rather, it is more in a state of collapse.

Photograph No. 37, “Waiting for orders,” is striking for the nonchalant attitudes that it captures. Federal troops are making preparations to defend their position. An officer standing to the left of the frame is turning to face his troops, some of them lying prone with their rifles, others kneeling, and in a last row others standing. This is the classic three-tiered composition of rows of soldiers in order to maximize

the number of bullets that can be shot at one time. What is unusual is the man in an everyday business suit in the foreground. He leans over, apparently to speak to a kneeling soldier. We will never know the content of their conversation. The unexpected proximity of the civilian to the soldier here is reinforced by the row of civilians in the background. Though blurry, the nature of their silhouettes, dresses, and hats suggests that they come from the upper class, and they would appear to be spectators of the action about to take place. This is an image that speaks to the way wars were still conducted then—among soldiers. Civilians were not targeted, nor were photographers. Today, despite supposed international rules of war, everyone is a target. “Warfare has always been chaotic, but there were always lines of demarcation and the opportunity to leave and rejoin areas they defined. Now the lines have been eradicated, and along with them any sense of security or escape” (Howe, 2002: 15).

This photo also captures what was at the heart of the Mexican Revolution—the fact that a small minority of upper-class Mexicans and foreign governments and corporations owned the majority of Mexican property and businesses, while everyone else was a virtual slave. The caption “Waiting for orders” suggests a kind of ambiguity. From whom will the orders come—the officer to the left, the civilian businessman leaning over and talking with the kneeling soldier, or the aristocratic institution in control of Mexico that is represented by the upper-class bystanders in the background?

In photograph No. 99, “Giving water to a wounded man,” Osuna again employs the Neoclassical triangle composition. A wandering nurse, who has placed her white flag of neutrality on the sidewalk, gives a sip of water to a wounded soldier—more than likely a Federalista. It is a classic Pietà image, in which the Virgin Mary cradles the dead body of Jesus. The composition is enhanced by the converging of the building on the right side of the street, in full daylight, with the building façade on the left, where the soldier lies in a doorway, cast in shadow. The woman is at the center of this convergence, suggesting that she is a kind of intermediary between the forces of light and dark or, more literally, the battle between Díaz’s dictatorial, aristocratic government and the rebellious populace demanding a voice in government and equitable distribution of resources. In fact, the woman’s sash is at dead center, as if her body were the only thing keeping the country tied together.

## Recollection

These are but a few of the best images in the collection. As a whole, this is not an archive that was meant to support either Díaz or Madero, but Osuna’s eye was not arbitrary either. Rather, he was a portrait photographer who lived in the capital city and could not ignore the conflict that was ripping open its core. The rules of war allowed him to be a noncombatant and not a target. He was allowed to get up close to the action—to be an itinerant witness using the language with which he was most familiar, photography, and one that could readily communicate with a populace that was 85 percent illiterate. To this day, despite digital technology that can call into question the authenticity of the image, photographs hold power over the imagination.

Rarely do we remember a headline. More often we remember Capa’s Spanish militiaman shot in the head, Joe Rosenthal’s image of the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima, Eddie Adams’s depiction of the execution of a Vietcong suspect, Nick Ut’s Vietnamese girl running down a road covered in napalm, or even the more government-controlled images of the first Gulf War from the viewpoint of a bomb descending on its target in Iraq. Perhaps these images of the Mexican Revolution will help make a place for it as a chapter in future books on the history of war photography.



Giving water to a wounded man.  
(No. 99)



Felicistas in the YMCA. (No. 51)

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