

Review / Reseña

Buchenau, Jürgen. *The Sonoran Dynasty: Revolution, Reform, and Repression*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2023. 407 pp.

Jason H. Dormady

Central Washington University

Some paths are well trodden, while others only appear so. Historian Jürgen Buchenau's *The Sonoran Dynasty in Mexico* analyzes a topic once thought overworked and demonstrates instead that it was overlooked. With the characteristic clear and straightforward style that readers expect from Buchenau, he examines the ruling cadre of northern Mexican politicians and officers who dominated Mexico from 1920 until 1936. His conclusion is that scholars misunderstand the relationship between the various figures in the group and that their legacy is both more powerful and more subtle than previously understood.

The dynasty referred to includes the expected presidents Álvaro Obregón (1920-24) and Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-28), as well as interim president and key political leader Adolfo de la Huerta (1920). President Abelardo Rodríguez (1932-34) is redeemed from previous simplistic portrayals as a puppet of Calles. The important but less-studied figures of Benjamin Hill and Francisco Serrano also receive solid attention. Also in the Sonoran orbit are military or political leaders who helped the dynasty take root: Salvador Alvarado, Manuel Diéguez, José María Maytorena, Arnulfo Gómez, and Ignacio Pesqueira. The coverage of these last five is limited to the first six (of ten) chapters representing the early Revolutionary years—which is still more coverage than they usually receive in English-language scholarship on the era.

The first two sections of the book (chapters one to four) deal with the road to power for the Sonorans. Buchenau argues that the roots of the Sonoran *camarillas* spring from the geographic and colonial boundaries of Sonora and the neighboring areas of Chihuahua and Sinaloa. The reign of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911) brought prosperity to some families in the region, but it also stripped other traditional ruling clans of their local power. Thus, both ruling elites and the lower classes rebelled against Díaz—the former to regain power, and the latter inspired by the rhetoric of social and economic reform, or from their direct experiences of labor repression at the hands of Mexican and U.S. law enforcement. These Sonoran alliances formed tenuous bonds as generals and politicians jockeyed for position and power between 1911 and 1915.

After 1915, some members of the coalition rose to state-level power, where they harnessed capitalism under state-directed guidance to pay for social reforms—and to fill their personal coffers. Others left government and used the time to amass wealth and make connections in the United States that later proved valuable. In this era, as Sonoran revolutionaries accrued wealth and influence to unseat Carranza (1917-20) and his followers, they remained divided over issues like presidential power, legislative strength, and representative democracy in Mexico. Increasingly at the center of section two is Álvaro Obregón, who cultivated an image as a man of the people, which obscured the vicious and Machiavellian operation lifting him to the presidential chair.

A noted contribution of this book is its treatment of de la Huerta's 1920 interim presidency. Buchenau argues that the presidency legitimated elections and began an important (although at first unsuccessful) rapprochement with the U.S. De la Huerta's administration also ended or decreased regional threats posed by caudillos through negotiation or focused application of violence.

Section three helps readers understand how the Obregón administration functioned through the cabinet and military support of remaining Dynasty members, particularly the contentious partnership with de la Huerta and Calles. With other Sonorans in supporting roles (like Serrano and Gómez), the three repaired relations with foreign investors, shrunk the army, muzzled political party opposition, paused tensions with the Catholic Church, and gave renewed attention to land reform, education, and labor organizing. These reforms met the needs of the masses to an extent, but also allowed the central state to develop institutions that dominated Mexico until the end of the century.

The work also helps readers better understand the 1923 de la Huerta rebellion. As de la Huerta worked to empower the legislative branch, it drew him into a circle of loosely associated factions wary of the growing power of Calles and Obregón. Buchenau demonstrates that pro-clerical forces, army officers, pro-legislative politicians, anti-communists, *hacendados*, and pro-oil factions pushed back against Obregón and Calles in a disorganized but numerically superior revolt. Nevertheless, with the support of U.S. armaments, Obregón emerged triumphant. With de la Huerta in exile and other Sonorans executed, the former broad coalition became what Buchenau calls The Duarchy (Calles and Obregón) of the Calles administration (1924-28).

Section four provides readers with a nuanced view of Calles as less of a story-book villain than usual. Buchenau moves beyond his war against Catholicism to consider his efforts on economic growth, land reform, public health, literacy, and social welfare that paved the way for Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40). And even when it comes to the Cristero War (1926-29), Buchenau demonstrates that Calles did not stand alone: his cabinet and individual state governors drove much of the early fight with the Roman Catholic clergy. Still, the more positive spin does not relieve him of his violent massacre of an estimated five hundred politicians and officers who opposed a second term in office by Obregón—including Sonoran Dynasty members Serrano and Gómez. For Buchenau, Calles rose to the challenge of the era with a pragmatic, practical view of political reality under incredible pressure from a wide range of sectors.

Processes of state consolidation and institutionalization under the Sonorans dominate section five. From 1928 to 1934, the book chronicles the creation of the national party that became the mask of democracy for the new authoritarian state. The party established an official narrative of the Revolution with an accompanying pantheon of heroes and fended off the final military revolts of remaining Sonoran revolutionaries. Importantly, Buchenau shows that Emilio Portes Gil (1928-30), Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930-32), and Abelardo L. Rodríguez (1932-34)—while still under Calles's nominal control—were not the complete puppets that popular myth says. Still, Calles's interference undercut their power and prevented them from becoming the powerful executives that he and Obregón had been.

The presidency of Abelardo Rodríguez—one of the last remaining players from the old Sonoran alliance—served as the bridge between Calles and the Cárdenas presidency. His surprisingly active presidency engaged in legal and constitutional

reforms that gave Mexico a stronger veneer of democracy, progress, and social welfare. Into this increased enthusiasm for reform stepped Lázaro Cárdenas, whose military background and political record of reform made him a popular figure who garnered support from around the nation. Such enthusiasm forced Calles's hand, and he urged other candidates within the ruling party to step aside for Cárdenas—paving the way for the end of the Sonoran Dynasty.

In sum, the Sonorans represented a loose alliance of men from a variety of northern Mexican society instead of a single, cohesive group. Drawn together by the 1910 Revolution and partially bound for a time by Madero and Carranza, Buchenau effectively demonstrates the tension between each of the groups, which both intentionally and unintentionally drove the nation toward a decrease in overt violence. They also tempered the most ambitious revolutionary impulses to create a nation that offered reform, but only at a level still acceptable to foreign business interests. An ever-pragmatic set of overlapping *camarillas*, their lack of ideology helped elevate the 1917 Constitution while keeping its most radical elements from spinning out of control. Instead of ignoring or solving the contradictions of the Revolution (which would have created more violence), the Sonorans successfully navigated the Mexican ship of state through its rocky waters.

The problematic but effective rule of the Sonorans at a key post-revolutionary moment prompts Buchenau to reflect on Mexico's current struggles with governance and violence. Rulers of Mexico are faced with practicing what is politically possible under challenging circumstances. Like the Sonorans before them, will Andrés Manuel López Obrador's MORENA party and attendant cult of personality rise to the challenges of the moment?

The Sonoran Dynasty should become a required text for established scholars to help them avoid the myths that have grown up around Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles and to better understand the wider Sonoran circle of associates. Graduate students might pair this book with work by Sarah Osten, Ben Fallaw, and Paul Gillingham to gain a broad view of the political transition to post-revolutionary Mexico. For undergraduate students that already possess a knowledge of the 1910 Revolution, the book would work well to understand the politics of the era.