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The Background of the Last Caudillo

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> Mexico is not a republic, but a military Díazpotism.
>
> Charles Flandrau (1908)

Obregón's career developed in two different contexts, and both of these contexts are important in understanding his role in the Mexican Revolution. In the first place, Obregón grew up in a somewhat contradictory political context—a system marked by both authoritarian political practices and the inability of governments at the national and state levels to enforce their decisions on a recalcitrant and diverse population. Second, his upbringing in distant Sonora, an arid state that borders the United States, instilled in him the political culture of the northwest. This culture and society differed in crucial ways from those of central and southern Mexico.

Since the beginning of recorded time, the area we know today as "Mexico" has featured struggles between strong central rulers and regional chieftains with considerable autonomy. The rugged, mountainous terrain has always made political centralization difficult. Such was the case in the Mexica Empire under Emperor Moctezuma; and likewise, the authoritarian methods of the Spanish Crown, in what it called the Viceroyalty of New Spain, faced stiff local resistance. The political system of the viceroyalty imposed centralizing features that would survive all the way to Obregón's era: a top-down pattern in all levels of governance;

The Last Caudillo: Alvaro Obregón and the Mexican Revolution. Jürgen Buchenau
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no clear separation of powers; and the appointment rather than democratic election of many regional and local leaders. The king appointed a Spanish-born viceroy to rule in his stead, held in check by a group, the *audiencia*, with executive, legislative, and judicial powers. At the regional and local levels, the viceroy named *corregidores* (regents) although larger towns featured elected *cabildos* (town councils). After the Bourbon Reforms of the late 1700s, the king also sent intendants as a means of enforcing his power. In practice, strong regional loyalties and chiefs remained throughout the colonial period, and subalterns often did not carry out the orders coming from their superiors. Throughout the colonial period, the Spanish authorities struggled to subdue local and regional rebellions, and they never controlled the vast northwestern frontier—including present-day Sonora—much at all.[1]

By the Wars of Independence (1810–1821), France's Napoleon Bonaparte provided a new blueprint for central rule not only for Europe, but also for Latin America. Napoleon's armies overran a checkerboard of local sovereignties in central Europe by means of a brilliant military strategy and a dedicated volunteer army devoted to service of the French nation. Not surprisingly, contemporary artists represented the Venezuelan Simón Bolívar, the Argentine José de San Martín, and the Mexican Agustín de Iturbide as citizens-emperors, scions of Napoleon. In many ways, these liberators constituted the first wave of caudillos in Latin America: self-anointed military heroes who commanded by virtue of their network of clients.[2]

Of these leaders, Iturbide established the most direct bridge to Napoleon by means of his coronation as Agustín I, Constitutional Emperor of Mexico, on July 21, 1822. Unlike the other Spanish American independence leaders, who established republican forms of government, Iturbide became a monarch, just like Napoleon. However, this monarchy was short-lived. Iturbide's empire was vast, stretching from California east to the Louisiana border and south to Costa Rica. Moreover, Iturbide's sudden exaltation went to his head. He ennobled members of his immediate family and ordered their birthdays to be celebrated as national holidays. Petitioners who wished to see him needed to kneel before him and kiss his hand. Thus, an uprising ousted Iturbide in March 1823. After a year in exile, he returned home, only to be arrested and executed by firing squad just two years after his proclamation as emperor.[3]

From Santa Anna to Díaz

Iturbide's brief reign highlighted several important characteristics that would endure until Obregón's days. Most importantly, his dissolution of parliament indicated the supremacy of the executive branch over the legislative one, as well as the arbitrary use of power. Iturbide's self-aggrandizement pointed the way to the forging of personality cults that would prove a crucial aspect of authoritarian political rule. Finally, his fall at the hands of his former lieutenants set a pattern for violent changes of government. Until 1920, the year of Obregón's election, most presidents would come to power via a coup d'état. Two leaders in particular—Antonio López de Santa Anna and Porfirio Díaz—left important legacies for Obregón's career.

Santa Anna belonged to a new generation that came to power in the chaotic decades following the wars of independence. Historian John Lynch calls this group "primitive caudillos:" leaders who ruled over unstable nations with stagnating economies by personal fiat.[4] This generation also comprised other classical cases of caudillo rule such as Argentina's Juan Manuel de Rosas and Venezuela's José Antonio Páez. These leaders had entered the wars as rank-and-file but worked themselves up to important positions by the time the conflicts ended. Hence, they were next in line when the original independence heroes fell from grace. Rosas helped spread the purview of the independence movement beyond the capital region of Buenos Aires by organizing a regiment of the famed cowboys, the *gauchos*. As a champion of the gauchos, he remained the dominant figure of the region until his fall in 1853. Páez joined Bolívar's 1810 insurrection at the age of twenty. He commanded the pro-independence army in Venezuela while Bolívar was helping spearhead the liberation of Peru; and in 1830, he declared Venezuela's independence from Gran Colombia. Páez and Rosas represented themselves as the embodiment of their nations, yet they depended on personal alliances with hacienda owners, the military, the high clergy, and indigenous leaders. Their power remained limited by the absence of political stability, the persistence of local and regional challenges to central authority, and the existence of a minimal national government without the means to make its authority respected.[5]

Mexico's quintessential caudillo, Santa Anna was born in Jalapa, Veracruz, in 1794 into a middle-class creole family. He was a master at sensing the shifting of political winds. After entering the army at the age of sixteen, he served with the Crown's forces until 1821, distinguishing himself by his ruthless persecution of the pro-independence guerrilla. When he sensed that the tide had turned in favor of independence, he proclaimed his adherence to Iturbide's Plan of Iguala. As opposition against Iturbide mounted, Santa Anna declared the "Plan de Casa Mata," the successful call for the emperor's overthrow. Thereafter, he became the most important military figure of the early republic, and the master of an extensive patron-client network centered on his home base in Veracruz. He took center stage in the most important military confrontations of the first thirty years of independent Mexico, which featured wars with Spain, France, and the United States and the formation of two rival political blocs: the Centralists and the Federalists. Sometimes, he helped the nation pull together; at other times, his ambitions constituted a singularly disruptive force. In 1829, he led a successful campaign against Spain's attempt to reconquer its former colony. In 1832, he helped the Federalists to power, and he served a brief first stint as president from May 16 to June 3, 1833. Within a few months, Santa Anna regretted his alliance and helped the Centralists regain power under his second presidency. However, he enjoyed his role as a savior who rode in on his horse whenever the nation appeared in need, more so than he relished the authority vested in the presidential chair. In 1836, another such opportunity came when Santa Anna led Mexican troops to fight the effort of Texas settlers to obtain their independence from Mexico. However, the following year, the Texans dealt him a devastating defeat at San Jacinto.[6]

Soon thereafter, Santa Anna bounced back, thanks in part to a lost limb that became a political spectacle just as Obregón's would a century later. In 1838, a French fleet blockaded the port of Veracruz in order to exact payment of claims held by French citizens. On November 27, at his hacienda near the city, Santa Anna heard the distant rumblings of cannon that accompanied the French attack on the fortress of San Juan de Ulúa. He mounted his white horse to meet the invaders. As the Mexican armies forced the French to return to their ships, a cannonball severed his left leg below the knee. The mutilated caudillo again became a national hero, and he sought to exploit his sacrifice. On September 27, 1842, he gave

his leg a state burial, complete with an urn, a mausoleum, and a twelve-gun salute.[7]

However, such a spectacle could not instill lasting allegiance to a caudillo. Upon a successful coup d'état against Santa Anna in 1844, the victorious rebels removed the leg from its mausoleum and waved it around during their procession. In Santa Anna's own words: "A member of my body, lost in the service to my country, dragged from the funeral urn, broken into bits to be made sport of in such a barbaric manner. … In that moment of grief and frenzy, I decided to leave my native country … for all time."[8] Of course, within a short time, the caudillo returned despite this nefarious mistreatment of his leg. He weaved in and out of power throughout the next nine years, which included defeat in the US-Mexican War (1846–1848). The traumatic defeat formalized the US annexation of Texas and the transfer of a total of one-half of the Mexican territory to the United States. Santa Anna played an unsavory role in the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, which transferred southern Sonora to the United States. According to some sources, 600,000 dollars ended up in his own pocket.[9] This transaction earned him the moniker of *vendepatria*, or seller of the fatherland. Not surprisingly, official Mexican historical memory has treated Santa Anna as a villain.

It was no coincidence that another caudillo, Juan N. Alvarez, spearheaded the rebellion that finally toppled Santa Anna for good. Just as Santa Anna took advantage of his regional base on the Gulf Coast, so Alvarez enjoyed a privileged position as the commander of the Pacific port of Acapulco. By the time his supporters pronounced the Plan of Ayutla on March 1, 1854, Alvarez had dominated southern Mexico for more than three decades. The program called for Santa Anna's removal due to his corruption, referencing in particular the dastardly act of selling off a part of the nation. The new caudillo found the presidency unappealing and returned to his hacienda after a few months in office. Alvarez's parting words would later find a prominent imitator in Obregón, both in their emphasis on his humble origins and in their denigration of political office: "I entered the presidency as a poor man, and I leave it as a poor man, with the satisfaction that I do not have to bear the censure of the public because I was dedicated from an early age to personal labor, to work the plow to support my family, without the need for public offices where others enrich themselves by outrages to those in misery."[10]

Alvarez's brief tenure paved the way for the ascendancy of the Liberal party and its most famous exponent, Benito Juárez, an attorney of Zapotec origins from the southern state of Oaxaca. Led by Juárez, the Liberals opposed caudillo politics and favored the installation of a genuine representative democracy. They also called for an end to all privileges enjoyed by the Catholic Church, the aristocracy, and the army, groups that enjoyed the protection of special courts. They viewed the Church, especially, as an obstacle to progress and advocated lay education, civil marriages, and the expropriation of its wealth, which included more than half of the nation's arable land. The Liberals wished to turn Mexico into a nation of yeoman farmers who produced enough food to export it to the burgeoning populations of western Europe. In 1857, Juárez became president, and the Liberals codified these ideas in a constitution that remained the law of the land until 1917.[11]

Juárez's government could not establish effective control, however, before encountering stiff resistance from the Church and the Conservative Party. The Conservatives used the Liberal campaign against the Church as a rallying cry that resonated particularly with deeply religious indigenous communities. They could also count on the support of ranchers and hacendados who stood to lose by a reorganization of agricultural land. And, of course, they knew that they could depend on the allegiance of many of the Santannista strongmen, as well as other local leaders dissatisfied with the central government. In 1858, the Conservatives ousted Juárez. The Liberals triumphed following three years of war, only to be driven from power again in 1862 by French invasion forces sent by Emperor Napoleon III. The emperor harbored the dream of establishing a Caribbean dominion. In 1864, he installed the Habsburg prince Maximilian on the throne of a restored Mexican empire.

Maximilian's style of leadership differed from that of a caudillo as much as anyone could imagine. The Austrian fashioned himself as a kind-hearted conciliator who could heal old divisions and solve Mexico's problems in a few short years. He surrounded himself with a circle of educated advisors, the so-called *imperialistas*, to aid him in the formulation of policy.[12] The emperor attempted to endear himself to the Liberals by refusing to roll back the Reform Laws; unfortunately, that step alienated the Conservatives without winning him any Liberal friends. Similarly, he made history by decreeing the end of debt peonage, only to find out

that he had added the landowners to his already considerable list of enemies. Therefore, the goal of reconciliation eluded an emperor who served as a pawn of Napoleon's ambitions, and who owed his throne to French arms. Worse yet, the blond, blue-eyed Austrian aristocrat who had grown up in the palaces of Europe remained an utter outsider. Finally, Maximilian held deeply romantic visions of indigenous Mexicans. In his view, he alone was destined to save that population from ruin and exploitation. Consider the following quote of a French military officer: "When … the burden of his job seemed too heavy, His Majesty would go on a little trip. Amidst the ovations of the poor, morose Indians, he found relief and pleasure, as he considered himself adored by his subjects."[13] Maximilian's failures gave the Liberals a chance to reinvent themselves as patriots, and they went on the offensive. Faced with this threat, the emperor panicked and swore the Liberals a war to the death. As the Liberals waged a guerrilla campaign, a fateful decree promised death to all rebel officers captured by the government.

Not surprisingly, the decree angered the Liberals, who first chased out the French and then returned to power in June 1867. They gave the emperor a dose of his own medicine, executing him and two of his closest Mexican allies. When Juárez returned to the presidency, he knew that his faction had triumphed through military conquest rather than the superiority of the Liberal program. He also embraced repressive tactics in order to deal with rebellions and banditry. For example, he established a roving police force, the *rurales*, a corps made up primarily of former bandits that enjoyed free rein in imposing order in the countryside.[14]

Therefore, the so-called "Restored Republic" already contained the seeds of a new form of dictatorship: the rule of General Porfirio Díaz. With the exception of a brief interregnum in the early 1880s, Díaz controlled the destinies of the nation between 1876 and 1911. The regime known as the "Porfiriato" holds direct relevance for Obregón as a revolutionary caudillo. The members of Obregón's generation were themselves products of the Porfiriato and often held minor political offices during its last years. According to historian John Lynch, Díaz was the archetype of the "modernizing" or "oligarchic dictator."[15] These leaders combined the political style of a caudillo with command over an extensive state apparatus that could enforce central rule with the help of

railroads, modern standing armies, and growing tax revenues deriving from booming export economies. But Díaz was one of a kind: no other Latin American nation produced a leader so identified with his era that it bears his first name. Of the leaders of major Latin American nations, only Brazilian Emperor Pedro II and Cuban dictator Fidel Castro exceeded his political longevity.

A poor mestizo, Díaz, like Juárez, hailed from the state of Oaxaca. Born in 1830, he enjoyed a formal education in a seminary, but left before taking his vows. He also passed his fourth-year law examinations, yet did not finish his legal training either. Díaz earned his first military rank during the War of Reform. On May 5, 1862, the brigadier general helped lead his troops to a short-lived victory over the French at the first Battle of Puebla—an event that is still commemorated today as the Cinco de Mayo. Five years later, he directed the army that triumphantly occupied Mexico City and thus put an end to Maximilian's reign. Díaz felt that his military exploits had earned him the right to his own term as president. Thus, he rose up against Juárez in 1871, and a year later, following Juárez's death, he opposed the accession of Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada, chief justice of the Supreme Court. Following Lerdo's reelection in 1876, Díaz led a successful coup under the motto "effective suffrage, no reelection"; a battle cry that would come to haunt him after thirty years in the presidential chair.[16]

Once Díaz was invested with presidential authority, he transformed his persona from that of a rough-and-tumble caudillo into a cosmopolitan leader. Over time, his image transitioned to a European leadership style with heavy borrowings from France, the nation that most Latin American leaders desired to emulate. Díaz's transformation mirrored the nation's modernization during the 1880s and 1890s, when British, French, and US investments poured in to build up an infrastructure that would allow capitalists to exploit the nation's mineral riches and agricultural potential. Within just twenty years, railroads crisscrossed the nation; agribusinesses and mines produced sugar, silver, copper, and many other export commodities; port facilities saw significant upgrades; and an urban middle class of professionals and white-collar workers emerged in the growing cities and towns (see Map 1.1).

Ironically, Díaz's style bore resemblance to that of Napoleon III, the French emperor who had ordered the occupation of Mexico. One key

Map 1.1 Mexico in 1910.

to this image was don Porfirio's marriage to his English tutor, Carmen Romero Rubio. Thirty-four years younger than her husband, doña Carmelita belonged to a wealthy and highly educated creole family from the capital. Díaz's association with an elite clan from the capital made him socially acceptable to the other ruling families. Porfirian rituals of rule further demonstrated the shift in Díaz's public persona. One important aspect of a caudillo was his claim to be an ordinary citizen close to the people. However, following the renovation of the National Palace in the 1890s, the rituals surrounding presidential audiences created distance between don Porfirio and his people. Petitioners could only see the president on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Friday afternoons. They first inscribed their names on a list before noon and awaited notification that

they were selected to wait for hours in a crowded anteroom known as "hell." Eventually, some of them, often the wealthier among the crowd, won admission into a better furnished room known as "purgatory." After waiting in that room, a number of petitioners made it into a final, lavishly appointed anteroom that visitors referred to as "limbo," in part because admission into that room did not guarantee a personal audience. Díaz only saw ten petitioners per afternoon. Don Porfirio invited important visitors to his personal residence later that evening, and cabinet secretaries and diplomats enjoyed special access to the president via a separate entrance.[17]

These rituals promoted the political motto most associated with the Porfiriato: order and progress. Order and progress signified the Porfirians' quest for political order (i.e. a powerful central state that could make its influence felt in Mexico's most distant regions) paired with economic progress, defined as modernization in infrastructure and technological terms. The Díaz regime was not the only Latin American government to use this term to define its program. Indeed, the contemporary Brazilian flag still carries the words *ordem e progresso* on a band around the equator of the globe in the center of the flag. What is most significant about this motto is its lack of emphasis on democracy and participatory political rule. Thus, modernization did not end the authoritarianism that had plagued Mexico throughout the nineteenth century. Instead, the Porfirians showed that they wanted practical solutions rather than wage and win the political debate necessary to arrive at a solution broadly supported in public opinion.

To help build this authoritarian system with a focus on material progress, Díaz employed the assistance of a new circle of political leaders made up of technocrats with a formal education, a positivist persuasion, and international business connections. The origins of the Mexican technocrat date to Maximilian's *imperialistas*, intellectuals influenced by French positivism. Positivism established the supremacy over the human mind over divine providence; and it explained the technological and economic superiority of the North Atlantic nations in terms of the scientific rather than religious orientation of their ruling classes. After the Liberal triumph, positivist technocrats formed much of Juárez's inner circle. One of them, the French-trained lawyer Gabino Barreda, founded a National Preparatory School dedicated to education according to the

positivist model. The ENP focused on science over the humanities, and its teachers instructed many of the men who would become Porfirian technocrats. During the Porfiriato, Barreda's positivist creed became government doctrine. Once reintroduced into the governing elite, doña Carmelita's father, Manuel Romero Rubio, became the centerpiece of a group committed to modernization in accordance with French and US models.[18]

Known as the *científicos*, this group of about two dozen became the most influential faction in the Díaz regime. Their approach to political issues was *menos política, más administración* (less politics, more administration). This theme highlighted the positivist belief that educated men could find an administrative solution to any political problem. They disdained democratic processes that involved people whom the científicos considered unfit to make political decisions. The científicos also amassed considerable wealth by using their influence to gain control over formerly public lands, and by brokering agreements between the government and foreign investors. The científicos came to represent the worst aspects of the Porfiriato: authoritarian rule, foreign economic influence, and cronyism. The revolutionaries of 1910 would rally in part to end their influence. Yet the political system in which the científicos thrived—a military clique wedded to a circle of technocrats—would survive the revolution, and Obregón would recognize the utility of loyal intellectuals as much as Díaz had done.[19]

Born in the early years of the Porfiriato, Obregón's generation revealed the imprint of their age. They grew up under the Díaz regime, and in many cases, witnessed state- and local-level politics as the rule of the same clans allied with the Porfirians. One cannot understand Obregón or his contemporaries without reference to the antidemocratic context in which they grew up. To be sure, Obregón and many others would grow to resent the *científico* clique for their corruption and extensive hold on power. Yet they became inured to their political methods, and they agreed that material progress constituted the most important goal for a developing nation. To achieve material progress, they believed, the ends often justified authoritarian means. What would set Obregón and other revolutionaries apart from the Porfirians was the awareness that modernization required a modicum of social justice. How Obregón blended Porfirian precedents with new revolutionary ideas is the central story of

the chapters that follow. But that story cannot be understood without reference to the state in which Obregón grew up.

The Sonoran Background

Obregón has often been described as a typical Sonoran: a member of a frontier society different in many ways from the rest of Mexico. He founded a political dynasty of Sonorans that would account for four out of six presidents of the period 1920 to 1934. This fact is even more astounding when one considers Sonora's population of 140,000 at the time of Obregón's birth; only one out of a hundred Mexicans lived in the nation's second largest state. The Sonoran background therefore served as an important building block of the post-revolutionary state that Obregón and his allies helped create. It allows historians to understand one of the fundamental dramas of the revolution: the conquest of central and southern Mexico by northern frontiersmen who, as historian Héctor Aguilar Camín exaggerated, "had little idea of the inner history or human reality" of most of the nation they had just conquered.[20]

Like the rest of the north, Sonora experienced only sparse Spanish colonization during the colonial period. The northern frontier held few attractions for the conquistadors who first came to this distant region in 1530. Land was abundant but arid, with scorching hot summers in which temperatures exceeded 120 degrees Fahrenheit (49 degrees Celsius). Initially, neither silver nor gold lured the conquistadors, although the southern city of Alamos became an important center for silver mining in the late eighteenth century, and vast copper deposits in the north awaited their discovery in the late nineteenth century. Those wayward Spaniards who found themselves in what is now Sonora faced an indigenous population able to preserve its autonomy. One historian has characterized the colonial northwest as the land of "wandering peoples," as many of these indigenous civilizations, and particularly the Apaches, lived a nomadic lifestyle.[21] Ranging across an area that included today's Sonora and Chihuahua as well as much of what is now the US Southwest, the Apaches held tough against Spanish attempts to subdue them from *presidios*, or garrisons. Even today, thick-walled churches in eastern

Sonora remind residents of a time when settlers feared Apache depredations on the "nomadic frontier."[22]

However, two major indigenous communities—the Yaqui and the Mayo—made their mark as sedentary peoples, and both of these peoples would greatly affect Obregón's career. They lived near the two most significant rivers of the region, and the former inhabited a wide swath of territory north of the Yaqui River. Due to the availability of water for irrigation, these communities claimed the prime farmland of Sonora. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Jesuit missions made this area into one of their most profitable holdings in the Americas. As elsewhere, Spanish settlers in this arid region coveted arable land, sowing the inevitable conflict that marked the encounter of indigenous and European cultures. By the time Mexico became independent in 1821, the Mayo and Yaqui held on to most of their land three centuries after the Spaniards had subdued the Aztecs. They also asserted their right to remain independent, and they would not pay taxes or tolerate the presence of government soldiers. Throughout the nineteenth century, they allied with those who would help them maintain their autonomy from the Mexican republic and the Spanish-speaking people they called Yori. For example, they forged a strategic alliance with the Gándara clan. During the age of Santa Anna, Manuel María Gándara had established his supremacy over the state. He hailed from Ures in east-central Sonora, an arid district with little potential for economic development, but one that featured a number of former *presidios* set up to defend the area from Apache incursions. Gándara allied with indigenous chieftains, and specifically the leaders of the Yaqui, whom he regarded as natural allies against the Apaches. During the 1850s, he lost out to Ignacio Pesqueira, a Juárez ally from the northeastern district of Arizpe. Pesqueira saw indigenous Sonorans as an obstacle to economic development. Not surprisingly, the Mayo and Yaqui realized that the building of railroads and the construction of a stronger central state threatened their status quo. Therefore, in 1875, they joined forces to proclaim their independence from Mexico. It was not until 1886 that the government crushed this indigenous holdout.[23] Most Yori continued to fear the indigenous Sonorans; in this regard, Obregón would prove to be an important exception, as he recruited both Mayo and Yaqui to fight with him.

Another significant difference between Sonora and much of the rest of Mexico was the role of the Catholic Church. In central and southern Mexico, thousands of priests tended to the spiritual needs of their parishioners. In those areas, Catholicism became deeply ingrained into the cultural fabric, and as evidenced by the plethora of ornately adorned churches and cathedrals, the Church emerged as the wealthiest institution in the colony. In Sonora, however, the Jesuit missions among the Yaqui constituted the most important footprint of the Church. Not surprisingly, Catholicism played a more important role among the indigenous communities than among the Yoris. Upon the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Spanish empire in 1767, few priests remained in northwestern Mexico. By 1830, one year after Spain's failed attempt at reconquest led to the exile of most Spanish-born clergy, there were only eighteen priests in an area the size of the US state of Montana.[24]

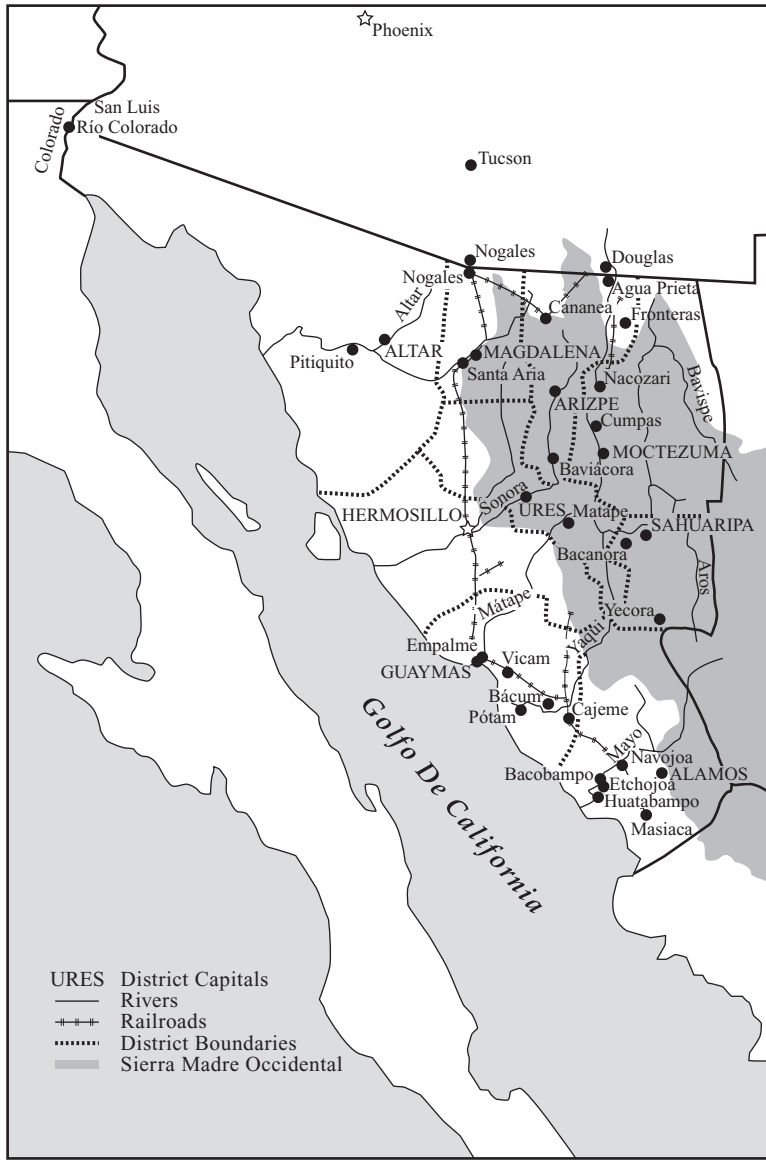
Yet another difference between northern Mexico and the rest of the nation lay in the fluidity of social relations. Spanish-speaking Sonora remained a frontier society engaged in the conquest of the environment and the state's indigenous population. The scarcely present Catholic Church could not regulate social relations: births out of wedlock were common, and in many cases, wives could desert unfaithful or cruel husbands by running away and starting a new life. Social pedigree—so important in the center and south—held less importance than individual achievement. In part for that reason, many Mexicans called Sonorans the "Yankees" of their nation.[25] Patron-client and familial relationships of the sort that Obregón would use to his own benefit structured this fluid frontier society. The handful of notable families who dominated Sonora learned the importance of personal relationships in acquiring wealth and power. In the absence of central political authority, they acquired these two signifiers of social status by fiat rather than by law, and by means of personal alliances rather than legal titles.[26]

Sonora not only differed from states farther south, but also from other northern states such as neighboring Chihuahua, the largest state of the republic. In Sonora, most land belonged to medium-sized and large holdings, with very few exceeding one thousand hectares. Therefore, with the exception of the indigenous communities mentioned above, there were few *rancheros* (smallholders) and landless peons. Not coincidentally, the Sonoran military forces in the revolution comprised a large number

of farmers, shopkeepers, teachers, and other middle-class rebels. In Chihuahua, on the other hand, large estates abounded along with thousands of smaller properties. For example, Luis Terrazas and his family owned the largest land holdings in the entire republic, which exceeded the US state of Maryland in territorial extension. But that state also featured a sizable population of landless campesinos, rancheros, and squatters, a population that mobilized in the very first days of the revolution. Under Pancho Villa's leadership, they remained at the forefront of the fighting until Obregón's forces emerged victorious.

A final peculiarity of nineteenth-century Sonora lay in its proximity to the United States. Following the US annexation of the Mexican Northwest in 1848 and the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, Sonorans interacted to a greater extent with the inhabitants of the United States than with those of neighboring Baja California and Chihuahua. Baja California remained virtually unpopulated until the early twentieth century; and the tall peaks of the Sierra Madre Occidental limited interaction with the state of Chihuahua. With the exception of Sinaloa, which abuts Sonora to the south at the Sea of Cortez, communications with the rest of Mexico were even more difficult. By the time of Obregón's birth, there were no railroads in Sonora; port facilities were in abysmal shape, and overland travel could only be accomplished by donkey or mule. By contrast, the border crossing to the United States was easy. Sonorans looked to Arizona as refuge, employment opportunity, and a source of money and arms.

The Sonora that the young Obregón knew firsthand, of course, was that of the Porfiriato (see Map 1.2). Porfirian modernization affected Sonora more profoundly than many other states. Its location on the border made the state a keystone of efforts to link the Mexican and US economies. As part of their strategy to centralize and modernize the nation, the Porfirians and their US supporters turned Sonora from a sleepy backwater at the periphery into a crucial state at the very center of the modernization effort. Three critical infusions of foreign capital helped accomplish this goal. First, in 1882, British and US investors funded the Sonora Railroad that connected the port of Guaymas to the Arizona border. By the dawn of the new century, this railroad extended beyond the Sinaloa border under the name of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Second, in 1890, a US investor obtained the rights to most of



Map 1.2 Sonora in 1910.

the waters of the Yaqui and Mayo Rivers. Reduced to the Yaqui River valley, this concession later ended up in the hands of the US-owned Compañia Constructora Richardson. Finally, in 1897, the Phelps-Dodge Corporation invested in a copper mining site near the northeastern town of Nacozari, and two years later, Colonel William Greene founded the Cananea Consolidated Copper Company. Together, railroad construction, irrigation, and copper mining engendered an unprecedented boom. As a result, the state's population doubled between 1880 and 1910, as thousands of migrants came looking for work on the farms and in the copper mines. By contrast, the population of central and southern Mexico grew far more slowly.[27]

Modernization entailed a far greater presence of central government in this distant state. In particular, a triumvirate of leaders—Luis Torres, Rafael Izábal, and Ramón Corral—helped the Porfirians extend their political hold into Sonora. The triumvirate came to dominate state politics by doling out contracts and other favors backed by a federal government that at last commanded significant enough revenue to buy influence in state governments. Of the three politicians, Corral was the only native Sonoran, and probably the most important of the group. He was the only Sonoran member of the *científico* group that dominated the Porfirian inner circle. Beginning in 1904, he served in the new office of Vice President—an appointment that illustrated the rising importance of the state in national politics.[28]

During their thirty-year hold over the state, the triumvirate attempted to break the power of the notable families, and especially the Pesqueiras, who never reconciled themselves to the new order. They also used their political offices to become the crucial intermediaries between foreign investors and local governments. Yet resistance persisted: the Pesqueiras retained powerful friends, especially the Maytorena clan, a landowning family from the Guaymas area. In the copper mines, adherents of the Flores Magón brothers organized labor along anarcho-syndicalist lines. Anarcho-syndicalists believed that the central government repressed the workers in alliance with the copper companies, and that freedom for the workers could only come through the abolition of both private capital and the state.[29]

Porfirian modernization dealt a decisive setback to indigenous aspirations for continued autonomy. In 1886, the army's defeat of the Mayo

opened their land to exploitation by Yori settlers, the government, and foreign investors. That same year, the government also crushed the Yaqui army. None other than Corral led the charge against the Yaqui, which lost not only the war, but also their leader, José Leyva de Cajeme, who was executed by the government. One year thereafter, however, Cajeme's second in command, Tetabiate, led the remaining Yaqui rebels into the Sierra de Bacatete mountains east of the Guaymas region. Even as the Porfirians seized most of their land and deported thousands of Yaqui into slavery in Yucatán, Tetabiate and his successors would continue defending their independence well into the 1920s. There was no prominent Yori in the central and southern parts of the state not affected by the endless conflict with the Yaqui. Even those who hated the Yaqui and sought a military victory at all costs needed their labor and enlisted their assistance as military allies.[30]

Modernization also exacted a toll on the population working in the copper mines. To be sure, the copper boom brought rapid population growth to the northeast of Sonora, and the miners received better wages than those paid in mines elsewhere in Mexico. But workers in the mines of Cananea and Nacozari observed that their North American co-workers received much higher pay for the same work; in Cananea, for example, Mexican workers received 3.50 pesos while North American workers earned 5 pesos per day. In addition, the Mexican miners worked in deplorable conditions. In this atmosphere, an anarchist and socialist opposition party led by the Flores Magón brothers, the Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM, or Mexican Liberal Party) found ready converts. On June 1, 1906, more than five thousand Mexican miners went on strike, demanding the removal of a particularly abusive foreman and a pay rate of 5 pesos per day. When the company rejected the demands, the workers organized demonstrations, and in response, the company called in a posse led by Arizona Rangers. The brutal suppression of the strike left 23 miners dead, and a legacy that would later reverberate in the Mexican Revolution.[31]

This sketch of Obregón's historical context would remain incomplete without a brief look at southern Sonora, and particularly the district of Alamos in which he spent most of his life. The district was wedged between the Gulf of California to the west, the Sierra Madre mountains to the east, and the state of Sinaloa to the south. The border with Sinaloa

made the region into the gateway to the center. Obregón and many other small entrepreneurs from the district were more likely to travel to northern Sinaloa than to the state capital of Hermosillo. Not surprisingly, the region was more oriented toward the rest of Mexico than the United States. For example, while Sonora enjoys national renown for the quality of its beef, the city of Navojoa remains famous for its roasted chicken and seafood. As another example, ethnic relations in the Alamos district resembled those in regions farther south in that the Mayo defeat during the 1880s ushered in a relatively stable ethnic hierarchy. Unlike the Yaqui, the Mayo found a tenuous arrangement with the Yori who had defeated them in battle.[32]

To sum up, both Obregón's historical (Liberal-Porfirian) and regional (Sonoran) background influenced his generation's role in the revolution in important ways. Modernization in the late nineteenth century led to rapid economic growth in Sonora fueled by foreign investment and the growth of a transportation and communication infrastructure. Obregón grew up in a dictatorship in which the practical ends of politics reigned supreme over deliberative processes that would have involved democratic decision-making and consensus-building, on whatever scale such processes could have occurred in a regionally diverse and largely illiterate society. Likewise, the Sonoran tradition instilled in him several important attitudes, including an abiding faith in individual initiative; a critical attitude toward the Catholic Church; a belief in modern, privately-owned agriculture on a small to medium scale; a reliance on extensive familial and clientelist networks; and an abiding belief in a hard-headed political pragmatism as opposed to a commitment to representative democracy.