

Pancho Villa

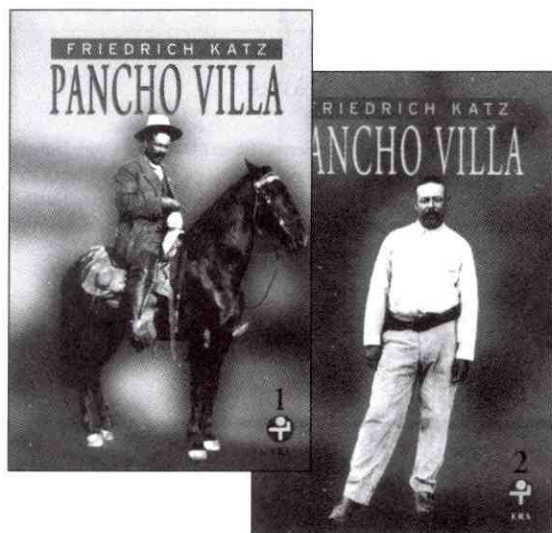
(The Life and Times of Pancho Villa)

Friedrich Katz

Paloma Villegas, trans.

Stanford University Press-Era

Stanford, California and Mexico City, 1998, 985 pp. (2 vol.)



Austrian Friedrich Katz took up a challenge when he wrote the history of the main caudillo of the most radical mass current in Mexico's 1910 revolutionary movement, a leader who survives as a folk epic that continues to expand even today in the collective memory of the Mexican people. Katz' accepting that challenge has resulted in the publication of one of the greatest books of contemporary narrative on Mexican history.¹ The text of the University of Chicago researcher and historian is the fruit of an enormous academic endeavor and over 20 years of complex, rigorous, impassioned research. During that time, he followed the tracks of the revolutionary through archives and documents of different nations of the Americas and Europe. He also gathered and reviewed practically all the innumerable texts written on the life of Villa. No less important is the iconographic and cinematographic research, as well as the numerous interviews he did to document and support his work.

Pancho Villa is narrated in four chronological parts. The first part deals with the life of the young bandit, hunted by the law in his native state of Durango, when he was still known by his real name, Doroteo Arango. In these years, the future revolutionary Francisco Villa lived like an outlaw and became the

brigand most hated by the rich, the hacienda owners and the state government, at the same time that he won the admiration of other outlaws and the poorest of the poor, giving birth to the legend of the justice-seeking rebel. These are also years when survival was difficult in the inhospitable northern hills, when he learned the hard lessons of the guerrilla fighter and man of arms and when his tough character and ability to command were forged. This part of the book ends with Villa's joining the Mexican Revolution and an account of his performance during the first three years of fighting.

A second part of the book analyzes Francisco Villa's rise to national prominence and his transformation into one of the most outstanding leaders of the revolutionary movement. This is the stage of his life of the legendary Division of the North, the poor people's army Villa headed, that, at the height of its strength had 50,000 troops, mainly poor and landless peasants, former peons and workers from the great northern haciendas, miners, workers, *soldaderas* (women soldiers) and a vast contingent of men who, like Villa, had been classified as "transgressors of the law" and were hunted by the old Porfirio Díaz dictatorship. This period produced Villa's most important military victories (Chihuahua, Torreón and Zacatecas, among others), which would be definitive for the defeat and weakening of the counterrevolution. Katz also explains the social composition of the Villista movement, its ideology and its meaning in the context of the Mexican Revolution.

During the period from 1915 to 1920, the Villista guerrilla forces waged a struggle of resistance, leaving behind the days of victory and the unstoppable Division of the North. In the third part of the book, Katz describes the times of defeat and the definitive decline of the Villista army when the movement headed up by Villa was reduced to a few hundred men who came together to mount assaults like the one on Columbus, New Mexico, or who scattered to get away from Carranza's army or the U.S. army's so-called "punitive expedition." In these years, Villa and his men took refuge in the desert and foothills and survived on the resources taken from their enemies and the government and thanks to the inhabitants of little towns who remained faithful to their cause.

The last part of the book reviews Villa's capitulation and days at the Canutillo Hacienda, where he was confined after making a peace pact with the Mexican government. The curtain rings down on the last act with a description of the conspiracy

and murder of the "Centaur of the North" in 1923. Katz uses documentary proof to show that Villa's death was a decision made by the victorious caudillos of the armed struggle, who then declared themselves the only legitimate heirs of the Mexican Revolution.

While Katz' work is preceded by a great many books, narrations, tales and memoirs that have contributed to myth and legend, revindicating the figure and legacy of Francisco Villa's struggle, as well as others that have aimed to reduce him to a simple bandit and portray him as a murderer without scruples, ideals or political principles, Katz' Pancho Villa is the first academic study and historical work that transcends legend and myth, apologia and crude abuse, to situate and explain the origins and social character of Villismo, its significance for the

revolutionary movement and its historical contribution to contemporary Mexico. The name and work of Friedrich Katz will surely be obligatory references when remembering or analyzing the life and times of Pancho Villa. **MM**

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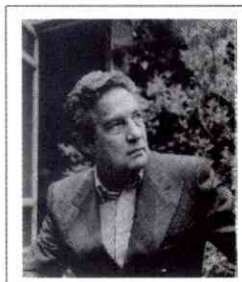
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¹ Friedrich Katz is the author of *The Secret War in Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) and *La servidumbre agraria en México* (Mexico City: Sep-Setentas, 1976) and editor of *Riot, Rebellion, and Revolution: Rural Social Conflict in Mexico, from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).



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