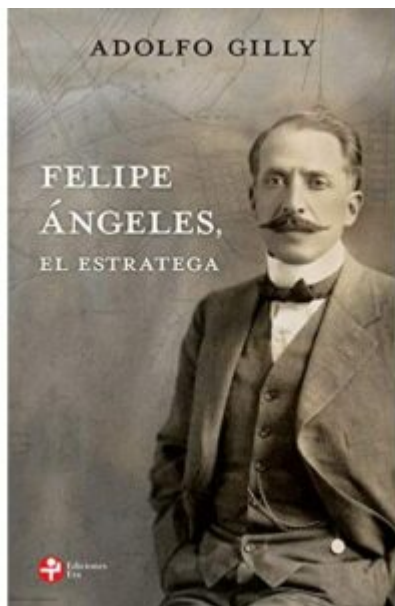
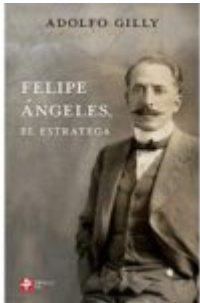


# The Life of A Strategist: Adolfo Gilly's Biography of Felipe Ángeles

August 26, 2020



## Book Review

Adolfo Gilly. *Felipe Ángeles, el estratega*. Mexico: Ediciones Era, 2019. Notes, bibliography, index, map. 782 pages.

I have loved reading the Argentine-Mexican writer Adolfo Gilly ever since I picked up his book *La revolución interrumpida* in June 1971 just as it appeared on the shelves of *El Sótano* bookstore in the basement of a building on the Alameda Central in Mexico City. That book, later published in English as *The Mexican Revolution*, is a brilliant Marxist analysis of that enormous and complex series of events that transformed Mexico in the 1910s.

The other most important book on Mexico by Gilly is *El sueño cardenista* (we could translate it as *The Dream of Lázaro Cárdenas*), which offers his interpretation of the political role and views of the Mexican president Cárdenas in the 1930s, his notion of an alliance between the state and the peasantry to create a socialist society. But he has also written other books and many essays on Mexico, Central America, on political theory, as well as on contemporary events. I consider Gilly to be a brilliant thinker and often a marvelous writer, capable of allowing us to see things in a new light, even though I may and often do differ with his opinions.

Gilly's most recent book, *Felipe Ángeles, el estratega*, so far available only in Spanish, is a long (almost 800-page) book dealing with the life of a Mexican general who played a crucial role in the battles of Torreón and Zacatecas at a crucial stage in the Mexican Revolution, when he served under

Francisco “Pancho” Villa. Winning those battles gave Ángeles his place in Mexican history, as others have recognized, but Gilly is interested—as a biographer should be—not only in the decisive events, but also in the character, the values, and the meaning of the life of his subject.

Felipe Ángeles, who described himself as “indigenous,” was born in 1868 in the state of Hidalgo, the son of a provincial, middle class, farming family. His father had after fighting against the U.S. invasion of Mexico in the war of 1846-48 and against the French Intervention of 1861-68 risen to the rank of colonel in the Mexican Army. Felipe himself grew up in the Porfiriato, the period of the rule of president, then dictator Porfirio Díaz from 1876 to 1911. During that era, Felipe entered the Mexican Military Academy at the age of fourteen and through his diligence and study rose to the rank of lieutenant of engineers in 1892, captain of artillery in 1896, major in 1901, and full colonel in 1908.

The Mexican Army sent him to Paris in 1901 to look into the purchase of heavy artillery and in 1904 to the United States to see about buying gunpowder, a deal he rejected. When the School of Military Candidates was established in 1908, he became professor of the Theory and Practice of Firing, teaching mathematics and artillery courses, but a conflict within the school became public and he was jailed for eight days, then sent off to France. Why was he jailed and sent away on a foreign assignment? It was in part because he was the author of a long critical article about Mexican military schooling that had the character of a political manifesto in favor of a more rigorous scientific education. There was also the fact that he had prevented corrupt deals with German ordnance manufacturers such as Krupp that involved pay offs to Mexican generals and politicians.

Altogether, Ángeles spent five years between before 1910 as a Mexican officer in the French Army and when in 1910 the Mexican Revolution broke out, Ángeles was still in France where he served as Mexican Inspector General of Munitions at the Sharpshooting Academy in Mailly. For his service and his expertise, the French government made him a Knight of the Legion of Honor in May of 1911.

During the period he was in France the great national debate continued over the Dreyfus affair. Alfred Dreyfus, another artillery officer, was accused by the French government of being a German spy, in a case based on falsehoods and tainted with anti-Semitism. The novelist Émile Zola wrote his famous *J'accuse* in Dreyfus' defense and Jean Jaurès, the leader of the Socialist Party also rallied to his side. And it was in this same period that Jaurès wrote his book *L'Armée Nouvelle*, calling for the formation of a citizen's militia. All of this political ferment, especially since it dealt with military affairs, must have had an impact on Ángeles who was deeply concerned about such issues.

When Ángeles attempted to return to Mexico in 1911, asking for a command, his commanders refused his request; the establishment viewed him as disloyal. If he had not been disloyal, he was becoming so. He was sympathetic to Francisco Madero, the northern landlord and mystic who had called for and set in motion the Mexican Revolution in November 1910. Yet Gilly emphasizes that, while French and Mexican political developments influenced Ángeles, it was his sense of truth and justice that stood at the center of his morality, which was his compass. Gilly sees his character as his destiny, and his destiny was to play a role in the Mexican Revolution's second phase.

### **Ángeles Joins Madero**

When Porfirio Díaz had fled to France and Madero had won one of the few legitimate elections in Mexican history, Ángeles returned to Mexico prepared to serve the new president. Madero had kept intact the Mexican state—its bureaucracy, its police, and its army—though he wanted to reform them, so he chose Ángeles to become the head of the Military School in January of 1912, being promoted from Colonel to Brigadier General. Madero also asked Ángeles to take charge of the education and training of the Municipal Guard. Madero and Ángeles became good friends, the general

accompanying the president on his morning rides in Chapultepec Park or other parts of Mexico City. Still, as Gilly notes, the two men had very different outlooks, a result in part of their origins, Madero being a wealthy landlord and Gilly the son of a modest farmer.

Díaz and the landlord class had over the thirty-five years of his rule, stolen the land from something like 90 percent of the Mexican peasants, so Madero's election put the demands for a redistribution of land at the center of Mexican politics. But Madero, a landlord himself, was hesitant to confront the issue; he moved slowly, delayed, and resisted until under the leadership of Emiliano Zapata, a horse trainer in the state of Morelos, the peasants began to take the land themselves. Zapata and his followers directly challenged Madero and his government while at the same time Pascual Orozco led a rebellion in the north. In the summer of 1912, Madero chose general Victoriano Huerta to fight Orozco and sent Ángeles to attempt to deal with Zapata in the south. Ángeles could not successfully negotiate with Zapata as long as Madero failed to carry out an agrarian reform, and to the degree possible he wished to avoid fighting Zapata with whose position he sympathized. Rosa E. King, an American landlord in Morelos, described Ángeles as different than and a cut above the other Mexican generals, perhaps because he restrained his soldiers from carrying out the usual atrocities. In discussing the issues with reporters Ángeles implicitly criticized the increasingly conservative generals of Madero, which led them to view him as an undesirable element.

Meanwhile, the landlord class, the old generals of the Porfirian era, and the embassies of the United States, Great Britain, Germany and other foreign nations, had become impatient with Madero and his vacillations. In February of 1913, Bernardo Reyes and Félix Díaz led a military rebellion in Mexico City to overthrow the Madero government and for ten days artillery bombarded the neighborhoods of the capital. Throughout much of those events, Ángeles was with Madero who remained calm and did not seem to realize that he had lost control of the military to his chief military commander Huerta. Encouraged by U.S. Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson, Huerta went over to the rebels, overthrew the Madero government, assassinated Madero and vice-president Pino Suárez, and was quickly recognized by foreign governments as the new head of state.

In the midst of all of fighting, Ángeles was imprisoned and as one of Madero's favorites seemed sure to be assassinated, but somehow he survived and even kept his commission. Ángeles, still an officer in the Mexican Army, went to London to enroll his son in the university, then went on to Paris, supposedly to examine artillery, but finally, without permission, took a ship to the United States and from there went to the Mexican state of Sonora to join the rebel Constitutionalist Army that had risen up against Huerta. Venustiano Carranza, the Supreme Leader of the Constitutionalist forces, received Ángeles with ceremony and appointed him Secretary of War, though not long after Carranza thought better of it and took over those functions himself, reducing Ángeles to undersecretary, an administrative rather than a commanding position. Carranza may have done so because generals Álvaro Obregón and Benjamín Hill and other Constitutionalist military leaders objected to Ángeles' commissions. The revolutionaries like Obregón and Hill, writes Gilly, feared that the leadership of the revolution was passing into the hands of men like Carranza and Ángeles, both of whom had been prominent figures in the Porfirian regime. In truth Carranza had dissolved the old Porfirian Federal Army and created a new one mostly commanded by the revolutionaries like Obregón.

Gilly explains that Ángeles' continued to have differences with both Carranza, who with no military training pontificated on military matters, as well as with the other generals, in part because of his reserved personality, his severe personal discipline, and his ethos. Ángeles rode, exercised, meditated and studied every day, he kept his own counsel despite the criticism that he suffered, and he refused—unlike the other generals—to shoot prisoners. He insisted to Carranza that he had not returned to Mexico to sit behind a desk and that he would rather have command of a small artillery unit in one of the great revolutionary armies.

## Ángeles Joins Villa

In March of 1914, Ángeles got his opportunity. Luis Cabrera, the leading Constitutionalist intellectual, suggested to Carranza that he assign Ángeles to join the *División del Norte* (Division of the North) led by Francisco “Pancho” Villa, which was about to attempt to take the city of Torreón. Carranza did so, but when a little later he decided to countermand the order, it was too late. Ángeles had already left to join Villa. Patrick O’Hea in his *Reminiscences* left us a wonderful description of Villa and his generals: “...a fantastic collection of idealists, sadists, patriots, adventurers, heroes and ruffians who were the leader of the Revolution in the countryside.” Now this bizarre collection of armed civilians was joined by the general, professor of mathematics and artillery, director of the military academy, and misfit in the Revolution, Felipe Ángeles. It was the personality and military genius of Pancho Villa that brought order to this concatenation of men and ambitions and Villa who found a place for Ángeles as the Division’s trains and cavalry moved south.

Now part of the general staff and responsible for artillery, Ángeles’ expertise played a key role in the battle of Torreón, one of the decisive battles of the second stage of the Revolution that led to the overthrow of Huerta. Studying his maps and riding from hill to hill Ángeles personally supervised the artillery and his cannons insured Villa’s victory. Villa then proceeded to move to take Zacatecas, but Carranza ordered him to stop, wishing to prevent Villa from becoming in fact the most important revolutionary leader. Villa’s generals were frustrated, angry, and divided; some thought they should do as Carranza said, others were so angry that they felt they should go over to Huerta’s side, but Ángeles now a leader of Villa’s general staff personally intervened. To him neither Carranza, whose generals envied and hated him, nor Huerta, against whom he had rebelled, were alternatives. He wrote the letter to Carranza on behalf of Villa and the others in which he criticized Carranza’s “miserable morality, his envy, his lack of patriotism, his ambition, and his despotism.” And so Villa’s cavalry and Ángeles’ artillery took Zacatecas. Afterwards Ángeles wrote, “We are satisfied with our work; between Huerta and Carranza, we prefer Carranza.” As Gilly writes, this was the culmination of Ángeles career,

Villa’s insubordination in taking Zacatecas—an act of disobedience in which Ángeles had played a central role—led to a break between Villa and Carranza. A Convention was called in Aguascalientes to attempt to reconcile the revolutionaries and bring peace, and Ángeles served as one of Villa’s representatives there. But reconciliation was impossible and the Revolution now entered its third stage that would go on for six more bloody years. The Convention, dominated by Villa and Zapata, now fought against Carranza and Obregón of the Constitutionals, the latter gradually gaining the upper hand. Ángeles remained with Villa and in his first independent command took the city of Monterrey, but the great *División del Norte* was disintegrating, being reduced to guerrilla bands and Ángeles was forced to flee into exile in the United States. One small detail that I found fascinating was Gilly’s wonderful account of Ángeles in New York, in poverty, studying socialism, unable to find work, thinking of going to work in the coal mines of Pennsylvania. But in the end Ángeles decided to return to Mexico to work with Villa against Carranza, a decision that would decide his fate. One is reminded of Benito Juárez in New Orleans working as a waiter before returning to lead the great wars of the Reform and against the French Intervention. In December 1918 Ángeles returned to Mexico to join Pancho Villa, but he was captured by the Constitutionals and in November 1919 executed.

## Who Was Ángeles?

Adolfo Gilly is fascinated with, one might say obsessed with the Mexican Revolution, with its glory and its tragedy, and he is particularly intrigued by the key events that marked its course and by the individuals who led it. In addition to the books that I mentioned at the opening of this review, he had already in 2008 contributed an essay to a collection on Felipe Ángeles and in 2013 he wrote an

entire book on the ten tragic days—*Cada quien morirá a su lado: Una historia militar de la decena trágica*, both of which are taken up again in this enormous, over-stuffed volume. Those who read Spanish but do not have the courage to climb this mountain of a book, where at times the terrain can get rough, the temperature cold, and the air thin, might consider going directly to the peak, the concluding Chapter 52 which provides both a summary of the book and Gilly's considered thoughts on the life of Ángeles.

What is it about Ángeles that fascinates Gilly? Gilly is intrigued by Ángeles character and its contradictions. Ángeles is a military man of the old regime, but he is attracted to the democrat Madero. Ángeles is from a humble farming family, but he rejects the radical agrarian program of Zapata. In France and in the United States, Gilly became influenced by the socialism of the sort of Jean Jaurès and Eduard Bernstein and the Fabians, but in Mexico he wants to return to the liberal Constitution of 1857 (the banner of the counter-revolution) and hopes to preserve the old Federal Army of the Porfiriato. Profoundly conservative in many ways, he puts himself under the command of Pancho Villa and the radical army of farmers and workers thrown up by the revolution which helps to win the battles that destroy the old army. Ángeles, was an admirer of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and of American civilization, but also feared a U.S. invasion. He had as early as 1916 proposed that he and other generals return to Mexico and place themselves at the service of the Mexican government to resist the United States.

Gilly notes, and one has to find it astonishing, that Ángeles never understood the importance of agrarian reform for the Mexican Revolution, the issue that virtually all historians of the Mexican Revolution and the participants in it recognized as by far the most important question. Andrés Molina Enríquez had already in 1909 in his book *The Great National Problems* recognized agrarian reform as the central question. Luis Cabrera, the great intellectual of the conservative wing of the revolution, recognized agrarian reform as the key issue in his essay "The reconstitution of the villages' ejidos as a way of ending the slavery of the Mexican day-laborer" published in 1912. Zapata, of course, had made it the center of the revolutionary program in his 1911 *Plan de Ayala*, his call for "the land to those who work it," and his practice of simply taking it. Ángeles was an admirer of Emiliano Zapata and his forces, but opposed the Zapatistas' call for a national program of land reform. As Gilly notes, this is always the problem with Ángeles, "he is attracted toward the underdogs by his sympathies, but also attracted toward the elite with their education and refinement." He sympathizes with the working people and the poor, but he cannot imagine changing the system of property and production that exploits them.

Gilly explains that Ángeles in exile, already old at 50, didn't want to die in peace and in exile, ashamed of himself and forgotten by others. So he returned to Mexico, Ángeles worked to elaborate a plan for Pancho Villa and his troops, now reduced to guerrilla warfare. But, "Neither the methods nor the goals of Ángeles and Villa coincided." And Ángeles was completely dependent upon Villa, for he had no forces of his own, and Villa's forces had been reduced from massive armies to small guerrilla bands where Ángeles' skills were of little use. This material situation made it rather easy for Carranza's agents to deceive and capture Ángeles. Carranza ordered his assassination as he had Zapata's, both in 1919. Carranza, the bourgeois landlord and state builder, had no choice but to kill Ángeles who might otherwise have become an alternative pole for a political and military regroupment while the Supreme Leader's government was entering into crisis.

This book, still only in Spanish, is a tome for the professional historian or the real *aficionado* of the Mexican Revolution, and it is a tiring book. At 784 pages the book is too long. It is sometimes repetitive; it is full of excessively long extracts from contemporary primary sources such as autobiographies—quotations of a page, two, three, even four—which might have been reduced to a line or two. The author relishes minutiae of events like the ten tragic days, but his overly detailed account slows the telling of the story. And it is a great story, but it would have been a greater story

in a book of 300 or 400 pages. Still, for some, the climb up the mountain will be worth it, not only because of the interesting things one finds along the path, but also for the view from the peak, even if that view is a little hazy.