

WOMEN OF THE REVOLUTION: **SOLDADERAS**

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

The following activities are based upon excerpts from Elena Poinatowska's *Soldaderas: Women of the Mexican Revolution*, Nellie Campobello's "Nacha Cenicerros" found in *Cartucho*, and lesson plans created by PBS for their education module: Revolutionary Women. The five-minute video clip and lesson plans can be found at: <http://www.pbs.org/itvs/storm-that-swept-mexico/classroom/revolutionary-women/>.

MATERIALS

- ❧ Copy of excerpt from Elena Poinatowska's *Soldaderas: Women of the Mexican Revolution* and Nellie Campobello's "Nacha Cenicerros" for each student (provided below)
Note: The book in its entirety gives a much more complete picture of the complex nature of the role of women in the Revolution. The short excerpts are provided to give snapshots of the soldadera experience.
- ❧ Internet Access
- ❧ Computer, LCD projector, and/or Smartboard to project video film for class
- ❧ PBS film module: *The Storm that Swept Mexico: Revolutionary Women* (this is available online for free at the PBS website indicated above)
- ❧ Copy of PBS Student handouts for each student (this is available online for free at the PBS website indicated above)
- ❧ One copy of PBS Teacher handouts for instructor (this is available online for free at the PBS website indicated above)
- ❧ Post-it Notes (6 colors)
- ❧ Pens, Markers

PROCEDURE

1. Follow "Activity One: The Seeds of Revolution" from the PBS lesson plans on "Women of the Revolution," engaging students in a discussion of the various roles in U.S. society and then in the specific state of women's civil rights in Mexico during the Porfiriato. You may then choose to move into Activity 2 if students need an overview of the people and events of the Revolution. This activity does require internet access for each student.

2. As a class, view the film module “Women of the Revolution.” Discuss what students learned from the film about the roles of women before, during and after the Revolution.
3. Read the excerpts from Elena Poniatowska’s *Soldaderas: Women of the Mexican Revolution* and Nellie Campobello’s “Nacha Cenicerros.” Ask students to think about how these excerpts discuss the role of women during the Revolution. What was it like to be a woman during the Revolution?
4. Follow the “Post-Screening Activities” provided in the PBS lesson plans. Here students will complete group research projects on various women of the revolution. Students will need access to a library or the internet to complete the research, or you will need to obtain information on the specific revolutionary women ahead of time. Essay questions are also provided that could serve as an assessment.

WOMEN IN THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION: ELENA PONIATOWSKA'S SOLDADERAS:

The following are excerpts from Elena Poniatowska's book *Soldaderas: Women of the Mexican Revolution* (El Paso: Cinco Punto Press, 1999).

PANCHO VILLA'S 1916 MASSACRE OF SOLDADERAS

[excerpt from *Soldaderas*; italicized sections denote quotes from Muñoz included in Poniatowska's book.]

According to the novelist [Rafael F. Muñoz], in 1916 Villa's Dorados captured the train station from the Carrancistas in Santo Rosalia, Camargo, Chihuahua. Sixty soldaderas with their sons were taken prisoners. Someone from the group of women fired a shot that managed to nip the Centaur of the North's [Pancho Villa] hat.

Rafael F. Munoz described Villa's voice like a rumbling, his eyes like fire. "*Ladies, who fired that shot?*" The storyteller Muñoz tells how the group of women drew in even closer together. The shot had come from their direction. Villa pulled out his gun and aimed it at the level of their heads. "*Ladies, who fired that shot?*" *An old woman with a pockmarked face raise her arm and yelled: "All of us did. We all would like to kill you!" The rebel chief drew back. "All of you? Then all of you will die before I do." The infantry men began to die them down, four, five or six in each ring. They tied the ropes tightly, bruising their flesh. In little time, the sixty women were tied up into ten or twelve bundles of human flesh, some standing up, others lying on the floor like stacks of firewood or barrels. The soldaderas screamed, not out of pain, but out of rage. There were no moans coming from the women's mouths, only insults. They didn't plead for mercy, instead they threatened an impossible revenge. The most blunt, vile and violent insults were heard coming from those piles of women pressed tightly against each other by the ropes. Sixty mouths cursing at once, sixty hatreds aimed at a single target. . .*

Because the wood was dry and the wind blew, the human pyres burst into flame quickly. First, the women's petticoats and their hair caught fire. Then the smell of burnt flesh. Yet the women never stopped cursing Villa. . ."

There are several other accounts that confirm the massacre of the soldaderas. . . Villa asked the women to point out the guilty party. Nobody answered. Then

he gave out the following orders: “Execute them, one by one, until they say who it was.” Nobody moved. They preferred to die than denounce anyone. . . Colonel José María Jaurrieta, the Centaur of the North’s loyal secretary, wrote that this massacre made him think of Dante’s *Inferno*. The horror of those ninety women massacred by Villista bullets stayed in his memory forever” (p. 10-11).

EMILIANO ZAPATA AND THE SOLDADERAS:

[excerpt from *Soldaderas*]

If Villa, in the north, was the scourge of women, Zapata on the other hand, never humiliated them, as John Womack relates in his book *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*: “In Puente de Ixtla, Morelos, the widows, wives, daughters, sisters of the rebels formed their own battalion to ‘seek vengeance for the dead.’ Under the command of a stocky former tortilla-maker by the name of China, they carried out savage incursions throughout the Tetecala district. Some dressed in rags, others in elegant stolen clothes. . . these women became the terror of the region. Josefina Bórquez, in her account *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*, states that Emiliano Zapata treated women very well. To back it up, she describes how she and four married women were detained in Guerrero—a Zapatista nest—between Agua del Perro and Tierra Colorado.

The Zapatistas came out to meet them. They took them to General Zapata himself. . . Zapata put her at ease: “Well, you’re going to stay here with us until the detachment arrives.” They remained in the camp for fifteen days and were treated well. . . The women ate a lot better than they did with the Carrancistas.

When General Zapata found out that the Carrancistas were in Chilpancingo, he told the women that he would take them himself. He took off his general’s uniform, put on cotton trousers and escorted them unarmed. (p. 14)

THE REALITY OF A SOLDADERA

[excerpt from *Soldaderas*]

In the photographs of Agustín Casasola, the women. . . don’t look at all like the coarse, foul-mouthed beasts that are usually depicted by the authors of the Mexican Revolution. On the contrary, although they’re always present, they remain in the background, never defiant. Wrapped in shawls, they carry both the children and the ammunition. . . On the bare ground, or sitting on top of the train cars (the horses are transported inside), the soldaderas are small bundles of misery exposed

to all the severities of both man and nature. . . Casasola shows us again and again, slight, thin women patiently devoted to their tasks like worker ants—hauling in water and making toritillas over a lit fire, the mortar and pestle always in hand. . . And at the end of the day, there's the hungry baby to feed.

Without the soldaderas, there is no Mexican Revolution—they kept it alive and fertile, like the earth. They would be sent ahead of the rest to gather firewood and to light the fire. They kept it stoked during the long years of war. Without the soldaderas, the drafted soldiers would have deserted. . . The soldaderas crop up everywhere in the photographs—anonymous multitudes, superfluous, apparently not much more than a backdrop, merely there to swell the ranks, yet without them the soldiers would not have eaten, slept or fought. The horses were treated better than the women. (p. 15-16)

WOMEN IN THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION: NELLIE CAMPOBELLO'S "NACHA CENICEROS"

The following is "Nacha Cenicerros," an excerpt from Nellie Campobello's book *Cartucho* (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1988). The excerpt tells the story of Nacha Cenicerros, one of the Mexican Revolution's soldaderas.

NACHA CENICEROS

A large Villista encampment at station X near Chihuahua. All was quiet and Nacha was crying. She was in love with a young colonel from Durango by the name of Gallardo. Nacha was a coronela who carried a pistol and wore braids. She had been crying after an old woman gave her advice. She went to her tent where she was busily cleaning her pistol when, all of a sudden it went off.

In the next tent was Gallardo, sitting at a table and talking to a woman. The bullet that escaped from Nacha's gun struck Gallardo in the head and he fell dead.

"Gallardita has been killed, General." Shocked, Villa replied, "Execute the man who did it." "It was a woman, General." "Execute her." "Nacha Cenicerros." "Execute her."

She wept for her lover, put her arms over her head, with her black braids hanging down, and met the firing squad's volley.

She made a handsome figure, unforgettable for everyone who saw the execution. Today there is an anthill where they say she was buried.

This was the version that was told for many years in the North of Mexico. The truth came out some time later. Nacha Cenicerros was still alive. She had gone back to her home in Catarinas, undoubtedly disillusioned by the attitude of those few who tried to divide among themselves the triumphs of the majority.

Nacha Cenicerros tamed ponies and rode horses better than many men. She was what's called a country girl, but in the mountain style. With her incredible skill, she could do anything a man could with his masculine strength. She joined the revolution because Porfirio Diaz's henchmen had assassinated her father. If she

had wanted to, she could have married one of the most prominent Villista generals. She could have been one of the most famous women of the revolution. But Nacha Ceniceros returned quietly to her ravaged home and began to rebuild the walls and fill in the openings through which thousands of bullets had been fired against the murderous Carranzistas.

The curtain of lies against General Villa, spread by organized groups of slanderers and propagators of the black legend, will fall, just as will the bronze statues that have been erected with their contributions. Now I say—and I say it with the voice of someone who has known how to unravel lies, Viva Nacha Ceniceros, Coronela de la revolución (p. 21)