

## **The Japanese-Mexican Infiltration of Pancho Villa's Forces**

In the dark morning hours of March 9, 1916, the Mexican Revolutionary leader Pancho Villa rode his troops across the border into New Mexico. In revenge for President Wilson supporting Villa's enemies in the Revolution, they burned portions of the city of Columbus to the ground. Despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of Mexicans had already fled into the United States since the start of the Revolution in 1910 – a million would by the Revolution's end – the attack on Columbus led to the first positioning of U.S. troops along the border.

The attack also led President Wilson to order military forces into Mexico itself, to hunt down Pancho Villa. These forces included a regiment of Black troops... the so-called Buffalo Soldiers stationed in the Southwest. Some of these Black troops justified their involvement by stressing how revolutionary nationalism in Mexico had caused Mexicans to turn on most foreigners, including the Black Americans who had fled to Mexico first to escape slavery, and at that time, Jim Crow. Indeed, Mexico's revolutionary nationalism focused on glorifying Mexico's indigenous heritage, but often did so in such a way that it portrayed blackness itself as something foreign that didn't belong in Mexico. The American forces were also helped by Chinese immigrants in Mexico... communities that had either fled America's Chinese Exclusion Acts and anti-Chinese violence, or who had been invited into Mexico directly from China to boost Mexico's labor force. These Chinese communities suffered greatly during the Mexican Revolution: in one case, a nationalistic mob attacked a Mexican Chinatown and slaughtered 300 Chinese in a single day. More anti-Chinese murders took place during the Mexican Revolution than in the entire twentieth century United States. Chinese in Mexico thus had every reason to work as spies and saboteurs for the invading American forces... or the Punitive Expedition, as it came to be called.

Already, there are multiple stories here: the story of Chinese communities in Mexico; of Black Americans and of blackness in Mexico... and of Pancho Villa, who himself had Black ancestry and developed ties with Black American leaders even as he fiercely embraced expelling all Americans from Mexico, regardless of their race or ethnicity. But these are stories for some other time. This short story is about the little-known Japanese-Mexicans who became involved in the Punitive Expedition.

First it should be said that the Japanese in Mexico were a unique group that did not suffer from the same anti-foreigner sentiment as did other groups, due to the fact that Mexico looked at Japan as a potential foreign ally. Whereas China at the time had essentially been chopped up and divided amongst major European and American powers and was in a state of internal chaos, Japan had arisen as the single, powerful example on the global stage of a non-White nation holding its own in a world dominated by White supremacist notions of colonialism and control. Japan had not only not been colonized, it had defeated Russia in 1905 and was at the time making great imperial strides forward during WWI... although at the rest of Asia's expense. Many Mexican revolutionaries looked up to the Japanese and certainly did

not want to alienate Japan from Mexico. Indeed, many Japanese living in Mexico were trusted by Villa's forces; some were considered to be valuable weapons smugglers.

The U.S. government soon became embarrassed at the Punitive Expedition's inability to track down Pancho Villa. Month after month passed, but Villa and his troops evaded the American forces at every turn. As America faced the probability of entering the First World War, the nation's inability to even locate – much less capture or kill – an underfunded, ragtag enemy right on their doorstep sent an uninspiring message to the American public and to allies abroad about U.S. military capabilities. American intelligence agents thus began reaching out to Japanese-Mexicans, partly because they had been embraced by Villa as potential allies, and partly in the hopes that they would not be as nationalistic as indigenous Mexicans, and might be more willing to become informers on Pancho Villa's whereabouts and next moves. Intelligence agents soon contacted a man named Gemichi – or "Gustavo" – Tatematsu, who had been a servant of Pancho Villa and knew his family. Another Japanese-Mexican by the name of Lucas Hayakawa also knew the Villa family, and had already worked as an informer for the U.S. Army in the border city of El Paso. The Bureau of Investigation (later the FBI) began employing these two Japanese-Mexicans three months into the Punitive Expedition, on June 14.

Before sending Tatematsu to gather information on Villa, the Bureau of Investigation sent him to California to gather intelligence about Japanese communities in America and their sympathies towards Mexico. The mission was a way of feeling out Tatematsu's trustworthiness. The Bureau quickly came to believe that Tatematsu would not divulge anything that would hurt Japanese communities, but they decided to move forward with him regardless of their concern that he was holding back on them. Because Hayakawa had already been an informer, he didn't need to be put through this period of testing. By July, the two men were considered ready for the mission, and were sent into the north Mexican state of Chihuahua with the cover story that they were delivering important letters to Pancho Villa. At the same time, the Bureau also sent another Japanese-Mexican, Hidekichi Tuschia, to try and infiltrate Pancho Villa's forces. Tuschia worked independently of Tatematsu and Hayakawa partly so the Bureau of Investigation could compare and contrast their information and have a way to better judge the quality of their information.

Meanwhile, while the Bureau cultivated these Japanese-Mexican informants, General Pershing – who was leading the Punitive Expedition – cultivated a network of about sixty spies in Mexico. Although these spies included Mexicans, Americans, and Chinese, it was the Japanese-Mexicans who were given the most sensitive mission due to the greater ease with which they could enter Villa's camps. In the words of the Punitive Expedition's Intelligence Section: "The Japanese were utilized largely as confidential agents in enemy country as their relations with the de facto government and the Villistas were such that they could visit either camp with impunity." The Army sent four Japanese-Mexicans to Chihuahua to search for Villa:

men by the names of Fuzita and Suzuki focused on gathering intelligence, while two others named Dyo and Sato searched the mountains for Villa.

On June 28, Dyo and Sato made contact and were led into Villa's encampment. The revolutionary leader recognized Dyo immediately and expressed joy that he had not been killed by the enemy Carrancista forces during a previous capture. Dyo and Sato were accepted as trusted allies and given a tour of the encampment, which held 700 soldiers. On June 30, Dyo and Sato accompanied this force when they smashed a 300 man Carrancista column, and watched as Villa took prisoners and had slices of their noses and ears chopped off, with the warning that if men who had been so marked were ever found supporting Carrancista again, they would be shot on the spot. The two Japanese-Mexican informers were soon incorporated into Villa's personal staff. They were armed and accompanied him in another successful attack on the Carrancistas, after which Villa began making plans to take over a major mining center. During this time of planning and strategizing, Fuzita and Suzuki rejoined Dyo and Sato. Together, they plotted the best way to poison Pancho Villa.

The plotting assassins had been provided with poison tablets with no taste or smell, and had already successfully tested them on a dog. Their window of opportunity was July 12-14, before Villa's encampments would be on the move again. The assassins were expected to administer the poison and stay with the encampment until Villa's death was certain. Understanding the risks, they undertook a Japanese death farewell ceremony before proceeding. Dyo then took an opportunity to poison Villa's coffee, but then watched as Villa – who understood he could be poisoned at any time – had one of his men drink half of the coffee first, and then watched for any reaction. Seeing none, Villa then drank the other half. The Japanese-Mexican agents, however, knew that this poison did not set in immediately and took three days to cause death. Worried that Villa would not die but would be made seriously ill and that they might become suspects, the men fled.

Just over a month later, on August 25, a strange article was published by the Associated Press, stating that "A Japanese physician by the name of Nodko claims to have brought about the death of Villa by slow poison given under the guise of medical treatment, according to the Chihuahua local papers today." Two days later, the U.S. Army sent Dyo and Fuzita on a new mission to determine Villa's actual state, but the answer became obvious when Villa staged a surprise attack two weeks after the article was published. It's possible that the article was just being used by Villa as a way to keep his planned attack invisible and throw his enemies off guard. The fact that it highlights a Japanese assassination attempt – although a concocted one – seems like more than a coincidence, and it might have been a sign from Villa that he understood who had tried to kill him.

In a likely attempt to erase any evidence of this assassination plot, the reports on the activities of these Japanese-Mexican agents were deleted from the Punitive Expedition's intelligence files. However, the Bureau of Investigation had also come into contact with the Japanese agents working for the Army, and had written a

report about their activities which was sent to the Attorney General, who then sent it to the Secretary of War. An investigation ensued, and it is likely that General Pershing, who was in charge of the Punitive Expedition, ordered the files destroyed before the investigation could take place. Military authorities also requested that the Bureau of Investigation ensure that no word of the assassination plot reached reporters. The story did not see the light of day until the 1970s, when the combination of Vietnam and Watergate crushed White American's faith in the trustworthiness of institutions they assumed operated according to basic principles of justice and fair-play... a delusion that few people of color had. It was only at that moment that the FBI and various military intelligence agencies were forced to begin opening their documentation to the public... to some extent at least. As for the Punitive Expedition, it was unable to ever track down Pancho Villa, and pulled out of Mexico in February of 1917, after almost a full year of futile searches.