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In the Footsteps of Sandino:

Geographies of Revolution and Political Violence

in Northern Nicaragua, 1956-1979

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in History

by

Robert James Sierakowski

2012

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

In the Footsteps of Sandino:  
Geographies of Revolution and Political Violence  
in Northern Nicaragua, 1956-1979

by

Robert James Sierakowski

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Robin Derby, Chair

Why is it that certain groups and individuals come to rebel against a dictatorship's authority and support insurgents while others remain loyal to the regime? This dissertation examines the geographical paradoxes of revolutionary upheaval and counterinsurgent repression in northern Nicaragua during the two decades leading up to the 1979 Sandinista Revolution. Taking a micro-historical approach, this project focuses on the Segovias region, documenting how it came to be bifurcated between zones overwhelmingly supportive of the Sandinista guerrillas and other areas which fought to preserve the Somoza dictatorship. Drawing on government and military archives, in conjunction with a large collection of oral histories, this dissertation finds traditional

explanations for both the dictatorship and the popular upheaval highly insufficient. I argue instead that geographic locality remains the fundamental variable determining the configurations of political consciousness and collective action. To explain the formation of “regions” and their responses to revolutionary crisis, I document the inherently spatial processes undergirding three key historical transformations at the local level: socioeconomic structure, political cultures of the state, and experiences of revolutionary/counterinsurgent violence.

The dissertation of Robert James Sierakowski is approved.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION .....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	ix
VITA .....	x
Introduction. In the Footsteps of Sandino? : The Geographical Paradoxes of Revolution and Political Violence.....	1
Questions and Hypotheses .....	1
Scholarship and Historiography of the Sandinista Revolution .....	6
Case Study Areas: Estelí and Somoto.....	12
Chapter Outline.....	16
Methodology: Sources and Approaches .....	18
Chapter One. The Diagram of Counterinsurgency: Landscapes of Injustice and Remembrance in Somoza’s Segovias .....	21
Introduction.....	21
The Segovias: Frontier, Violence and the “War of Sandino” .....	25
Contested Memories of Sandinismo .....	34
“That’s Why Later the War Came:” Estelí, Commerce, Sharecropping and Exploitation .....	39
“The Poorest Zone”: Somoto, the Indigenous Communities and Drought.....	47
Conclusion .....	53
Chapter Two. Seeing like a Mafia: Municipal Politics, Criminality and Patronage in Estelí and Somoto, 1960 and 1970s.....	54
Introduction.....	58
Some Aspects of the Northern Question: Military, Political and Religious Authority at the Municipal Level .....	59

Elections, Nepotism and Arbitrary Power .....	64
The Shifting Meaning of Criminality: Cattle Thieves, Moonshine and Prostitution.....	68
Party Competition, Violence and the 1967 Election of Somoza Debayle .....	73
Politics after 1967, Case Study One: The Landowner State and Factional Politics in Estelí and Condega.....	81
Politics after 1967, Case Study Two: Rentier State and Ethnic Conflict in the Indigenous Community of Cusmapa .....	85
Conclusion .....	91
<b>Chapter 3. The Tragic Triangle: Town and Country in the Genesis of the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Estelí, 1956-1970.....</b>	<b>92</b>
Introduction.....	92
Sandino’s “Fertilized Terrain”: Guerrilla Landscapes and the Geographic Imaginary .....	95
Workers and Artisans: Urban Spaces, Places of Conflict, Cultures of Class .....	103
¡Al campo! : Rural Organizing, Emerging Solidarities and Repression.....	111
Playing with Fire? : Holy Week 1965 and the Demise of the Union Movement.....	115
The Student Movement: Strikes, Occupations and State Violence .....	121
Conclusion .....	127
<b>Chapter 4. “Persecuting the Living Christ”: Mapping Liberation Theology onto the Body Politic, 1968-1976 .....</b>	<b>129</b>
Introduction.....	129
Catholic Perspectives Transformed: Local, National and International Factors .....	132
“He Put the Gospel into True Practice”: Cursillos, Class Identity and Political Action in Rural Estelí.....	137
Other Pathways to Liberationist Praxis: Civic Movements (Condega) and Radio Schools (Cusmapa).....	146



“To Be Treated as Human Beings”: Guerrilla Strategy, Hybrid Ideology and Civilian Support Networks .....	153
“Sealed with their Actions”: Captures, Torture and its Effects, 1975-1976.....	163
Conclusion .....	169
Chapter 5. “They Planted Corn and Harvested Guards”: <i>Campesinos</i> , the National Guard and Mobilization for Terror .....	173
Introduction.....	173
From Peasants into Somocistas: The Geography and Materiality of Military Recruitment .....	177
From Patronage to Anti-Communism: US Cold War Doctrine and the Stalled Transformation.....	187
The EEBI Elite Unit: Making a Counterinsurgency, Making Counterinsurgents	194
Conclusion .....	201
Chapter 6. “The Tongue Has No Bones, But it Breaks Bones”: A Social Anatomy of the Secret Police and Popular Espionage in Northern Nicaragua.....	203
Introduction.....	203
Intelligence in Diapers? : Spying, Torture and US-Supported Modernization...	206
“They Sold Humanity like You’d Sell a Horse:” Honorary Agents and the Political Economy of Denunciation .....	213
The Fascination of Betrayal: Infiltration of the FSLN, Self-Making and the Targeting of GN Violence .....	224
Conclusion .....	236
Chapter 7. “You Need a War to Get Consciousness”: Urban Space, Neighborhood and Youth Participation in the Sandinista Insurrections, 1976-1979 .....	238
Introduction.....	238
Organizing Youth: Regime Co-optation and Student Organizing.....	241
Insurrectionary Sparks and Mass Participation in Conflict, January-July 1978.	246

Organizing Territory: Civil Defense Committees, Neighborhood and the Campo	252
“A Crime to be Young”: Spaces of Rebellion and Terror in the September Insurrection .....	259
Consciousness after Mobilization: Ethic of Equality and the Transformation of the Youth .....	266
Conclusion .....	270
Chapter Eight. The River of Blood: Fractious Geographies of Counterinsurgency, Cataclysm and Community, 1978-1979 .....	272
Introduction.....	272
Continuing Urban Warfare in Estelí: Waves of Insurrection and Limpieza.....	277
Fire on the Mountain: Silence, Solidarity and Martyrdom in La Montañita .....	289
Massacre of the Well: Victim Identity, Blame and Resistance in Santa Cruz.....	294
“You’re Next”: The Mano Blanca and Community-as-Martyr, Condega.....	298
A Tale of Two Massacres: “False Flags” and Selective Memory in La Trinidad	304
“Just for Fun”: Making Sense of the Senseless Along the Honduran Border ....	309
Conclusion .....	314
Conclusion. Conjuring Up the Spirits of the Past.....	315
Concluding Remarks.....	315
Postscript: After the Fall .....	319
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	327

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Map of the Segovias Region.....	24
Figure 2. Patronage Politicsin Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí, 1966.....	77
Figure 3: Patronage Politics in Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí, 1966.....	78
Figure 4. Selected Images, <i>Cristo Campesino</i> .....	158
Figure 5 Selected Images, <i>Cristo Campesino</i> .....	159
Figure 6. Map of Urban Estelí .....	253
Figure 7. Map of Guerrilla Encampments, Rural Estelí, 1979. ....	285

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“Enfrentando la ocupación: Hacia un estudio comparativo de la resistencia armada en Centroamérica y el Caribe,” in *Cultura, Diversidad y Diálogo*, edited by César Zapata, Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, República Dominicana, 2009.

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**Introduction.**  
**In the Footsteps of Sandino? :**  
**The Geographical Paradoxes of Revolution and Political Violence**

**Questions and Hypotheses**

“¡Patria libre o morir!” “¡Viva el Frente Sandinista!” “¡Fuera Somoza!” Thus went the chorus of furious and urgent shouts rising from the tumultuous mass of young people that swarmed the streets of Estelí in northern Nicaragua. In the early morning hours of September 9, 1978 guerrilla combatants from the Sandinista National Liberation Front entered the city to lead the population in an uprising against the barracks of the armed forces, the National Guard. Young men and women from the city, mostly teenage boys—“los muchachos,” they were called—threw up barricades and participated in armed combat with the goal of toppling the Somoza regime that had governed the country for nearly five decades. These high school students and youths from the *barrios* fought with Molotov cocktails and homemade bombs and were led by a handful of guerrilla combatants; in many cases, their older relatives, neighbors and friends. *Campesinos* from the surrounding villages and hamlets also descended into the city’s working-class neighborhoods on cue to provide support, yielding old hunting rifles as they joined in the fight. Among the civilian population, a massive percentage provided food, shelter and information to the guerrillas. Even children scrambled from one barricade to another with tiny flecks of paper that served as a makeshift communication system. They faced off against a terror-inspiring praetorian military, armed and trained for decades by the United States.

Though this rebellion was crushed by the military’s superior force, the city collectively participated in revolutionary upheaval on other occasions. Unique among Nicaragua’s cities, Estelí would erupt in armed insurrection three times over the course of this turbulent year,

earning itself the designation of “three times heroic.” In the wake of each armed action, the city was bombarded ruthlessly by the government’s airplanes, killing hundreds. On the ground, elite squads of the National Guard moved from house to house, rooting out and summarily executing those believed to have participated in combat or given material aid to the insurgents. So important was Estelí’s resistance that it was said that Somoza—believing it could never happen—promised to leave Nicaragua if Estelí fell into the rebels’ hands. Apocryphal or not, this is precisely what occurred on July 17, 1979 as Anastasio Somoza Debayle boarded a plane to Miami the day following Estelí’s “liberation” by guerrilla forces. It is not without cause that in the collective memory of the revolution, Estelí is its Guernica *and* its Stalingrad: both victim and avenger.

Humberto Ortega and other Sandinista *comandantes* were often queried about the centrality of Estelí to their movement. For many of them, it was a simple product of the region’s “rebellious heritage.” For Ortega and others, the mountainous northern region known as the Segovias was clearly identified with the nationalist uprising of Augusto César Sandino in the 1920s and 30s against the United States’ military occupation. As he explained to Marta Harnecker:

Even since the time of Sandino, Estelí was the scene of battles. Sandino was there. On the other hand, it was a support point for the effort that was being made in the mountainous north. A great number of Estelianos joined in the struggle because in the last few decades Estelí was an obligatory stop for the Sandinistas that came from the north that entered Nicaragua from Honduras. Now referring to the September insurrection, the response of the Estelianos was latent in the whole Nicaraguan people.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Humberto Ortega Saavedra, “La Insurrección Nacional Victoriosa (Interview by Marta Harnecker),” *Nicarahuac*, June 1980, 30.

Ortega begins to answer the question, but his references to the area's strategic locale and mythical history make the process seem simple or inevitable. In fact, the deeper social and political history of this region—and its interactions with memories of earlier resistance, state repression and popular identities—requires a far more complex explanation.

The seemingly obvious leap from Sandino's earlier movement to the "spontaneous" uprising more than four decades later explains far less than it seems at first brush. The insurrectionary fervor was patently not "latent" in huge swaths of the impoverished rural countryside, the very terrain where Sandino had found such deep support decades earlier. Often left out of this romantic vision of the Sandinista legacy is the fact that urbanizing nuclei like Estelí were ensconced in large swaths of countryside in which fear, apathy and even outright support for the Somoza regime were the norm.

In the days of the raging September uprising in which the "whole of the Nicaraguan people" was said to be on the verge of taking up arms against the regime, Luis A. Osorio, the Somocista head of the Nicaraguan Institute of Agricultural Technology (*Instituto Nicaragüense de Tecnología Agropecuaria*) wrote that:

In the last twenty days of fieldwork, I have seen that the Nicaraguan campesino identifies with his immediate environment, wants peace and defends his freedom... He's not interested in the commotion of hate in the cities, the bombs, the assaults, the drugs. He's immunized against the virus of violence which is a phenomenon characteristic of an urban minority... where children from age ten are given bombs and become guerrillas. You don't see this in our countryside, only in the cities of the Pacific region.<sup>2</sup>

Though his statement was inapplicable to certain rural zones, as we shall see, Osorio correctly identifies the spatial and ideological ironies of the geography of revolution and

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<sup>2</sup> *Novedades*, September 11, 1978.

counterinsurgency. When the FSLN attempted to spark similar uprisings in the two Segovian towns *most* identified with Sandino’s movement—Jinotega and Ocotal—they were shocked to find almost no support from the population. A guerrillero explained that “they had to retreat after several hours of fighting during which the residents hadn’t so much as offered them a glass of water.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, other Segovians provided support to the dictatorship, whether as Liberal Party voters, as *jueces de mesta* (local rural officials), or as *orejas* (lit. “ears”, informants) of the regime’s secret police. Rather than hanging by a tether to be snapped by the guerrillas, Somocismo survived so many decades in part because of its far-reaching vertical network of patronage relations which integrated all sectors of society: urban and rural, rich and poor, indigenous and *ladino* (non-indigenous), modernizing and traditionalist.

Likewise, many young people from this very region—particularly campesinos—enlisted to serve in Somoza’s National Guard and participated actively in suppressing opposition to the regime. In the regime’s final years, this repression included torture, rape, assassination and mass killings. The organization’s directives, of course, came from the Somoza family and the corrupt US-trained officer corps with its vast landholdings and business interests. Still, a large number of those that staffed the National Guard—both its long-time “police officers” and highly-trained infantry brigades—were campesinos from the economically-depressed region surrounding the city of Somoto, Madriz, a mere 50 kilometers to the northwest of the rebellious city of Estelí.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Pisani, *Los muchachos* (Editorial Vanguardia, 1989), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Pilar Arias, *Nicaragua, revolución: relatos de combatientes del Frente Sandinista* (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1988), 95; Centro de Investigación y Estudios de la Reforma Agraria (CIERA), *Nicaragua, y por eso defendemos la frontera* (Managua: CIERA-MIDINRA, 1984), 358–359; Sergio Ramírez, *Adiós muchachos: una memoria de la revolución sandinista* (Aguilar, 1999), 132. As Robert Kagan emphasizes, “They had nothing to do with the political world of Managua. They had not been leaders in the governments and the legislatures of the Somozas... Although the Guardsmen may have fought for Somoza, unlike many of the leading opposition politicians



These soldiers and their families, like many Nicaraguans, had a clear stake in the maintenance of the dictatorship and its clientelistic structures. Many came from indigenous communities and valleys that had seen their lands and communal rights taken away by politically connected landowners. Some were even the sons, nephews and grandsons of men and women that had supported or even fought alongside General Sandino decades earlier. From the guerillas' perspective, these men should have been natural allies of the revolutionary movement. Instead, they remained fiercely loyal to Somoza, literally massacring the civilian population until the dictator fled and abandoned them to the revolutionaries.

Why is it that certain groups and individuals come to rebel against a dictatorship's authority and support insurgents while others remain loyal to the regime? To explicate these questions in this dissertation, I closely document the social history of the four-decade long rule of the Somoza dynasty and the revolutionary movement attempting to topple it through a regional case study. In the existent literature, the origins and causes of revolutionary action remain murky and partial at best, obscured below a mountain of facile stereotypes. Particularly novel in the field of Latin American history, this dissertation looks in depth at the various sides of this conflict—revolutionary and counterinsurgent— bringing together the stories of *both* Somocista politicians, National Guard soldiers and secret police agents *as well as* those of Catholic organizers, artisan trade unionists, student activists, and guerrilla combatants. By historicizing and juxtaposing these pathways to political consciousness and action, I cast into sharp relief the origins of these phenomena. This required abandoning the populist “assumption

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they did not actually know him or do business with him.” Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977-1990* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 225.

that all from-below agency is necessarily progressive,” a position which ignores that “historically and currently, grassroots agency has been the result of mobilization by the political right as much as by the left.”<sup>5</sup>

In addition, this study upends many of the simplistic constructions of revolutionary politics which treat concepts such as “agrarian relations,” “elite divisions,” “the patrimonial state,” and “repression” homogenous at the level of the nation-state. I argue than an additional factor—geographic locale—was central to the roots of the Sandinista Revolution and the political identities that emerged during this period of upheaval. The varying regional conditions formed the basis of social and political experience and shaped the worldviews and identities of the various historical actors. Due to these diverse responses, we need to understand the actual lived experience of class formation, political action and violence. It is not simply that these variables were distinct depending on which locale or scale is observed. Rather, as I will show, the economy, the state and political violence were part and parcel of specifically *spatial* processes of wealth accumulation, political governance, movement building and warfare.

### **Scholarship and Historiography of the Sandinista Revolution**

Following the 1979 Sandinista Revolution, numerous journalistic and scholarly volumes appeared, as writers sought to respond to the growing crisis enveloping Central America with historically-informed policy critiques and recommendations. Much of this academic writing was vigorously partisan in tone and explicitly denounced US government support for the military dictatorship in El Salvador and the armed Contra rebels in Nicaragua. By and large, these authors

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<sup>5</sup> Tom Brass, “On Which Side of What Barricade? Subaltern Resistance in Latin America and Elsewhere,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 29, no. 3 (2002): 347.

argued that what the Reagan administration presented as a problem of “communist subversion” was in fact the product of the region’s history: the intersection of unjust agrarian structures and US backing for the region’s repressive oligarchic regimes. Given such a history of poverty and oppression, the social movements and insurgent organizations were seen as carrying out (as one author famously put it) “inevitable revolutions.”<sup>6</sup> Many of Central America’s dilemmas were traced to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Liberal reforms that stripped the rural population of access to land and inaugurated an agro-export capitalist era dependent on the industrialized “core” in North America and Western Europe.

The major touchstone publication on Nicaragua was Jaime Wheelock’s *Imperialismo y dictadura*, in which he emphasized the links between export agriculture, the Somoza dictatorship and its financial, diplomatic and military backing by the United States.<sup>7</sup> Later authors enriched this framework taking into account the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the export of cattle, sugar and cotton further changed the landscape and the social structures, provoking new dislocations.<sup>8</sup> In such interpretations, the dictatorships and revolutionary movements became stand-ins for these social forces and the dispossessed rural classes.<sup>9</sup>

Other writers seeking to explain the outbreak of violence strongly emphasized explicitly political factors rather than these social or economic underpinnings. In the Nicaraguan context, scholars documented the Somoza dictatorship’s inability to satisfy expanding demands,

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<sup>6</sup> Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Jaime Wheelock, *Imperialismo y dictadura: crisis de una formación social* (Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Robert G. Williams, *Export Agriculture and the Crisis in Central America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Phil Ryan, “Structure, Agency, and the Nicaraguan Revolution,” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 2 (April 1, 2000): 187–213.

responding with repression and swelling support for the armed challengers.<sup>10</sup> Some cast the Somoza regime as distinct from neighboring military dictatorships, given its neo-patrimonial or “sultanistic” structure, with few links to the masses or the elite, and thus seemingly destined to fall. Indeed, there is more than an element of truth to this analysis. Unlike the institutional rule of the military officers found in the other dictatorships in Latin America, the United States-backed Anastasio Somoza García gained power in 1936 and his sons Luis and Anastasio Somoza Debayle governed until 1979. In this way, the Somoza regime looked most similar to the Cuban dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, which had also been overthrown by guerrillas two decades earlier. Both the socioeconomic and state-centric approaches importantly emphasized the long histories of dictatorship, political repression, economic dislocation and foreign exploitation to which Central America had been subjected. Some of these works placed the regime in Nicaragua and regional economic development in a somewhat exaggerated light, finding wherever they looked *ex post facto* the “inevitable” origins of the uprising. How these larger political, economic and social processes manifested themselves in lived experience and discrete locales such as regions, towns, cities and communities—and what impact this had upon the process of revolutionary mobilization and political violence—were quandaries that would have to await future historians.

Other scholars chose to look closely at the mechanics of the revolutionary movements themselves, rather than treating them as a natural extension of popular will. They examined the biography, sociology, ideology and strategy of the guerrilla leadership. Authors largely

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<sup>10</sup> Carlos María Vilas, *The Sandinista Revolution: National Liberation and Social Transformation in Central America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986); John A. Booth, *The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985).

concluded that Sandinista ideology was the providence of a small group of middle class rebels, who mixed together socialist ideas, Catholic liberation theology and the nationalist heritage of the Sandino rebellion.<sup>11</sup> Liberation theology and Sandinismo were treated as intellectual systems of thought, observed synchronically and statically from the perspective of the 1980s after the FSLN had become a ruling party. Taking the FSLN leadership at its word, it has been written that “from the beginning... a more or less deep knowledge of the figure of Sandino, his personal coherence, his anti-American and pro-independence nationalism” was central to the movement.<sup>12</sup> Another author wrote that liberation theology was an “overarching ideology,” a symbolic, utopian worldview found in popular religiosity as the masses struggled for emancipation.<sup>13</sup>

These types of claims are belied by the evidence of the case studies discussed in this dissertation. From the organization’s foundation 1961 to the 1978 insurrection, the FSLN aimed its recruitment at the rural and urban lower classes, with a discourse which revolved explicitly around the issue of social class, exploitation and inequality. In retrospect, such Marxian terminology which was virtually written out of the organization’s history in favor of more purely “nationalist,” “populist” or “religious” causes. Matilde Zimmerman’s rich biography of FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca has helped dispel some of this mythology, emphasizing the profound inspiration of the Cuban Revolution and Fonseca’s own re-invention of “Sandino” for the needs

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<sup>11</sup> Donald Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986); Dennis Gilbert, *Sandinistas: The Party and the Revolution* (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); David Nolan, *The Ideology of the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Institute of Interamerican Studies, Graduate School of International Studies, University of Miami, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> María Ferrero Blanco, *La Nicaragua de los Somoza : 1936-1979* (Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2010), 118.

<sup>13</sup> Roger N Lancaster, *Thanks to God and the Revolution: Popular Religion and Class Consciousness in the New Nicaragua* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 108.

of the 1960s.<sup>14</sup> The question of which elements of Sandinista ideology actually took hold, in which places, among which groups and for what reasons has been almost completely ignored. Close, detailed ethnographic explanations as to how these worldviews were incorporated (or transformed) by personal experience, political practice and community mobilization is a central thread that scholars have as yet barely engaged with.

In the wake of the Sandinistas' loss of power through the ballot box in 1990 (following nearly a decade of brutal civil war directed by the CIA), localized historical studies have served to increase our empirical knowledge and sharpen our analysis. These works have generated something of a revisionist approach to the historical stereotypes of a previous generation of historians interested in the "long history" justifying the revolutionary upheaval of the 1970s and 80s. For example, some historians looking back on the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Liberal reforms found that property records and contemporary accounts reflected not a mass of landless proletarians, but a predominance of small-scale, self-employed farmers.<sup>15</sup> These studies suggest the need for further studies on the actual relations of land tenure, their change over time and how this related to political praxis over the course of the dictatorship. Likewise, historians have questioned the simplistic view of the Somoza dictatorship, which projected the blood-soaked tyranny of 1978-1979 backwards in time. Knut Walter's nuanced study of the Somoza García regime (1936-1956), argues that the government maintained itself in power through coalition-making with opposition landed elites and opportunistic populist appeals towards the working

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<sup>14</sup> Matilde Zimmermann, *Sandinista: Carlos Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Dore, *Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Julie A. Charlip, *Cultivating Coffee: The Farmers of Carazo, Nicaragua, 1880-1930* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003).

class, rather relying on constant, unrelenting repression.<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Gould's work on Somoza García's populist approach towards organized labor and Victoria González-Rivera's work on women's emergence into the public sphere within the dictatorship's organizations have added further nuance to our understanding of the regime.<sup>17</sup>

Gould's *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979* remains the single most important local study of the Somoza period and the rural origins of the revolution. In this work, Gould seeks to expose the historical process which scholars had only treated superficially, assuming "that somehow support for the FSLN emerged naturally out of the workers' and peasants' innate hostility toward the regime... [simplifying] the *regionally varied*, complex process through which the popular classes came to support the FSLN."<sup>18</sup> Gould emphasized the role of rural Nicaraguans in efforts against the dictatorship, arguing that in "the key agro-export departments of Chinandega, León and Matagalpa, a 20-year-old agrarian movement created the conditions for a campesino-FSLN alliance, thus providing a large political and military base for the revolutionaries."<sup>19</sup> Focusing of the modern era of cotton production for export in the western departments (*departamentos*) of Chinandega and León, his micro-history of rural social movements documents the historical

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<sup>16</sup> Knut Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza, 1936-1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey L. Gould, "'For an Organized Nicaragua': Somoza and the Labour Movement, 1944-1948," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 19, no. 2 (November 1, 1987): 353-387; Victoria González-Rivera, *Before the Revolution: Women's Rights and Right-Wing Politics in Nicaragua, 1821-1979* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 1990), 294.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

evolution of the peasants' and rural workers' consciousness as "they worked their way through the institutions of the Somocista state" in the struggle for land rights, reformulating discourses from elites and power-brokers. Gould argues that the early Somoza regime maintained a populist aura and combined reformism and repression until the 1960s, successfully dividing workers and campesinos from elite political opposition to the dictatorship. Gould's later publications looked briefly at similar dynamics among the indigenous people of Nicaragua's highland communities, and whether their prior histories of economic dispossession allowed them to find common ground with the guerrillas and rural labor unions.<sup>20</sup> While campesino movements for land had profound impacts in the specific regions that Gould documents, these were in fact exceptional cases when compared to the rest of rural Nicaragua. The pre-history of political participation and social movement formation prior to the Sandinista Revolution looks quite distinct when viewed from other geographical settings across the country.

### **Case Study Areas: Estelí and Somoto**

To engage with these issues, I examine the modern history of two zones in the northern Segovias region, particularly the municipalities of the department of Estelí and those of the western portion of neighboring Madriz, located around the city of Somoto. According to Michael Schroeder, the Segovias are "a rugged, mountainous frontier region with a bewilderingly complex physical and human geography" and a "uniquely violent" place in Nicaraguan history, with a past of *caudillo*-led armed gangs and political violence in the 19th and early 20th

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<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Die in This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880-1965* (Duke University Press, 1998).



centuries.<sup>21</sup> This border region alongside Honduras served as a theater of war in Augusto César Sandino's effort to expel the US military occupation in the 1920s and 30s and as a site for various failed rebellions in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In addition, this area's cities hosted key battles during the Sandinista insurrections of the late 1970s and the mountains again saw great bloodshed during the counterrevolutionary Contra War of the 1980s. The region's past is deeply implicated in the violent contradictions and divisions which have plagued the country's history. Its political geography, bifurcated into zones of mass revolutionary participation alongside areas of total quiescence and support for dictatorship, offers something of a natural experiment in the geographic logic of revolution.

As mentioned above, the FSLN version of history posits a direct link from the Sandino's struggle to that of the latter-day Sandinistas, encapsulated well in the title of Humberto Ortega's important pamphlet, *50 Years of Sandinista Struggle (50 años de la lucha Sandinista)*.<sup>22</sup> It is a trope mentioned by countless authors. Drawing on data from John Booth, political scientist Timothy Wickham-Crawley argues that there was a "basic ecological correlation" in which "very areas of the FSLN's rural bases and peasant support were rough palimpsests of Sandino's own movement a half century earlier."<sup>23</sup> The testimonial literature of former guerrillas likewise

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<sup>21</sup> Michael J. Schroeder, "Horse Thieves to Rebels to Dogs: Political Gang Violence and the State in the Western Segovias, Nicaragua, in the Time of Sandino, 1926-1934," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28, no. 02 (1996): 392.

<sup>22</sup> Humberto Ortega Saavedra, *50 años de lucha sandinista* (Editorial de ciencias sociales, 1980).

<sup>23</sup> Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes Since 1956* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 246.

emphasized interactions with aging Sandinistas from the earlier generation and their families in the formation of the modern guerrilla army.<sup>24</sup>

There are, of course, elements of truth to this version. The legacy of Sandino was indeed re-mobilized by FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca and others who participated in the leftist movement. In some cases, they even forged links with men like Colonel Santos López from Yalagüina in Madriz who had fought with Sandino as a child. Such direct connections, however, remained exceptions that prove the rule for a number of reasons. First of all, the two movements which fought under the Sandinista banner were not analogous: they possessed different goals, military strategies, geographical locales and sociological bases of support. While Sandino's movement was largely rural and found its support among the *most isolated* homesteads of peasants beyond the reach of the state and the hacienda economy, the later Sandinista movement was drawn from the zones *most integrated* into the commercial economy, urbanization, the state, public education, etc. Secondly, the positive memory of Sandino as a nationalist liberator was not universal, as many from the Segovias who remembered the earlier period as *bandolerismo* (banditry) and violence. Francisco Rivera, the guerrilla commander in Estelí noted that even among FSLN combatants there were a number who continued to believe Sandino had been a "bandit!"<sup>25</sup> Finally, between the "Sandino war" of 1927-1933 and the "Somoza war" of 1978-1979 (as they are often referenced in local memory), the region underwent massive transformations—political, social, economic and cultural—on a far greater scale than any time in its history. Thus, it should not surprise us that many of the very places where Sandino had

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<sup>24</sup> Omar Cabezas, *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1986), 184.

<sup>25</sup> Pisani, *Los muchachos*, 87.

significant support were often quiescent and apathetic during the insurrectionary upheaval or were violently hostile to the Sandinista government of the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the legacy of the previous era of guerrilla warfare was not a straightforward explanation and mobilizing Sandino's memory ("bringing a dead man to life again," as one guerrilla organizer put it) proved to be one of the greatest challenges for organizers.<sup>27</sup>

Given the general acceptance of "agrarian change" as the determining factor in the mobilization against the Somoza dictatorship, it is surprising how little participation campesinos had in the revolutionary movement as a whole. In sociologist Carlos Vilas' analysis of those killed during the insurrections of 1978-1979, "peasants and farmers" made up only 4.5 percent of guerrilla combatants in a country in which the vast majority of the population continued to make a living from the land. Nationally, the vast majority of combatants were students and urban artisans (or tradespeople). In fact, it is *only* in Estelí out of all of the departments that campesinos were the single most important "social subject" of the insurrection, accounting for 30 percent of the combatants alongside the students and urban workers.<sup>28</sup> Even in Estelí, however, political contention primarily emerged in the cities before spreading outward to the countryside. Placing these case studies within the national context requires specific analyses of what agrarian change meant for the population and how different social groups related to each other, the Somocista state and the emerging opposition. This micro-comparative approach examining individuals,

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<sup>26</sup> Outside of the region of this study, Quilalí in Nueva Segovia and San Rafael del Norte in Jinotega—two of the most iconic bases of support of Sandino's nationalist army—not only refused support for the Sandinista guerrillas in the 1970s but even fielded astonishing numbers of campesinos in the US-backed counterrevolutionary forces in the 1980s.

<sup>27</sup> "Who Is Who in the Sandinistas?," *Latin American Political Report*, September 29, 1978, 299.

<sup>28</sup> Vilas, *The Sandinista Revolution*, 112, 117.

family groups, communities and regions allows for a far clearer explanation of the mechanisms which produced such different outcomes.

## **Chapter Outline**

Chapter One lays the groundwork for understanding the acts of mobilization and mass violence in Nicaragua by excavating the modern transformation of the Segovias region. It begins with a brief synopsis of the region's history, focusing on the rebellion of Augusto Cesar Sandino and the provincial landscape's conversion into a "diagram of counterinsurgency." I document vast shifts which occurred following Sandino's death and the rise of the Somoza dictatorship, as the region was further divided into two zones and landlord-peasant relations were transformed in contradictory ways. Building on this analysis, the second chapter focuses how the political culture of the dictatorship came to permeate everyday life in the regions of Estelí and Somoto, particularly in terms of municipal political conflict, ethnic relations and criminality. In this chapter, I argue that the Somocista state at the municipal level needs to be understood neither as a purely repressive entity from above constantly resisted by subalterns, nor a mere product of local conditions. Rather, it was the result of the varied interaction between political culture, economic constraints and varying class coalitions across the region.

In Chapter Three, I shift from these wider conditions to the historical origins of the Sandinista National Liberation Front. I begin by zeroing in on the emergence of opposition to the dictatorship in Estelí in the 1960s and early 1970s by artisan labor unions and high school students. I document how the new factors indicative of the urban economy and modern polity provided opportunities for mobilization, while efforts to expand to the guerrillas' "natural base of support" in the countryside were stifled by both state repression and other factors inherent in the

system of domination. Thus, I explain how the rural-urban divide in Nicaraguan society produced results quite different from those predicted by the revolutionary leaders or sympathetic scholars. Chapter Four continues this analysis of the FSLN, looking at the Catholic Church's emerging "liberation theology" in the 1960s and 70s and its role in expanding the guerrillas' civilian base of support. Examining how the Sandinistas linked their message with the legitimacy of the Catholic Church, I consider the relationship between traditional religiosity, organizing methods and guerrilla discourse. In both of these chapters, I also emphasize the state's violent response to such efforts and its impact of silencing some segments of the opposition while further radicalizing others.

Chapter Five shifts gears, peering inside the National Guard from below to understand how peasants and others were drawn into the organization in search of opportunities for social mobility. As with the FSLN, I map out the importance of consciousness and ideology and their linkages and incongruence with traditional forms of patronage. The chapter concludes with Cold War attempts to "modernize" and "professionalize" the security forces from a corrupt police apparatus into a "total institution," capable of meeting the guerrilla challenge through counterinsurgency and terror. The sixth chapter looks at the specific role of the National Security Office (*Oficina de Seguridad Nacional*, or OSN), the secret police force of the National Guard. I examine efforts to craft traditional clientelism and oral cultures of rumor into a system of intelligence-gathering as the OSN gained infamy for its torture, surveillance, and assassination of regime opponents. At the same time, the chapter examines the motivations and roles of grassroots-level informants—both anonymous spies and tortured former FSLN supporters—who played a key role in the coming violence.

Chapter Seven examines the immediate origins of the 1978 urban uprising in the two years of student mobilization and neighborhood organization which preceded it. I document at the spiraling cycles of protest, repression and rioting and the ways in which massive, indiscriminate state terror against the civilian population led to generalized integration into the guerrilla army. Violence, rather than a merely an effect of the underlying social forces is analyzed for its transformative effects on political dynamics. Chapter 8 continues this narrative, exploring the ways in which the counterinsurgency spread beyond the city into the rural hinterland. In this chapter, I carry out a close reading of identity formation in the narratives of numerous massacres of civilians which occurred during 1979. Finally, the conclusion brings together the implications of this new perspective for our understanding of the Sandinista Revolution and its tortured course from 1979 to the present.

### **Methodology: Sources and Approaches**

The passage of time since this tumultuous period gives us the opportunity to look at these events with new eyes less clouded by the political passions of the moment. On the other hand, the events are still recent enough to gather richly detailed ethnographic data and oral history material. For this project, I drew on archival documents, periodicals from the period and two large collections of interviews.

Central to my research were the various archival sources found in Managua. In the General Archive of Nation (AGN), I collected internal correspondence from the National Guard, the Ministry of the Interior (*Gobernación*) and local political officials from throughout the Somoza period. In addition, this archive houses the files of the Special Tribunals (*Tribunales Especiales*) against former members of the National Guard and the secret police, organized by

the Attorney General's office (*Procuraduría General*) in 1980 and 1981. These testimonies and documentary evidence submitted by the prosecution and the defense lawyers provide a comprehensive vision the grassroots operation of the National Guard internally and in its relations with society. At the Center of Military History of the Nicaraguan Army (CHM), I used the rich and virtually unstudied collection of documents from the guerrilla army, including its pamphlets, communiqués and internal correspondence. In addition, I used newspapers and magazines from this era housed at the Institute of Central American and Nicaraguan History (IHNCA) located at the Central American University (UCA) in Managua. The most important periodicals consulted were *La Prensa*, *Novedades*, *Acción Cívica*, *El Infante*, *Lucha Sandinista* and *Gaceta Sandinista*.

Oral history interviews with participants on both sides of the political divide were an invaluable source for this project. There were two types of interviews to which I had access. One was a collection of 7000 interviews recorded in 1980 by high school students as part of a national literacy program in 1980. Organized geographically by department, municipality, town, and hamlet, these interviews with guerrilla combatants and supporters document popular participation in the insurgency. Many of the informants were eyewitnesses to—or victims of—repression at the hands of the National Guard during the previous years. For my research, I reviewed over 300 of these cassettes drawn from my two regions of study. While these oral histories provide a fascinating portrait of grassroots participation in the revolutionary, they present some obvious limitations for the historian. As the product of the Sandinista regime during a particularly heady post-insurrection moment, they obviously highlight a specific narrative and occlude the perspectives of non-Sandinistas. Taking into account these lacunae, in

2008 and 2010, I carried out around 200 original oral histories with community leaders and elders, men and women that supported or fought with the FSLN, as well as former National Guard soldiers, paramilitaries and political authorities from the time of Somoza.

Given the academic debates over the use of oral history and memory, it is worth acknowledging that I analyze and use these oral histories in two manners. Firstly, I treat them as partial accounts of what occurred to be triangulated and coordinated with other available accounts including government documentation and newspaper records. Where documentary sources were not available, such as the descriptions of human rights violations or massacres, their statements—often the only sources for such information—have been crosschecked between numerous informants and through follow-up interviews. On the other hand, oral histories also permit consideration of the expressive and narrative aspects of self-presentation and recollection. As scholars have shown time and again, oral histories are dense with meanings both spoken and unspoken, involving transformations of memory and the claims-making embedded in the remembering process. This has required the use of ethnographic tools as well as the analysis of ideology, mythology, narrative, tropes and figurative speech in these accounts. Representation and memory provide an additional window through which to understand the historical events and the role they played shaping political identity.



**Chapter One.**  
**The Diagram of Counterinsurgency:**  
**Landscapes of Injustice and Remembrance in Somoza's Segovias**

**Introduction**

When Sandinista cadre Omar Cabezas arrived in the region of Condega, Estelí in 1975, he headed to the area known Canta Gallo in search of campesino supporters for the guerrilla army. Traveling undercover as a livestock buyer, he went from house to house with his local contact, hacienda foreman Antonio “Toñito” Centeno, in search of potential allies. He visited the impoverished hovels of the campesinos and spoke to them about the land on which they lived and worked and asked whether they owned it. Their reactions ranged from incredulous laughter to a shamed hanging of their heads. “The landlords—or the fathers, or the grandfathers of the landlords—had been taking the land away from the campesinos slowly, in such a way that the generation that we met told us that their great grandparents had had land,” Cabezas described.”<sup>29</sup>

Finally, after a number of clandestine visits to the homes of terrified campesinos, in the valley of Los Planes he came face to face with Leandro Córdoba, an elderly campesino who had supported Augusto César Sandino’s army decades earlier. The reaction of don Leandro was far more enthusiastic, telling him that though he was too old for the fight, his children and grandchildren were at the disposal of the guerrillas.<sup>30</sup> For Cabezas, the moment summed up the existence of a popular culture of resistance which had survived decades of repression:

They had a Sandinista history, a history of rebellion against exploitation, against North American domination, interpreted in a sensory and primitive form for them. They had a sense of rebellion acquired in their battle against the North American occupation. It was not irresponsibility; rather it was history, the vengeance of a

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<sup>29</sup> Cabezas, *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde*, 222–223.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

people, the rebellion of a people. The Sandinistas remained isolated after the death of Sandino but they began to educate their children about this tradition, to feed this sentiment against the Yankees that occupied us, that intervened and humiliated us. They were barefoot men, miserable, but with an extraordinary sentiment of national dignity, a consciousness of sovereignty, this was essentially the reality.<sup>31</sup>

Taken together, these two passages in Cabeza's widely read memoir reflect the major tropes of regional history incorporated into historical accounts. For much of the writing on the relation between the two Sandinista movements, an easy one-to-one parallel has been posited, with the lives of men like Leandro Córdoba providing legitimacy and continuity between the two periods. Likewise, there is an assumption that the Somoza period caused massive land loss and provoked agrarian tensions to which the FSLN turned their attention. In this chapter, I critique the argument—both academic and popular—that the Segovias, as the former domain of Augusto Cesar Sandino, were destined to serve as a base of support for the nascent guerrilla army. I also contest the presentation of the Nicaraguan economy during the Somoza dictatorship as a nationally-homogenous phenomenon, impoverishing the population and stripping them of access to land. I show that instead that it produced differential impacts—“combined and uneven development”—on the local level and led to both bonds of adhesion to the regime and opportunities for resistance. While emphasizing the traumas, exploitation and dislocations produced by the expanding market economy, the chapter does not present these transformations as so many tensions propelling the region ever forward towards its date with revolutionary upheaval. Rather, it seeks to set these later events within the context of the evolving agrarian

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 234.

relations and conflicts over resources that undergirded the system in times of struggle as well as times of peace.

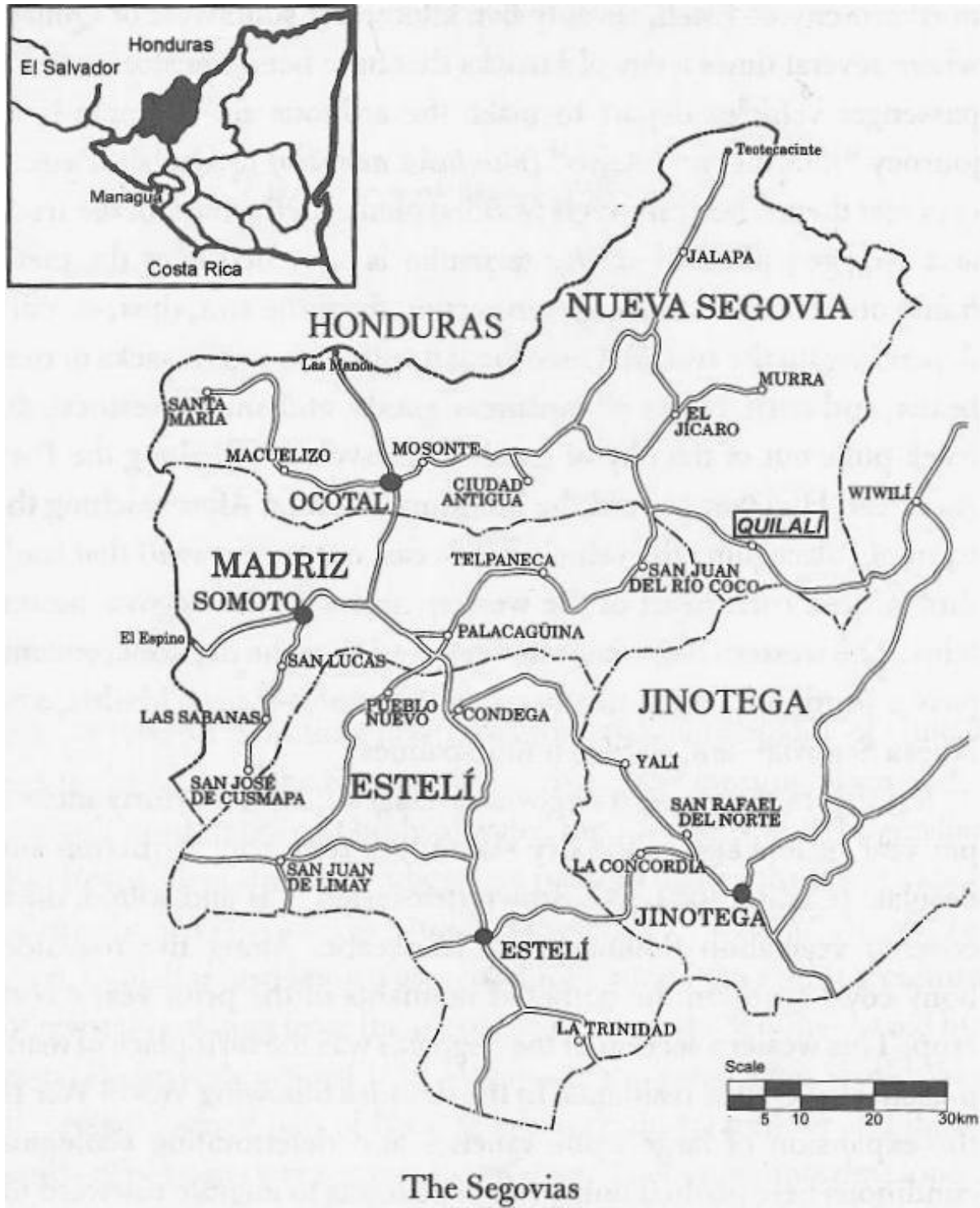


Figure 1. Map of the Segovias region, featuring the major cities, towns, highways and border crossings. (Source: Horton, Lynn. *Peasants in Arms*, pg. 20)

## **The Segovias: Frontier, Violence and the “War of Sandino”**

The Segovias—a sprawling area which includes the contemporary Nicaraguan departments of Estelí, Madriz and Nueva Segovia—have historically been a frontier region, with its rocky landscape of forests serving as a transitory point on the path northward; to the gold mines, to the Republic of Honduras and beyond. While the hills and mountainous areas of this region feature a humid atmosphere suitable for coffee production (introduced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), the dry subtropical climes of the valleys have historically been dominated by cattle ranches.<sup>32</sup> In this chapter, I examine two parts of this wider zone: the department of Estelí (the municipalities of Estelí, San Juan de Limay, Condega, Pueblo Nuevo and La Trinidad) and the western portion of the department of Madriz (the municipalities of Somoto, San Lucas, Las Sabanas, Cusmapa, Yalagüina, Palacagüina and Totogalpa).

From colonial times, the spheres of influence around the town of Estelí and Somoto have functioned as two distinct sub-regions. In the valley of Estelí and its adjacent areas, *encomiendas*—grants of indigenous labor to Spanish conquerors and settlers—developed from the 16<sup>th</sup> century into medium and large cattle haciendas that existed alongside rural peasant communities.<sup>33</sup> Pre-colonial settlements such as Condega and Pueblo Nuevo were slowly transformed through miscegenation and re-classification into *ladino* (non-indigenous) towns with *mestizo* (mixed-raced) peasant populations and no legal claim to primordial collective ownership

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<sup>32</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, División de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales, “Estudio socioeconómico de Nicaragua, Primera etapa, Región VI (Interior Norte)”, 1974, 2.

<sup>33</sup> Germán Romero Vargas, *Las estructuras sociales de Nicaragua en el siglo XVIII* (Managua, Nicaragua: Editorial Vanguardia, 1988).

of the land and resources.<sup>34</sup> In the western zones near Somoto, with their rocky, dry soil and cyclical problems of drought, slash and burn food production survived well into the twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> Here, many natives were grouped in Indigenous Communities (*Comunidades Indígenas*) and received land grants by the Crown during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These collective titles assured the land be farmed by community members and neither bought nor sold to outsiders.

With independence, the towns of Estelí and Somoto were drawn into the sphere of influence of León, the Liberal pole of Nicaragua's political conflicts, which was pitted against the Conservative faction of Granada.<sup>36</sup> Military mobilization by landlords and caudillos remained important aspects of local political culture up through the period of the guerrilla movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Armed gangs, with a blend of political and private motivations, structured armed conflict during much of post-independence history, particularly in the isolated, northern periphery. In addition, the lengthy border with the neighboring Honduras served an important role in the transfer of rebel soldiers, weapons, ammunition and money in both directions.

During the Conservative oligarchy's thirty-year rule in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and under Liberal dictator José Santos Zelaya from 1895, the traditional agrarian structure and regional geography were increasingly transformed by logic of the market. With the goal of profitable agrarian capitalism, state and Church lands were privatized and coercive labor practices were introduced to cajole subsistence farmers onto the emerging haciendas for commercial

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<sup>34</sup> Centro de Investigación y Estudios de la Reforma Agraria (CIERA), *Nicaragua, y por eso defendemos la frontera*, 58–60, 65.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> David R. Radell, *Historical Geography of Western Nicaragua: The Spheres of Influence of Leon, Granada, and Managua, 1519-1965* (Dept. of Geography, University of California, 1969). The Conservatives had significant support in Ocotal to the north of our region of study.

development. Modernizing landowners began to expand their holdings into the forest, water and pasture “commons” of peasant villages as well as the allegedly protected indigenous communities.<sup>37</sup> In this era, coffee took off as Nicaragua’s major export crop for the international market, transforming class relations, land tenure and state formation in important ways. The local experience in Estelí or Madriz, however, does not support Jaime Wheelock’s theory of “rural proletarianization” which stated that this period marked the definitive “expropriation of lands at the expense of smallholder production, and the transformation of these producers into salaried workers.”<sup>38</sup>

As the twentieth century progressed, the immediate effects of the “market society” seem to have been greatest in the hacienda-centered zone of Estelí with its cattle ranches and expanding coffee production. By the 1920 census, carried out during the coffee harvest, a massive 64.3 percent of the population identified rural day laborers (*jornaleros*), the highest such figure in the country as a whole.<sup>39</sup> A large share of the population of the municipalities of Estelí, Condega and La Trinidad also worked as sharecroppers (*trabajando a medias*) on haciendas of larger landowners who in turn received half of all that which the campesinos produced. These were the very zones which had a long history of encomiendas and Spanish landowners from the colonial period, suggesting certain long-term continuities in labor extraction. Along the unsettled “agrarian frontier” to the northeast and the indigenous communities to the northwest,

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<sup>37</sup> Centro de Investigación y Estudios de la Reforma Agraria (CIERA), *Nicaragua, y por eso defendemos la frontera*, 108–109.

<sup>38</sup> Wheelock, *Imperialismo y dictadura*, 69.

<sup>39</sup> Oficina Central del Censo, *Censo general de 1920*. (Managua: Tipografía General, 1920).

sharecropping did not feature as prominently in economic life.<sup>40</sup> In Somoto from around 1910, indigenous farmers were progressively converted into *minifundistas*, with small plots of land, as ladino outsiders took over the few lands with commercial possibilities for coffee and cattle ranching. The rapid accumulation of wealth and land occurred overnight, leading many locals to assume it could only have been the result of pacts with the devil.<sup>41</sup>

Resistance to the US occupation brought the Segovias into a prominent position on the national—and briefly, international—stage. The United States intervened in Nicaragua militarily on multiple occasions from the 1850s when the country began to serve as an interoceanic transport route. One of the more memorable expeditions was that of filibusterer William Walker, who occupied the country in 1855, naming himself president and legalizing chattel slavery. Though it was a short-lived adventure that united the perennially warring Liberal and Conservative factions against foreign domination, it was a harbinger of things to come. In the early twentieth century, the United States again intervened, opposing Liberal President Zelaya's plans for a canal through Nicaragua to compete with the US-owned Panama Canal. The US helped force him from office in 1909, and in 1912 sent the Marine Corps to prop up the Conservative Party. The Conservatives, more amenable to US interests, in turn sold off lucrative chunks of the Nicaraguan economy to Wall Street and agreed to abandon all plans for the canal. Though the remaining Marines were withdrawn in 1925, the following year they swooped into Nicaragua again to defend the Conservative Party and legitimize its recent coup d'état against a Liberal uprising. In 1927, the US forced the two sides to sign a peace treaty legitimizing the coup

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<sup>40</sup> *Censo nacional de 1920*. The figures are 68 percent for Estelí and 31 percent for Nueva Segovia.

<sup>41</sup> Centro de Investigación y Estudios de la Reforma Agraria (CIERA), *Nicaragua, y por eso defendemos la frontera*, 117–144.



and the US occupation, known as the Pact of Espino Negro. The Liberals led by General José María Moncada agreed to lay down their weapons and accept Conservative rule in exchange for the chance to return to the presidency in the near future.

Alone among the various armed Liberal factions, General Augusto César Sandino refused to hand over his arms and collaborate with the occupation forces. Declaring it better “to die as rebels than to live as slaves,” he and a group of loyal followers returned to his mountainous redoubt in the Segovias and began a six-year-long guerrilla war against the foreign occupation.<sup>42</sup> Sandino, a mechanic and the illegitimate son of a Liberal landowner from the department of Masaya to the south of Managua, had learned of anti-imperialist politics while working abroad on the US-owned banana plantations and oil fields in Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico. The affront to national dignity posed by the United States’ continued interventions in Nicaraguan politics through puppet politicians and violent occupation found its answer in Sandino’s decision to wage a guerrilla war against the Marines.

Carlos Fonseca Amador, the founder of the later Sandinista National Liberation Front recalled that Sandino—like Liberals Sacasa and Moncada before him—had chosen to base his struggle in areas beyond the control of political and military forces.<sup>43</sup> Though he was not from the Segovias, Sandino had worked at a mine in the region and found followers in the inaccessible subsistence communities at the far edge of the state and the market. These impoverished “Segovian mountain peasants” had supported the Liberal Party in the cyclical warfare against the

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<sup>42</sup> Augusto Sandino, *El pensamiento vivo de Sandino*, ed. Sergio Ramírez (San José Costa Rica]: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1974), 79.

<sup>43</sup> Carlos Fonseca Amador, “Charla del Co. Carlos Fonseca en la Conmemoración del 4 de Octubre” October 4, 1973. CHM-MR, E-001, C-008, 000214.

Conservatives and were disillusioned by their leaders' capitulation.<sup>44</sup> This northern area offered the rebels vast expanse of mountains, caves and forests in which to hide, few roads for troop movements and a porous international border. Sandino's message of national liberation found a keen audience among the scattered peasant homesteads in Wiwilí and Quilalí, along the ravines and ridges of the agrarian frontier, and in isolated indigenous valleys around San Lucas and Somoto. Even in the southern Segovias and the more populated hacienda zones near Estelí and Condega, Sandino's followers received food and aid from campesinos—particularly in the mountain range through San Juan de Limay and Pueblo Nuevo—while some local elites provided land for encampments and funding.<sup>45</sup>

While Marxist historians have sought to directly link the expansion of capitalist relations with participation in the armed resistance to the United States occupation, these connections are quite tenuous. On the contrary, it was precisely those areas *beyond* the reach of the expanding export economy and state institutions that were most supportive of Sandino's guerrilla army.<sup>46</sup> Michael Schroeder and Volker Wunderich, two historians that have closely studied Sandino's movement, both acknowledge this material base but came to the conclusion that the nationalist

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<sup>44</sup> This category, "Segovian mountain peasants," is borrowed from Richard Grossman, "*Hermanos En La Patria*": *Nationalism, Honor, and Rebellion: Augusto Sandino and the Army in Defense of the National Sovereignty of Nicaragua, 1927-1934*. (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1996).

<sup>45</sup> Michael J. Schroeder, "'To Defend Our Nation's Honor': Toward a Social and Cultural History of the Sandino Rebellion in Nicaragua, 1927-1934" (Unpublished Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1993); Sandino, *El pensamiento vivo de Sandino*; Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo, *Ahora sé que Sandino manda* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1986); Gregorio Selser, *Sandino, General de hombres libres* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Abril, 1984); Anastasio Somoza, *El Verdadero Sandino: O, El Calvario De Las Segovias* (Managua: Editorial San José, 1976); Neill Macaulay, *The Sandino Affair* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> Volker Wunderich, *Sandino: Una biografía política* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1995), 27.

struggle against occupation grew out of the heritage of political warfare and in reaction to the violent counterinsurgent repression by the Marines (and later, the National Guard they formed.)<sup>47</sup>

Rather than a spontaneous upheaval, the “charismatic leader” from outside of the region was instrumental in the movement’s formation.<sup>48</sup> In his appeals to the campesinos, Sandino—a freemason and member of the theosophist Magnetic Spiritual School founded in Argentina—folded certain elements of this millenarian religiosity into his nationalist framework.<sup>49</sup> He referred to his struggle as a battle between good and evil, emphasizing the redemptive nature of the fight against the occupying power. For his willingness to directly confront the tormentors of the local population, he garnered a great deal of popular support. Leandro Córdoba, the campesino from Los Planes mentioned in the opening vignette, claimed that when he met Sandino, the General told him that he “was fighting to get rid of the slavery we were living in. I was delighted because I had always been an opponent. I’d always fought for change. That was my struggle.”<sup>50</sup>

Though retrospective readings, such as that of Carlos Fonseca, have pulled out a number of turns of phrase from Sandino implying a class-oriented, quasi-Marxist vision of society, this does not appear to be an underlying current of his armed movement. Though the vast majority of

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<sup>47</sup> Wunderich, *Sandino: Una biografía política*; Schroeder, “‘To Defend Our Nation’s Honor’: Toward a Social and Cultural History of the Sandino Rebellion in Nicaragua, 1927-1934.”

<sup>48</sup> Wunderich, *Sandino: Una biografía política*, 27.

<sup>49</sup> On Sandino’s ideology, intellectual genealogy, millenarianism and utopía, see: Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution*; Michelle Dospital, *Siempre más allá--: el Movimiento Sandinista en Nicaragua, 1927-1934* (Managua: Centro Frances de Estudios Mexicanos y Centroamericano, 1996); Marco Aurelio Navarro-Génie, *Augusto “César” Sandino: Messiah of Light and Truth* (Syracuse University Press, 2002); Alejandro Bendaña, *La mística de Sandino* (Centro de Estudios Internacionales, 1994).

<sup>50</sup> Alison Rooper, *Fragile Victory: a Nicaraguan Community at War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 34–35.

his supporters were campesinos (again, unlike the later Sandinistas), he consistently emphasized a specifically nationalist, multi-class coalition as the ideal vehicle for liberation. Sandino also infamously sent the Communist internationalist Farabundo Martí from El Salvador packing when he attempted to introduce a class orientation into the movement. In an interview with a foreign journalist, Sandino insisted that the movement he formed was neither *agrarista* nor battling for land reform as many abroad apparently believed as they drew parallels to Emiliano Zapata in the Mexican Revolution.<sup>51</sup> He saw the fundamental cleavage of Nicaraguan society not along class lines, but between “the people” and those that were selling out the *patria* (homeland), namely the Conservative and Liberal Party leadership. In the early stages of his struggle, Sandino even drew support from a number of regional Liberal elites.<sup>52</sup> And though he had a major international reputation, within Nicaragua, Sandino’s support was largely confined to the Segovias, leading some to classify him as a “regional caudillo.”<sup>53</sup>

A clear parallel with the FSLN’s later development, though, was the effect of mass violence in shaping political identity. Popular adherence to Sandino’s army became particularly formidable once the US Marines Corps arrived in pursuit of the elusive Sandino and began torturing, murdering and bombarding the local population in their villages. Rather than an innate anti-imperialist consciousness or class resentment, it was the lived experience of military occupation and violence at the hands of the Marines that garnered peasant support for Sandino. “When General Sandino was around, the Yankees committed many crimes,” explained Teófilo

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<sup>51</sup> Sandino, *El pensamiento vivo de Sandino*, 290.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> Knut Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza, 1936-1956* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 1993), 31.

Alfaro, an elderly campesino from El Rodeo in Somoto, whose relatives supported Sandino and who himself later supported the FSLN. In addition to aerial bombing of peasants huts, he particularly recalled the Marines' murder of two young men "who had nothing to do with the Sandinistas, they were just workers" for allegedly giving food to the "bandits." After the Marines shot two other campesinos in the valley of Santa Rosa, don Teófilo recalled, they hung their bodies from a Guasimal tree "just for fun."<sup>54</sup> The history of the region is filled with countless tales of similar acts. The sense of self-defense and vengeance against the occupiers was woven together and given cohesion in the wise and apocalyptic voice of General Sandino.

In their counterinsurgency campaign, the Marines established military garrisons at Ocotal and Estelí and began training a new "apolitical" constabulary force which came to be named the National Guard of Nicaragua.<sup>55</sup> Though headed by an American officer, like any occupying power, the US drew heavily on the local population as informants, guides and recruits for the newly emerging army. Indeed, as the tide turned, many of the very same families and communities that had provided aid to Sandino now enrolled in the military to fight against the remnants of the guerrilla army. In particular, the impoverished indigenous communities near Somoto were an important recruiting ground for those sent to the mountains to battle Sandino's peasant forces. Fighting against fellow Nicaraguans created difficulties for Sandino's politics of national resistance, as did the election of Liberals to the presidency in 1927 and 1933. With the military expansion of the state, the guerrilla leader moved his locus of operations farther to the

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<sup>54</sup> Interview C-103, Teófilo Alfaro Cáceres, El Rodeo, Somoto, Madriz, 2010. Acts of brutality being committed "just for fun" is a trope to which we will return in Chapter 8.

<sup>55</sup> While the major garrison with over 100 soldiers was in Ocotal farther to the north, Estelí came to house 96 Marine-National Guard troops as of October 1930. Schoeder, "To Defend...", 312.

east to the mountainous locales far removed from the major population centers. Many regional elites were not happy with the de facto control and taxation by “the bandits” and continued instability and violence alienated a large part of the non-elite population.

The war ground to a stalemate of sorts that would last until 1933, when the United States withdrew its troops Nicaragua, leaving the National Guard in the hands of their hand-chosen officer, Anastasio Somoza García. Sandino, who had struggled for the departure of the foreign troops, duly entered into peace negotiations with President Sacasa and laid down his weapons. With the American exit, Somoza and his National Guard positioned themselves as the main arbiters of political power in the country. They ambushed and killed Sandino, his brother and other former resistance leaders in a treacherous attack in Managua in February 1934, following a dinner between Sandino and the president. Following the murder, Guardia forces wiped out his supporters in the Segovias, arresting and murdering those believed to have supported the “bandits.”<sup>56</sup> Throughout the region, the fall of Sandino’s leadership was followed by wave of denunciations and betrayal as neighbors fingered each other as erstwhile collaborators of the nationalist army. The violence against Sandino’s backers was short-lived in the Estelí area, where a sympathetic National Guard officer is said to have prevented the mass execution of campesino participants.<sup>57</sup>

### **Contested Memories of Sandinismo**

Due to these complexities, the memory of Sandino in the Segovias was not an unambiguous “rebellious culture” waiting to be picked up by the FSLN but a contested legacy

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<sup>56</sup> Sandino, *El pensamiento vivo de Sandino*, 79.

<sup>57</sup> Interview, A296, Felipe Urrutia, El Limón, Estelí, 2010.

which impacted the long-term political development of the region.<sup>58</sup> Many Segovians were happy for an end of hostilities and even celebrated Somoza García for bringing peace, referring to him as *El Pacificador*. Even for those who had given aid to Sandino's guerrillas and even lost family members to Marine-Guardia violence, the raw realities of power and fear outweighed all else. The new regime presented Sandino as a lunatic, bandit and a wanton murderer, a revisionist history codified in the book *The True Sandino, or the Calvary of the Segovias*, ghostwritten for the dictator Somoza García.<sup>59</sup>

Take, for example, the language used to discuss Sandino when his name was mentioned in a positive light decades later by members of the Conservative opposition campaigning against Somoza in Estelí. Somoza's paper *Novedades* responded incredulously that the Conservatives "have now become Sandinistas, praising Sandino *in the exact area* where Sandino is most hated and where the citizens have the horrifying crimes of the Sandinista hordes etched in their minds."<sup>60</sup> What is important to note here is that the spatial framework later used in revolutionary historiography is here inverted: these were the places that had suffered greatly during the war and thus "most hated" Sandino.

Even those with a history of supporting Sandino apparently saw little contradiction with their newfound embrace of the Somoza regime. In Estelí, Liberal leaders such as Antonio Molina (in whose home Sandino was housed on his way to Managua to sign the peace treaty with president Sacasa), Antonio Torrez Molina, Dr. Doroteo Castillo and others were brought into the

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<sup>58</sup> Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*, 246.

<sup>59</sup> Somoza, *El Verdadero Sandino*.

<sup>60</sup> *Novedades*, January 9, 1962. Italics added.

new regime as political leaders and business associates, quickly forgetting their previous connections to Sandino. With the ascent of Somoza to political power in 1936, there were continuities on the grassroots level as well, with the micro-authorities of communities (known as *jueces de mesta*) that had supported the rebellion now throwing their support behind the dictatorship. “When Sandino was in the mountain, the *jueces* were the same ones as when Somoza,” remembered Antonio Centeno from Condega. “All of them were. That’s the way the people are here: when there’s someone who stands out, they all praise him. Even if it’s not voluntary, they all just go along with it.”<sup>61</sup> Liberals and Somocistas throughout the Segovias to this day recall that Sandino, like Somoza, “was a Liberal” and consequently, “not a communist,” emphasizing a contrast with the later FSLN. Indeed, Somoza ironically fulfilled one of the goals of Sandino’s follower as he eliminated the power of the Conservative elites in Ocotol and their followers throughout the countryside. The community of El Bromadero in Condega, which had joined Sandino in his fight against the Marines and the Guard, now garnered a reputation as a loyally Somocista Liberal valley.<sup>62</sup> Many children of former Sandinistas also now joined the National Guard, seeing no incongruity with their family history of Liberal political identity.

There was, however, a subterranean counterdiscourse which continued to recount the heroics of General Sandino and the repression suffered at the hands of the US Marines and the National Guard. These subversive memories were concentrated in certain family groups and

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<sup>61</sup> Interview, Antonio Centeno, Condega, Estelí, 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Beverly Castillo and Asociación para la Investigación del Desarrollo Sostenible de Las Segovias, *La tradición oral en la conformación de la identidad histórica-cultural del municipio de Condega: Historia, tradiciones y costumbres* (Centro de Investigación y Comunicación Social SINSLANI, 2006), 76, 83.



specific geographic pockets of the Segovias such as the area adjacent to Ocotal.<sup>63</sup> In some cases, Liberal families switched to the alternative faction in local power struggles as their community-level enemies became Somocistas. In the valleys of Condega, for instance, a number of families abandoned the Liberal Party following the rise of Somoza. “My father was a Liberal but a *Sandinista Liberal*,” noted Fermín Zedilla, a campesino from the valley Robledalito. “When I started to work, I saw that the Liberals were the ones who killed Sandino. It was planted in me. I switched to the other party but the Conservatives were never going to win.”<sup>64</sup> Many of Zedilla’s neighbors likewise had been Sandino supporters now voted for the Conservatives and came to support the guerrilla army in the 1970s.<sup>65</sup> Many former Sandinistas were ostracized by their neighbors who now supported the Liberal dictatorship. “My father was one of Sandino’s men, we were Sandinistas,” remembered José Julian Olivas from Palacaguina. “Well it’s better to say that we were ‘devils’ [in the eyes of the community.] Everyone here became Somocistas and no one liked us. I couldn’t even tell people that I hadn’t been able to go to school because my father was denounced for being against Somoza.”<sup>66</sup>

The malleability of Sandino’s legacy in the Segovias is reflected in Flores Obregón family from Somoto, whose Liberal legacy led two brothers in diametrically opposed directions. The younger son, Guillermo Antonio Flores Obregón, was born in Somoto in 1925, in his words,

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<sup>63</sup> Interview A75, Manuel Morales Fonseca, Managua, 2010.

<sup>64</sup> Interview CNA.1B-242, Fermin Zedilla Peralta, Robledalito, Condega, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>65</sup> Omar Cabezas, *Canción de amor para los hombres*, Biblioteca popular sandinista 22 (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1988), 33.

<sup>66</sup> Interview, CNA.3F-17, Juan José Olivas, Palacaguina, Madriz, 1980.

“one year before the Revolution of 1926, son of a hero who fought alongside Sandino and Parajón.”<sup>67</sup> At the age of 19, he left high school:

...to enter into the Military Academy, not with the intention of committing any crimes but to serve the fatherland...by then, there were no Marines. The government of that time gave the opportunity to enter into the Military Academy where you could study any career and seeing the sacrifices of my parents, I decided to fill out an application and pass the physical and intellectual exams.<sup>68</sup>

Guillermo, nicknamed “Piplaca” in the National Guard, rose to the level of Brigadier General in Somoza’s army and was later charged with repression of student activists in León in the 1970s.

In contrast, Guillermo’s older brother, medical doctor Emilio Flores Obregón, became a leader of the opposition Independent Liberal Party (PLI) in the town of Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí. In 1934, Emilio was studying at the National University in León and recalled the indignation he felt at the time of Sandino’s murder. “I was a Sandinista since his assassination. There were 120 students [in the university] when they murdered Sandino. We were all Sandinistas,” he said, mentioning classmates such as Julio Quintana and René Schick, future Liberal politicians that would serve as puppet presidents under the Somoza regime.<sup>69</sup> In his later life, Dr. Flores Obregón was an outspoken defender of Sandino’s legacy and one of the earliest supporters of Carlos Fonseca’s latter-day Sandinistas. For such activities, he was often jailed and harassed by the National Guard. Thus, Emilio—unlike his brother—maintained Liberal *and Sandinista* family identity, with his sons going on to join the FSLN.

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<sup>67</sup> Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 6, Caso 27, March 20, 1980, pg. 5

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, pg. 6

<sup>69</sup> Interview CNA.1D-5, Emilio Flores Obregón, Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí, 1980.

### **“That’s Why Later the War Came:” Estelí, Commerce, Sharecropping and Exploitation**

With a major challenger for national power eliminated, Somoza carried out a coup against Sacasa in 1935, and the following year held an election making himself president. He and his two sons—Luis and Anastasio Somoza Debayle—came to dominate Nicaraguan politics for the next half-century, controlling the National Guard and amassing vast fortunes and landholdings. During their reign in power, the Somozas carried out a major push for agro-exportation—including coffee, cotton, beef and tobacco—with the dictator and closest circle among its top beneficiaries. These transformations and the accompanying development of infrastructure created poles of development, capital accumulation and poverty. The countryside was ever more bifurcated into hacienda zones producing for profit and areas of small “minifundio” peasant holdings producing food for subsistence. These sectors of stagnancy and economic dynamism collectively generated a panorama of diverse social inequities. Thus, spatial differentiation was not incidental but rather an integral part of capital accumulation in the region.<sup>70</sup> These transformations did not mechanically generate political developments but provided a framework in which political actors could mobilize the population to a greater or lesser extent.

Above all, these diverse trajectories in political economy were produced by the location of roads and highways, which linked areas to external markets. In the early twentieth century, the nearest railroad hub to the Segovias was in El Sauce in the neighboring department of León. This required lengthy overland transportation to export goods, such as coffee to the capital Managua

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<sup>70</sup> Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (University of Georgia Press, 2008).

or the international port at Corinto. The construction of roads throughout the Segovias began during the time of the war by the Marines as a way to move troops and generate goodwill to win over a hostile population. Given their military purpose, this network of roads and highways, one author wrote, approximated a “diagram of counterinsurgency.”<sup>71</sup> The extension and paving of the Pan-American Highway, a transnational expressway planned by the United States to link all of the Latin American republics to its southern border, built upon these earlier projects in the 1940s. The Pan-American Highway produced an axis around which many of the future political, economic, social and even military developments revolved. “Estelí is a small department,” observed René Molina, the region’s Somocista leader and dominant landowner. “It does not have very rich lands; it doesn’t have much good for agriculture. What Estelí did have was the luck that the Pan-American Highway came to practically divide the department in two.”<sup>72</sup> In the wake of this development, the city steadily converted from its historical role as a northerly frontier to a point of convergence between various regions of the north. In addition to nearby the nearest haciendas, towns in Madriz, Nueva Segovia, Chinandega and Jinotega all came to funnel their commercial traffic through the city.

An economic boom took place as the city of Estelí expanded as a nucleus for the flows of people, market goods, and northern-bound cargo. The urban population of the department Estelí doubled between 1930 and 1967, and again by 1974, reaching 36,039 out of a total department population of 88,616.<sup>73</sup> In 1941, with increasing demands for credit, the first banks

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<sup>71</sup> George Black, *Triumph of the People: The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua* (London: Zed Press, 1981), 53.

<sup>72</sup> Interview C080, René Molina Valenzuela, Ometepe, 2010.

<sup>73</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, Division de Investigaciones Económica y Social, *Compendio estadístico, 1965-1974*, 1976, 87; Julián N Guerrero Castillo and Lola Soriano de Guerrero, *Estelí (monografía)* (Managua, 1967), 87, 92.

began opening in the city, including branches of the Banco Nacional and the Banco Nicaragüense.<sup>74</sup> With the expansion of the financial system, plans were later put in place to found a new bank in the city, the first such institution to be founded outside of the capital Managua.<sup>75</sup> Within the growing urban sphere, there was rapid growth in artisanal production, with workshops sprouting up to produce clay bricks, roofing materials, cement blocks, soda, candy, bread and shoes.<sup>76</sup> The city hosted nearly 25 shoe workshops producing footwear for rural workers.<sup>77</sup> Local furniture factories came to manufacture some 80 percent of the country's production for local sale and export.<sup>78</sup>

For the region's landowning families, these were times of phenomenal success and economic growth, with growing access to markets and easy credit. Coffee production for export, particularly in the area around Condega but also in the higher altitudes of Pueblo Nuevo, produced great wealth at the expense of neighboring peasant communities who lost their land to the expanding estates. One of the most prominent coffee producers was Filemón Molina, the owner of Darailí and San Jerónimo, two large estates located to the east of Condega in the cooler, more humid highlands.<sup>79</sup> In warmer, lowland climes, the period witnessed the growth of cattle farms as amorphous estates converted into capitalist ranches. This industry was given a boost in 1962 with the establishment in Condega of a slaughterhouse and meatpacking facility,

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<sup>74</sup> *La Prensa*, February 11, 1971.

<sup>75</sup> *La Prensa*, January 5, 1972.

<sup>76</sup> Guerrero Castillo and Soriano de Guerrero, *Estelí (monografía)*, 101.

<sup>77</sup> Myrna Mack, *Organización y movilización: la propuesta nicaragüense de los '80 para Centroamérica* (Fundación Myrna Mack, 1995), 55.

<sup>78</sup> *Acción Cívica*, September 1977.

<sup>79</sup> Guerrero Castillo and Soriano de Guerrero, *Estelí (monografía)*, 180.

EMPANICSA, financed with capital from the Somoza family. This facility, granted USDA approval for export to the North American market, offered lucrative lines of credit to politically-connected ranchers throughout the area.<sup>80</sup>

The final major export crop introduced during the Somoza period was tobacco for cigar production. This project came to fruition as a joint venture between Anastasio Somoza Debayle, landowner René Molina (chosen as *diputado* for Estelí by Somoza) and a number of Cuban cigar producers who had emigrated from Pinar del Río in the wake of Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution. With a new government development arm, the Institute for the Promotion of National Production (*Instituto para el Fomento de la Producción Nacional*, INFONAC) footing the bill, the state provided seed, technical assistance and financing to those with land apt for tobacco production. Molina was impressed with the terms Somoza laid down to him: "I was going to participate in 30 percent of the partnership without investing a cent; he would assume all of the risk. I would get 30 percent just for putting up the land."<sup>81</sup> In three specific valleys with the appropriate conditions (Estelí, Condega and farther to the north in Jalapa), tobacco plantations were established. With their connections to foreign markets and technical know-how via their Cuban partners, Molina and Somoza made millions on the venture, while the other farmers went belly up and declared bankruptcy following the first harvest. Cuban technicians then parlayed their positions and government contacts into wealth as they took on ownership of the failed farms and emerged as an important new sector of the local elite.<sup>82</sup> The tobacco plantings officially registered nearly

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<sup>80</sup> CIERA, p. 213-216.

<sup>81</sup> Interview C080, René Molina, Ometepe, 2010.

<sup>82</sup> *La Prensa*, January 28, 1967; February 29, 1968; May 14, 1968; September 29, 1969; October 13, 1969; February 26, 1970.

tripled from 650.5 to 1822 manzanas between 1964 and 1974.<sup>83</sup> Unlike coffee or cotton, which only contracted labor during the harvest, the tobacco industry employed a large number of people year-round in planting, irrigation, applying fertilizers, picking, drying and rolling cigars. By the late 1970s, it was estimated that 5,000 people worked in the tobacco sector between the fields and the factories, although the Cuban and Nicaraguan *tabacaleros* gained notoriety for not paying the minimum or permitting unionization.<sup>84</sup>

In spite of these changes, land in Estelí was not as highly concentrated as elsewhere in Nicaragua, with only 19 estates were classified as *latifundios*.<sup>85</sup> “In general, here in Estelí,” noted don Gerardo, an urban worker:

...the social classes were never so marked as in other parts, like in Jinotega, León, Granada and Chinandega. Frequently the workers and the landlords mixed, above all in leisure activities. Traditionally, the rich people born in Estelí have been very few... around seven or eight families. They are principally cattle ranchers whose properties are between 2,000 and 15,000 *manzanas*. Some of these families have grown so much that they stratified within themselves. Thus, one finds members of the rich and working class within the same family.<sup>86</sup>

Importantly, there was never a period of rapid, massive land dispossession as Jeffrey Gould described in other regions of Nicaragua, nor a campesino movement demanding lost land

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<sup>83</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, Division de Investigaciones Económica y Social, *Compendio estadístico, 1965-1974*, 418.

<sup>84</sup> *Acción Cívica* September 1977; Alejandro Dávila Bolaños, *El interrogatorio: escrito en la cuarta semana de diciembre de 1978* (Estelí: Loaisiga, 1979), 13.

<sup>85</sup> Ministerio de Economía, Dirección General de Estadística y Censo, *Censos nacionales 1963: Agropecuario* (La Dirección, 1964), 96.

<sup>86</sup> Mack, *Organización y movilización*, 44.

rights.<sup>87</sup> Here the process was slow, leaving displaced campesinos with ever-smaller patches of land to work. As local farmers put it in their creative diction, “*nos enchiquearon*.”<sup>88</sup>

With private *haciendas* gobbling up the best fields and demographic expansion, the campesino population was increasingly drawn into wage labor to supplement their meager subsistence production. The 1963 census, carried out during outside of harvest time, a third of the population reported as *jornaleros*, or wage workers.<sup>89</sup> For many, this period is remembered as a time of economic dynamism with lots of work opportunities but increasingly poor labor conditions. “When Somoza came to power, there was peace and lots of work,” Antonio Centeno from Condega recalled. “In everything: sugarcane, rice, cotton.... the coffee haciendas grew. But there wasn’t respect for the worker. There was what the patrón said and nothing more. *That’s why later the war came*.”<sup>90</sup> Many peasants recall the exploitation and abuse they received on these landed estates, working long hours for low pay at the will of the landlord or his foremen (*mandadores*.) As early as the 1940s, wage labor and exploitation had already led to peasant strikes against coffee growers at the estate of Daraily in Condega.<sup>91</sup>

Other campesinos found work sharecropping, known as *mediería*, in which the landowner received half of the harvest for providing the land. The department of Estelí had some

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<sup>87</sup> Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 1990).

<sup>88</sup> Cabezas, *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde*, 223.

<sup>89</sup> Ministerio de Economía, Dirección General de Estadística y Censo, *Censos nacionales 1963, vol. 5: Población* (La Dirección, 1964), 363.

<sup>90</sup> Interview, Antonio Centeno, Condega, Estelí, 2008.

<sup>91</sup> Mario A. Trujillo Bolio, *Historia de los trabajadores en el capitalismo nicaragüense (1850-1950)* (Mexico: UNAM, 1992), 185.



of the highest rates of sharecropping in the region, ranging from 40 to 50 percent in Estelí and La Trinidad and between from 30 and 40 percent in Condega.<sup>92</sup> “One was obligated irredeemably to hand over half of this production,” noted former campesino Salvador Loza Talavera from Rodeo Grande. “It was an unjust *mediería* because it was at the cost of our sweat... We were the one who worked the land and did everything: the seeds, the water, the harvest, the tools and the risk.”<sup>93</sup>

Many campesinos were drawn into wage labor and dependency simply by selling their produce in advance (*adelantado*) for usurious prices. Marco Orozco Espinoza, a campesino from Santa Cruz described that:

The majority of the country was exploited. Those with money were fine and we, the campesinos, were poor. Due to a lack of food, money for clothes and shoes, we had to enter into contracts with them. Later they paid the prices they wanted. That is to say, if we borrowed 100 pesos to pay it off later, we had to work 20 days here as a campesino because they paid us five córdobas. Later, there was an increase and they said they were going to pay the campesinos 11 córdobas, but they kept on paying us eight. And we couldn't protest at all because that brought down the butt of the Garand [rifles used by the National Guard]. Those three pesos they took from the campesino every day was to pay the colonels of the Guard so they would pressure us. If we said anything, they beat us with their gun butts or sent us to jail.<sup>94</sup>

On the estates of El Regadío to the north of Estelí on the road to San Juan de Limay conditions were quite similar, as campesino Anastasio “Tacho” Rivas Cruz explained:

Those that lived here in the time of Somoza were the workers of José María Briones, Daniel Moncada, Hilario Montenegro and couple others who had their

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<sup>92</sup> Encuesta de Trabajadores del Campo, 1980 cited in CIERA, p. 63. Contradicting Wickham-Crawley's claim that “sharecropping forms of tenancy are unimportant throughout Nicaragua,” Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*, 234.

<sup>93</sup> Salvador Loza and Mario Rizo, *Mística y coraje: testimonio del guerrillero Salvador Loza* (Amerrisque, 2009), 31.

<sup>94</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-691.688 Marco Orozco Espinoza, Tres Esquinas, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980.

small parcels of land. It was just these three or four people. We were the workers in these large sugar mills; others worked cleaning the cane... Or they worked milking their cows. This community was small and there were no big factories to create jobs. These were artisanal jobs: the person who milked the cow also brought the milk to the city. The sweets were made with little technology and only a few workers and the landowners never wanted to invest very much. We started at five or six in the morning, or four in the morning and left at four in the afternoon. They were long working days! There were two National Guards who were in the service of them [the landowners] and not us. We were terrified of them. One Guard could capture ten or twenty men at a time. The poor were always the most punished by the laws of earth, the most oppressed. There was a Ministry of Labor, but the poor never won a dispute. It was just to have there, not to defend the rights of the little guy.<sup>95</sup>

As we can see from both of these accounts, the climate of fear generated by the National Guard formed a backdrop for all of these agrarian transformations by silencing complaints.

Despite rapidly expanding production, statistics on social indicators remained dismal throughout the Somoza period. Tropical diseases were common and access to doctors was minimal, with quack *curanderos* (folk healers) roaming the countryside pedaling their services. Numerous one-room schoolhouses were opened over the course of the Somoza period but were largely concentrated in the more urban areas or those alongside the highway and roads. Most of the boys and young men labored in agriculture and did not have a chance to receive any extended schooling. In the town centers (*cascos urbanos*), such as Condega and the city of Estelí, enterprising priests and nuns established a number of learning centers, including the region's first high schools in the 1960s.<sup>96</sup> By 1974, the department had 138 primary schools, 13 middle schools, three high schools and even one teacher's college.<sup>97</sup> Despite this expansion of public

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<sup>95</sup> Interview B017, Anastasio Rivas Cruz, El Regadío, Estelí, 2008.

<sup>96</sup> *La Prensa*, February 4, 1965, November 15, 1969.

<sup>97</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, Division de Investigaciones Económica y Social, *Compendio estadístico, 1965-1974*, 158, 160–161.

education, according to the regime's own inflated statistics, only 37.8 percent of men and 43.9 percent of women could read in 1963.<sup>98</sup> If life in the countryside was dreadful, conditions in the neighborhoods springing up around the city of Estelí were quite poor as well: unpaved streets, limited access to clean, running water, faulty sewage systems, and flooded streets during the rainy months of winter.<sup>99</sup> Especially in Estelí, the deprivations of average people stood in glaring context to the wealth of the rising rural bourgeoisie.

### **“The Poorest Zone”: Somoto, the Indigenous Communities and Drought**

Whereas in Estelí, the post-Sandinista period witnessed a great deal of economic growth as hacienda agriculture expanded and the city converted into a key nucleus of commerce, a different development path took place to the northwest in the area around Somoto. Adrian Gutiérrez, a trade unionist from Estelí, recalled observing these differences when he headed to the neighboring department in the 1960s:

What happened is that Estelí is a place where there is a convergence from all parts. Here commerce developed, there was more investment, and even more so with the arrival of tobacco. Here, cattle ranching were good. On the other hand, Somoto has always been a place punished by drought, especially when it comes to food production. Years and years went by and they had no rain. Here [in Estelí] there are dry places, too, like Pueblo Nuevo but they are supplied with food from Canta Gallo [in Condega] where it always rains... So there has been more development because of this. But Somoto has always been a dry place, I used to travel from Somoto to the towns there [on the other side of the border] in Honduras, and they're the same: misery. They have always lived in misery. Somoto is an old town but it hasn't developed. And in the time of Somoza, it was just miserable.”

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<sup>98</sup> Ministerio de Economía, Dirección General de Estadística y Censo, *Censos nacionales 1963*, vol. 2 (La Dirección, 1964), 6.

<sup>99</sup> *La Prensa*, December 21, 1965, October 11, 1967, “Ciudadanía Pide al Gobierno Mejoras para los estelianos” in *LP*, October 17, 1967. Loza and Rizo, *Mística y coraje*, 36. Loza and Rizo, *Mística y coraje*, 36.

Indeed, the cyclical drought that struck the indigenous lands in the department of Madriz was an ever-present reality in the region's social and economic history. In the years of 1971 and 1972, rainfall decreased nationally to a record lows—less than a quarter of what it had been in 1968—leaving these lands parched with corn dying on the stalks of the *milpas* and cattle dying of thirst.<sup>100</sup> By June 1971, the catastrophic drought had destroyed the corn, bean, sorghum and sesame seed harvests, causing losses in the millions of córdobas and leading to starvation in the countryside. It was estimated that 1,000 families fled the region for the eastern agrarian frontier of Wiwilí, Wamblán and Nueva Guinea.<sup>101</sup>

These agricultural problems were compounded by the lack of a similar commercial impetus such as that generated by the Pan-American Highway in Estelí. While *la Panamericana* originally passed through Somoto on its northward path via the border at El Espino, when it was shifted to Las Manos near Ocotal, Somoto returned to its position as a backwater of great poverty in the 1960s. While the highway was being constructed in the 1940s and early 50s, one journalist wrote:

[T]his northern city saw a hopeful future. There were lots of sources of employment and money was in motion, producing benefits. In the middle of this bonanza, the offices of the Highway Department stood as a giant protector... Now the panorama is different. The jobs have slowly disappeared and the great bastion of Highways has disappeared. The lives of the workers and peasants are shameful and artisans have left the city to head to the capital in search of a better market for their products. The little capital that is here is stagnant and loan sharks have spread. The city continues to be attractive in its façade but nothing more. Misery and hunger abound below the surface.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, Division de Investigaciones Económica y Social, *Compendio estadístico, 1965-1974*, 22.

<sup>101</sup> *La Prensa*, June 14, 1971; CIERA, “Diagnóstico Socioeconómico De PRONORTE.”, 1980, 69.

<sup>102</sup> *La Prensa*, May 11, 1970.

Given the ecological limitations of the area, the lowlands of the Somoto and the neighboring municipalities offered few possibilities for export agriculture. Where there was high quality land, it was quickly gobbled up by cattle ranches and coffee estates. “Most of the land had been divided up, so the majority of the campesinos didn’t have land,” described Manuel Maldonado, a worker from Somoto.

The land was in the hands of four people. There was a family from Ocotal, the Lovos, who had bought most of the land in San Luis [a cattle ranch north of Somoto]. They were taking over all the land. The two National Guard Generals [Roberto and Felix] Guillén took over the land in Somoto and part of Las Sabanas. This is the poorest zone.<sup>103</sup>

Even the Indigenous Communities, which were to protect collectively-owned land and the rights of the “casta indígena,” found themselves under threat by the ladino landowners. In 1935, the village of Santa Isabel, part of the indigenous municipio of San Lucas, was annexed by the ladino municipio of Somoto. The local population initially fought back against these measures, with the Jefe Político of Madriz reporting, “the *indios* of San Lucas got violent... and the public had to repress these acts of violence... [the Indians] would assault and retreat to Honduras.”<sup>104</sup> Now that village lands were no longer protected by the community, cotton farmers moved in to the newly available fields.

Even within the territories of the indigenous communities, large landowners took over large swaths of land, converting it into cattle ranches which offered few employment opportunities. The Guillen brothers did likewise in the indigenous community of San Lucas, fencing up fences large stretches of land which had been collective property a generation

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<sup>103</sup> Interview C101, Manuel Maldonado, Somoto, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>104</sup> Gould, *To Die in This Way*, 186–187.

earlier.<sup>105</sup> Those that came from outside “to rob and demarcate lands” were “coffee farmers, ranchers and white people,” the community of San Lucas recalled in its community history.<sup>106</sup> The humid valley of Las Sabanas within the indigenous territory was so coveted by ladino farmers (including, notably, a number of Hondurans), that the lands were excised to form a new ladino municipality. Following this administrative change, coffee haciendas were no longer subject to the indigenous land rules and customs.<sup>107</sup> “Before, there were no rich and poor,” described campesino Julian Velasquéz, “but in Las Sabanas, we got to know who the rich were.”<sup>108</sup>

Likewise, the forests within the domains of the indigenous communities whet the appetites of Somocista political operatives, who began clear-cutting the rich forest resources that the community had used as commons for their needs. Companies such as EMAGON and YODECO signed contracts with political functionaries, chopped down the forests to sell to the American company Plywood.<sup>109</sup> This deforestation left behind an ever more barren, dry landscape prone to erosion and cyclical hunger. As we will see in the next chapter, all of these processes were linked to abuses by local agents and representatives of the Somocista state.

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<sup>105</sup> Though they were *ladinos* somoteños and not *indígenas sanluqueños*, they were suddenly given membership within the indigenous community.

<sup>106</sup> Pueblo Indígena de San Lucas,, “Es que él que es indio, es indio: Experiencia de la organización del Pueblo” (TROPISSEC Y EDISA, Esteli, 2002), 10.

<sup>107</sup> *La Gaceta*, August 24, 1945,

<sup>108</sup> Interview, Julián Velásquez, Cusmapa, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>109</sup> CIERA, “Diagnóstico Socioeconómico De PRONORTE.,” 85.

Even after these legalized land thefts, the department of Madriz still had the lowest number of latifundios in the country, with only eight haciendas of more than 1000 *manzanas*.<sup>110</sup> Within the indigenous communities, there was little class differentiation, with individual families holding parcels of land in usufruct for the satisfaction of household sustenance. But the equality was one of generalized poverty and ecological limitation, with few job opportunities and the land increasingly not sufficient for family needs. In the communities of San Lucas and Somoto, the divided—and then subdivided—peasant landholdings came to resemble a virtual chessboard of postage stamp-sized minifundio plots. On these tiny family farms, technology use was incredibly low, with the lowest capital to product ratio in the country.<sup>111</sup> Cusmapa, for example, was largely farmed with the anachronistic *espeque* (a pointed wooden stick for opening holes) and only occasionally with a donkey-pulled tractor. Like the small producers mentioned above in our discussion of Estelí, these campesinos sold their harvests in advance at highly disadvantageous prices to local merchants. Many searched out work on haciendas near and far to meet their needs.

With the ability of a household to reproduce itself reduced due to demographic pressures, the expansion of haciendas and environmental destruction, there were few job opportunities for the nearly 80 percent of the population of Madriz that earned their living in agriculture.<sup>112</sup> Thus male campesinos came to rely from the time of the US occupation—particularly in the drought years—upon employment in the National Guard, a career path we will explore in greater depth in

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<sup>110</sup> Ministerio de Economía, Dirección General de Estadística y Censo, *Censos nacionales 1963*, 96; Julian Guerrero and Lola Soriano de Guerrero, *Madriz (monografía)* (Managua: Artes Gráficas, 1971), 45.

<sup>111</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, División de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales, “Estudio socioeconómico de Nicaragua, Primera etapa, Región VI (Interior Norte),” 42.

<sup>112</sup> Ministerio de Economía, Dirección General de Estadística y Censo, *Censos nacionales 1963*, 33.

Chapter Six. This recruitment of indigenous campesinos reached such extremes that a popular refrain stated that, “in Somoto, they plant corn and harvest Guards.” Likewise, the local urban population was wholly dependent on the state for employment, with many finding work as schoolteachers or military officers. For local professionals, Liberal party politics served as a route to social mobility and wealth that the sagging agricultural sector could not provide.<sup>113</sup>

In terms of social statistics, the region was far worse off than Estelí. With little economic appeal from the perspective of agro-exportation, the state provided few social services to the campesinos in these parched, mountainous lands. Malnutrition rates in the northern region of which Madriz were the highest in the country, with official statistics showing more than 6 in 10 children did not receive a sufficient caloric or protein intake.<sup>114</sup> Likewise, education for the region’s population—doomed to small-scale agriculture or military service—expanded significantly but was never a priority.<sup>115</sup> In 1971, only 19.3 percent of the and 3.3 percent of young adults attended school, the lowest figures in the country.<sup>116</sup> Not surprisingly, Madriz had nearly the lowest literacy rates in the country with only a small minority learning to read and write.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> See the biographies of prominent local figures and politicians in Guerrero and Guerrero, *Madriz (monografía)*, 160–183.

<sup>114</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, División de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales, “Estudio socioeconómico de Nicaragua, Primera etapa, Región VI (Interior Norte),” 23.

<sup>115</sup> Madriz, for instance, was one of the only departments in the Republic that saw the number of schoolhouses actually *drop* between 1966 and 1974. Banco Central de Nicaragua, División de Investigaciones Económica y Social, *Compendio estadístico, 1965-1974*, 160–161.

<sup>116</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, División de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales, “Estudio socioeconómico de Nicaragua, Primera etapa, Región VI (Interior Norte),” 16–18.

<sup>117</sup> Ministerio de Economía, Dirección General de Estadística y Censo, *Censos Nacionales 1963*, 9.



## **Conclusion**

This region of the Segovias by the 1960s and 1970s had undergone massive transformations as export agriculture and the market economy spread rapidly and urbanizing nuclei emerged. Much of the region bore little resemblance to the peasant society in which Sandino gained his massive following. In this chapter, I have laid out the social geography of the region as it developed over the course of the twentieth century and onto which the political and social movements were later grafted. Through the spatial logic of capital accumulation, diverse sources of discontent were produced as the area was further bifurcated into two different types of micro-regions. As we will come to see in future chapters, these spatial differences were important to class and ethnic formations and the political cultures which emerged. As in other cases, in Nicaragua it was not the most destitute who rose up in revolution. In fact, as we will come to see, many of them were on the other side of the barricades.

On the other hand, these regions, provinces and towns—mountain paths and Guasimal trees—were not merely the sites of material production. In this chapter, I have also described the ambiguous regional legacy of Sandino’s guerrilla movement. In contrast to the claims of a direct correlation with the latter-day FSLN, all micro-level data suggests almost a total inversion of where Sandino held sway and where the new guerrilla army would find its mass support. This contradictory legacy, the politics of historical memory and the emergence of the new rebel group are the subject of the later chapters as the modern-day “disciples” of Sandino began organizing in the region from the late 1960s.

**Chapter Two.**  
**Seeing like a Mafia:**  
**Municipal Politics, Criminality and Patronage in Estelí and Somoto, 1960 and 1970s**

**Introduction**

In February of 1970, Pedro Cardoza, Police Judge in town of La Trinidad to the south of Estelí, closed down a brothel jointly owned by the local National Guard officer and a woman from the town. In a letter defending his decision, Cardoza explained that the cantina had remained open but prostitution was no longer permitted. Though the business was technically legal, he wrote:

It was open until the morning and was the scene of scandals and complaints: people were robbed, drunken women harassed young people on their way to school, and drunks shot their guns in presence of Sergeant Fuentes, the *comandante* of this town.<sup>118</sup>

What the Police Judge did not take into account in his decision was that such rules did not apply to those with “pull” in the dominant political structure. It was not long before a petition arrived from thirty-nine Triniteños demanding that the whorehouse El Buen Gusto (“Good Taste”) be reopened, explaining that the owner was a “true asset in the ranks of the Liberal Party” and that the town’s young men needed “a place for physiological recreation.”<sup>119</sup> The National Guard *comandante* in Estelí wrote arguing that the local had paid all of its taxes—and, implicitly, its

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<sup>118</sup> Telegram Mariano Buitrago to Cmte. Uruiel Fuentes, forwarding communication from Pedro Cardoza, Juez de Policía, February 25, 1970, AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Box 16, Folder “La Trinidad.”

<sup>119</sup> Petition, October 17, 1970. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Box 16, Folder “La Trinidad.”

bribes—and did not bother anyone.<sup>120</sup> The female owner dashed off a missive arguing that she was being victimized by denunciations of enemies, signing off with a key detail: that she and her family were:

...Somocista Liberals that collaborate in everything within our reach. Right now, I have a jeep in which I am installing loudspeakers to dedicate it to propaganda supporting his Excellence Sr. President General Don Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Please believe that our commitment is sincere and we would make any sacrifice necessary for the cause of General Somoza.<sup>121</sup>

Not surprisingly, several days later the order came from the Minister of the Interior that “El Buen Gusto” was to be re-opened and the prostitutes were to be sent back to work.<sup>122</sup> These experiences were politics as usual in small-town Nicaragua under the Somoza dictatorship: state and military-run prostitution rings operated by government supporters remained open. Yet it was not merely matrons and toms that got to go about their business thanks to political connections, such relations are representative of the very nature of political power itself.

Don Hector Mairena is a legend of sorts in of La Trinidad—and indeed throughout the region. “He was a big man with huge hands,” recalls one woman living next to the park. “He helped *his* people.”<sup>123</sup> Many local folk recall the Liberal Party leader as “closer than a brother” to the dictator Anastasio Somoza García. Mairena was not only the largest landowner in La

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<sup>120</sup> Letter of Support, Lieutenant Coronel Álvaro Valle S, no date, AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Box 16, Folder “La Trinidad.”

<sup>121</sup> Telegram M.G. and L.G. to Mariano Buitrago, October 14, 1970, AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Box 16, Folder “La Trinidad.”

<sup>122</sup> Telegram, Mariano Buitrago to Pedro Cardoza, October 19, 1970. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Box 16, Folder “La Trinidad.”

<sup>123</sup> Interview, Anonymous, La Trinidad, Estelí, 2010.

Trinidad but became a congressman, senator and dominant figure throughout the north of Nicaragua. He was referred to as the “cacique,” with campesinos—hats in hand—coming from far and wide to humbly beg favors from the patrón. Famously, “don Hector” had the ability to order the release of any man that had been arrested by the National Guard. Upon their return to La Trinidad, it is said, these accused criminals were often put to work sharecropping (*trabajando a medias*) on his sprawling estate, El Guasimal. When the dictatorship held its *faux* elections every few years, the town’s population poured out of the valleys and neighborhoods to cast their votes for the dictator and the Liberal Party.<sup>124</sup>

These stories bring together several threads of the politics of everyday life, criminality, land and labor during the Somoza dictatorship. The Somocista state has been treated in much of the literature as either the personal will of a single family or a mere function of agro-export elite and its backers in the United States. While such interpretations suggested that the regime maintained itself in power solely on the basis of repression, Jeffrey Gould’s research into Somoza’s populism towards organized labor and Victoria González-Rivera’s work on Somocista women have complicated that image.<sup>125</sup> What we are still lacking is an understanding of the everyday mechanics and political culture which undergirded the dictatorship as a whole. The state, as many have noted, looks quite different when viewed on the national scale than when examined in terms of regional variation or municipal politics.<sup>126</sup> Andrés Pérez-Baltodano re-

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<sup>124</sup> Indeed, to this day La Trinidad continues to vote for the Liberal Party, a virtual island of Somocismo in a department noted for its revolutionary tradition. A neighborhood in the town is still named after Mairena and the central park after his mother.

<sup>125</sup> Gould, ““For an Organized Nicaragua””; Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979*; González-Rivera, *Before the Revolution*.

<sup>126</sup> Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton University Press, 1988); Jonathan Fox, “The Difficult Transition from Clientelism to Citizenship:

conceptualized the Nicaraguan state as not a nation-state but rather the successor of its colonial heritage, an *Estado Conquistador*, with a “low capacity of social regulation, social and territorial fragmentation of its spatial base, a high level of external dependence and a great deal of autonomy in relation to society.”<sup>127</sup> In this chapter, we build upon this framework by investigating the ways in which it functioned on the local level and integrated the population into its structures.

I argue that the state functioned primarily as a network of privilege that distributed employment and permitted illegal behavior on the part of its local allies. While landholding elites gained access government contracts and credit from financial institutions, farther down the food chain the regime offered only poorly paid employment and an arbitrary application of laws and regulations.<sup>128</sup> More than populist handouts and mass mobilization, it was this access to immunity before the law that was most integral to the system’s functioning. Rather than a house of cards merely waiting to be pushed over by rebels, Somocismo laid deep roots among city folk

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Lessons from Mexico,” *World Politics* 46, no. 2 (January 1, 1994): 151–184; Gilbert Michael Joseph and Daniel Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Duke University Press, 1994); R. Andrew Nickson, *Local Government in Latin America* (L. Rienner Publishers, 1995); Frances Hagopian, *Traditional Politics and Regime Change in Brazil* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Jeffrey W. Rubin, *Decentering the Regime: Ethnicity, Radicalism, and Democracy in Juchitán, Mexico* (Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>127</sup> Andrés Pérez Baltodano, *Entre el Estado Conquistador y el Estado Nación: providencialismo, pensamiento político y estructuras de poder en el desarrollo histórico de Nicaragua* (IHNCA/UCA Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica, Universidad Centroamericana, 2003), 23.

<sup>128</sup> Useful have been the various works that deal with patron-client relationships including *Friends, Followers, and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); S. N Eisenstadt, *Patrons, Clients, and Friends: Interpersonal Relations and the Structure of Trust in Society*, Themes in the Social Sciences (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Judith Chubb, *Patronage, Power, and Poverty in Southern Italy: A Tale of Two Cities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); John Thayer Sidel, *Capital, Coercion, and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999).

and peasants alike. We need to examine this bundle of practices and social behaviors through which the regime drew its power both from above and from below.<sup>129</sup>

Secondly, it is my contention this system of power was not uniform and that regional variation in geographic features, political economy and agrarian relations presented diverse wealth accumulation strategies to local, state-allied elites. Thus, by examining cultural practices, I do not want to dissolve the local state into discourse but to demonstrate its general function as the “organ” or “committee” of a specific dominant social group in its local iterations.<sup>130</sup> In doing do, I identify a broad unity and functionalism to the state, namely bolstering of control power of the ruling group and the integration of subaltern allies via the materiality of patronage and hegemony.<sup>131</sup> Thus, while the national state worked in the geopolitical interests of the United States, the agro-export elite and particularly Somoza faction, on the local level there was some variation. In the region of Estelí, the hacendado-commercial elite took control of the state

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<sup>129</sup> Practices as in Bourdieu’s classic definition of habitus, “The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.” Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53.

<sup>130</sup> Inspired by Foucault’s theories of micropowers and the state as simply one more node in a sprawling web of non-egalitarian relations, much literature has reduced the state to a series of “state effects” created through discourse, rather than relations of force mediating material production and distribution. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 19. With the state falling under the hatchet of the postmodern attack on “essentialism” and “reification”, suggesting its falseness given the artificial society-state dichotomy and the various internal divisions within the state, Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977),” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 1988): 58–89., Akhil Gupta, “Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State,” *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (May 1, 1995): 375–402., Timothy Mitchell, “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics,” *The American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (March 1, 1991): 77–96.

<sup>131</sup> Using “hegemony” in the original Gramscian sense as the way in which the “fundamental group” or ruling class exercises its control via the superstructure in order to receive the consent of the governed—not in the postmodern sense of constantly contested “slippages.” Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1972).

apparatus and used its monopoly to profit from capitalist agricultural development. In the region of Somoto and its hinterland, on the other hand, a quite different dynamic was at play. There, a “rentier” political class of ethnically non-indigenous state authorities—often urban professionals rather than landowners—lorded over a countryside of indigenous peasants which were gradually stripped of their best land, forest resources and water rights.<sup>132</sup>

### **Some Aspects of the Northern Question: Military, Political and Religious Authority at the Municipal Level**

Political power in Somoza’s Nicaragua was exercised by way of three distinct structures of power: the municipal and department-level political leaders (mayors, governors, senators, and congressmen), often chosen directly by Somoza; the military authorities of the National Guard *also* chosen by Somoza; and the ecclesiastical power of the Catholic Church, which was in an open alliance with the regime.

Given its origins as an “army of occupation,” the National Guard was focused less on national defense, placing its heavy weaponry and the bulk of its forces in Managua, the seat of national power and throughout the regional cities. In small towns, only a handful of guards were necessary to maintain control. Though it worked closely with the political authorities, the word of the GN comandante (of the 15<sup>th</sup> Company garrison in Estelí and the 16<sup>th</sup> Company barracks in Somoto) was considered the law of the land, for he reported directly to the dictator Somoza.

While the Guard harassed political opponents of the regime around election time and backed

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<sup>132</sup> We will see here that the state is neither a totally autonomous agent as “statists” would have it, nor another “node” in the web of power relations as the “Foucauldians” suggest, nor solely the “executive committee of the bourgeoisie” as the classic formulation takes it. A cursory glance at history suggests the state must be seen as (the other classic formulation) “a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory” and that though it may not be single-minded, unified or totally cohesive, it *must* serve as a ballast for the ruling class of a given social formation or (history shows) it cannot long survive.

landowners in labor- and land-related disputes, such conflicts were quite rare. Far more common in popular memory was the quotidian terror of the rough treatment (particularly the *culatazo*, i.e. beatings with the butts of their Garand rifles) doled out to civilians arrested for public drunkenness on the weekends. The abuse functioned as a business operation as when bribes (*mordidas*) were demanded for the prisoner's release the following morning! This arbitrary and heavy-handed treatment particularly angered the public, given the limited options.

The National Guard bases also functioned as a sort of protection racket, collecting bribes and investing in brothels, cantinas and gambling dens. During much of the period, the GN rarely engaged in open terror, though its threat remained latent in its myriad daily abuses of the population.<sup>133</sup> “It seems to me,” said guerrilla Carlos Manuel Morales Fonseca, who organized in the region of the Segovias:

that compared to the other dictatorial systems in Latin America like the South American regimes in Chile and Argentina—which were sophisticated repressive structures with high levels of organization—the Somocista dictatorship was instead the *only* apparatus of power. This monopoly of power permitted them to have influence in all of national affairs. In numeric terms, the National Guard had 5,000 men; it was not of disproportionate size, it was a small army. The physical presence at the level of the municipality was one soldier. One! And that was sufficient to maintain order due to fear. No one protested. So it was an oppressive system, based on unbearable oppression: one couldn't breathe. Sometimes the *repression* is emphasized more because it was more brutal... the people knew the repression could come and when it did, it was violent. If [the Guard] needed to kill, they killed. And the people knew this. But I think the *oppression* was the base of the articulation of the entire system. This made it function in all of the political, economic and social areas. People felt a limit because they knew the Guard was there and Somoza was there.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Justiniano Pérez, *Semper fidelis: el secuestro de la guardia nacional de Nicaragua* (Colombia: J. Pérez, 2004), 44–46.

<sup>134</sup> Interview A075, Carlos Manuel Fonseca Morales, 2010.



In the political realm, there was an entire coterie of regime loyalists endowed with total power (what Somoza personally told them was their “*hegemonía*”) at different scales from the local to regional. While Hector Mairena had long been the regional face of the regime, by the 1960s and 1970s a young, dynamic leader emerged as the dominant figure in the region. René Molina, Somoza’s partner in the tobacco venture discussed in the previous chapter, was chosen as the congressman (*diputado*) for Estelí and quickly rose to regional dominance. Whereas the older landed elite had based their power solely upon access to land and job appointments, the new leadership took a much more capitalist-oriented, modernizing approach. During Molina’s leadership, the region witnessed the rapid expansion of agricultural production, infrastructure and social services. His critics, however, argue that he and his allies profited disproportionately from state contracts, monopolies and their control over the legal system. As diputado, Molina came to have supreme influence over both the political and economic life of the department. The opposition paper *La Prensa* reported in 1967 that in Estelí:

Somocista politics is controlled by the all-powerful will of a businessman who—for more than 15 years—has exercised direct and indirect control over thirty businesses that range from alcohol factories to the construction of elementary and high schools, lotteries, bullfighting rings, sawmills, movie theaters and rental houses.<sup>135</sup>

In the city, there were other prominent landowning families, such as the Briones, whose patriarch José María Briones served in the Senate, and the Castillo family, which fielded a number of national political figures including the Minister of Health and the head of INFONAC. José Indalecio Rodríguez, from another important family, served as Jefe Político (governor) of Estelí during much of the regime’s later period. In the smaller towns of the department,

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<sup>135</sup> *La Prensa*, April 9, 1968

hacendados and businesspeople served as the political chiefs of the municipal branches of the Partido Liberal Nacionalista (Nationalist Liberal Party, PLN.) Among some of the best known PLN leaders were prominent landowners such as Pastor and Aristedes Midence in Pueblo Nuevo, Salvador Castellón in San Juan de Limay and Juan María Pérez in Condega.

In Somoto and its hinterlands, a quite distinct development pattern emerged and was bolstered by different system of power. The department of Madriz was excised from the larger province of Nueva Segovia following the end of the armed conflict in the 1930s. As an overwhelmingly Liberal Party-supporting area, Madriz was to serve as a counterbalance in electoral terms to Ocotol in Nueva Segovia which was controlled by the Conservative Party. It certainly did so, with some quipping that “Somoto could easily be named Somoza” given the massive support offered for the dictator. Given the agrarian limitations discussed in the previous chapter, landowners did not develop sufficient supremacy over the local economy or the political scene. Camilo López Irías, a Liberal general from the 1926 Constitutionalist War, and local judge Victor Manuel Talavera emerged as the leaders of the rentier state elite based in middle-class professionals. These men were later succeeded in power by their sons: a lawyer and schoolteacher.<sup>136</sup> A female *Jefe Político*, Tula Baca de López (the wife of Camilo López Núñez, the general’s son) was a dominant figure in local politics. As such these townspeople ruled over a rural population of indigenous peasants with whom they did not have much of a direct economic relationship. The typical mayors chosen by the Liberal Party were non-indigenous *ladinos*, including many who had migrated from the neighboring department of Estelí. As we

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<sup>136</sup> Guerrero and Guerrero, *Madriz (monografía)*, 165–175.

will see below, this created a divided system in which ladino officials came into conflict with indigenous community councils for the control of the territory and municipal power.<sup>137</sup>

Finally, it is impossible to understand the system of power in this highly religious rural area without acknowledging the role of the Catholic Church. Though previously dependent on León, the diocese of Estelí was founded in 1962, a bishop installed and the city's church elevated to the status of Cathedral.<sup>138</sup> The first bishop was Monseñor Clemente Carranza y López, who apparently also served as a commissioned chaplain-major in the National Guard.<sup>139</sup> At government acts, a representative of the Church was always on hand to consecrate the regime's activities. The spiritual guide Carranza y López was a close friend of the towns' leading families, who had elegant, reserved pews for Sunday mass thanks to their generous donations. Leonel Rugama, a young former seminary student in the 1960s angrily told a neighbor that, "the rich families of Estelí: the Castillo, Rodriguez, Briones and Molina families, the large landowners that screwed over the people... were friends of the Church. The Church defends the interests of these landowners who are screwing over the people."<sup>140</sup> Local parishes were located in the municipal centers and the valleys, with only occasional visits by the priests at various points

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<sup>137</sup> As Gramsci wrote of southern Italy, the Segovias functioned as something of "a great agrarian bloc made up of three social layers: the great amorphous, disintegrated mass of the peasantry; the intellectuals of the petty and medium rural bourgeoisie; and the great landowners and great intellectuals." Antonio Gramsci, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," in *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgacs (NYU Press, 2000), 178–179.

<sup>138</sup> Manuel Ortega Hegg and Marcelina Castillo, *Religión y política: la experiencia de Nicaragua* (Havana: Ruth Casa Editorial, 2006), 96.

<sup>139</sup> Teófilo Cabestrero, *Leonel Rugama: El delito de tomar la vida en serio* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1990), 208–209.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

throughout the year. Certain priests also got in on the corruption and gained renown for charging the campesinos and others to carry out baptisms, weddings and funerals.

### **Elections, Nepotism and Arbitrary Power**

The system of power that worked to the benefit of elite factions was remarkably successful in incorporating large sectors of the poor in the cities, towns and villages through different forms of patronage and clientelism. This entire web of top-down relationships was brought together through the periodic faux elections held every few years throughout the Somoza period. Though these electoral exercises have been ridiculed for their utter falseness, I argue that they actually served an integral role in solidifying the system of domination. The Sundays on which elections were held were not times of party strife, but “very beautiful... a party [and] a very happy day” according to the daughter of a Liberal landowner in the firmly Liberal town San Lucas.<sup>141</sup> From the morning, the campesinos and urban population were called to the polling places in front of Liberal Party activists’ homes or on the haciendas of Somocista landlords. A secret ballot was a mere formality and there were immediate benefits distributed to those who duly cast their vote for the dictator: a *nacatamal* (a traditional Nicaraguan dish of corn and meat wrapped in a banana leaf), a *boli* of *guaro* (alcohol) and five *córdobas* in cash. In addition, they were given red cards bearing the photo of Somoza, declaring themselves members of the PLN. This document was known as *la Magnífica* in popular parlance, for like a religious prayer book, it was to be carried at all times to open doors for work at public institutions and the haciendas. René Molina, the longtime Somocista *diputado* of Estelí, observed:

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<sup>141</sup> Interview, Anonymous, San Lucas, 2010.

Whether they like it or not, the campesino was always the main bastion of support of Liberal Party... We had at least 80 percent support. The campesinos are very smart: they go with the party they think is going to win. And the Liberal Party controlled the state and controlled the army, so they always voted for it.<sup>142</sup>

And what was true in the countryside was largely true in the cities as well. “They supported [Somoza] due to their simplicity,” recalled trade unionist Dámaso Picado of the campesinos:

They were hungry so they supported him because they [the Somocistas] had all the work. There came a moment where if you didn’t have the red card [*la rojita*], the patrón didn’t give you work. So the poor campesino... and the workers... supported him. Don’t think that there is a huge difference in knowledge between workers and the campesinos. No, it’s small. The only difference is that we know how to read and they don’t know how. But the darkness [*la oscuridad*]... the darkness is here, too.<sup>143</sup>

At election time, the harassment of the opposition Conservatives was at times extreme; some were tossed in jail, others forced to vote far away, and still others physically blocked or even attacked at the polling stations. Elsewhere, they were allowed to vote and the local election council simply stuffed the ballots boxes before the vote count. In Madriz, the Liberals attempted to whip up votes by playing on the ethnic divisions of the department, with one Somocista candidate posing as the candidate of the “whites” and another Liberal representative branded as standing up for the indigenous. Don Eulogio Hernandez, an aged indigenous campesino from Cusmapa (at that time part of San Lucas), recalled that:

They had us so blindfolded that they were able to trick us. And as we didn’t know any better and didn’t know how to read, they told us: Camilo López is in favor of the whites; Victor Manuel Talavera is in favor of the *indígenos* [sic]. And they were the same shit. So the fierce little Indian said: ‘Camilo López is with the ladinos, we aren’t going to support him because he’s with the ladinos!’ Or they said, ‘We’re going with Talavera, he’s with the indígenas!’ And they were the same thing. They even fought over this with their machetes and killed each other.

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<sup>142</sup> Interview C080, René Molina Valenzuela, Ometepe, 2010.

<sup>143</sup> Interview B182 Dámaso Picado, Estelí, 2010.

One said, 'I'm with Camilo López!' 'But you're not ladino, you son-of-a-...', said the other one. But really, López and Talavera were the same thing... Camilo López won and got to be senator for four years, and Victor Manuel got to be congressman for four years. I said to myself: What a scam, right? (Laughs) And these son-of-a-guns were in office for life. Old Camilo López died, his son stayed in his place. Old Talavera died, his son stayed in his place. How they tricked us!<sup>144</sup>

As both groups represented the Liberal Party and the political class of the Somoto elite, the indigenous communities came out losing either way.

In the small towns, control over the *alcaldía* (mayor's office) was considered a relative cornucopia of wealth, power and employment opportunities in perennially depressed economic conditions. Though the Municipal Law of 1942 did not allow the presence of family members in multiple positions, nepotism and favoritism were the very essence of small-town politics.<sup>145</sup> In San Juan de Limay in 1973, for example, an excluded PLN supporter off a complaint to the Minister of the Interior complaining that one of the alderwomen was the first cousin of the mayor, Juan Vetando de Ordóñez, while the mayor's own son was employed as the town secretary. The complainant signed off stating that he had only written to contribute to "brilliant administration of the Great Nationalist Liberal Party led by our great leader General Anastasio Somoza Debayle." Interestingly, he also took the opportunity to castigate the landowning local elite, writing that "the leader of this town, Salvador Castellón Guevara doesn't see these things. He doesn't care about this at all because he only cares about his capital."<sup>146</sup> That this letter and others critique such actions through a normative standard suggests that there was a constant

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<sup>144</sup> Interview C111, José Eulogio Hernández Alvarado, Las Sabanas, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>145</sup> Insituto Centroamericano de Administración de Empresas, Centro de Asesoramiento, *Estudio de las municipalidades en Nicaragua* (Managua: INCAE, 1973).

<sup>146</sup> Telegram, A. Sánchez to Ministro de Gobernación, May 25, 1973. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Box 14, Folder 5.4.

tension between “actually existing somocismo” and the pronounced “democratic” electoral system and “rule of law.”

Below the mayors in the rural villages and hamlets was an additional structure of power linked to both executive power and the National Guard. These micro-authorities were known as *jueces de mesta*, and their subordinates, *jueces de cantón*. These were peasants, usually the so-called “natural leaders” or “elders” from a given valley who supported Somoza and functioned as traditional community-level boss. Practically by definition, they were poor or middle peasants and never wealthy landlords as some observers have suggested. Chosen by the Jefe Político and often given a *vara* (staff) as symbol of their power, jueces de mesta guaranteed order in the rural areas. Though not directly paid for their work, they were granted a large dose of arbitrary power over their neighbors with the ability to fine and jail those found committing any of a long list of infractions.<sup>147</sup> As the regime’s eyes and ears at the community or village level, the jueces came to play an important role in the structures of surveillance and repression with the rise of opposition movement. Given the personalistic nature of power at all levels, these community figures could be “miniature Somozas” or relatively anodyne, depending on their personality and relationship with their neighbors. Stories are legion of unpunished criminal behavior by family members of jueces, but another common statement says, “the jueces *here* were good, elsewhere they were not.”

These community-level organizations took different forms depending on the local social conditions. In Madriz, with large numbers of campesinos employed by the National Guard, a parallel and overlapping structure, the Civil Reserve (*Reserva Civil*, RC), had estimated 5,000

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<sup>147</sup> Ministerio de Gobernación y Anexos, *Manual del juez de mesta* (Talleres Nacionales, 1952).

armed peasant members throughout the department and functioned as something of a paramilitary.<sup>148</sup> At times, these former soldiers even launched critiques of local political authorities for not favoring their interests. An association of retired Guardias in Somoto led by Major Gerardo “Ñato” Peralta denounced the townspeople elite and particularly the “cacique” Tula Baca, the Jefe Político, saying, “She doesn’t allow the slightest participation of [the former soldiers] in the political issues of their own party.”<sup>149</sup> Despite their strength in numbers and the economic power of landowning Guard officers like the Guillenes, these former soldiers were never allowed to develop any direct influence over the state or the Liberal Party. With Somoza’s blessing, Tula Baca and the other middle-class Liberal politicians remained firmly in control of politics in Madriz throughout the period.

### **The Shifting Meaning of Criminality: Cattle Thieves, Moonshine and Prostitution**

For many of its adherents, the Somocista state did not need to hand out material benefits, land or employment. Instead, it merely offered to selectively apply the law, allowing its supporters to engage in criminal behavior with immunity. Take, for example, a particular wave of cattle theft (*abigeato*) which swept over Estelí in the late 1960s, as gangs of rustlers stole the animals at night, removing their hides and meat and burying the bones. Examined on the various levels and degrees of culpability, this case gives a feel for the quotidian politics of criminality.

First, if complaint of cattle theft were to be taken seriously depended on whether the petitioner in question had political pull with the Somocista authorities. When Dr. Alejandro Briones, a Conservative Party supporter and president of the local ranchers’ organization, wrote

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<sup>148</sup> *Novedades*, September 8, 1962.

<sup>149</sup> *La Prensa*, November 10, 1971.



to the Guardia demanding action in response to a number robberies, the comandante at first refused to help him, writing to the Somoza that:

The doctor, like the others that are members of the Association of Cattle Ranchers of Estelí, are inveterate Chamorristas—I even have the list of when they held a celebration for Pedro Joaquín Chamorro... and thus are enemies of Somoza and the National Guard.<sup>150</sup>

As political “enemies” of the dictator, and by extension his military, the protection of their property was not given priority by the authorities. However, as the rustlers did not discriminate between Liberal and Conservative-owned cattle, the National Guard eventually responded to the thefts with brute force. “I remember they found a band of a cattle thieves they went around stealing cows,” one former Guardia recalled, “The Guard didn’t take them prisoner; it just killed all of them. This made it so everyone would reflect a thousand times before thinking of robbing anyone.”<sup>151</sup>

However, for others involved in the illegal system (such as local butchers and tanners who processed the stolen goods), the law’s application was not so clear. Initially, their complicity in the plot was so blatant that the authorities were forced to act, canceling the licenses of locals accused of working with the thieves. E. Jiménez, one of the those accused of slaughtering stolen livestock, wrote to the Minister of the Interior explaining that she was a “woman that has helped the Nationalist Liberal Party in the elections by voting and through

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<sup>150</sup>Telegram, Álvaro Valle Salinas, Cmte. of Estelí to President Somoza and Inspector General Major José Somoza, Jefe del Estado Mayor, Jefe de Seguridad Nacional, March 6, 1972, AGN, Fondo Guardia Nacional, Sección Estado Mayor, Box 22, File 314.

<sup>151</sup> Interview A294: Anonymous, La Trinidad, Estelí, 2010.

distribution of campaign propaganda” and asking for her permit to be reinstated.<sup>152</sup> Likewise Y. Leiva from the valley of Santa Cruz, another of those accused, wrote indignantly to Somoza himself, explaining that she had:

...been a faithful collaborator in the political campaigns and in my Party, as you can verify with the entire town of Estelí. I am a leader in Santa Cruz and I have always moved hundreds of people in favor of yourself and the rest of the Liberal Party.

Leiva not only asked she be given the right to return to her business “for the needs of my family that is facing increasing poverty,” she also took the opportunity to ask “you, who are our maximum leader and boss... for understanding and human sentiments so that you help me out in some way—in other words, monetarily.”<sup>153</sup> As with the example of the brothel mentioned in the vignette which opened the chapter, accusations were blamed on the lies of rumormongers and political opponents (non-Liberals), while the claims to rights were staked on personal participation in the periodic electoral contests.

Those better connected apparently did not get their licenses revoked at all, as the mayor of Estelí commented in private to the Minister of the Interior. “They don’t even mention the truly guilty,” she wrote, “those that didn’t spend even a single day in jail for being related to people with political influence in this city.” Among the culpable, she wrote, was “Señor E. Molina”—still in business—“in whose tannery stolen animals were butchered in the late hours of the night

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<sup>152</sup> Telegram E. Jiménez de Espinoza to Mariana Buitrago, Ministro de Gobernación, Estelí, Feb. 8, 1971, AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Box 16, File 5.4.

<sup>153</sup> Telegram, Y. Jimenez to President Somoza, July 20, 1971, Estelí, AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Box 16, File 5.4.

and from whose jeep they sold the meat of these animals clandestinely and also they kept the skins which served as evidence.”<sup>154</sup>

Like cattle-theft, the distribution and sale of alcohol was another pillar in the state’s system of corruption. The production of *aguardiente* or hard liquor was placed in the hands of a state monopoly, and local regime operatives were granted concessions for distribution and sale. This system was apparently ineffective in assuring levels of quality, with semi-poisonous, altered alcohol sold in Condega, La Trinidad and Estelí in order to increase the profit margins of local affiliates. “Clandestine aguardiente was found to exist in various places but the things continue the same,” the mayor of Condega wrote to the Minister of the Interior. “They found altered guaro in the aguardiente warehouse in this town and in the revenue administration of Estelí, mixed with casusa (pure alcohol.) It is terrible that such a thing is happening in a government institution.”<sup>155</sup> When state inspectors came to charge fines, a connection in the National Guard was all that was needed in order to escape punishment.<sup>156</sup>

Many of the semi-illegal businesses were indirectly controlled by National Guard, with the “law enforcement” body profiting greatly from these activities. In the city of Estelí, the area west of the city center along the river such as the barrios Venecia, El Tanque and El Bajío—or Barrio Los Placeres (“the pleasures”)—was filled cantinas, brothels and gambling dens paying into the pockets of the Guardia. Young girls brought from the rural villages were put to work as

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<sup>154</sup> Telegram, Lilliam Vilchez a Vicente Navas, Ministro de Gobernación, to President Somoza, August 9, 1968, Estelí, AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Box 16, File 5.4.

<sup>155</sup> Telegram Romeo González to Ministro de Gobernacion, December 23, 1967, Condega, Estelí, AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Box 16, File 5.1.

<sup>156</sup> *La Prensa*, Mar 19, 1968.

prostitutes earning profits for owners and their military backers. What many remember as an increasing moral corruption of the city was perhaps the inevitable outcome of such widespread profitable opportunities with government endorsement.<sup>157</sup> Drunken shoot-outs and stabbings were common in the streets of this red light district, as *La Prensa* commented in 1968, saying that on “Saturday and Sunday, this city lives like the days of the American West from the movies.”<sup>158</sup> As we saw in the discussion of “El Buen Gusto” that opened the chapter, this was true in the regional towns on a slightly smaller scale. Responding to complaints of a brothel and cantina in the town of Palacagüina in Madriz, the Jefe Político Tula Baca de López confirmed to her superiors that the business did in fact exist. However, she wrote,

If we follow the law, I have the security that we won't be heard. Because the same thing has happened to me when I explain the complaints of the different citizens of this municipality [Somoto] in which 18 brothels are in business and these requests have only provoked the anger of the Señor Comandante [of the National Guard].<sup>159</sup>

A wave of criticism regarding “the low morality” in Somoto were published in *La Prensa*, saying that brothels and cantinas where “the worker and the campesino leave not only their money but also their health” and denouncing the presence of scantily-clad prostitutes in the town's streets.<sup>160</sup>

This outrageous number in the small city of Somoto was eventually lowered through an increase in the bribe claimed by the GN from each business. One brothel owner and matron, señora A.G., wrote to Somoza denouncing:

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<sup>157</sup> Francisco Rivera Quintero and Sergio Ramírez, *La marca del Zorro: hazañas del comandante Francisco Rivera Quintero* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1989), 38.

<sup>158</sup> *La Prensa*, Oct. 18, 1968.

<sup>159</sup> Telegram Tula Vaca de López to Vicente Navas, Ministro de Gobernación, March 23, 1968. Fondo Gobernación, Sección Jefes Políticos, Box 50, Folder 9.0.

<sup>160</sup> *La Prensa*, April 18, 1968.

...the new comandante who has prohibited me from running my business, a cantina with women. He wants to charge me C\$35.00 each woman while before I paid C\$25.00. These women don't cause any problems. I am a poor woman without resources. I beg you to give me the permission to have women and they won't make any problems.<sup>161</sup>

The issue of prostitution and was pilloried by moralists and revolutionaries alike over the coming years, denouncing the regime's complicity with unethical and quasi-illegal activities. Yet, for those who made wealth by altering alcohol, prostituting young girls and women or selling stolen cattle, these tacit nods of support only further tied them into the Somocista system of power.

### **Party Competition, Violence and the 1967 Election of Somoza Debayle**

Though the Liberal Party appeared completely dominant, there existed numerous pockets of traditional opposition in both the towns and throughout the countryside, which often coalesced around the banner of the Conservative Party. Even by the late 1930s, the “historical parallels”—Conservatives and Liberals—were not political parties with clear ideologies and competing programs but rather clientelistic networks tied to elite patrons. The political parties—the Liberals represented by a red flag, the Conservatives by green—essentially mapped onto different family groups through a binary logic: those tacked into the system of patronage, employment and recognition and those that were not. Many times, family feuds and factional disputes within communities that went back generations were given a mask of party competition. In such cases, the party affiliation of one's father became an important part of one's identity passed between

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<sup>161</sup> Her plea was signed “your dear, dear friend and Somocista Liberal.” Telegram, A.G. to President Somoza, forwarded to National Guard comandante, May 5, 1968. Fondo Guardia Nacional, Sección Estado Mayor, Box 24, Exp. 326.

generations.<sup>162</sup> In other communities, the political party of the *patrón*, the landlord providing employment, affected the voting pattern of all those that labored on his estate.

From Somoza's arrival in 1936, the Conservatives were never declared winners of an election, coming closest in 1947 when the joint candidate of the Conservatives and the Independent Liberals had the election stolen from him. Duplicitous Conservative leaders in Granada and Managua consistently made pacts with the various Somozas to extract their quota of power and corruption from the state. Such politicians gained a reputation as “*zancudos*” or blood-sucking mosquitoes. These gentlemen's agreements were signed between Somoza García and the Conservative caudillo General Emiliano Chamorro in 1944, 1950 and again in 1955.<sup>163</sup> On the grassroots level, however, many Conservatives considered themselves oppositionists and followed the anti-regime newspaper *La Prensa* and the radio broadcasts of its editor, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro. Though Conservative Party supporters were found throughout the region, they were generally concentrated in certain geographic areas (communities and valleys) which developed identities as regime opponents. Most famous was Santa Cruz to the south of Estelí and the hinterland of town of Condega. Even outside of these zones, there were family groups that voted for the Conservatives in all of the municipalities, even in Somocista bastions like Somoto.

A more programmatic opposition political party which had some weight in Estelí was the Independent Liberal Party (*Partido Liberal Independiente*, PLI), a dissident offshoot from Somoza's Liberal Party that took up the anti-reelection banner in 1944. Positing itself as the “true” representative of the Liberal ideology and even tracing its roots to Sandino, the PLI gained

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<sup>162</sup> Castillo and Segovias, *La tradición oral en la conformación de la identidad histórica-cultural del municipio de Condega*, 77.

<sup>163</sup> Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza, 1936-1956*.

a number of elite adherents and even a measure of popular support among traditionally liberal families in Matagalpa, León and Estelí. Modesto Vanegas, a PLI supporter from Pueblo Nuevo recalled that:

Somoza was very smart in politics. Before, there used to be an opposition... the so-called opposition parties. He bought off so many men, good opposition leaders. In Estelí, there was an opposition leader from the Independent Liberal Party... a man who had confidence and later he just suddenly stopped. It turned out Somoza gave him a job at the IAN (*Instituto Agrario Nicaragüense*, Nicaraguan Agrarian Institute) and if I'm not mistaken he later married a daughter of [National Guard officer] Fermín Meneses.<sup>164</sup>

Vanegas referred to Dr. Ricardo Hidalgo Jaen, a lawyer and PLI leader from Estelí, whose acceptance of a cushy government job in 1965 left the opposition party deeply divided and weak.<sup>165</sup> “He was our leader,” explained Marco Rivera, a grassroots PLI supporter in the city. “And he gave up everything for his interest in money.”<sup>166</sup>

From 1963 to 1966, the civilian government of René Schick permitted a certain amount of political liberalization, although National Guard director Anastasio Somoza Debayle remained the power behind the throne. With the sudden death of Schick in August 1966, though, the GN chief decided to follow in the footsteps of his father and his brother in assuming the presidency. In response to this threat of yet another Somoza government, the Conservatives joined together with other small parties such as the Independent Liberals, the Social Christians and Communists to form the umbrella group, the National Opposition Union (*Unión Nacional Opositor*, UNO).

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<sup>164</sup> Interview Modesto Vanegas, CNA.1D-31, Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí, 1980. Fermín Meneses was a high-ranking National Guard officer, landowner and businessman in Estelí. He and members of his family were accused of numerous crimes and murders in the 1960s and 70s.

<sup>165</sup> *La Prensa* Feb. 4-9, 1965, Apr. 5, 1965.

<sup>166</sup> Interview Marco Rivera, Estelí, 2010.

With the wholehearted support of *La Prensa* and its well-respected editor Chamorro, the UNO put forward Conservative caudillo Dr. Fernando Agüero Rocha as their candidate for the presidency.

In the run-up the election in Estelí, there was phenomenal mobilization on both sides of the political spectrum. Massive marches and demonstrations were held in favor of Agüero in Estelí with Chamorro present in support.<sup>167</sup> Using the state coffers, the regime responded by massively expanding its voting booths in those rural zones where Somoza was guaranteed to carry the election. For instance, Somocista stronghold San Juan de Limay was now assigned 16 polling stations, including ten in rural areas and on Somocista haciendas, while in “the valleys close to Estelí populated by large nuclei of hamlets where the majority of the population are opposition supporters, not a single polling station was opened.”<sup>168</sup>

As with every election, a number of state-supported “mass organizations” and groups suddenly appeared on the scene. Schoolteachers and other women joined the *Ala Feminina* (Feminine Wing) of the Liberal Party while others joined “fronts” and “associations” filled with public employees and jueces de mesta.<sup>169</sup> Those organizations, such as campesino cooperatives allied with the state, were the target of populist appeals and gifting from the regime in order to reiterate their material interest in the regime’s perpetuation. Consider the following photos in which Somocista landowner and diputado René Molina (in sunglasses and smiling for the cameras) poses ritually hands out loans, insecticides, improved seeds and fertilizers to the

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<sup>167</sup> *La Prensa*, Dec. 13, 1966.

<sup>168</sup> *La Prensa*, Aug. 26, 1966.

<sup>169</sup> *Novedades*, March 26, 1966.



Guasuyuca Cooperative of bean producers in Pueblo Nuevo, alongside representatives of the National Guard, the Banco Nacional, and the Ala Feminina of the PLN.<sup>170</sup> In the facial expression of the recipients and the “benevolent” authorities, the power dynamics of shame and obeisance could be no clearer.



Figure 2. Diputado René Molina Valenzuela (smiling in sunglasses) provides fertilizer for the Guasuyuca Cooperative in Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí. *Novedades*, May 21, 1966.

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<sup>170</sup> *Novedades*, May 21, 1966.



Figure 3: René Molina provides loans for the Guasuyuca Cooperative in Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí. *Novedades*, May 21, 1966.

In preparations for the 1967 election, the threat of violence began to play a major role in the campaign. Contributing to the aggressive atmosphere was the new mass organization (or paramilitary group, according to its opponents) known as the Association of the Somocista Workers, Peasants and Retired Soldiers (*Asociación de Militares Retirados, Obreros y Campesinos Somocistas*, AMROCS). The cities' lumpenproletariat and vast numbers of campesinos in the countryside signed up as members of the organization.<sup>171</sup> In Madriz, the web of the Civil Reserve of ex-Guards was re-anointed AMROCS and welcomed women into its ranks. Large groups formed in almost all of the campesino communities outside of Somoto, including Santa Isabel, Santa Teresa, Tamarindo, Cacaúlí and El Espino.<sup>172</sup> Armed posses

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<sup>171</sup> In Managua, there were clear overlaps—if not simply re-branding—of the *turbas* or mobs of Nicolasa Sevilla, a former prostitute who organized riot squads of *lumpen* from the poor barrios to attack opposition political activities and defend their beloved leaders, the Somozas. What was unique about AMROCS was that the Frentes Populares Somocistas began to have true reach throughout the provinces outside of the capital.

<sup>172</sup> *Novedades*, May 16, 19, 27, 1966.

allegedly patrolled the city streets, using “exaggerated pressure to impede members of the opposition from registering” to vote and provoking “grave tension in Estelí,” according to the opposition newspaper.<sup>173</sup> *La Prensa* even claimed that these groups were led by René Molina and Aniceto Rodríguez, “prominent members of Somocismo... who, showing arms, harass the opposition in the cantons, provoking a delicate situation.”<sup>174</sup> In addition, AMROCS members in Estelí were accused of registering voters each weekend under different names while using handing out alcohol, two blatantly illegal practices even under Somocista election law.<sup>175</sup>

Agüero campaign’s effervescence reached a fevered pitch when his supporters were bused to Managua to participate in a massive march down Roosevelt Boulevard in Managua on January 22, 1967. The events of that day remain shrouded in mystery, confusion and silence. A Conservative campesino from Cusmapa, Madriz recalled that the day of the march:

Pedro Joaquin Chamorro said that all of the opposition should come to Managua and bring a ‘little bit of food.’ But like other campesinos, we were blind and stupid, we thought he was talking about beans and tortillas and it wasn’t that.<sup>176</sup>

Upon arriving to Managua, he said, he realized that many Conservatives had instead arrived with guns and were itching for a fight. Many present recall that Dr. Agüero publicly called on the National Guard to topple the dictatorship, hoping to spark a rebellion against Somoza. Instead, an estimated one hundred peaceful demonstrators were gunned down in the streets at the hands of GN snipers.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> *La Prensa*, Nov. 19, 1966.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *La Prensa*, Nov. 26 and 28, 1966 and Dec. 8 and 19, 1966.

<sup>176</sup> Interview CNA.3C-13, Juan Alvarado Sanchez, Cusmapa, 1980.

<sup>177</sup> Booth, *The End and the Beginning*, 89; Black, *Triumph of the People*, 43–44.

The outcome was two-fold. On the one hand, there was rage and fury among those present and their family members towards the Somoza regime and the GN, which had so pitilessly fired upon them, slaughtering scores. José del Carmen Araúz, from the Conservative community of Santa Cruz, noted that “after the massacre, there was popular discontent because they killed people who did nothing more than support a party, those that supported Agüero.”<sup>178</sup> At the same time, in the wake of this massacre, many opposition campesinos began to see the fruitlessness of continued participation in the electoral process, feeling that they had been used by the “big men” (*grandotes*) of the Conservative Party who had brought them as cannon fodder for their putschist pretensions. A campesino from Robledalito in Condega remembered that that day in Managua he lost faith in “General [Emiliano] Chamorro and Dr. Agüero Rocha. I was in their big march. They had their plan but *we* were the ones who suffered.”<sup>179</sup>

The following week, Somoza won a commanding victory in the election. To add insult to injury, Somoza and Fernando Agüero Rocha came together to formulate yet another oligarchic pact known as *Kupia-Kumi* that, once again, brought certain elements of the “zancudo” Conservative elite into the Somoza government. For many of the supporters of the Conservatives, the caudillo Agüero had exposed himself as a false prophet and they were hungry for new options. Asunción Merlo from Cusmapa recalled the day of the massacre being surrounded by smoke on all sides. “I felt tricked” after January 22, he said, “I had always

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<sup>178</sup> Interview, Jose del Carmen Araúz, “El Segoviano”

<sup>179</sup> Interview CNA.1B-242, Fermin Zedilla Peralta, Robledalito, Condega, Estelí, 1980.

participated as an electoral judge for the Conservative Party. We put up with all this and that's why we knew there had to be an armed struggle.”<sup>180</sup>

### **Politics after 1967, Case Study One: The Landowner State and Factional Politics in Estelí and Condega**

Battles over taxation, exemption and corruption figured prominently in all of the municipal conflicts we will now examine. The three cases of factional struggles examined here (Estelí, Condega and Cusmapa) give an idea of how local politics functioned and the variance in political culture between the two zones. With the Conservative Party largely closed locus for conflict in the aftermath 1967 election debacle, divisions within the Liberal Party served as the only channel for criticisms of the system itself. As power became more personalized, arbitrary and corrupt in the wake of Somoza Debayle's assumption of the presidency, there was a more authoritarian inflection to problem-solving among his regional underlings. Reforms to the electoral rules in 1963 allowed “minority” candidates of the ruling party (i.e., outside of the locally dominant cliques) to become mayor with the vote of the Conservative Party alderman, opening an opportunity for significant conflict at the municipal level. Importantly, all three towns discussed here would provide support for the FSLN in the 1970s, allowing us to read these critiques as a sort of “Cahiers de Doléances” of the abuses that later drove the population into the arms of the emerging insurgent opposition.

In 1967, Lilliam Vílchez de Benavides, the local PLN party secretary and an alderwoman on the city council, was the first woman elected as mayor of Estelí in the city's history. Almost immediately upon receiving the office and reviewing the accounts left by her predecessor, doña

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<sup>180</sup> Interview CNA.1D-24, Asunción Merlo, Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí. 1980.

Lilliam wrote to Managua urgently pleading for “auditors to review the management of finances under the previous administration.”<sup>181</sup> Despite the city’s economic dynamism, she found municipal finances were in deep distress, with more than a million córdobas of debt due to malfeasance and corruption. At the same time, many local capitalists, landowners and politicians had paid far less than their required taxes.<sup>182</sup> City hall was in a “chaotic state,” she wrote in an open letter “to the citizenry of Estelí,” as “goods belonging to the municipality had been treated like they were private.... It is time for the representatives of the people make their voices heard... and forget about their outrageous personal family ambitions that are known to all the citizens.”<sup>183</sup> She claimed that the Electric Company of Estelí (*Empresa de Luz Eléctrica de Estelí*)—owned by two leading Somocista politicians—had charged outrageous rates to the city, permitting for the transfer of vast sums of money from municipal coffers into private bank accounts. According to *La Prensa*, she demanded the end of this “anachronistic contract” and a “substantial decrease in the price of these services,” which allegedly provided the owners with profits of “C\$5 million tax free córdobas a year.”<sup>184</sup>

As soon as Vílchez raised these complaints, she invited the fury of the local elite who had benefited from the status quo ante. PLN political leaders withdrew their support for her administration and threatened to purge her from the party if she did not step down immediately.

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<sup>181</sup> Letter Lilliam Vílchez de Benavides to Antonio Coronado Torres, Viceministro de Gobernación, May 3, 1967. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías, Caja 15, Código 5.0.

<sup>182</sup> Partido Social Cristiano de Estelí, letter “Serios Problemas Afectan a Estelí,” *La Prensa*, October 11, 1967; January 1, 1968.

<sup>183</sup> Lilliam Vílchez de Benavides, “Carta abierta a la ciudadanía esteliana,” June 4, 1968, AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías, Caja 15, Código 5.0.

<sup>184</sup> *La Prensa*, April 9, 1968

Paid radio advertising carried out character assassination, accusing Vílchez of criminal behavior and corruption. For her part, Vílchez claimed that those behind the propaganda campaign “owe great sums of money” to the municipal government.<sup>185</sup> “The situation is getting dangerous for the *alcaldesa*,” a confidential report leaked to *La Prensa* explained, “a woman of firm character, honorable and inflexible, she could be forced from office by the politicians.”<sup>186</sup> In the neighboring department of Matagalpa judicial proceedings began against her for supposed embezzlement, charges she denied, insisting that she was the “victim of dirty intrigues on behalf of the local politicians, including the current diputado René Molina Valenzuela and the Jefe Político Señor José Indalecio Rodríguez.”<sup>187</sup> All of her denunciations were to no avail. A miniature “coup d’etat” was carried out in the local city council, with Vílchez stripped of her position. Rumors spread that as her house was encircled by National Guards, she escaped across the rooftops clutching her four-year-old son in her arms.<sup>188</sup> Even from the mayor’s office, she had fought against “city hall” and lost.

A strikingly similar case took place that same year in the neighboring municipality of Condega. This town, as we noted in the previous chapter, had a relatively booming agricultural economy during 1960s, with coffee, cattle and tobacco production taking off and an expanding town center. The incoming mayor, Romeo González—a large hacendado from an alternative faction of the local Liberal Party from that which had ruled in recent years—assumed power and, like Vílchez, found available funds greatly depleted by his predecessors. In order to begin

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<sup>185</sup> *La Prensa*, January 16, 1968

<sup>186</sup> *La Prensa*, April 9, 1968

<sup>187</sup> Lilliam Vílchez de Benavides, “Carta abierta...”

<sup>188</sup> *La Prensa*, April 14, 1968

closing the budgetary shortfall, González began to carry out a survey measuring the publicly-owned municipal *ejido* lands used by the local elites in order to assess the debt they owed. Among those using the town's land for free was Juan María Pérez, coronel of the Civil Reserve, tax collector, aguardiente concessionary and the leader of the opposing Somocista faction in local politics. Others in debt to the town hall were a former mayor, the owner of the movie theater, nearly all of the large ranchers and businessmen of the town, as well as the diputado Molina himself.<sup>189</sup> As a result, these elite groups rose up, practically in rebellion against the mayor. The Jefe Político of Estelí, José Indalecio Rodríguez was sent by the Interior Minister to investigate the alleged "abuses" being carried out by mayor González and reported back to the executive that there was no way to find a solution, "as he has the majority of the population against him, particularly the Liberal Leaders of this zone."<sup>190</sup> González, in his defense, responded to the Vice-Minister of the Interior that:

[T]hose the Jefe Político calls Leaders of course feel defrauded because my authority is for the Citizenry and that in my office there are no privileged people or those who due to their economic position or political influence get to give orders to the authorities. The Law is for the people.... The truth is there is a marked interest that I leave my position as soon as possible. The complainants are the owners of lands or renters of lands and as we are working to measure these lands and apply the respective fees, they think that when I leave office this process will not take place.<sup>191</sup>

As a member of this same local elite, González had few supporters among the wider population and was removed from office a few months later, effectively ending the attempt to charge local

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<sup>189</sup> Romeo González Espinoza, Alcalde of Condega, to Antonio Coronado Torres, Viceministro de Gobernación, July 15, 1967. AGN, Fondo Goberación, Sección Alcaldías, Caja 16, Folder 5.1.

<sup>190</sup> José Indalecio Rodríguez, Jefe Político of Estelí, to Vicente Navas, Ministro de Gobernación, August 31, 1967. , Fondo Goberación, Sección Alcaldías, Caja 16, Folder 5.1.

<sup>191</sup> Romeo González Espinoza, Alcalde of Condega, to Antonio Coronado Torres, Viceministro de Gobernación, September 8, 1967. AGN, Fondo Goberación, Sección Alcaldías, Caja 16, Folder 5.1.



elites their corresponding taxes. Despite his failure, his children would go on to join the opposition, serving as leaders of the community protests and guerrilla activities in the 1970s.

### **Politics after 1967, Case Study Two: Rentier State and Ethnic Conflict in the Indigenous Community of Cusmapa**

In the indigenous community of Cusmapa, conflicts over municipal politics took a decidedly different form, given the regional context of divisions between indigenous communities and ladino politicians. El Carrizal, a remote indigenous community with a royal land title, had long been part of indigenous municipality of San Lucas. However, when non-indigenous farmers hoped to gain access to the best coffee lands in the indigenous municipality, they created a separate ladino-run municipality named Las Sabanas, which included the valley of El Carrizal as part of its patrimony. The indigenous people, located 1,500 meters above sea level alongside the border with Honduras were now cut off from indigenous brethren and ruled over by the ethnically-distinct hacendado groups they referred to as “*los ricos*.” Indigenous ethnicity in western Nicaragua, as Jeffrey Gould has shown in his studies of other indigenous communities, was defined by the 20<sup>th</sup> century not by language or dress but in terms of collective memory, titles to territory and institutional continuities in the Indigenous Communities (*Comunidades Indígenas*.) These Communities were, Gould writes, “roughly the equivalent of a trade union, a powerful local government-cum-political party and a church rolled into one.”<sup>192</sup> The Nicaragua’s “non-indigenous” mestizo identity, he showed, served to deny the continued rights of these communities while ladinos tried to gain control over their lands and resources.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Gould, *To Die in This Way*, 15.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

These Indigenous Community structures functioned to manage collectively-owned land and defend the rights members of the “casta indígena.” Within the indigenous communities of this region, there was very little income differentiation, with individual families holding parcels of land in usufruct and growing corn, beans and sorghum for subsistence. At the same time, the Indigenous Community as a political structure were deeply inserted into the same networks of the Liberal Party and the Somocista state. Thus, while community leaders could stand up to ladino outsiders and make claims on the state, they had little chance of “winning” in the long-run as their authority flowed from the acquiescence of the same ladino bureaucracy.

In the early 1960s, with the help of an enterprising Italian priest, Rafael Maria Fabretto, the community constructed (by hand and pickaxe) a road connecting the valley of “Cusmapa” to the highway. The village was named San José after the patron saint to whom they prayed to survive one of the region’s period droughts. In addition, Fabretto and the indigenous leadership personally lobbied President Rene Schick and General Anastasio Somoza Debayle to have the community grant Cusmapa its own municipality so it could gain access to social services. “We may not produce coffee,” Fabretto reportedly told Somoza, “but we have men and we have hands to vote with.”<sup>194</sup> In this election year, a new municipality was an offer too good to refuse and San José de Cusmapa began Nicaragua’s youngest town in 1963.<sup>195</sup>

While municipal government allowed for the arrival of social services such as a health clinic and expanded education facilities, it also augured the arrival of more intense political

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<sup>194</sup> Interview, Anonymous, Cusmapa, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>195</sup> *Novedades*, November 29, 1962, October 20, 1962, January 8, 1963.

conflicts within the community. Though the town's first mayor was an indigenous leader, two ladino Somocistas from the department of Estelí—Rafael Irías and Luis Beltrán Martínez—quickly assumed dominance not only of the mayor's office but (through local allies) of the Indigenous Community structure itself. Through their political roles, these men gained access to the economic benefits of state power and the resources of the community—namely land and the lumber from the bountiful pine forests. In their struggles for supremacy, both Irías and Beltrán developed cliques of indigenous supporters around themselves. Though the indigenous communities were exempt from state land taxes, Beltrán began his term in office by trying to make them to pay up. The Interior Minister's telegram accepting taxation of the protected indigenous holdings was most chilling. He replied that “the Indigenous Communities, which previously were mutual aid societies, a type of cooperative, should now be considered disappeared because they are considered under Chapter VIII of the Land Reform Law.”<sup>196</sup> This response suggested ignorance of both the history and contemporary legal status of indigenous landholdings in the region. Arguing for the community's disappearance was consistent with the central government's century-long attempt to definitively obliterate indigenous holdnig. When Beltrán announced this government writ to this community, he suddenly had an open mutiny on his hands. “The people here are making a big scandal,” he wrote back to the Minister. “They say I'm the one that is trying to make the Indigenous Community disappear. I want you to tell these people that I'm not the one making the Indigenous Community disappear.”<sup>197</sup> While the Interior

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<sup>196</sup> Telegram, Gustavo Espinoza L, Asesor de Asuntos Municipales to Luis B. Martínez, August 3, 1967. AGN, Fondo de Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías, Caja 26, Folder “SJ de Cusmapa.” Italics added.

<sup>197</sup> Luis Beltrán Martínez to Vicente Navas, Ministro de Gobernación, August 14, 1967. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías, Caja 26, Folder “SJ de Cusmapa.”

Ministry backtracked on its earlier claims, saying there had been a miscommunication, the tension between the ladino political authorities and the traditional ethnic leadership continued to hang in the air.<sup>198</sup> The municipal budget approved by Somoza in August 1968 documented how the ladinos planned on squeezing wealth from the poor villagers. It included 156 taxes, fines and fees applying to all property, sales, services or infractions occurring within the municipality.<sup>199</sup>

Interestingly, in this struggle against land taxation, the ladino leader of the other Somocista faction, Rafael Irías, cynically took the side of indigenous rights. Both he and his sister Rosa (later the mayor of Somoto) were the owners of timber, which they had been extracting from community lands without paying a dime to the alcaldía or the indigenous community. Tula Baca, searching for a solution to the lack of funds, asked to the government to:

...stop the exit of trucks loaded with wood and the continued felling of pine trees until Señora Rosa Amelia Irías de Piñeda pays the taxes she owes this municipality.... She refused to pay the taxes demanded in the Budget Plan, saying that if [Beltrán] kept insisting, her brother Rafael would greet him with bullets (*recibirlo a balazos*)<sup>200</sup>

A little over a year later, Beltrán was shot dead at his dinner table under mysterious circumstances.<sup>201</sup> While some blamed Irías, others noted that Beltrán too had dispossessed the local population and created many enemies in the process.

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<sup>198</sup> Gustavo Espinoza to Luis Beltrán Martínez, CC: Sr. Miliciades Alvarado, August 19, 1967. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías, Caja 26, Folder "SJ de Cusmapa."

<sup>199</sup> *Gaceta Oficial*, September 16, 1968.

<sup>200</sup> Tula Baca to Vicente Navas, December 12, 1968, AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Jefes Políticos, Caja 50, Folder 9.0.

<sup>201</sup> Julián Vásquez A. to Ministerio de Gobernación, February 27, 1970. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías, Caja 26, Folder "SJ de Cusmapa."

The arrival of Rafael Irías and his wife Guisela Garamendia to total power in Cusmapa further aggravated conflict between the indigenous leaders and the mayor's office, as they refused to pay the community for the lumber trucked out of the town on a daily basis.<sup>202</sup> Once they had achieved control of the mayor's office, the local council of the Liberal Party and the judge's office, the couple used their control to impose arbitrary taxes and fines on the campesinos. Even the Somocista Jefe Político Ramón Fiallos could not defend the behavior of this ruling couple, writing privately to the Minister, "It is known that the Mayor and the Local Judge, based on any pretext, apply fines, particularly against humble campesinos who they have jailed without justification."<sup>203</sup> The official letter that the Indigenous Community, led by President Julian Vásquez Alvarado, wrote demanding the removal of the couple is worth quoting at length for the insights it provides:

Our community of San José de Cusmapa for many years has been suffering a series of arbitrary acts, threats and hostility to its dignity by Rafael Irías González and Guísela Garamendia de Irías, a couple which has monopolized politics in our community for their personal interest, taking the positions of Municipal Treasurer, Local Judge, Bailiff and others for themselves.

This man and woman, protected in their roles as authorities and violating all principles of the law, have carried out a series of threats against our humble *comuneros* [indigenous community members] from whom they try to take their land, using all manner of subterfuge from simple trickery to threats of jailing, while applying a series of fines with the only goal of obtaining money at the cost of the humbleness and fear of our campesinos who, threatened by these authorities, give in to their demands. ...

Our town of Cusmapa, humble but tenacious, has for ten years struggled without rest to achieve greater socioeconomic development, carrying out a series of

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<sup>202</sup> Ramón Fiallos to Ministerio de Gobernación, April 1, 1974. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Jefes Políticos, Caja 50, Folder 9.0 Somoto.

<sup>203</sup> Ramón Fiallos to Ministerio de Gobernación, April 5, 1975. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Jefes Políticos, Caja 50, Folder 9.0 Somoto.

community development projects including schools, medical dispensaries, community centers, country roads, nutrition centers, soup kitchens, artesian wells, phone lines, electrification, etc. works that speak for themselves and of the desire for improvement that we want to reach. With the help of our parish priests, Padre Fabretto and Monseñor José Suazo we have been able to obtain them for our wellbeing. Caritas, FAO and AID, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Public Works and other national and international organizations are the friends that have helped us in our struggle against misery. They know the nobility of our race and the healthy desire we have, not for personal gain but to share wellbeing with all of the dispossessed.

...

We are humble but conscious that the authorities are to serve and improve a pueblo, but our authorities of Cusmapa are currently doing the exact opposite: they threaten and exploit our town and look for ways of destroying it.

By appealing before your honorable person, we ask for comprehension and help. What we describe here are not lies or exaggerations, rather they are the faithful testimony of the sad situation which we are living here in Cusmapa: the law of the powerful, an archaic and feudal law, that does not square with our Christian and democratic principles.<sup>204</sup>

Yet their appeals to the “dignity of their race” and their “humbleness” were for naught.

As this conflict continued, Irías used indigenous allies to attempt to take over the community from within to silence his local challengers. In June 1974, for instance, Julian Vásquez, now outgoing President of the Indigenous Community, wrote to the Vice-Minister of the Interior that the incoming president backed by Irías “had participated in ugly maneuvers by interested parties outside of the community.” He continued explaining that the “repulsion of the indigenous pueblo ... can be seen in that in the absurd and ridiculous election, only 42 out of 5000 *comuneros* voted.... Our democratic principles have been violated by unscrupulous and ill-intentioned elements.”<sup>205</sup> Although there are startling parallels between all three cases, the issue of taxation

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<sup>204</sup> Junta directiva Comunidad Indígena Cusmapa to Ramón Fiallos P. Jefe Político, March 20, 1974. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Jefatura Política, Box 50, Folder 9.0.

<sup>205</sup> Julian Vásquez to VM de Gobernación, Dr. Justo García Águila, Fondo Gobernación, June 20, 1974. Sección Comunidades Indígenas, Caja 104, Folder 9.4.

was paramount in struggles at the community level. However, the agricultural and commercial dynamism in Estelí meant that struggles were over the misappropriation of state resources for private profit while in Cusmapa, primitive accumulation and dispossession were practiced against the long-isolated indigenous communities.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have sought to build upon the skeleton of economic development and historical legacies described in Chapter One. We examined the political culture of the dictatorship as it permeated everyday politics in the two regions—participation, ethnic relations and criminality—in order to assure the ascendancy of ruling cliques. Instead of positing the dictatorship as an autonomous entity carrying out repression from above or a “state formation” produced through the agency subaltern actors, we set its developments within the limits of repression and local material conditions. This chapter suggests that argument of geographic differentiation can be fruitfully extended to the structures of the state at various scales.

This chapter serves as an important link to the following two chapters, which deal with the emergence of the Sandinista National Liberation Front within this very milieu and the set of festering social and political conflicts. New social groups produced by economic development, such as high school students and trade unionists, did not find a place in this clientelistic pyramid and would serve the key agents in resistance. The insurgents likewise worked through the elements of local political culture and kinship ties described in these chapters as they recruited and mobilized supporters and denouncing social injustice and the abuses of the authorities.

**Chapter 3.**  
**The Tragic Triangle:**  
**Town and Country in the Genesis of the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Estelí,**  
**1956-1970**

**Introduction**

In May 1970, Igor Úbeda, an 18-year-old former student from Estelí, entered a bank in downtown Managua to carry out an armed robbery (termed “an economic recuperation from the bourgeoisie”) in the name of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, FSLN.) In the process, Igor was shot dead.<sup>206</sup> His mother, Isidora de Úbeda, later remembered her son as “very humble, very country-like (*acampesinado*). Even though he studied here in the city, rather than having only friends in the city he liked to be friends with kids from the *campo*.”<sup>207</sup> Isidora had moved to Estelí with her family from San Rafael del Norte in Jinotega, the very town where Augusto César Sandino had launched his nationalist guerrilla movement decades earlier. Knowing his grandparents had given support to the insurgents of that era, young Igor was as fascinated by these historical events as he was perturbed by the injustices and poverty he saw in the *campo*. His mother, however, could not offer him a heroic narrative of upheaval. Around age 12, she recalled:

He started to ask me to tell him about the war of Sandino. I told him, if you had lived in those times, you wouldn't ask me about it because it was horrible. For me as a child, it was horrible. I didn't know what it was about; I just knew that my father was at risk of being killed. He could be killed by one side or by the Guard. But, [Igor] told me, 'I like this sort of thing. I want to know more about Sandino's life.' He didn't stop asking, he wanted to write down all the things I told him. He kept growing and I could see this was something natural to him: revolution and social change. I suspected something but I didn't know his unease was so great.

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<sup>206</sup> *La Prensa*, May 17, 1970.

<sup>207</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-270, Isidora de Úbeda, Estelí, 1980.



By his teenage years, Igor joined with a group of high school students in Estelí that were clandestinely organizing FSLN cells in the city. “He was very reserved,” his mother recalled:

He didn’t say anything about this except to certain compañeros that he could trust. In truth, a lot of youths entered but they didn’t like it and quickly quit. But Igor didn’t quit. When he left our home, it was because he was being persecuted.<sup>208</sup>

With his death in Managua, journalists quickly noted that Igor was the *seventh* young person from Estelí to die at the hands of the National Guard in the previous few years. Rumors spread that a large number of students had vanished from the city to join the Sandinistas in the mountains or in clandestine Managua hideouts. More than a dozen other Estelianos were in jail for allegedly taking part in subversive activities, while the National Security Office (OSN)—the GN’s secret police—had opened their first office outside of Managua in the city. “Taking into account the population of this city and that of the whole country,” wrote *La Prensa*, “the percentage of young men from the FSLN that have died at the hands of the military is very high. This suggests that this leftist extremist organization held a school or training center here.”<sup>209</sup> As we will see, the causes went far deeper.

Studies of the leadership of the revolutionary movements have focused on the important role of university students in these efforts.<sup>210</sup> For their critics, that relatively privileged students purported to speak on behalf of others was seen as a sign of hypocrisy. Anti-Sandinista politician Humberto Belli, for instance, argued that:

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<sup>208</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-270, Isidora de Úbeda, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>209</sup> *La Prensa*, May 17, 1970.

<sup>210</sup> Yvon Grenier, *The Emergence of Insurgency in El Salvador: Ideology and Political Will* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999); Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America*, 220.; Francisco J. Barvosa “Insurgent Youth: Culture and Memory in the Sandinista Student Movement,” Unpublished PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2006.

The social base of the Sandinistas was not in the shantytowns where the urban poor ... lived. Nor was it among the urban workers, nor, least of all, among the religious traditionalist peasants. The social base for the FSLN was the Nicaraguan college campuses and secondary schools. This was a substantial base. Due to the youth of the Nicaraguan population (half of the people are under twenty years old) and the vigorous modernizing process begun in the fifties, the Nicaraguan student population was larger than the rather small proletarian class and was increasing at an amazing rate in the sixties.”<sup>211</sup>

David Nolan, likewise, wrote that “objectively, the Sandinismo of the FSLN... was never a lower class phenomenon” but rather “the ideology of a group of young people, mostly middle- or upper-class in origin (or at least upwardly mobile due to their education)” in “search of identification with a mythical community of the common masses.”<sup>212</sup> While students were clearly central to the movement, such arguments suggest that the urban poor and students were two groups separated by a chasm. In Estelí, the FSLN was, in fact, a “lower-class phenomena,” with support diffusing from workers in craft workshops and urban trades to rural wage laborers and sharecroppers in the zones adjacent to the booming towns. Only then was the cause picked up by high school student activists, most of whom were only one generation removed from rural life themselves and only “middle class” in the context of rural Nicaragua.

To understand the origins of the FSLN, we need to move beyond abstractions and begin to understand the way places—regions, towns, communities, neighborhoods, and even specific workshops—came to be imbued with political identity. I examine the origin of Sandinista mobilization as a confluence of two key factors. Firstly, the emerging political culture of conflict in the towns as artisan workers and high school students emerged as political actors challenging

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<sup>211</sup> Humberto Belli, *Breaking Faith: The Sandinista Revolution and Its Impact on Freedom and Christian Faith in Nicaragua* (Westchester, IL: Published by Crossway Books for the Puebla Institute, 1985), 11.

<sup>212</sup> Nolan, *The Ideology of the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution*, 22.

the dominance of regional elites and the Somocista system. In the urban sphere, new class solidarities, built around sociability, residence and political ritual were produced as the very social and physical spaces of the town itself was transformed by urbanization, migration and economic growth. Rather than a dichotomy between “rural” and “urban” spheres, it was where rural life was most integrated into the urban commercial economy *and* where city life was connected to the injustices of the countryside that embraced the revolutionary movement.

The second factor to be considered is the strategy of revolutionary organizing pursued by the FSLN. Inspired by the Cuban Revolution, the geographic imaginary of the Sandinista leadership saw the mountainous fringes with their poverty, memory of struggle and topographic potential for warfare as the future locus of revolutionary warfare. Though this strategy was not very successful in mobilizing the rural populations of the mountains, the approach achieved ironic results as the FSLN unintentionally intersected with the emerging urban social sectors centered on this key node of the country’s economy and society.

### **Sandino’s “Fertilized Terrain”: Guerrilla Landscapes and the Geographic Imaginary**

Though founded perhaps as early as 1961, for much of its early history the FSLN remained a small organization with limited popular support. It spent its nearly two decades of clandestine existence linking up with the diverse, organic currents of dissent throughout the country and regional place-based cultures of resistance. Despite its very few committed militants, the FSLN played an important role in shifting the contours of conflict. There was no unfolding teleology in which the conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s gave the FSLN ever-increasing support culminating in the 1978 insurrection, as revolutionary ideology would have it. As we will see, it was a process that cost many lives, with fits and starts, missteps and backtracking.

Between the death of Sandino in 1934 and the rise of the FSLN, a number of armed uprisings, coup attempts and invasions attempted to overthrow the dictatorship. Particularly in the wake of the assassination of Anastasio Somoza García in 1956 and his substitution in power by his son Luis, exiles carried out a host of cross-border incursions. These efforts, with diverse monikers such as the Sandino Revolutionary Front (Frente Revolucionario Sandino, FRS), rested on varied coalitions of aging guerrilla fighters from Sandino's army, dissident Liberals, Conservatives and leftists, as well as the occasional dissident National Guard general. In September 1958, Ramón Raudales, an elderly former General from Sandino's general staff, led an armed group across the border from Honduras before his group was crushed by the National Guard. The following September, an expedition led by anti-Somocista journalist Manuel Díaz y Sotelo and Cuban internationalist Luis Escalona was repressed by the GN and the jueces de mesta in the rural areas near Estelí.<sup>213</sup> Though participants were killed and tortured in brutal ways, the National Guard did not target the civilian population at large, sensing that these groups were made up of isolated outsiders.

A series of weaknesses overwhelmed these efforts. As we have seen, the countryside had been transformed, both politically and socially, during two previous decades of dictatorship. Rather than "the land of Sandino" ripe for rebellion, they found little popular support and rural population quickly denounced outsiders to the National Guard. When Coronel Santos López, who had fought with Sandino as a youth, was sent to the Estelí area in early 1958 to seek support from local opposition members, the secret police was immediately alerted to his actions. In La Trinidad, intelligence reports stated, López "invited all of the men to participate in a revolution

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<sup>213</sup> Blandón, 467-482, *Impacto*, February 12, 1960.

against the government of Nicaragua, saying that the arms had already arrived from Honduras by truck and mule,” and in Somoto held clandestine meetings at the hacienda San Luis, whose foreman was a former member of Sandino’s army.<sup>214</sup>

Another Achilles' heel was the fact that membership in these early armed efforts shared few organic links to the rural population or even the cities’ poor barrios. “These revolutionary groups that invaded the country were of urban origin,” recalled Salvador Loza Talavera, a worker in Estelí who was anxious to join in the efforts but had no social connections to those involved. “They were people from the so-called middle class or the wealthy. Many of them were professionals and generals and they were organized in the traditional political parties.”<sup>215</sup> The handful of Estelianos who participated in these movements came from the city center, rather than the working class neighborhoods ringing the town or the rural hinterland beyond.

The origin of the Sandinista National Liberation Front needs to be read in a different vein from these earlier groups. The nucleus of the FSLN’s leadership emerged not from disgruntled members of the traditional opposition or former Sandino supporters, but rather a cluster of young activists in the Nicaraguan Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista Nicaragüense*, PSN), the country’s Moscow-backed communist party. Though the PSN has been given little weight by observers hoping to ignore the Marxist origins of the FSLN or Sandinistas hoping to deny credit to the “Old Left,” this party was integral to the early organizational process in Estelí. The PSN, like other communist parties in Latin America, took a moderate position with regard to social revolution, participating in electoral coalitions and opposing violence. From 1956, however, all

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Loza and Rizo, *Mística y coraje*, 57.

eyes in the region were drawn towards the guerrilla war of Fidel Castro which toppled the US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, with little help from the local Community Party. Youth across the continent saw in the Cuba a model for overthrowing entrenched dictatorship and carrying out radical change. The left-wing parties' "go-slow" approach now seemed outdated when compared to the resolute actions of Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara. As early as March 1958, for instance, a red and black "Castro flag" was hung from the Cathedral in the downtown Estelí during the night by unknown activists.<sup>216</sup>

Following the Cuban Revolution, the Nicaraguan Patriotic Youth (*Juventud Patriótica Nicaragüense*, JPN) was founded—allegedly with support from Cuba's new ambassador—as a national organization of young people in favor of revolutionary change.<sup>217</sup> The JPN held its first provincial meetings in 1960, with its representative in Estelí, Armindo Valenzuela, calling on all of the "people of Estelí without distinguishing political party, sex or class, etc."<sup>218</sup> A young PSN and JPN member from Matagalpa, Carlos Fonseca Amador, who had participated in a 1959 invasion attempt with the traditional opposition parties at El Chaparral, was among those convinced of the efficacy of the Cuban model. He played a role in the foundation of another new organization, the New Nicaragua Movement (*Movimiento Nueva Nicaragua*, MNN), which operated from Honduras but established cells in Managua, León and Estelí. During the early 1960s, the JPN and the MNN participated actively in activities related to the Cuban Revolution, denouncing foreign intervention and propagandizing its accomplishments. This led the GN to

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<sup>216</sup> *La Prensa*, March 25, 1958.

<sup>217</sup> *Novedades*, May 22, 1962;

<sup>218</sup> Letter from Salvador Pérez Arévalo, Secretary General of the Executive National Committee of the JPN to Armindo Valenzuela, President of the Directive of the JPN, Estelí, July 15, 1960. CHM-MR, E-001, C-005, 000091

target them as “subversives” by the National Guard. During a mass arrest of MNN supporters, the organization’s representative in Somoto, Julio César Corrales Padilla, was tossed in jail in 1962 and deprived of food and clothing. The local GN officer insisted Corrales Padilla had been arrested for riding “a horse in a drunken state with a pistol in his belt, insulting the Excellent President of the Republic and the Jefe Director of the National Guard, shouting support for communist leaders Khrushchev, Lenin, Fidel Castro and his Cuban Revolution.”<sup>219</sup> In addition, Corrales Padilla was accused of trying to burn down the Ibis movie theater, owned by Somocista businessman.<sup>220</sup> Other young people joined the PSN’s Republican Mobilization (*Movilización Republicana*, MR), an electoral front group.

The FSLN emerged out of this organizational milieu and was led by students who wanted to move directly to armed action by building a base among the campesinos. Initially known simply as the National Liberation Front (*Frente de Liberación Nacional*, FLN), the group added an additional letter to its acronym becoming the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Carlos Fonseca insisted on the name change, arguing that the group needed to link their struggle with the memory of nationalist resistance rather than appear as Soviet-backed “communist” outsiders, as the regime was sure to brand them. Not all agreed with the name change, with some noting Sandino’s lack of a class-based critique of Nicaraguan society, while others felt it would limit membership to those with organic links to the original Sandinistas

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<sup>219</sup> *Novedades*, September 10, 1962.

<sup>220</sup> Document Membresía Movimiento Nueva Nicaragua, 1961, CHM-MR, E-001, C-005, 000096; Orient Bolívar Juárez, *José Juárez Espinoza: Rebeldía, conspiración y martirio de un patriota: Su lucha contra los Somoza, exilio y participación en los movimientos revolucionarios de 1958-1959* (Managua, Nicaragua: Jano, 2010), 27.

movement.<sup>221</sup> In the end, Fonseca's proposition won the day. Thus the Sandinista banner was not an indication that they were guided by popular nationalism rather than a socialist orientation. When Fonseca conducted research into Sandino's history, he noted that the nationalist leader represented "something of a path" which they could use to garner support, refashioning Sandino as a "proletarian guerilla" who had waged his struggle for social change under pre-modern conditions.<sup>222</sup> Sandino's greatest contribution was his anti-imperialism and denunciation of US power, given continuing US support for the National Guard, including arms, money and military advisers.

While some "revisionism" was needed to graft his political legacy onto the newly formed radical organization, his guerrilla strategy shaped the FSLN's own early practice.<sup>223</sup> His guide was Coronel Santos López from Madriz, the "vital link" between the two movements, who returned to the mountains of Matagalpa with the younger men to teach them the basics of guerrilla warfare and strategy. With his help, Fonseca met with aging former soldiers from Sandino's army in northern Nicaragua and in neighboring Honduras. The two men hoped to blend Sandino's strategy with the Cuban method of establishing a small *foco* of committed revolutionaries in the mountains. From distant locales similar to Cuba's storied Sierra Maestra range in or Sandino's El Chipote, a mass peasant army would gather force. "In the mountains, we will bury the heart of the dictatorship," went one FSLN slogan. Indeed, Carlos Fonseca

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<sup>221</sup> Tomás Borge, *La paciente impaciencia* (Júcar, 1990), 140; Monica Baltodano, *Memorias de la lucha sandinista. Tomo I: De la forja de la vanguardia a la montaña* (Managua: IHNCA-UCA, 2010), 187.

<sup>222</sup> Steven Palmer, "Carlos Fonseca and the Construction of Sandinismo in Nicaragua," *Latin American Research Review* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 1988): 91–109.

<sup>223</sup> Nolan, *The Ideology of the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution*, 18.



repeatedly reminded followers of “the rural character of Nicaragua and the advantages that its topography offers,” the rural population’s “relative homogeneity,” “the hacienda character of agriculture,” as well as “the traditional participation of the campesino masses in political struggles, not only in a negative sense [as Somocistas] but in a positive sense.”<sup>224</sup> This praxis formed the basis for early FSLN attempts to launch a guerrilla movement in the isolated regions of Bocay and Río Coco, Pancasán, Waslala and Zinica from 1962 onward. Despite their commitment to this thesis, “the mountain” (*la montaña*) never emerged as a military threat to the regime, instead looming much larger as a symbol of resistance.

A decade later, Fonseca continued to believe that Nicaragua’s revolutionary “tradition is more alive in the countryside and in the mountains than in the city. Without being negative, in the city Sandino is a thing of the past. In the countryside and above all the mountain, Sandino is to large extent of the present.”<sup>225</sup> Yet paradoxically, Fonseca argued, despite “the authority won by Sandino converts into a fertilized terrain,” “the revolutionary virtues of the campesino... are condemned to lethargy without the presence of worker and student guerrillas.”<sup>226</sup> The strategy appears to have overestimated the possibilities for a restoration of Sandino’s peasant army and the regime’s brutal treatment of those who provided succor to the guerrillas. Although it occurred well beyond the eyes of the media and the country’s population, it appears that the GN

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<sup>224</sup> Carlos Fonseca Amador, “Notas sobre algunos problemas actuales,” Abril 20, 1972. CHM, E-001, C-009, 000245, p. 3-4

<sup>225</sup> Carlos Fonseca Amador, “Notas sobre la Montaña y Algunos Otros Temas.” Octubre 8, 1976. CHM, Fondo Movimiento Revolucionario, E-001, C-010, 000259, p 8-9.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

committed large numbers of murders throughout the countryside against those seen as FSLN supporters.

Estelí emerged as a key spoke in the FSLN's strategy as a product of its intended support role for their mountainous bases. Fonseca later recalled that from an early point in the organization's history, pamphlets promoting the Cuban Revolution were sent from Honduras to the capital passing through clandestine storehouses in the city:

Given an accident in its transport, this literature spread a great deal at the regional level, especially in Estelí. We have to take into account that Estelí was an intermediate point between the capital and the border. So, many times these materials stayed some time in Estelí and so they never arrived to Managua but spread in Estelí itself. We have to take into account the role that the diffusion of these materials played, especially in the general inquietude in this zone. It is interesting to note in this sense that it was in a spontaneous form—somewhat improvised—that the central points that we attended came into being. [Estelí] was one of the points we were attending to, but it wasn't planned that it would convert into a central point. This explains the lack of effort in a series of places that do not lie between the border, the capital city or the mountainous region where our organization is operating.<sup>227</sup>

Paralleling its economic development, the city's position as midway point on the Pan-American Highway between Managua and the northern border now served the purposes of the clandestine group. At the same time, social transformations in recent years made the guerrilla organization's success slightly less fortuitous than Fonseca suggests. Let us turn now to a vision of the ways in which the political and economic transformations seen in the first two chapters intersected with these merging forms of resistance.

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<sup>227</sup> "Juan" (Carlos Fonseca), "Notas Experiencias Revolucionarias, s/d. CHM-MR, E-001, C-009, 000239

## **Workers and Artisans: Urban Spaces, Places of Conflict, Cultures of Class**

The period beginning in 1960 was something of a political opening in Nicaragua. Luis Somoza declared amnesties for many of those that had risen up militarily against his government and began laying the groundwork for a less personalistic and more institutionalized regime. René Schick, a civilian Somocista, assumed the presidency in 1963, promising a more moderate, reformist approach to governance in line with Alliance for Progress the US had established to prevent “other Cubas.” Though Anastasio Somoza Debayle remained in power as the head of the National Guard, this interlude did offer openness and rising expectations that were crushed when the GN chief directly assumed the presidency.

At the same time, as seen earlier, it was also a period of economic growth in much of the country. With the traffic on the Pan-American Highway generating commercial ascendancy, Estelí expanded rapidly from 5,550 residents to 12,659 between 1950 and 1963, making it the second largest urban area in northern Nicaragua.<sup>228</sup> The new residents, migrants from the countryside, lived in the new makeshift “barrios” such as El Zapote, El Tanque, San Antonio, Santo Domingo, El Calvario and El Cementerio. These neighborhoods sprang up in the oft-flooded, less habitable areas adjacent to the plateau on which the city center rested. Salvador Loza Talavera, a campesino from the valley of Rodeo Grande, recalled the conditions he and his family found upon arrival in the town:

The poor campesinos came down to Estelí from their homes, their caves, their burrows, the dwellings God have given them, to live in miserable, inhumane houses, without streets, without sidewalks, without water, without electricity, with nothing that would suggest progress. We continued living there as rural

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<sup>228</sup> Census 1963: Cifras Provisionales, *Boletín I*, (Managua, September 1963) , p. 3-9.

campesinos from an indigenous tradition, only now within the jurisdiction of a city and with the worst drawbacks of a city.<sup>229</sup>

In these spaces between rural and urban life—the same neighborhoods famed for shoot-outs, drunken revelry and mobilization for Somoza rallies—a particular political culture of resistance began to lay down roots. Francisco Rivera, from El Zapote, remembered his neighborhood and the city center as virtually “two different worlds.”<sup>230</sup> In the center, the city’s wealthy and middle class lived in well-constructed wood and cement houses on the two avenues expanding outward from the central park, where the state offices and the Cathedral were located. On these main thoroughfares, there were now department stores, pharmacies, hotels, movie theaters, banks and medical offices. Along the highway, gas stations, mechanic workshops, restaurants and motels had sprung up to cater to travelers and truck drivers. The region’s economic ascendance meant that even if average living standards generally rose, there was now far greater inequality between the well-to-do and the average workers in their makeshift slums.

It was in this very city center where the poor searched out jobs, particularly in the workshops producing an array of construction materials, food products, clothing and shoes. The latter was quite important, with between 15 and 25 workshops producing large amounts of basic footwear for use by rural workers on the massive coffee haciendas in the neighboring departments of Matagalpa and Jinotega. By the nature of the production process, where up to twenty *zapateros* sat alongside one another pounding the shoes together, these micro-factories

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<sup>229</sup> Loza and Rizo, *Mística y coraje*, 36.

<sup>230</sup> Quintero and Ramírez, *La marca del Zorro*, 25.

became hotspots for political conversation.<sup>231</sup> As early as 1945, following the passage of Somoza García's celebrated but spottily-applied Labor Code, the *zapateros* of the city formed one of the first trade unions in the north.<sup>232</sup>

In 1960, the shoemakers' union was revived by a number of young workers living in the western barrios alongside the river. Young men from El Zapote, like Adrian Gutierrez, Filemón Rivera, Fausto Garcia and Froylán Cruz founded the Union of Shoemakers of Estelí (*Sindicato de Zapateros de Estelí*). Many of them worked at El Zapatón, owned by Ramón Altamirano, a member of the opposition Liberal Independent Party (PLI) who had joined in Ramón Raudales' guerrilla army in 1958. Using this essentially congenial environment as a home base, they gained members in various workshops throughout the city, including those run by antagonistic patronés with whom they struggled for better wages and conditions.

A motor force behind the political development of these working class unionists was Alejandro Dávila Bolaños, a medical doctor from the city of León who had settled years earlier in Estelí. The bearded Dávila Bolaños gained a national reputation as a scholar for his research into indigenous mythology, language and medicine and local standing among campesinos for his willingness to offer free medical treatment.<sup>233</sup> Though a middle-class professional practicing in the city center, Dávila Bolaños was also a long-time member of the Socialist Party and was routinely tossed in jail by the National Guard at the slightest sign of political conflict in the town.

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<sup>231</sup> In a certain way, this runs parallel to the role of tobacco workers in 20th century Cuba. Miguel Marmol, the famous Salvadoran labor leader, also began his trajectory of struggle as a *zapatero*.

<sup>232</sup> Mack, *Organización y movilización*, 55–56.

<sup>233</sup> *Novedades*, April 23, 1965.

A close friend of his, José Simón Delgado, another medical doctor and a member of the PLI, also gave support to the unionization efforts.

To help the incipient workers' organization, Davila Bolaños gave lectures on a variety of topics in their workshops. Francisco Rivera, the younger brother of union founder Filemón, remembered Dávila Bolaños before a blackboard, explaining:

...the class struggle to them in a nice and simple way. He explained to them that the history of Nicaragua since the beginning of the Spanish colony always involved the oppressors above—the owners of the wealth—and the oppressed always below, accepting the yoke, as was happening in the Somoza dictatorship in present times.<sup>234</sup>

The central role of the doctor in helping the workers is reflected in the great fondness with which he was remembered by the zapateros. “We had a great leader. He was a man that helped in all senses,” unionist Dámaso Picado recalled of the doctor, noting how he offered his own money as insurance against any property damage that could occur during their May First marches:

We saw he was a true leader with heart. A true leader is one who feels the pain of the worker. And he wasn't a worker, he was a doctor. He taught us about Marxism but it was clandestine because you couldn't speak publicly about such things. He taught us world history: the history of Europe, the parties that existed in Europe, the time of Marx, the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And in the United States—which was very interesting—the first of May of 1886.<sup>235</sup>

In the eyes of Estelí's political and economic elite, Dávila Bolaños was something of an “evil genius” who singlehandedly converted once content laborers into violent Sandinista guerrillas. The irony is that while his role in labor mobilization was undeniable, as a PSN member, he

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<sup>234</sup> Quintero and Ramírez, *La marca del Zorro*, 34.

<sup>235</sup> Interview B182 Dámaso Picado, Estelí, 2010.

strongly opposed the method of armed struggle and worked for a political end to the Somoza regime.

In order to facilitate relations between workplaces and different trades, the unionists organized social activities in the city. For instance, on the weekends they held a baseball league with teams of different trades (including the zapateros' own team, *Los Salvajes*) turning the popular pastime into a recruitment tool and opportunity for conversation beyond the ears of the employers.<sup>236</sup> The trade unionists also rented a building for office space, where on weekends they hosted parties to raise funds, bringing together men and women, young and old. From the initial single shoemakers' union, the *sindicalistas* spread outwards into other sectors, helping form unions for construction workers and drivers, as well as one *de oficios varios*, which brought together different trades under a single umbrella. Collectively, these trade unions formed the Federation of Workers of Estelí (*Federación de Trabajadores de Estelí*, FTE), and five unions in the city had been registered with Somoza's Labor Ministry by mid-1963.<sup>237</sup> At the national level, the FTE affiliated with the PSN-led General Labor Confederation-Independent (Confederación General de Trabajo-Independiente, CGT-I.)

Through their personal examples and public demonstrations the unionists galvanized a new political culture. Local business elites—so used to paying the wages they chose and reigning over a quiescent citizenry—called on the National Guard to rough up and arrest sindicalistas for their actions. Yet this harassment only solidified the esteem and credibility of the leadership in the eyes of the barrio youth. For the annual celebration of International Workers' Day on May

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<sup>236</sup> Loza and Rizo, *Mística y coraje*, 42, 69.

<sup>237</sup> *Labor Law and Practice in Nicaragua, BLS Report. No 265*, United States Department of Labor, January 1964, p. 39.

First, the organized marches on the city center behind banners for the different unions, symbolically “invading” the space of the rich and middle class. Filemón Moncada, a zapatero, described an early May First march when the Federation decorated a flatbed truck with a float depicting the hanging of the martyrs of Chicago 1886. When the demonstrators reached the end of the avenue and began pouring into the park, the GN began to break up the march. Moncada remembered that:

The Guardia came and they didn’t understand and they asked what were we doing acting like we were going to hang the rich people of Estelí! Because they didn’t know the history of labor struggles. So they took the trucks from us. The Guard was posted on the other side of the sidewalk with their guns trained on us in firing position and we were all on the other side together. Someone came with the permit and we continued marching.<sup>238</sup>

During another May First event, Filemón Rivera and Dávila Bolaños gave rabble-rousing speeches from the steps of the health clinic alongside the park. Suddenly, the National Guard and civilian paramilitaries rushed the crowd, beating them with gun butts and fists.<sup>239</sup> During this same period, political graffiti started appearing with the acronyms of the unions and leftist organizations, particularly on the walls of the “clean” city center. The unionists also began distributing a newspaper appealing to workers’ rights, which “sold like hotcakes” (“*como pan caliente*”). The city’s wealthy were perturbed to find employees and housemaids speaking the language of class struggle and demanding their labor rights. Under threat of arrest or death by the GN, Dámaso Picado remembered, the unionists were obliged to desist in its publication.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Interview C054, Filemón Moncada, Estelí, 2008.

<sup>239</sup> Loza and Rizo, *Mística y coraje*, 61–63; Quintero and Ramírez, *La marca del Zorro*, 43.

<sup>240</sup> Interview, Dámaso Picado, Estelí, 2010.



The third pole of power in the local political system, the Catholic Church, also came out strongly in opposition to the activities of organized labor. Local priest Monseñor Emilio Santiago Chavarría denounced the “atheistic communism” creeping into the city via the trade unions on his weekly radio program.<sup>241</sup> In this highly religious, country town, such an accusation from a respected figure was enough to tar the unions’ reputation in the eyes of much of the population. The alleged incompatibility between the Left and Catholicism put a major brake on the ability of the movement to expand to other social sectors.

Given the constant abuse of the National Guard, many among the union leadership began to question their mentor Dávila Bolaños’ commitment to a peaceful road to social change. These doubts coincided with the arrival of FSLN activists who had been alerted to the town’s surge in activism. “The compañeros Filemón [Rivera] and Adrian [Gutiérrez] started to make contacts and connections with people in León,” zapatero Salvador Loza Talavera said of the origins of their relationship with the guerrillas:

These people were following us trying to see who we were because they had heard of our history. So they tried to get close and talk to us. They tried to raise our consciousness. In those days, it was hard because you couldn’t trust anyone. They couldn’t trust us and we couldn’t trust them. But we started getting to know each other in depth.<sup>242</sup>

In 1961, just a year after they had formed the *zapateros* union, Carlos Fonseca arrived in the city to hold a clandestine meeting with the goal of forming a “front” in support of armed struggle. In addition to the unionists, representatives of groups allied with the old Sandinistas and student representatives in the MNN and the FLN were invited to join in. Other pre-existing

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<sup>241</sup> *Novedades*, April 23, 1965.

<sup>242</sup> Interview CNA-1<sup>a</sup>.800. Salvador Loza Talavera (Martín), Rodeo Grande, Estelí, 1980.

organizations we have touched on, such as the JPN and MR would serve as feeder groups for these guerrilla efforts.<sup>243</sup> Adrian Gutiérrez, who attended this initial conference, explained that the plan was never to replace the message of the PSN with a nationalist discourse based on Augusto César Sandino, as some historians have suggested, but to simplify the PSN's Marxist discourse to connect with a wider demographic:

Carlos told us... that we are going to change the rules. We are not going to predicate philosophical things because that is what the Socialist Party did, they prepared one to say mechanical and philosophical things from Marxist theory. So Carlos told us, we're not going to do that, we're going to talk to the people in a simple and clear way, with no theory. We're going to explain, especially to the campesino, how much they got paid them and how much goes to the patrón and ask the campesino if that was fair. Ask if he could send his kids to school and who it was that made the landowners into millionaires. Ask the campesinos if they could go to the doctor and explain that the children of the landowners went to study abroad to later come back and keep exploiting the campesinos.<sup>244</sup>

Fonseca's message was not that far removed from that of Dávila Bolaños but his call for direct action against the repressive appealed to those that had suffered at its hands. Within a few years, Filemón Rivera and others were for guerrilla training and strategy at a farm near Managua under Fonseca and other top Sandinista leaders. Other unionists were sent to guerrilla encampments in the mountainous north, including zapatero Fausto Garcia who would be gunned down in rural combat during the 1967 efforts in Pancasán. Though it has been written that the FSLN "had little or no influence in the labor movement, and the PSN dominated the important unions," there a significant overlap between FSLN and the Socialist Party, suggesting that during the 1960s this division was not as sharp as commonly assumed.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Quintero and Ramírez, *La marca del Zorro*, 36.

<sup>244</sup> Loza and Rizo, *Mística y coraje*, 239–240.

<sup>245</sup> Zimmermann, *Sandinista*, 91.

## ¡Al campo! : Rural Organizing, Emerging Solidarities and Repression

“We lived with them and helped them pick corn, helped them pick beans. That is why these people saw us as their protectors,” zapatero Gutiérrez recalled of their methods in organizing unions in rural Condega. They were the locales where the FSLN would later find support for its efforts. “The [Sandinistas] who came there later thought they rebelled spontaneously. No, people had come to orient them and defend them; they felt protected.”<sup>246</sup> This new form of social solidarity, in which urban workers headed to the countryside to live among campesinos in order to organize them suggests a great deal about the spatial nature of class formation. In 1965, both the unionists and their guerrilla allies had their eyes set on shifting efforts to the rural areas, where the majority of the population lived, including approximately 68.5 percent of Estelí’s 71,000 inhabitants.<sup>247</sup>

That same year, *La Prensa* publisher, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, an elite opponent of both the Somoza dictatorship and the radical left, penned an editorial entitled “The Reds, the Countryside, Their Advantages and the Tragic Triangle.” In it, he laid out the severe threat posed to country’s stability by the unjust economic system and the failure of the US-backed Alliance for Progress to fundamentally alter the growing inequalities. “The communists have a fertile terrain in Nicaragua and it is strange that they haven’t taken better advantage of it,” he noted:

We live in the image of our national shield: a triangle whose base is represented by a large, unsatisfied and miserable population and whose tip corresponds to those that direct for themselves all that comes from the production of wealth. And

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<sup>246</sup> Interview, A188, Adrian Gutiérrez, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>247</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, Ministerio de Economía, Industria y Comercio. *Compendio Estadístico 1965-1974*, p. 87.

this triangle could convert in a tragic figure for our *Patria*, as the communists actively work in this wider portion, which is full of the neediest people.<sup>248</sup>

Chamorro dashed off this missive as a warning call to the progressive elites to eliminate the “fertile terrain,” and correctly observed that the leftists had been unable to make much headway among the rural population.

With a regional economy oriented to agricultural production, the threat of unionized day laborers struck great fear into the hearts of the local hacendados. While organized labor had forced some adherence to workplace protections, minimum wages and unionization rights in the factories, plantations and ports of western Nicaragua, the north was lacking in these fundamentals. Working conditions on the haciendas were very poor, as the unionists knew from their childhoods in the campo or their work during the harvests. University student activists from León who arrived to help in the organizing efforts, however, were shocked by the conditions in the countryside. In the campo in the vicinity of Estelí and Madriz, they carried out research into labor and living conditions which they wrote under the byline of the “Rural Union of Estelí” (*Sindicato Agrario de Estelí*), observing:

Nicaraguan agriculture is yet to emerge from feudal relations of production and all of the campesinos suffer the most brutal exploitation. The northern zone of the country is one of the richest in Nicaragua and yet the *campesinado* from this region live in total pauperism which contrasts with the immense riches of the landlords and traders that dedicate themselves to the productive business of robbing the campesinado. These men only have to figure out how to take away the lands and harvests from the campesino, adding them to their own while robbing the rural workers of their labor power through the payment of miserable salaries.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> *La Prensa*, October 2, 1965.

<sup>249</sup> Federación Estudiantil Revolucionaria, (possibly Julio Buitrago) “Informe FER-Sindicato Agrícola de Estelí,” s/d, CHM-FR, E-001, C-012, 000337.

Traditional practices, such as buying in advance (*adelantado*) and sharecropping (*trabajando a medias*), appeared to the university students as something from the dark ages. In the valley of La Plazuela in Palacagüina, the document described with notable shock, landowners paid two córdobas for each *arroba* of corn and five córdobas for an *arroba* of beans, only to turn around and sell them for 20 and 40 córdobas respectively. “Worst of all,” they wrote, “the campesinos only have the opportunity to work [for wages] two months a year during the coffee harvest and receive a salary of five córdobas.”<sup>250</sup> With such low prices for their crops and dismal seasonal wages, campesino families subsisted on a diet of beans, tortillas and “coffee” made of corn. Dysentery and malaria were common and the nearest health center was located nearly 14 *leguas* from the village. Meanwhile, only 20 of the 50 school age children attended classes in a dilapidated schoolhouse. The students’ vision of the miserable life in the countryside served to raise awareness of rural conditions by those in the cities and as a clarion call for the organization of the impoverished campesinos.

The unionists replicated the strategy they had carried out in the city, taking the labor laws passed under Somoza and pushing them to their logical conclusions. The sindicalistas headed to the countryside on their weekends off to organize campesinos, particularly in Rodeo Grande, El Regadío and El Coyolito outside of Estelí, and in Robledal and Canta Gallo in Condega. The Campesino Union of El Regadío (*El Sindicato de Campesinos de El Regadío*), recalled one participant, began attending campaign rallies in Estelí for Somoza, but later broke ranks with the regime as their unionist contacts encouraged them to use their organization to truly fight for better wages. Union member Filiberto Cruz Casco described that, in order to elude repression:

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<sup>250</sup> FER, “Informe FER-Sindicato Agrícola de Estelí,” s/d, CHM-FR, E-001, C-012, 000337.

We carried a book that said “the Labor Code” that Somoza García *viejo* had. This was our protection (*estampa de mampara*) so the Guard would let us hold our meetings. Sometimes when we had our meetings in certain houses, this Guard named Nicolás came to stop us with his loaded rifle (*de bala en boca*). So we chanted our slogans and he left us alone. This Nicolás was the one who was controlling our lives (*imponiendo la vida*) in those days. Already in this union, they told us that the Somoza dictatorship just wanted things for them and the landowners, that it wasn’t good for the poor campesinos, which were us.<sup>251</sup>

In Condega, the unionists made inroads where large coffee estates had expanded by taking up land once farmed by peasant families and reducing them to wage laborers. Though the official rural minimum wage had been raised by Somoza to 8.20 córdobas, these haciendas continued to only pay five. “In Condega, there was lots of work... and lots of injustice,” explained Adrian Gutiérrez:

So we started to penetrate there and advise the people and help with lawyers. We started to fight with lots of consciousness. I told the Frente that we would arrive and investigate how the situation was. So we came, made a demand and when the landowner found out, he fired all of the workers. But when new workers arrived, they had to pay the legal amount.<sup>252</sup>

In this way, the sindicalistas had their greatest success in those areas integrated into the dynamic cash economy, through sharecropping and wage labor.

As always, the epithet of “communist” went far in delegitimizing labor activists in the eyes of many religious campesinos. When a group of union-backed campesinos denounced Condega’s mayor for cutting off use of a road that ran through his property, he dashed off a telegram denouncing their leader as “an enemy of the regime, a declared communist and a

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<sup>251</sup> Interview, CNA.1ª-770, Filiberto Cruz Casco, 1980.

<sup>252</sup> Interview, A188, Adrian Gutiérrez, Estelí, 2010.

disciple of Dávila [Bolaños].”<sup>253</sup> In another letter, the mayor stated that his opponents had “brought the Departmental Leader of the Extremists [Dávila Bolaños] to the hamlet to hand out communist pamphlets and raise their spirits in order to establish a climate of instability.”<sup>254</sup>

In Pueblo Nuevo, efforts to organize a union for rural workers began on the hacienda of Pastor Midence, a local PLN leader and a landowner who had accumulated vast holdings in Cofradías. In response to the organizing efforts, National Guard was called in against the trade unionists. One organizer, Tobías Gadea, was captured by the National Guard in Pueblo Nuevo. “They took off his shoes and they made him walk [to Estelí] barefoot,” said zapatero Filemón Molina. “They told him that if he couldn’t walk anymore they would kill him. He was able to get here and he was put in prison.” After six months—the legal limit to be held without charge—Gadea was released and immediately recaptured, a technique known as *pisa y corre*.<sup>255</sup> The renowned labor leader Domingo Sánchez Salgado (Chagüitillo), the loquacious organizer of the Managua’s construction workers, was among those arrested in Estelí for “leftist activities” in January 1965 (alongside Dámaso Picado and six others) and again in October 1966 in Cofradías itself.<sup>256</sup>

### **Playing with Fire? : Holy Week 1965 and the Demise of the Union Movement**

With arrests and abuse now typical of the tension-filled relationship between the labor unions and the National Guard (and, behind them, the landowners), a major turning point took

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<sup>253</sup> Romeo González, Mayor of Condega, to Comandante GN, Condega, October 16, 1967. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Caja 16, Expediente 5.1.

<sup>254</sup> Romeo González, Mayor of Condega, to Ministro de Gobernación, Condega, November 13, 1967. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Caja 16, Expediente 5.1

<sup>255</sup> Interview C054, Filemón Moncada, Estelí, 2008.

<sup>256</sup> *La Prensa*, January 6, 1965.

place during Holy Week of 1965 as a mysterious rash of arson attacks spread across the city. With the religious processions of Holy Friday underway, explosions rocked the house of *diputado* René Molina, which was quickly engulfed in flames. In the melee that followed, an estimated 70,000 córdobas worth of jewelry disappeared from the home. The following night, a home in the barrio San Antonio was set ablaze while on Sunday an illegal gambling den was consumed by flames which spread to a neighboring restaurant and a nearby home.<sup>257</sup> Though the city was now crawling with Civil Reserves, Guardias and secret police agents, another similar gasoline fire broke out the following night at four in the morning at a cantina frequented by Somocistas.<sup>258</sup> The arson seemed to following a pattern: it targeted the property and physical infrastructure of the quasi-criminal enterprises linked to the state in both the city center and the barrios.

A climate of tension and fear set over the city. The GN, true to its script, immediately arrested the “chief agitator” Dávila Bolaños, along with a number of the unionists who had been in the organizing efforts, such as Dámaso Picado, Fidel Molina, Ramberto Zeledón and Walter Sosa. A roundtable of the other leading figures from the city, including the GN comandante and the Bishop was held on the local radio station *La Voz de las Segovias*. The leaders took a highly aggressive and threatening tone with Francisco Moreno, a Liberal Party politician and owner of the Electric Company of Estelí, was quoted as declaring that “we have to fight with fire” by attacking “the communists with the same weapons.”<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> *La Prensa*, April 20, 1965.

<sup>258</sup> *La Prensa*, April 26, 1965.

<sup>259</sup> *La Prensa*, April 22, 1965,



The unions were quick to respond to the accusations, declaring their innocence and blaming the fires on a conspiracy of the city's elite. Picado, then serving as Secretary of Culture for the FTE, spoke to the press and condemned the attacks as:

...tricks that the landowners have played, in cahoots with the army and the Bishop to make these groups disappear for the mere fact of demanding better salaries and benefits. These fires are nothing but a plot by these men to create disorder and to provoke the persecution of the workers because what they want to do here in Estelí is something similar to what occurred in Chinandega.<sup>260</sup>

Picado here referred to the repression and murder of activists at the hands of the National Guard in that department.<sup>261</sup> He continued, declaring that the unionists:

knew in advance that the landowners were going to unleash a wave of terror to blame the workers because a someone that was present at a meeting held in the Church rectory with the military, the landowners and the Señor Bishop told us that they were had set up a plot involving fires to finish off the workers because they said we were communists.

He went on to call for dialogue between the trade unions and the military, political and religious authorities to defuse the situation and negotiate a solution to the crisis.<sup>262</sup>

The mysterious arson attacks in Estelí drew a great deal of attention nationally, with President Schick inaugurating a commission to investigate their origin. An editorial in *La Prensa*, perhaps penned by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, denounced the lack of a timely response to the fires by the GN as well as the accusations the unionists made against the religious authorities for their supposed role in the plot. The editorial concluded, saying:

What is happening in Estelí? Why is one house after another burning in this city? Is it true that some right-wing gentlemen, converted in Neros, burn their own

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<sup>260</sup> *La Prensa*, April 25, 1965

<sup>261</sup> Gould, *To Lead as Equals* Chapter 9 and 10.

<sup>262</sup> *La Prensa*, April 25, 1965

town to put the blame for the fires on innocent members of the extremist parties? Or is it the other way around and along with terrorist fires they are lighting the flames of criminal libel?... The inversion of values is reaching the point of chaos. A little more leniency and irresponsibility by our authorities and Nicaragua will enter the orbit of the Belgian Congo. We are playing—literally—with fire! <sup>263</sup>

The National Guard appeared to have been unable who had been responsible for the arson. The local Comandante wrote to Somoza blaming two brothers, one a travel agent near the park and the other who was “exiled various times from the country for his radical ideas and currently is studying in Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow.” The report went on to claim, erroneously, that the brothers “put bombs in the house of the mayor Don Salvador Gómez and in the house of Don José Antonio Molina, father of Don René Molina Valenzuela, who died as a result several days later.”<sup>264</sup> Even among the former unionists, the origin of this spate of fires remains a contested part of the memory. While Dámaso Picado maintained that his accusations of conspiracy had been veridical, Adrian Gutiérrez countered that the fires were actually the work of a secret FSLN squad with the goal of destroying:

...the scandalous centers of vice owned by the bourgeoisie.... They found locales where they played cards, dice and roulette, and were owned by the government. They investigated them and then set them on fire. They blamed [Dávila Bolaños], but he didn't know. He was not a lover of violence. Later, we saw that terrorism was not with the thinking of the revolution. Because terrorism—Carlos Fonseca said—is reactionary. So this calmed down. If not, they would have had to set all of Nicaragua on fire.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> *La Prensa*, April 27, 1965.

<sup>264</sup> Comandante of Estelí to President Schick and Anastasio Somoza, August 19, 1965. AGN, Fondo Guardia Nacional, Sección Estado Mayor, Caja 22, Expediente 314.

<sup>265</sup> Interview A188, Adrian Gutierrez, Estelí, 2010.

Whichever account is valid, the flames engulfing Estelí precipitated a rapid reaction in the form of a crackdown by the regime, truncating the progress of union organizing in both the city and the campo.

Much of the union leadership was blacklisted from the workshops of Estelí. Following the Holy Week events, organizing above ground in Estelí became increasingly impossible, with Filemón Rivera and three others arrested in July simply for selling the MR party platform in the city park.<sup>266</sup> Though he was released after 24 hours, Filemón soon got into a fistfight with a member of the National Guard at one of the zapateros' baseball games and decided to go underground, directly joining the guerrillas.<sup>267</sup> It was a pattern on numerous occasions, as union activists were further radicalized by repression and passed on to more aggressive forms of struggle. Years later, with poor health and behind bars for participation in the FSLN, Filemón Rivera noted that he “began to work with the campesinos by way of the labor unions,” but when the Guard began accusing him of crimes he “got scared and joined the Frente” for protection. He explained to reporters: “I’ve only been in the Frente so that we workers and campesinos could earn better wages. I did what I could.”<sup>268</sup>

The unions attempted to maintain the momentum they had accumulated in the early 1960s but found little success. The arrests continued, with union founder Adrian Gutierrez captured in the shoe workshop and accused of being in possession of sticks of dynamite.<sup>269</sup> When a shootout erupted between the National Guard and three apparently intoxicated civilians “of

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<sup>266</sup> *La Prensa*, July 6, 1965

<sup>267</sup> Interview A191, Pedro Pablo Espinoza, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>268</sup> *La Prensa*, July 15, 1979.

<sup>269</sup> *La Prensa*, December 2, 1966

left-wing tendencies” near the market, another wave of arrests by the secret police took place, including the opposition party leaders, and many of the young workers, including Gutiérrez (again), Juan Machado, Luis Enrique Rojas, and William Moreno. Even *La Prensa*, no friend to labor unions, commented that

The captures have provoked great nervousness in the city and as the arrests seem directed particularly toward the workers’ leadership, various workers in leadership positions have opted to leave the city to prevent the repression being carried out by the secret police.<sup>270</sup>

Gutiérrez remembered the day of the latter arrest with great pain. “They started to beat me savagely,” he described:

They took me to a farm near the Mina La India and they beat me and until I was unconscious. Then they urinated on me. I infuriated them because they asked where Carlos Fonseca was and I answered that I didn’t know that *señor*. So they told me, ‘He’s not a señor, he’s a young man like you.’ And I responded, ‘To me, Carlos Fonseca is a señor.’ So they beat me even more.”

When he was brought to the prison in León and thrown into a cell for female prisoners, he said, “My body was so inflamed from the all of the beatings that the women began screaming like crazy.”<sup>271</sup> Gutiérrez recounted a visit to his cell from Anastasio Somoza Debayle himself—accompanied by an American adviser—to request he work with the government. Swallowing his pride and anger, he calmly declined the invitation explaining that he did, he would face reprisal by Carlos Fonseca. After promising Somoza that he would leave labor organizing forever, he says the dictator told him: “You’re going to be freed but I am going to recommend one thing: you need to walk on eggshells (*con pies de plomo*) because if you work against me, you will be back

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<sup>270</sup> *La Prensa*, October 21, 1967.

<sup>271</sup> Interview, Adrian Gutierrez, 2010.

in jail or the hospital. Or the cemetery.”<sup>272</sup> Other young men captured during this period, Gutiérrez notes, were more willing to challenge the dictator to his face—spitting bloody saliva at him—and paid the ultimate sacrifice for their actions. Like his friend Filemón before him, upon his release, Adrian went underground and headed to the mountains with the FSLN. With the union movement decimated and its most committed cadres vanishing, momentum could not be maintained among the campesinos. Instead, the locus of popular organizing shifted to another emerging social sector outside of the system of patronage: high school students.

### **The Student Movement: Strikes, Occupations and State Violence**

The city’s first high school, the Instituto de Estelí, was opened in 1965, marking a major shift not only in education opportunities but also in the infrastructure through which the opposition movement would take hold. It was the Catholic Church, rather than the Somocista state, which time and again played the main role in the promotion of education. Other public and private high schools, such as the Escuela Normal Rural, the Colegio Nuestra Señora del Rosario, the Liceo Agrícola, the Instituto Nacional Diurno and the Centro Regional del Norte, all became magnets for student organizing through the FSLN-backed Revolutionary Student Federation (*Federación Estudiantil Revolucionario*, FER).

Student organizations in Estelí initially focused their protest on explicitly “student issues.” For instance, one thousand students went on strike in May of 1968 when the Instituto’s founder, Padre Francisco “Chico” Luis Espinoza—considered the school’s “heart and soul”—was replaced by a more pliable Somocista director.<sup>273</sup> The following year, students at the

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<sup>272</sup> Interview, Adrian Gutierrez, 2010.

<sup>273</sup> *La Prensa*, May 10, 1968.

agricultural school carried out a strike involving 130 students.<sup>274</sup> As with the earlier unionization efforts, FSLN cadres helped plan a strategy to merge the rebelliousness of the youths with their cause. Leonel Raules, a student during this period, noted that:

When we started organizing the Secondary Student Federation (FES). We started to have contact with *compañeros* who at this time we didn't know were in the Frente: Leonel Rugama, Alesio Blandón and José Benito Escobar. When the student movement started to carry out strikes and occupations of the Cathedral, the students started to have a more direct vision of what the Sandinista Front was. We started to realize that the student demands had an origin: that the *compañeros* that were members of the Frente were, through the student leaders, were beginning to organize us... to give a more political character to the student struggles. Because the majority of what the students asked for in the high schools were that they got rid of a teacher or had better food in the dorms or changed the math teacher. Things like that. They were not political demands, but rather student demands disconnected from the reality of the population. But by 1970, you could note that student participation now taken had a political character.<sup>275</sup>

In 1968, students hoped to carry out an act in memory of the university students killed by the National Guard nine years earlier during a demonstration in León and their request was denied by Jefe Político José Indalecio Rodríguez. He explained in a dismissive tone that such a march “would be taken advantage of by elements opposed to the National Government and at the same time by... leftist elements that want to use this day for their own benefit [*llevar agua a su molino.*]”<sup>276</sup> Following the memorial mass, both male and female students were arrested by the National Guard in a pattern that continued over coming weeks were captured “day and night” in the city.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> *La Prensa*, May 22, 1969.

<sup>275</sup> Interview CNA.2<sup>a</sup>-54, Leon Raules, Ocotal, Nueva Segovia, 1980.

<sup>276</sup> Clemente Rodríguez, Ramón Parrales, Rolando Benavides, Armino Valenzuela and Gloria Sotomayor to Indalecio Rodríguez, July 12, 1968 and J.I. Rodríguez to student leaders, July 22, 1968. AGN, Fondo Jefe Político, box 46, Exp. 15.0.

<sup>277</sup> *La Prensa*, September 23, 1968 and November 13, 1968.

Though the student activists looked up to the trade unionists who had begun the movement in the city, there were certain social distinctions between the two groups. At the early stage of the 1960s, the differences between the two groups were most clearly manifested in the recreational activities of the two groups. While the baseball league had been a recruitment tool for the young workers organized in the marginal barrios, the middle-class student activists from the city center were more interested in soccer, a recent trend brought by private school students studying in other parts of Nicaragua.<sup>278</sup> However, we should not exaggerate the social differences or characterize them as an alliance between rich and poor. These students were not members of the city's elite and their living standards were far lower than Managua's "middle class." Indeed, these young people were often only one generation removed from rural life, having spent ample time in the rural areas near Estelí in their youth and were well aware of the conditions in the countryside.<sup>279</sup>

At the same time, a number of high school graduates such as Leonel Rugama went on to study at the UNAN where they came into contact with the FER and the FSLN. Rugama, the son of a schoolteacher and a carpenter, had graduated at the top of the class at the Instituto and wrote poetry which he published nationally and internationally. Carlos Fonseca later wrote that this:

...creative achievement can best be appreciated by the fact that the fact that Rugama came from a working class family from Estelí, a predominantly rural Nicaraguan region in which only the tiny number of young people have access to the sixth grade in few schools in the area of the department.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> Loza and Rizo, *Mística y coraje*, 68.

<sup>279</sup> Cabestrero, *Leonel Rugama*, 146.

<sup>280</sup> Carlos Fonseca "Conmemorando el 15 de Enero de 1970," 1973, CHM-MR, E-001, C-008, 000212. *Leonel Rugama: El delito de tomar la vida en serio*.

That Rugama was seen as working class from the outsiders' perspective suggests the malleability of these categories. From the parochial vision of Estelí, of course, all of those who lived in the city center were seen as having far greater opportunities than those that lived in the barrios.

Though he had originally entered a seminary to become a priest, Rugama was converted instead to the FSLN and became a fervent admirer of the man he called "Saint Che Guevara." He was acutely aware of the divisions between his life opportunities and campesinos of the rural valley of Matapalos outside of Estelí where he was born. While at the National University in León, Rugama penned a prize-winning 1968 essay on "The Student and the Revolution," which remarked that students "in spite of their theoretical vision of the situation, have a restricted knowledge of it. Because of this, it is necessary to live for a time among the oppressed class and thus learn of its problems."<sup>281</sup> He went on to remark that if their efforts to mobilize the masses, "needs us to give our lives, we will give them without hoping that we be mentioned by the future generations. But let us assure that our bones will be the columns of that future."<sup>282</sup>

Rugama's entrance into the seminary and close friendship with several progressive priests like Chico Luis suggests the decidedly different relationship emerging vis-à-vis the Catholic Church. While the Church had previously lined up with the city's landowning elites and the National Guard in opposing unionization as "communism," the clergy now denounced acts of violence against the protesting students—many of whom had studied in the schools the Church had established. We will discuss these seismic shifts in the Catholic Church more fully in the next chapter.

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<sup>281</sup> Cabestrero, *Leonel Rugama*, 284.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.



From student strikes, the FER passed onto more brash occupations of public space in order to spread their message. Students took over the city's Cathedral in a protest action on December 1970 with the slogan "*Una navidad sin reos políticos*" ("A Christmas without political prisoners") and again in April of 1971, draping the Nicaraguan flag from the bell tower and using pews to block access to the doors. They rang the church bells, calling the unsuspecting population downtown to a public denunciation of the Somoza regime. The National Guard replied with tear gas canisters and beatings of the crowd until a truce was worked out between the GN comandante and the student leaders, with the intermediation of a local priest.<sup>283</sup>

The GN further radicalized the student movement with its use of outright violence that left victims dead on the concrete. On July 15, 1969, a group of student Sandinista militants were killed Managua by the GN, among them Alesio Blandón, an activist from Estelí. This action sparked the indignation of the students in Estelí, who poured into the streets, protesting with a mock casket in a funeral march. The National Guard attempted to block the demonstrators' path, placing themselves in their path, meeting the student's indignation with brute force. As scuffles broke out, the GN opened fire on the crowd. Twenty-seven-year-old René Barrantes and 21-year-old Manuel Herrera were the two students killed by their bullets. *La Prensa*, the newspaper for which Barrantes had worked as a journalist, responded the following day that, "it is tragic to think that to impede a symbolic burial, the authorities have produced two real burials that will surely produce more agitation than the first."<sup>284</sup> In the welling up of rage, thousands turned out for the burials of the two young men, while schoolteachers, high school administrators and the

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<sup>283</sup> Orient Bolívar Juárez, *La Catedral de Estelí: historia y arquitectura* (Editorial Hispamer, 1993), 180–183.

<sup>284</sup> *La Prensa*, July 18, 1969, *Novedades*, July 26, 1969..

Catholic Church condemned the act of repression. Students, unlike workers and campesinos, were not the “category” of civilians that could be beaten and killed at the state’s discretion. Due to the intense public anger about the murdered young men, the Guard was forced to carry out a court martial of commanding officer Captain Fermín Meneses and one of his subordinates, though they were permitted to continue serving in Estelí as the trial continued.<sup>285</sup>

As with the earlier repression of the union movement, the arrests and attacks may have silenced some activists but radicalized others to join the FSLN. These former students were sent to the safe houses in Managua or the guerrilla bases in the mountains to the east. On January 15 of the following year, Leonel Ruguma was shot dead in a pitched battle in Managua, after the National Guard attacked what it called a “Sandinista nest” with overwhelming military force, killing three suspected Sandinistas. OSN patrols tore apart five houses in Estelí searching for Ruguma’s friend and fellow student organizer, Enrique Lorente Ruiz. Lorente would also be shot dead in León two months later.<sup>286</sup> The death of Igor Úbeda mentioned in the chapter’s opening also occurred during this period as well. When Somoza arrived in Estelí to hold a rally, FSLN guerrilla Adrian Gutierrez escaped an OSN ambush, leaving two secret police agents dead near the bridge to the neighborhood El Rosario. Once again, numerous arson attacks were carried out throughout the city, setting tobacco warehouses ablaze and destroying millions of córdobas worth of the treasured leaves.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> *La Prensa*, August 26, August 28, 1969.

<sup>286</sup> *La Prensa*, January 1, 1970

<sup>287</sup> *La Prensa*, March 25 and April 9, 1970.

The besieged student movement, like the unions before them, had proven unable to challenge the regime's violence, which sent many activists streaming into the arms of the guerrilla organization and effectively validating their thesis of armed struggle. When the FSLN arrived to organize the students a half decade later, they found an Esteliano student population interested in military activities rather than nonviolent direct actions or social movements.<sup>288</sup> This was a clear legacy of the intense experience of cruelty which they had witnessed during the late 1960s.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined the social origins and the ideological orientation of the revolutionary movement and the manner in which localities and groups of people became progressively integrated into it. Against simplistic arguments involving class position, regime type or even insurgent behavior, in this case study we returned to the importance of the local, decentralized forms in which these took on meaning.

In essence we asked: How is *place* endowed with political identity and how are objective factors—material and immaterial—given meaning through movement formation and the strategies of revolutionary agents? The emerging urban society with its rural economic base and semi-rural political culture seen in previous chapters provided opportunities for mobilization, while the effort to expand into the guerrillas' the campo (the locus of Chamorro's "Tragic Triangle") was stifled by both state repression and ideological factors inherent in the system of domination. As we will see in the following chapter, this strategy and division of labor was hotly

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<sup>288</sup> Monica Baltodano, *Memorias de la lucha sandinista. Tomo II: El crisol de las insurrecciones: Las Segovias, Managua y León* (Managua: IHNCA-UCA, 2010), 52.

debated within the FSLN during the coming decade. In the next chapter, we turn to the revolutionary movements' tremendous expansion during the 1970s as it linked itself with traditionally religious popular culture and the new ideological current of liberation theology. In the process, it invited scores of previously excluded groups—such as women, middle class Churchgoers and large numbers of *campesinos*—into the revolutionary fold.

**Chapter 4.**  
**“Persecuting the Living Christ”:**  
**Mapping Liberation Theology onto the Body Politic, 1968-1976**

**Introduction**

It was Good Friday and a procession of religious folk marched through the hot streets of Estelí—filled to maximum capacity for Holy Week—in honor of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. “From the mass of people, they brought out a ‘Living Christ,’” the campesina María Briones recalled:

It was a brother of mine, Juan Ramón Briones... he participated as the Living Christ. Padre Julio came and prepared this person with the cross, made him look all dirty and worn-out, shoeless with a broken *sombrero*, and he brought him into the procession... Even in our valley of La Montañita, we didn’t know who he was because they made him look so haggard.

Along the procession route, soldiers from the National Guard followed close behind, hoping to capture the filthy vagrant who was shuffling alongside the parishioners decked out in their Sunday best. “I guess [the Guards] didn’t understand what was going on,” his sister continued:

Then Padre Julio came and took the cross from the Living Christ and he brought him close and he said in his prayers: Viva el Cristo Vivo! In the Stations of the Cross, Padre Julio spoke of slavery, of the rich, of the bourgeoisie and of those who had nothing. [He said] they had saved him from the Guard who were persecuting him because he was so filthy... On [Easter] Sunday, Padre Julio brought this up in Mass and said that we knew that this image was well adored... He called on the people to see the needs of the People, the situation of the Living Christ and how Somoza was treating him. The parishioners always spoke about this moment... Well, those that agreed with it. Those that didn’t agree, well, they didn’t want to hear what he was saying.<sup>289</sup>

This anecdote about experience of Christian political practice Estelí in the years prior to the revolution reveals a great deal about the Catholic liberation theology which took hold in the

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<sup>289</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-753, María Briones, Sabana Redonda, Estelí, 1980.

region. During this period, the Sandinista National Liberation Front created a deep base of support throughout the urban neighborhoods and rural valleys of the region, even as the Somoza regime responded by capturing and torturing those accused of aiding the rebels. There is a close correlation between where this religious movement took hold and where Sandinistas were later able to mobilize the population for their revolutionary efforts.

Liberation theology has been the subject of great debate among religious scholars, social scientists and political commentators. Given its contentiousness as the intersection of two perennially controversial topics—politics and religion—it is not surprising that much of the analysis has been highly partisan and polemical in nature. This was particularly so in Nicaragua where the FSLN carried out the first modern revolution in which the population participated massively *as Christians*. Essentially, the early considerations of this phenomenon can be delineated into two schools of interpretation. On the one hand, Church intellectuals and other conservative voices denounced liberation theology as the infiltration of Marxist ideas through Scriptural misreading and the “politicizing” manipulations of outsiders.<sup>290</sup> Of course, such an interpretation ignores the deep interrelation between the Catholic Church and political power throughout history, as well as the historic tension between radicalism and the status quo embedded in Christianity. On the other end of the spectrum, sympathetic observers quickly jettisoned the “opium of the masses” vision of religion as folly and uncritically cheered its central role in popular mobilization. Indeed, some imagined liberation theology as part of a longer heritage which included Catholicism’s critiques of capitalist modernity and the religiously

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<sup>290</sup> For example, see: Michael Novak, *Will It Liberate?: Questions About Liberation Theology* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1991); Belli, *Breaking Faith*.

inspired revolutions in England and the United States.<sup>291</sup> Others argued this new radical Catholicism was the natural outgrowth of traditional popular religiosity, and not introduced “from without” but “arrived at through local reflection and mediation.”<sup>292</sup> Bearers of this reading, Phillip Berryman observed, “romantically [saw] theologians as distilling the wisdom already present in the base communities,” an interpretation which he saw lacking in historical context and acknowledgment of the contribution of “organized actions by clergy and laypeople.”<sup>293</sup>

The case studies in this chapter give lie to both poles of the debate. Against the more populist interpretation, it is more than apparent that a new discourse—brought “from above” by “outsiders”—was a major rupture, permitting cultural forms such as popular religiosity to be re-coded in new ways. That “waking up” or “removing the blindfold” emerged as the central trope in the grassroots narratives of this period is suggestive of the inapplicability of a perspective which sees popular radicalism emerging from everyday forms of resistance and popular consciousness somehow existing outside of hegemony.<sup>294</sup> The role that liberation theology played in Nicaragua’s political conflict cannot be understood through theologians’ texts but must

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<sup>291</sup> Michael Dodson and Laura Nuzzi O’Shaughnessy, *Nicaragua’s Other Revolution: Religious Faith and Political Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Michael Lowy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (Verso, 1996).

<sup>292</sup> Lancaster, *Thanks to God and the Revolution*, 85. Debra Sabia makes the argument that “it was primarily religious factors (rather than class or political ideology) that brought the popular sector together” in the revolutionary effort. In this chapter, I show liberation theology represented the unity of all three factors. See *Contradiction and Conflict: The Popular Church in Nicaragua* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 210–211.

<sup>293</sup> Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: Essential Facts About the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America--and Beyond* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 81.

<sup>294</sup> Lancaster, *Thanks to God and the Revolution*; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 1985); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990); Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Duke University Press, 1999).

rather be examined through the ways these ideas were taken up, re-interpreted, and acted upon by grassroots actors at particular times and in specific localities.<sup>295</sup>

In the Segovias, I argue, liberation theology's appeal had little to do with deep traditions of rebellion or visions of utopian upheaval. The narratives and documents of participants suggest that its greatest contribution was to secularize traditional mysticism by introducing a critique of social inequality informed by the moral lessons of the Bible. These problems cried out not for the "end times" but quotidian solutions linked to everyday life, such as access to social services and higher wages. These appeals made an impact insofar as the traditional intellectuals like clergymen spoke meaningfully to the living conditions and material needs of the population within a given parish. Finally, as I will demonstrate, the arrests, torture and murder of civilian activists transformed this social movement. While effective in crushing the guerrilla networks, these brutal acts shifted the locus of denunciation from social structures and class hierarchy to the tyranny of the Somoza regime itself.

### **Catholic Perspectives Transformed: Local, National and International Factors**

The Vatican II council held between 1962 and 1965, aiming to bring the Roman Catholic Church into the modern world provoked massive changes at all levels of the Latin American Church. This coincided with the publications of Pope John XXIII's encyclicals *Mater et Magistra* in 1961 and *Pacem em Terris* in 1963 which went beyond prior statements in their social criticism, calling for human rights, health care, education and housing for all people. At

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<sup>295</sup> As Daniel Levine puts it in his critical review of the literature on liberation theology in Nicaragua, "The issues it raises are not the exclusive province of professional intellectuals - ordinary people debate and discuss them all the time, and act according to their rights. The methods of intellectual history are, therefore, not adequate to the task. Analysis has got to move out of the library and start listening to popular voices and asking how movements start, grow, and survive," Daniel H. Levine, "Review: How Not to Understand Liberation Theology, Nicaragua, or Both," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 32, no. 3 (October 1, 1990): 231.



the 1968 meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (*Conferencia Episcopal Latinoamericana*, CELAM) held in Medellín, Colombia, progressive Church intellectuals had their proposals largely accepted as regional policy approved by the Bishops.<sup>296</sup> Defined as a “preferential option for the poor,” liberation theology argued for a re-reading of the Bible with an eye towards myriad structures of injustice identified as “sins,” and which Christians had an obligation to actively change. In addition to these interpretative changes, there were also shifts in the relations between laity, clergy and the society at large. With the formation of local Christian reading circles led by trained laypeople, the Bishops also found a solution toward the problem of large rural populations and limited numbers of priests. In Nicaragua, these changes were felt at the First Pastoral Congress held in January and February 1969, which featured fierce debate between liberationists and conservatives over the plan for adapting the Medellín platform.

Though the Nicaraguan Church had traditionally been allied with economic and political elites, these international intellectual shifts coincided with a series of events which had strained relations between Church and state. In the early 1960s, as we saw, the Diocese of Estelí denounced organized labor as “atheistic communism” and justified workers’ arrests by the regime. In the latter half of the decade, however, the National Guard’s aggression toward high school students led the once quiescent Church to speak out. Following the 1969 shooting deaths of two local students, Bishop Carranza y López and the diocese’s 14 priests publicly denounced “the imprudent actions of those that are called on to maintain order and the respect of life” and called for “respect of the personal safety of human beings and their right to life.”<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>297</sup> *La Prensa*, August 8, 1969.

National Guard violence against members of the clergy and schoolteachers generated further animosity between the Christians in Estelí and the regime. The following year, Padre Francisco Mejía from Estelí, was brutally beaten by the National Guard after attempting to negotiate at the scene of a shoot-out between the FSLN and the GN in Managua. The Bishop of Estelí initially refused to acknowledge that the abuse had taken place, but following the protests of numerous Catholics, the Nicaraguan Church itself took the extraordinary step of excommunicating the secret police agents involved in the torture.<sup>298</sup> That year's nationwide schoolteachers' strike likewise helped push the Church closer towards a stance of opposition. In October, the GN violent expelled members the local teachers' union from their meeting place in the Church rectory. In the process, the Guard aimed their rifles at a number of teachers as well as Padre Chico Luis Espinoza, the founder and director of the city's first high school. Again, the Bishop spoke out against the National Guard's actions, denouncing the violation of the Church's sanctity, giving the teachers his support and providing assurances that they could return.<sup>299</sup>

Another project which contributed greatly to the Diocese's transformation was the *Cursillos de Cristiandad*. The cursillos were short-term Bible study seminars following a Spanish model brought by Jesuits based at the Central American University (*Universidad Centroamericana*, UCA) in Managua. Often the cursillos began with an initial retreat (*retiro*) in which a group of ten or so married couples spent a weekend studying the Sacrament of Marriage

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<sup>298</sup> *La Prensa*, January 20-21, 1970, Rosa María Pochet Coronado and Abelino Martínez, *Nicaragua--Iglesia: manipulación o profecía?* (San José: Editorial DEI, Departamento Ecueménico de Investigaciones, 1987), 82; Giulio Girardi, Benjamín Forcano, and José María Vigil, eds., *Nicaragua, trinchera teológica: para una teología de la liberación desde Nicaragua* (Managua/Madrid: Lóquez ediciones : Centro Ecueménico Antonio Valdivieso, 1987), 92.

<sup>299</sup> *La Prensa*, October 20-21, 1970.

and the Christian message's importance to relations between husband and wife.<sup>300</sup> Rather than a complex theological reading, the cursillos had the goal of re-evangelization through the generation of community and the direct experience of Christian faith.<sup>301</sup> Importantly, early cursillos and retiros focused little on political or socioeconomic critique, emphasizing instead spiritual transformation and what one author calls a “mystical worldview,” involving prayer, song and ritual.<sup>302</sup> However, the formation of communities based around these religious practices was central to the success and survival of such groups under the dictatorship.<sup>303</sup>

As with the national program, early cursillos in Estelí focused exclusively on the middle- and upper-class citizens from the city center, drawing doctors, dentists, lawyers, teachers and other professionals. This policy of searching out the “*gente decente*”—what Medellín documents call “los Elites”—to serve as the “vertebrae” for cultural renovation and to carry out social change via somewhat paternalistic actions in favor of the poor, orphaned and sick.<sup>304</sup> Importantly, in Estelí a number of the lay leaders that emerged were supporters of the opposition parties that had backed Fernando Agüero in the 1967 election. Local businessman Felipe Barreda, a member of the city's Lion's Club and the Chamber of Commerce, and his wife Mery, joined in one of the cursillos in Managua on a whim. Their participation in the retiro served as something of a

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<sup>300</sup> Coronado and Martínez, *Nicaragua--Iglesia*, 75–76; Juan Hervas, *Manual de dirigentes de cursillos de cristiandad* (Euramérica, 1968).

<sup>301</sup> Carlos Mantica, “Ubicación del Método de Cursillos dentro de la Pastoral de Conjunto,” in *De cara al futuro de la Iglesia en Nicaragua* (Ediciones Fichero Pastoral Centroamericano, 1968), 191.

<sup>302</sup> Debra Sabia, *Contradiction and Conflict: The Popular Church in Nicaragua* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 64.

<sup>303</sup> Daniel H. Levine, “Assessing the Impacts of Liberation Theology in Latin America,” *The Review of Politics* 50, no. 2 (April 1, 1988): 252.

<sup>304</sup> Mantica, “Ubicación del Método de Cursillos dentro de la Pastoral de Conjunto,” 207.

spiritual “rebirth” for the couple, strengthening their marriage and leading them to participate actively in Church activities over the coming decade. The Barredas later invited their close friends Josefa Ruiz Lorente and her husband Rodolfo Rodríguez (known as “Chilo Negro”) to join in and they too played important roles in the coming years.<sup>305</sup> Given the “preferential option for the poor,” Josefa Ruiz recalled, the later cursillos became increasingly critical of the status quo:

We started to study the documents of the Church, the new documents. For example: Vatican II and Medellín... These were the documents that we studied. And the Bible too, of course; all of this was based on the Bible. So this awoke in us a consciousness: the Renovation of the Church. In this period, the Christian base communities were born. On the one hand, we were getting together to raise consciousness and at the same time these Church documents were inviting us to participate in a changing of the structures. We couldn’t say we were Christians if we were living in structures of injustice and crime and remaining quiet. We couldn’t. So in these groups we were able to raise critical consciousness but also to participate in changing things.<sup>306</sup>

Though few local residents involved were involved, the National Guard quickly perceived the “threat” of this new movement given the links of cursillos leaders to the minor Social Christian Party, formed by Conservative Party youths to promote a social democratic “Christian Democracy” along the lines of Chilean President Eduardo Frei. The city’s comandante, Lieutenant Colonel Ricardo López, wrote in June 1969 to Somoza explaining that the GN had:

through a diligent investigation, determined that the Social Christian Party—communism disguised with an exotic name whose ideas cannot compete with those of the Nationalist Liberal Party—have created a new front group with the

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<sup>305</sup> Teófilo Cabestrero, *No los separó la muerte: Felipe y Mary Barreda, esposos cristianos que dieron su vida por Nicaragua* (Editorial Sal Terrae, 1985), 96.

<sup>306</sup> Interview A185, Josefa Ruíz Lorente, El Calvario, Estelí, 2010.

name of Cursillistas, with the unquestionable goal of taking power by any means possible.<sup>307</sup>

Blocking religious meetings, however, was impossible given the power of the Catholic Church and its deep roots in popular consciousness. In the coming years, the cursillos expanded so rapidly that even the local GN comandante would come to join in their prayer sessions.<sup>308</sup>

It is common to suggest that liberation theology movement made an impact through “upper-class families” disgusted by Somoza’s regime, particularly in the wake of the 1972 earthquake and splits within the country’s elite families.<sup>309</sup> However, as we will see, liberation theology’s true power was not its ability to generate the sympathy of the elites, but in its mobilization of large numbers of the poor majority in hopes of transforming their dismal living conditions.

### **“He Put the Gospel into True Practice”: Cursillos, Class Identity and Political Action in Rural Estelí**

If Bishop López y Carranza adapted to the shifting tides, a younger generation of priests provoked the greatest changes in the diocese. These men, often but not exclusively of foreign birth, were highly critical of what they saw as the Church’s traditional role in bolstering the status quo and generating apathy and indifference among the campesinos.<sup>310</sup> The most prominent

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<sup>307</sup> Telegram from Lt. Cnl. Ricardo López to President Somoza, June 17, 1969. Archivo Nacional, Fondo Guardia Nacional, Section Estado Mayor, Box 15, File 265.

<sup>308</sup> Quintero and Ramírez, *La marca del Zorro*, 166–167.

<sup>309</sup> Gilbert, *Sandinistas*; Booth, *The End and the Beginning*; Rose J. Spalding, *Capitalists and Revolution in Nicaragua: Opposition and Accommodation, 1979-1993* (UNC Press Books, 1994); Ferrero Blanco, *La Nicaragua de los Somoza*, 110.

<sup>310</sup> Diócesis de Estelí, “Presencia cristiana en el proceso revolucionario,” in *Apuntes para una teología nicaragüense: encuentro de teología : 8-14 de septiembre de 1980* (Centro Antonio Valdivieso, 1981), 46.

member of this group was Colombian priest Julio López, who arrived in Estelí to serve as a parish priest shortly after the 1972 earthquake in Managua.

Padre Julio was a native of Medellín, Colombia and had studied for the priesthood amidst the atmospherics of the 1968 conference. With his longish hair and boundless enthusiasm, Julio made his base in El Calvario, a barrio to the southwest of the city center, blocks from where the first Sandinista efforts had taken hold a decade earlier. El Calvario was unique in that its population had a recent history of collective participation in community betterment projects: demanding electricity, running water, plumbing and sidewalks from the government and helping to fundraise for and build their own church.<sup>311</sup> Julio integrated himself into the community through a series of practical projects that addressing local problems. For instance, he began a campaign to close the infamous National Guard-supported cantinas and brothels that remained social blights throughout the neighborhoods. In the process, Padre Julio linked Christian conceptions of morality and ethics with the practical needs of the local families.<sup>312</sup> To address the social roots of these problems, he also helped established an office of Caritas, the Church's aid program, and organized a credit and savings cooperatives for local residents. These concrete improvements—rather than a fiery utopianism—convinced many of his good will.

Padre Julio also insisted that the cursillo effort needed to expand from the literate middle and upper classes to the marginal neighborhoods and the rural villages and hamlets outside of the city. As he noted:

The cursillos began with the idea and had the mentality that they would bring people with a certain cultural and economic position, because they believed that

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<sup>311</sup> *La Prensa*, September 6, 1969.

<sup>312</sup> Equipo Pastoral de Estelí, *Camino de liberación* (Equipo Pastoral de Estelí, Nicaragua, 1980), 35.

the people above were going to change the atmosphere. It was a good idea because all social sectors have good people. But it didn't extend from being something for very a few people. There was a great feeling but we left a lot of people out. That was when I had the idea that instead of using these criteria, we should bring people from the countryside to the cursillo and do it in a much simpler way.<sup>313</sup>

Given that, there were only 14 priests for diocese's 250,000 faithful in 1971, the idea of training laypeople known as Delegates of the Word of God had a certain utilitarian logic as well.<sup>314</sup>

Popular religious practice in rural Estelí was seen as “fanatically Catholic” and yet did not involve a deep awareness of the Bible or the teachings of Christ. Particularly during the region's lengthy ecclesiastical dependence on León prior to 1963, the rural population was accustomed to few pastoral visits, and its local religious practices remained largely beyond the purview of the official Church.<sup>315</sup> This popular religiosity manifested itself in the large processions held in the city, which generated a sort of “collective effervescence” through which Catholic identity was both constructed and consecrated. As in the rest of Nicaragua, the most important dates on the religious calendar were the annual *fiestas patronales*—which celebrated each town's patron saint, and Holy Week—both of which brought business as usual to a standstill. Such events drew the rural population to the towns for devotion and celebration, during which copious amounts of alcohol were also consumed. Though they provided an escape from the drudgeries of rural life, these religious processions were not inherently subversive in a carnivalesque sense nor were they a source of rebellion against the dominant culture as some have suggested.

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<sup>313</sup> Interview A219, Padre Julio López, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>314</sup> Hegg and Castillo, *Religión y política*, 109.

<sup>315</sup> Diócesis de Estelí, “Presencia cristiana en el proceso revolucionario,” 45.

Nicaraguan Catholicism, as everyday practice, was likewise imbued with a deep sense of providentialism, seeing all that came to pass as God's plan for mankind and promising suffering in this life would be rewarded in the next.<sup>316</sup> There were also appeals to the myriad mediating forces between the will of the Lord, involving localized myths, saints, magical objects and symbols not sanctified by the official Church.<sup>317</sup> Some campesinos recalled believing that Somoza was "a God on Earth," consecrated by the Church and who they supported with religious fervor. At times, traditional religiosity offered spaces for criticism of the landed elite, such as the cases of devil-pact narratives seen elsewhere in Nicaragua and Latin America. For instance, many local campesinos claimed Somocista landowner Aniceto Rodríguez made a pact with the Devil in exchange for bags full of money with which to buy up the fertile land.<sup>318</sup> Even when such criticisms spread as rural rumor, the origin of social problems were blamed on demonic forces, serving to legitimate fatalism in the face of growing inequality.

Rather than reaffirming these practice, the new generation of priests acknowledged the deep faith but also called for a purification of the elements seen as "superstitious" or "magical." At Vatican II, this distinction was defined to as that between "popular religion" and "adult" religious practice.<sup>319</sup> Liberation theologians, although rarely noted in retrospect, often saw

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<sup>316</sup> Baltodano, *Entre el Estado Conquistador y el Estado Nación*.

<sup>317</sup> Frutos Valle "Religiosidad Popular en Estelí," cited in Diego Irarrázaval, "Nicaragua: una sorprendente religiosidad," in *Religión y política en América Central: hacia una nueva interpretación de la religiosidad popular*, by Pablo Richard and Diego Irarrázaval (Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones, 1981), 38.

<sup>318</sup> Isolda Rodríguez Rosales, "Estelí en mi recuerdo," in *Anécdotas Nicaragüenses* (Fondo Editorial CIRA, 2004), 28; Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979*, 28-32; Michael Taussig, *Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, 1988.

<sup>319</sup> Pablo Richard, "Religiosidad popular en Centroamérica," in *Religión y política en América Central: hacia una nueva interpretación de la religiosidad popular*, by Diego Irarrázaval and Pablo Richard (Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones, 1981), 12.



popular religiosity as a form of ideological “alienation,” which needed to be extirpated to produce a new modernizing, “internally secularizing” Christianity.<sup>320</sup> While critical of contemporary society, liberation theology did not pine for the return to the halcyon days of peace and egalitarianism. Instead, it called for a modernized application of Biblical lessons for a new, more just social order. Rather than collapsing spiritual and profane “planes of existence” as in millenarian discourse, it secularized characters and parables from Scripture as metaphors for contemporary social problems.

The *cursillos* led to a veritable re-evangelization of the baptized and nominally Catholic rural population, generating new spiritual identities and social relations. Those campesinos selected to serve as lay Delegates of the Word for each rural community were brought for weekend retreats at the Center of Pastoral Formation in rural San Ramón to the north of the city. Urban lay people then divided up responsibility for the rural “pastoral zones” in the countryside to assure spiritual continuity, leading fasts, vigils and prayer circles.<sup>321</sup> In an important way, the Catholic Church formed new networks linking city and country as the activists left the city on weekends to head to places like Santa Cruz, El Regadío, Tomabú, El Pastoreo, La Montañita and San Roque.

The dominant figure during the *retiro* weekends was Padre Julio, held in great esteem due to both his personal charisma and the profound symbolic power of the Catholic Church in the eyes of rural population. “He was a very loved man and very friendly,” recalled Abelardo Velásquez Laguna, a campesino from Santa Cruz. “He put the Gospel into true practice, he took

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<sup>320</sup> Cristián Parker G, *Otra lógica en América Latina: religión popular y modernización capitalista* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), 50.

<sup>321</sup> Interview A185, Josefa Ruíz Lorente, El Calvario, Estelí, 2010.

the Gospel of Christ and put it next the situation in which we lived. When he came, he identified with the poor. He told us that Christ came for the poor.”<sup>322</sup> Padre Julio himself described the message he hoped to share in the retiros, saying his primary focus was on the concept of:

Injustice... And that the things should be shared by the community for all of the people. Everyone should get the salary that they deserve for their work and that no one should be exploited with a miserable salary. That was the worst thing that went on in those days: the injustice. The capitalist had no shame in making their workers labor all day and night for a small wage, no social services and if they got sick, they got fired.<sup>323</sup>

These retiros and cursillos thus focused not on otherworldly cataclysm and the total inversion of the social order but rather on a rather secularized interpretation of “injustice,” referring specifically to class inequality, low wages and exploitation. Such comments were supported with copious textual citations from the Bible, particularly from the Gospels of Christ and the Book of Exodus. To replace their visions of the demonic origin of social problems or the providentialism of God’s inevitable plan, they learned of man-made social structures which could be changed.

The retiros removed campesino participants from their socially-restricted surroundings of village life and brought them into contact with others, developing new conceptions of self, community and social location. Participants described the harmonious sense of union—with Christian brothers and sisters as well as God—as profoundly transformative. Many campesino participants later recalled the weekend spent at San Ramón with great nostalgia and a turning point in their religious and political lives. Don Filiberto Cruz Casco from El Regadío, for instance, explained:

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<sup>322</sup> Interview A238, Abelardo Velásquez Laguna, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>323</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-695, Julio López, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980.

The retiros were beautiful. We went from El Calvario to San Ramón and we were there three days participating with the Bible and talking about God and Brotherhood. Maybe eight of us went from [this community] to the retiro, but they didn't put us all in the same group. Instead, we participated with brothers we didn't know yet from other places, to get to know each other, to learn each other's names. While we were there, we felt a great sense of relief and were rather devoted to God. They started telling us that as Christians we had to find a way to untie ourselves; that we were tied up. And that we had to feel the pain of our brothers.<sup>324</sup>

Campeños almost universally reported these new views as continuity as a jarring rupture with their previous conceptions of the world. In retrospect, they often described the time prior to these consciousness-raising activities being "asleep," "blind," "in darkness" or "blindfolded." For example, two campesinos from La Montañita, Esteban Matute and don Santos, vividly remembered when they were presented with the contemporary reality of Nicaragua:

Don Santos: We learned about the amount of money Somoza had... the amount of land... and the many of us who had nothing. That's when I started to think about the great injustices. That's when I learned about the injustice that Somoza was doing. I didn't even know what 'injustice' was before! We lived in darkness! Before, we were so happy (*contentos*), so used to having the yoke around our necks that we didn't even complain.<sup>325</sup>

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Esteban: Padre Julio asked us how we felt, if we felt happy (*tranquilos*). We answered that yes, we were happy. But he told us, 'You don't understand who is oppressing you! You don't know what this man is doing to you.' They presented some skits and we started waking up. We started realizing that we were ignorant: we had lined up to vote for a man so he could be there always exploiting us, bleeding us dry. But in our naïveté, that's what we were doing.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-770, Filiberto Cruz Casco, El Regadío, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>325</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-677b, Don Santos, Las Labranzas, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>326</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-650, Esteban Matute Cruz, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980

Rather than the traditional hierarchy, deference and incommensurability, campesinos now saw their lives juxtaposed with that of Somoza, the supposed “God on Earth.” This critique of political and economic hierarchies once considered the product of divine writ marked a true paradigm shift.

Initially, Padre Julio maintained a certain amount of euphemism in his presentations, given the presence of secret police informants among the group. As Lilia Ramona Moncada, a campesina from Santa Cruz remembered, “Padre Julio told us about ‘justice’ but I mean he couldn’t just come out and say things because it was dangerous but we started being trained.”<sup>327</sup> As time went on, however, Padre Julio and the other diocese priests decided that the Church “as a free space” should offer “a clear political discourse that—basing itself on Faith—would help Christians face the national reality.”<sup>328</sup> Though she and other campesinos actively absorbed these new perspectives, Lilia explained that “many thought things were going down the wrong road. When we would talk about the Bible, they said we were mixing together religious things with subversive things.”<sup>329</sup>

The cursillo movement made great inroads in La Montañita, an impoverished village outside of the city which faced significant social problems. Perched in the hills to the northwest of the city, La Montañita had been long ignored by both the Church and state and had some of the highest rates of poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition in the region. The village was also infamous for drunken intra-community violence, with *La Prensa* stereotyping it as a place in

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<sup>327</sup> Interview, CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-686, Lilia Ramona Moncada de Velásquez, Los Plancitos, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>328</sup> Diócesis de Estelí, “Presencia cristiana en el proceso revolucionario,” 46.

<sup>329</sup> Interview, CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-686, Lilia Ramona Moncada de Velásquez, Los Plancitos, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980.

which “everyone is armed with machetes and all are aggressive people—to such an extreme that there doesn’t exist a man above the age of ten without a machete scar on his body.”<sup>330</sup> Given such a reputation, it was said that the GN did not even enter the hamlet for fear of the population. Against the advice of his urban parishioners, the Colombian priest decided to head on horseback to La Montañita to try and bring them into the Church’s work. “It was practically a miracle,” Padre Julio explained, incredulous even decades later. “They were rather affectionate with me and became very close to the Church. Later on, [the community] began changing.”<sup>331</sup> As in Estelí, the cursillistas critiqued all manifestations of social corruption, including alcoholism and inter-personal violence and thus helped to shift the behavior of the valley.

A major turning point in the community came when the next presidential election rolled around. The population en masse, thanks to their participation in the retiros, refused to cast their votes on behalf of Somoza as they had always done in the past. The local juez de mesta became infuriated and is remembered as threatening them, “If you don’t go vote, they’re going to throw you all in jail or kill you.” Still, the campesinos remained reticent, don Esteban recalled, responding: “If they kill us, they kill us. We’re not going to give our vote for a man on Earth: we only give our vote for God.”<sup>332</sup> Their response evoked the deep level of faith and determination of the renovation movement, as well as the secular demystification of the power structures.

Santa Cruz, the farming community directly to the south of the city, also participated massively in the emerging religious communities. This valley was well known for its often fair-

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<sup>330</sup> *La Prensa*, February 11, 1965. See also Jaime Herrera Chavarría, “*Estampas de mi tierra*, Editorial Isnaya, Estelí, 2009, p. 110-111.

<sup>331</sup> Interview A219, Julio López, Estelí, 2000.

<sup>332</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-650, Esteban Matute Cruz, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980

skinned and blue-eyed rural day laborers and sharecroppers, and had a tradition of supporting the opposition Conservative Party, making the population quite open to critiques of the Somoza regime. Here as in La Montañita, the arrival of Padre Julio and his cursillistas was linked with decreasing levels of alcoholism throughout the communities. Here, efforts by the Church to engage with local realities led the local organizations to function almost as a trade union for rural workers. Padre Julio and José del Carmen Araúz, a local campesino from Santa Cruz, founded the Christian Youth Movement (*Movimiento Cristiano Juvenil*) and organized local affiliates throughout the department of Estelí. For criticizing the exploitation by the landowners, the Movement soon garnered the enmity of the GN. By mid-1975, José del Carmen remarked, the group began to feel worried for their safety. “We didn’t have any links with anyone in the FSLN to tell us what to do,” Araúz remembered. “We knew that arms were necessary, but we didn’t know where to get arms and confront the Guard, how to defend ourselves from repression.”<sup>333</sup>

### **Other Pathways to Liberationist Praxis: Civic Movements (Condega) and Radio Schools (Cusmapa)**

While cursillos based in the city of Estelí were exceptional in Nicaragua in terms of their reach, other nearby municipalities also participated in the religious activities associated with liberation theology. Though the different towns took different pathways due to local conditions, the parallels are clear. In the neighboring municipality of Condega, from the early 1970s high school students—particularly teenage girls—were the leaders of both Christian and political organizing.<sup>334</sup> The parish priest, Nicaraguan Westher López established Christian base

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<sup>333</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-715.714.703, José del Carmen Araúz (El Segoviano), Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>334</sup> “Presidente Somoza Aprueba Donación...” November 5, 1968, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldía Municipales, Caja 16, Folder 5.0; *La Prensa*, November 15, 1969.

communities (*Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*, CEBs), with help from nuns such as Juanita Hoolen and Marina Bonner.<sup>335</sup> As in Estelí, liberation theology was linked with concrete social projects. Christian youth groups headed to the rural communities, distributing schoolbooks and medicine, helping orphans and the elderly, and fixing bad country roads as they spread the message of liberation theology among the campesinos.<sup>336</sup>

These activities converged on an openly political objective following the 1974 presidential elections in which—due to constitutional reforms—local mayors were up for election on Somoza’s ticket. As in previous contests, the election results in the department of Estelí were blatantly fraudulent, with 51,926 votes cast out of only 39,770 residents of voting age.<sup>337</sup> While Somoza’s reelection was considered a *fait accompli*, many were exasperated to learn that mayor Magdaleno Cerrato had been “reelected” as well. The Christians accused Cerrato of numerous misdeeds, such as stealing donated aid goods destined for earthquake victims for sale at his corner store. As in Estelí, Conservative Party families were the first to join in the protests, but the town was soon covered with graffiti indicating the movement’s reach: “Justice doesn’t have [political party] color,” “Magdaleno run, the People despise you,” “the voice of the People is the Voice of God.”<sup>338</sup> To escalate their protest against the mayor, 22 high school students occupied the town’s Catholic Church (with help from the priest and nuns) and promised to hold it until Cerrato left office. While similar student church occupations had taken

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<sup>335</sup> Castillo and Segovias, *La tradición oral en la conformación de la identidad histórica-cultural del municipio de Condega*, 90.

<sup>336</sup> Rooper, *Fragile Victory*, 91.

<sup>337</sup> *La Prensa*, August 23, 1974.

<sup>338</sup> Castillo and Segovias, *La tradición oral en la conformación de la identidad histórica-cultural del municipio de Condega*, 90.

place in cities over the previous years, they were practically unheard of in rural towns such as Condega.

High school students such as Fidelina Gómez and Amanda Centeno, who had planned and enacted the direct action, however, found themselves elbowed aside by the town's more politically-involved elements. These included members of the traditional political opposition as well as university students from the FER in León who arrived to offer their support. The occupiers elected Aura Velia González, the daughter of former mayor Romeo González, as their leader and she proudly declared that the “struggle will continue until they name another person for [Cerrato's] position.”<sup>339</sup> Many of the protesters hoped that the young Aura Velia herself would be chosen to take over the mayor's office.

To announce their goals, the committee wrote up a collective statement signed by over 1000 local residents explaining their aims which they sent to the Ministry of the Interior. The document stated that:

A General Assembly held in the Catholic Church of this city, with the goal of electing from the participants—all of them *vecinos* [neighbors, townspeople] from the city of Condega and delegates of the neighboring valleys—a Committee of Protest Against the Municipal Mayor Magdaleno Cerrato Torres. The reason for the election of this committee is the poor municipal administration and the anomalies that we consider are hurting the management of our beloved city. The committee elected this morning has the obligation of making the pertinent efforts before the President of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal... and the honorable Minister of the Interior... so that our demand, efforts and force remain within civic bounds without ever breaking with the principles of Our Political Constitution and our Representative Democracy, and will not accept within its elements that are motivated by personal interests and hope to use our movement to subvert public order or attack our Constituted Authorities, as what inspires us to take this serious determination to go before the Competent Authorities is based in the ideals of Our

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<sup>339</sup> *La Prensa*, September 11, 1974.



Liberal National Party perfectly represented in the worthy person of General Anastasio Somoza Debayle.<sup>340</sup>

Interestingly, given the radical nature of their action and the potential threat of repression, the Committee used language flattering of the regime, the Liberal Party and the dictator, as well as a pointed statement excluding those on the political left (“elements... that hope to use our political movement to subvert public order or attack our Constituted Authorities”). While the occupation did not achieve the objective of removing Cerrato, the resulting polarization of Condega’s population would have long-term consequences for the town and its political participation.

The neighboring department of Madriz proved far more closed off to liberation theology, due to widespread support for the Somoza regime and the lower levels of social interaction between the town and country. When activists from the Social Christian Party came to Somoto “with the goal of activating a cell of this political organization” (as the Jefe Político of Madriz put it), they were quickly denounced by locals and “were captured by intelligence agents to investigate their actions.”<sup>341</sup> Even in this context, however, liberation theology was able make headway due to the efforts of committed clergymen and lay people, as well the use of technology to overcome the large distances separating peasant communities.

Monseñor José del Carmen Suazo, a Nicaraguan priest of indigenous background from León was assigned a parish priest of Somoto in 1964 and quickly gained admiration for his constant visits to the villages and communication with campesino slang. When the region faced drought and widespread starvation in 1972-1973, Padre Suazo supported a series of social

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<sup>340</sup> “Acta No. Uno” by Comité Pro –Destitución del Alcalde Municipal de la Ciudad de Condega, September 6, 1974. Archivo Nacional, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Alcaldías Municipales, Box 16, Folder 5.1.

<sup>341</sup> Letter from Ramón Fiallos Pinell to Leandro Marín Abaunza, Minister of the Interior, July 3, 1974. AGN, Fondo Gobernación, Sección Jefes Políticos, Caja 50, Folder 9.0 Somoto.

projects in rural communities, including wells, irrigation systems and the collective farming projects with drought-resistant crops. As elsewhere, tangible service projects aimed at solving local problems were important in sparking the initial appeal of the liberation theology. “For us, this was something totally new: to work all of us together in community,” recalled one campesino from San José Cusmapa. “We were used to working our own little piece of land.”<sup>342</sup> Padre Suazo likewise invited groups of campesinos to attend seminars at the Parish Center for Human Development constructed alongside the temple in Somoto.<sup>343</sup> Suazo, of course, was compelled to speak in a language of euphemism, given the threatening atmosphere in Madriz. The First Commandment (“Thou shalt have no other gods before me”) served to subtly reference the regime and ruler as false “gods.” Others recall a video he played for them which juxtaposed footage of a bird in flight with that of a bird with a chained leg as a visual metaphor for the lack of freedom under the dictatorship. The Church, campesino José Eulogio Hernández explained, was “the principal base which helped us to wake up from that deep slumber we were in, to take off the blindfolds we were wearing. They were the origins of the new dawn: we came to learn we were the children of a single God.”<sup>344</sup> The sense of equality of this new cosmovision was both disorienting and empowering for the indigenous campesinos so long treated as second-class citizens.

Perhaps most importantly, Padre Suazo also helped to establish the literacy program of the Radio Schools of Nicaragua (*Escuelas Radiofónicas de Nicaragua*, ERN) in Somoto. Led by the

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<sup>342</sup> Interview, Anonymous, San José de Cusmapa, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>343</sup> Guerrero and Guerrero, *Madriz (monografía)*, 67.

<sup>344</sup> Interview C111, José Eulogio Hernández Alvarado, Las Sabanas, Madriz, 2010.

Spanish priest Bonifacio Echerri at Radio Católica, the ERN was based on a Colombian model of literacy education for isolated areas which provided equipment, batteries, chalkboards and didactic materials. Each evening, participants gathered around a communal radio for lessons in reading, writing and basic mathematics. Scattered among these lessons were moral and social messages influenced by the paradigm of liberation theology which were inserted by Padre Bonifacio. The show's opening song, by Nicaraguan folk singer José Isaac Carballo, gave a sense of the show's critical perspective and the lyrics were remembered verbatim even decades later by former students:

*Campeſino, aprende a leer,  
Campeſino, aprende a estudiar,  
Campeſino, si lees y estudias,  
será tuyo el suelo donde has de sembrar*

Campeſino, learn to read,  
Campeſino, learn to study,  
Campeſino, if you read and study  
the land where you work will be yours

*Por tu sudor nace cultivo,  
por tu sudor sale el pan,  
y otros se comen tortilla ni gracias te dan*

From your sweat comes the crops,  
From your sweat comes the bread  
and others eat the tortilla and do not  
even thank you

*Campeſino, levanta tu frente,  
también eres gente  
no humilles más.  
Con tus manos izquierda y derecho,  
hacés la cosecha para los demás*

Campeſino, raise your head  
You too are a person,  
Don't be humiliated.  
With your right and left hands,  
You bring in the harvest for  
everyone else<sup>345</sup>

While ERN programming avoided overtly political content, this did little to abate the ire of local Somocista bosses who saw the potential threat of mass literacy and critical thinking among the

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<sup>345</sup> José Isaac Carvallo, "Campeſino" sung from memory by José Eulogio Hernández Alvarado and others. Interview C111, Las Sabanas, Madriz, 2010.

quiescent masses of indigenous campesinos.<sup>346</sup> Somocista cacique Tula Baca opposed the Radio School and she even traveled “around the valleys telling humble campesinos that this educational campaign was totally ‘communist.’”<sup>347</sup> The presence of this new organization in the countryside was worrying for the PLN which maintained a virtual monopoly over the rural population.

Helping Padre Suazo in the organization of the ERN in Cusmapa was a young schoolteacher named Augusto César Salinas Pinell. Though he came from a lower-class Somoto family, even he was shocked by the living conditions, malnutrition and poverty he found in the distant valley of Cusmapa where he was sent as retribution for his participation in the schoolteacher strike.<sup>348</sup> Having secretly made contact with the FSLN by way of trade unionist friends in Estelí, Salinas volunteered as an auxiliary teacher for the Radio Schools during the evening and on weekends headed out on horseback to visit the distant ERN sites. “He entered into the radio school to organize people, the campesinos,” his wife, Esmeralda Marín, recalled. “He had more access to the groups and could talk to the people. Or the night schools, which he promoted here in the town, that’s where he got the best elements that later went underground [to join the guerillas.]”<sup>349</sup> As we saw elsewhere, families traditionally affiliated with the Conservative Party were the first to gravitate to these efforts, but as the work progressed, numerous Somocistas became involved as well.

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<sup>346</sup> Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación Radiofónica, *Siempre estuvimos alerta: testimonios de las escuelas radiofónicas de Nicaragua* (Quito: Secretaría Ejecutiva ALER, 1984).

<sup>347</sup> *La Prensa*, May 11, 1970.

<sup>348</sup> *La Prensa*, February 17, 1970.

<sup>349</sup> Interview CNA.3C-16, Esmeralda Hernández Marín, 1980

## **“To Be Treated as Human Beings”: Guerrilla Strategy, Hybrid Ideology and Civilian Support Networks**

These religious efforts dovetailed with shifts in political strategy of the guerrilla leadership. The FSLN came to recognize that their approach of organizing only in the major cities and the distant mountains had led to a certain stasis by excluding much of the Nicaraguan population from their organizing efforts. While the FSLN continued to assume that the locus of the struggle would be in the mountains, they now focused their efforts on the rural areas closer to the cities. Drawing on the Vietnamese experience, Carlos Fonseca insisted that organization abandon its homogenous treatment of the rural sphere and instead:

...differentiate between three zones: mountain, countryside and city. These specifications permit us to see with more precision the importance of rural organizing. At the same time, it will help us to get over the so-called *mountain-city paralysis*, which we have seen tends to exclude incredibly important areas that should be attended by our Organization.<sup>350</sup>

He also argued that isolated forests and jungles were not the only locales that offered protection and that “a zone with more limited cover might be more advantageous if the actual inhabitants of the place are the ones participating.”<sup>351</sup>

To remedy the “paralysis,” the guerrilla cadres were decentralized into regional groups responsible for the organization of various parts of the country. The main project of the new Northern Regional was the formation of the Augusto César Sandino Trail (inspired by the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Vietnam), which was to connect the city León in the west with the

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<sup>350</sup> Carlos Fonseca Amador, “Notas sobre algunos problemas actuales.” April 20, 1972. CHM, Fondo Movimiento Revolucionario, E-001, C-009, 000245, p. 4. In Fonseca’s notes, the word “plains”—following Vietnamese form—was originally written before being crossed out and replaced by “cities.”

<sup>351</sup> Carlos Fonseca Amador, “2nda Charla del Co. Carlos Fonseca,” September 11, 1973. CHM, Fondo Movimiento Revolucionario, E-001, C-008, 000214.

northeastern mountain base in Kilambé, where the small, permanent guerrilla force operated. Bayardo Arce, Monica Baltodano, Omar Cabezas, Carlos Manuel Morales Fonseca and others were sent to actively organize civilian supporters and recruit guerrillas from among the population of the Segovias. Their goal was to generate such a dense support base, Manuel Morales said, “that we would be able to travel across the country without having to go on a highway, just through the people.”<sup>352</sup>

During this same period, the FSLN’s perception of religious practice and the Church were also undergoing changes. While the FSLN founders were clearly communist militants, many student activists of the late 60s and early 70s had been drawn into political activism and radical politics by way of religious faith. Fonseca, in his conversations with Catholic priests, concluded that it was not necessary to break with Nicaragua’s deep religious heritage. The entrance of the Sandinistas into the region’s emerging Christian networks came by way of personal connections with religious leaders. With guerrillas Bayardo Arce and Julio Maldonado based in the area along the Honduran border, the Sandinistas recruited supporters in each of Cusmapa’s valleys using the very structure of the Radio School. Padre Bonifacio, the ERN coordinator, later jokingly commented with pride to the FSLN organizers that, “all of the work we did in the Radio Schools, you guys took them away.”<sup>353</sup> In Condega, the Centeno siblings who had organized the Christian community groups and the Church occupation were among the guerrillas’ first contacts. The eldest sister, Amanda, a student who later took up arms, declared that:

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<sup>352</sup> Interview A75, Manuel Morales Fonseca, Managua, 2010.

<sup>353</sup> Interview A75, Manuel Morales Fonseca, Managua, 2010; Radiofónica, *Siempre estuvimos alerta*, 146–147.

All of our political reflection took place in the space of the Christian Base Community, not in the FSLN. What the Frente did was to later win over these people, locate the centers of analysis and mobilization. The Frente won them over where the people were developing.<sup>354</sup>

Amanda's brother Toñito guided Omar Cabezas to the rural communities to the east of the town beyond the coffee estates of Daraily, San Jerónimo and Venecia, where the Sandinistas built a web of campesino supporters.<sup>355</sup>

The most fruitful link to the Christian communities came in 1975 when FSLN cadres fled to the city of Estelí, escaping GN repression farther to the north. They found refuge with Padre Julio López, established a close relationship with him and began placing guerrillas throughout the city in the homes of trusted middle class cursillistas, such as the Barreda family and doña Dolores Arróliga. From their base in the city, the guerrillas spread into the rural areas where the Catholic movement found adherents. In Santa Cruz, a new guerrilla squadron named after Sandino's General Pedro Altamirano (known as the GPA) was created with the help of the Christian community.<sup>356</sup>

The main organizing tool used by the guerrillas in the rural areas was the *Cartilla Campesina*, a manual that explained in straightforward and repetitive language how the campesinos had been exploited and marginalized by the landowning elite, which it colloquially called the *grandes ricos*. The document—read aloud in hushed tones by candlelight—had numerous points of overlap with the message of liberation theology heard in the cursillos, retiros

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<sup>354</sup> Interview A041, Amanda Centeno, Condega, Estelí, 2008.

<sup>355</sup> In the town itself, the college-educated children of two of the town's Somocista patriarchs (Romeo González and Santiago Baldovinos) also joined as guerrillas during this period after being radicalized through the student movement.

<sup>356</sup> Baltodano, *Memorias de la lucha sandinista. Tomo II*, 54; Cabezas, *Canción de amor para los hombres*, 201.

and radio broadcasts. Link inequalities of wealth and exploitation in the countryside with the country's external dependence, the *Cartilla* explained:

From the calloused hands of thousands and thousands of campesinos from Nicaragua come the coffee, the cotton, the corn, the beans, the plantains and the other agricultural products, and the cattle. But the money that comes from the campesino's work only benefits a small group of *grandes ricos* millionarios. The Yankee imperialists form a part of this evil gang... [They] pay low prices for the coffee and cotton they buy from us.... and... sell tractors, machetes, medicine, etc. at very high prices. The other members of this mafia that devours the campesinos are the grandes ricos millionarios led by the Somoza family. When this handful of grandes ricos takes the fruit of the hard work from the campesinos something terrible happens. The grandes ricos and their lazy families enjoy all sorts of luxury and pleasure while the campesinos suffer from everything: hunger, sickness, ignorance and lack of clothing.<sup>357</sup>

In its later sections, the document shifts focus from the economic factors to the role of the state, reiterating the confluence of interests between the regime and the landowning class:

The heads of the government and the Guard are not poor campesinos but grandes ricos. The Somoza family is not a family of poor campesinos but rather of grandes ricos. The Colonels and Ministers are not poor campesinos but grandes ricos. It is as clear as the summer sun that the calamities that the campesinos suffer are not from the curse of some strange unknown spirit. These calamities are caused by the grandes ricos and their government and their Guard.<sup>358</sup>

The document here returns to the issue of popular religiosity, specifically discounting the role of “a strange unknown spirit,” provided smokescreen for the actual culprits. The *Cartilla* goes on to call on campesinos to unite and stand up for their rights and their needs, while never mentioning the guerrilla army explicitly.

The ideas found in this guerilla manual were diffused further in 1976 with the launch of a new didactic pamphlet series, *Cristo Campesino*, published by the Center for Agrarian

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<sup>357</sup> *Cartilla Campesina*, s/d, pg. 3. CHM, Fondo Nuevo, box 15, doc. 80.

<sup>358</sup> *Cartilla Campesina*, p. 4.



Education and Advancement (*Centro de Educación y Promoción Agraria*, CEPA), an organization of lay Christians advised by the Jesuits. Written in comic book form with simple drawings and a basic vocabulary, the first and most widely distributed issue of *Cristo Campesino* closely paralleled the radical line of denunciation found in the *Cartilla*. At the same time, by linking the martyrdom of Christ to the suffering of the Nicaraguan campesino, it restored the prophetic and Biblical content which the FSLN clearly avoided in its own documents.



Figure 4. *Cristo Campesino*. **Top panel:** Campesino 1: “If we read the Bible, we see a number of things happened like what’s happening to us today”, Campesino 2: “Yes, well even in those times there were already exploiters and the exploited.” Passage: “The Egyptians treated the Sons of Israel cruelly making them slaves; they made their lives bitter with all sorts of farm work and all types of servitude.” (Ex. 1:13-14)

**Lower Panel:** Rabbi, Roman Centurion, Pontius Pilate: “What he says is not good for us. We have to kill him,” Text: “That is why when Jesus began to preach that the friends of God were those who loved their brothers, those that were united. He was rejected, in the first place, by those who benefitted from exploitation.” Crowd: “Crucify him!!!” Crosses: “Ignorance,” “Bad Salaries,” “Sickness.” *Cristo Campesino*, p. 6, 8.



Figure 5. *Cristo Campesino*. **Top panel:** Text: “There is neither justice nor equality. Society is divided into rich and poor. The rich have made money by the work of the campesinos and workers, paying them low salaries and constantly raising the prices of the things which we need. The rich can go to school... They can go to the hospitals... and we the poor cannot because they charge us 10 peso in the Velez Paiz and more at the other hospitals.” Phrases next to pictures: “Exploiter,” “Sickness,” “Lack of Housing. Beans cost 0.80 in 1972 and now cost 2.00”

**Lower panel:** Text: “And if one goes around talking about Justice and Love, they beat him and accuse him.” Hacendado: “That guy is dangerous!” Campesino: “But... If I only talk about the Gospel...” *Cristo Campesino*, p. 5 – 6.

*Cristo Campesinos* takes the Biblical struggles for Liberation—from the Book of Exodus and the Gospels—as a metaphor for the injustices and inequities of Nicaragua in the 1970s. In one panel, a campesino comments to another on the similarity of Biblical times to events taking place in Nicaragua and the other responds, “Ever since then there have been exploiters and the exploited.” Below this conversation, a passage from Exodus (1:13-14) describes the hard labor the Israelites were forced to do in captivity, while the image features Uncle Sam—representing US economic power and Somoza’s main backer—as the slave driver whipping a Nicaraguan campesino as he plows.<sup>359</sup> Another image shows a campesino family on its own Via Crucis with crosses labeled with social ills such as “bad salaries,” “sickness” and “ignorance.”<sup>360</sup> These same class-related and practical concerns are again raised in the representation of exploitation as the wealthy amass córdobas in moneybags leaving the campesinos without healthcare, education or decent housing.<sup>361</sup>

Pointing towards the important issue of political violence—the “persecution of the Living Christ”—the cartoons compare the Crucifixion to the growing state violence against Christian activists. Thus Jesus finds himself crucified by those religious, political and military authorities who profited from exploitation and rejected his egalitarian vision.<sup>362</sup> A parallel image in the pamphlet places a landowner (a pistol on his waist) denouncing a campesino to the National Guard exactly as the Biblical oppressors did in the other frame. “If ones go around talking about Justice and Love,” the text says, “they beat him and they accuse him.” To the hacendado’s

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<sup>359</sup> *Cristo Campesino No. 1*, 1976, p. 8.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

claims that the campesino is “dangerous,” he merely responds, “But... If I only talk about the Gospel...”<sup>363</sup>

Campesinos from across the region mentioned similar reasons for their initial decision to begin supporting the guerrillas. Essentially, they recalled being attracted to the possibility of basic social services, a minimum level of consumption and a sense of human dignity and honor. In the context of Somoza’s Nicaragua, of course, even these grounded or hopes seemed incredibly radical:

Juan Antonio (Cusmapa): Bayardo told us that if the FSLN won, we were going to have schools and any campesino would be able to study at the university or at a high school. He told us Somoza never cared about the campesinos. But if the Sandinistas won, everyone would learn to read and write. I really liked that because I thought: I’m going to learn to read and write... And maybe go to the university or a high school. This really inspired me. The other thing that inspired me was he told us that the campesinos weren’t going to be exploited but were going to be treated as human beings.<sup>364</sup>

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Don Juan (Cusmapa): He told us that we should fight for the Sandinista Front because over time our children would be able to enjoy benefits: the children would get access to medicine, shoes and clothes. These would be free. The campesinos would have more jobs and they would be better paid and we’d get better prices for our crops. And the adults would have schools.<sup>365</sup>

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Doña María (La Montañita): He told us that the campesino would be able to read, that the campesinos were all going to be equal and we would have medical treatment whether we had money [*riales*] or not. And that we were all going to be treated the same: the haves and the have-nots. The Somoza dictatorship never told us that! There were the rich and there were the poor; those that knew how to read and those that couldn’t. He never cared about those that couldn’t.<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>364</sup> Interview CNA.3C-7, Juan Antonio Espinoza Hernández, Cusmapa, Madriz, 1980

<sup>365</sup> Interview CNA.3C-13, Juan Alvarado Sánchez La Joya 2, Cusmapa, Madriz, 1980.

<sup>366</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-753, María Briones, Sabana Redonda, Estelí, 1980.

In all of these accounts, one can see the importance with which the campesinos treat the idea of being “treated as human beings” which the revolutionaries promised them.

In contrast to Jeffrey Gould’s paradigmatic study of Chinandega, demands for land reform were almost universally unmentioned as a central motivation for support of the guerrillas. The region’s continued access to land with a concomitant dependence on sharecropping and wage labor meant social demands were expressed through calls for increased social services, better wages, and higher prices for agricultural produce. As Estelí was the department with the greatest campesino participation in the guerrilla army, the striking silence on land reform suggests that was not a universal demand.

For those who accepted the rebels’ requests, there were numerous roles they could fill in the support structure the guerrillas were developing. Sebastian Zavala, from rural Condega, remembered being told by Omar Cabezas that “one could work with the guerrillas not just with a gun in their hand, but also through other forms, like giving them food, planting crops for them to harvest, carrying packages, or lending them tools.”<sup>367</sup> Others were called on to work as *correos* (messengers) or as *chanes/baquedanos* (expert guides of the rural trails and mountain paths). Perhaps most risky was offering one’s home as a *casa de seguridad*, a safe house where guerrillas were hidden. Other campesinos even began training in military maneuvers and the use of arms. Moisés Córdoba, the campesino from Canta Gallo worked with Cabezas in choosing those to recruit. “I chose who to ask to join because I knew the area,” he recalled. “All the

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<sup>367</sup> *La Prensa*, August 4, 1976.

peasants who joined were young and members of the Conservative Party. We set up four camps and did military training.”<sup>368</sup>

Late night conversations with the clandestine militants deepened their hosts’ understanding of the cause for which the young people were fighting. Likewise some guerrillas with little experience in Christian activism and an anti-clerical bias came to develop great appreciation for the revolutionary consciousness which had taken root through the Catholic faith. “There was such harmony, it was like a family atmosphere between the guerillas and the Christians,” Padre Julio remembers fondly:

We had the same goal of a revolutionary change, but it was very difficult and dangerous. The Christian families listened to them, talked to them and they listened to us. There was a great reciprocity. Although each of us had their own part to play, they served as a stimulus for us. But as Christians, our job was to do it without any political aspect. But we thought it through and we all agreed that we needed a revolutionary change. So our job was to ‘wake the sleeping’ and theirs was to ‘organize the awake.’<sup>369</sup>

The guerrillas’ presence in supporters’ homes forged a profound sense of community due to their shared risk. In many cases, the families even came to treat the young rebels as their sons and daughters, with a great deal concern for the wellbeing of “los muchachos,” as they called them. These experiences of interrelation, however, were soon cut short by the most brutal wave of repression that the Segovias had seen since the 1930s.

### **“Sealed with their Actions”: Captures, Torture and its Effects, 1975-1976**

In July 1975, following the detection of a guerrilla training camp in Macuelizo, in the department of Nueva Segovia, a crackdown began against Sandinistas’ supporters across the

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<sup>368</sup> Rooper, *Fragile Victory*, 91.

<sup>369</sup> Interview A219, Padre Julio López, Estelí, 2010.

region. The tenuous structures of civilian support fell like dominos before the onslaught of repression, as the National Guard captured unarmed supporters including at least six men in San José de Cusmapa.<sup>370</sup> From there, the GN and secret police trailed the guerrillas into the mountains of rural Condega and the following June arrested nearly the entire male population from the campesino community of Los Planes.<sup>371</sup> This was followed by captures the high school students and teachers who had joined in the Church occupations in Condega. Finally, on November 24, 1976, the GPA squadron in Santa Cruz was involved in a shoot-out with the GN which left two dead, including the guerrilla Santiago Baldovinos from Condega. The combat was followed by a sweep against the local population, including at least thirteen were arrested that day alone.<sup>372</sup>

Through interrogation and torture, the regime began exposing the clandestine world that the FSLN had developed below the surface. The Sandinistas were caught off guard by this rolling crackdown, with Arce emphasizing their “lack of preparation of our support base to stand the investigation so that many of those captured were surprised and vomited all they knew, incriminating themselves and others and the repression expanded.”<sup>373</sup> He insisted that Cabezas “politically and psychologically prepare” the campesinos of Condega in case of further arrests, “insisting that FOR NO REASON should they tell of our presence in the zone, MUCH LESS

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<sup>370</sup> Letter from Bayardo Arce to René Nuñez, April 17, 1976. CHM-MR, E-002, C-017, 000492.

<sup>371</sup> This valley of La Montañita is not to be confused with a like-named indigenous valley to the west of Estelí which was part of the *cursillos* mentioned and central to our study of the counterinsurgent massacres of 1979 in Chapter 8.

<sup>372</sup> Letter from Bayardo Arce to Nelson Velásquez, December 15, 1976. CHM-MR, Nelson Velásquez E-002, C-019, 000557; *La Prensa*, November 26, 1976.

<sup>373</sup> Letter from Bayardo Arce to Omar Cabezas, forwarded to Augusto Salinas Pinell, June 11, 1976. Found by OSN near the house of Leandro Córdoba in Los Planes, Condega, Estelí. Transcribed in OSN file for Bayardo Arce, CHM-MR, E-002, C-017, 000491



that they helped us in any way.”<sup>374</sup> Cabezas did not have time to carry out this task, as the GN swept into the area and numerous campesinos were taken into custody.

When a tortured high school student identified Amanda Centeno as his contact in Condega, she found herself taken to the GN base at Ocotal. Behind bars, she was able to deceive the Guard, “pretending to be a humble *campesina* who didn’t know anything,” she said. Knowing that the guerrillas Cabezas and Baltodano were in her sister’s house, she refused to say anything, “I was protecting my sister, not them [the FSLN]. I told them what they already knew, that the guerrillas had shown up at the high school and I described them by giving a totally fabricated description.”<sup>375</sup> Once released, she discovered that many of her friends and family members had gone into exile, a fact the GN would take as a clear sign of her guilt. She, too, had to flee the country immediately and would only return to Nicaragua as a guerrillera several years later.<sup>376</sup>

The tortures to which they were subjected were incredibly brutal and bespoke of the sense of vengeance with which the Guard treated these suspected guerrilla supporters. One campesino man from Canta Gallo was torn from his bed in June 1976 by the Guardia and taken to their base in Estelí. Once there, he later testified, he was blindfolded and led to a torture chamber by a hugely obese Guard with a reputation as a torturer of great sadism. Several years later, he recalled the tortures in detail:

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Interview A041, Amanda Centeno, 2008.

<sup>376</sup> A number of the high school students went into exile, including Santiago Baldovino’s brother, also went underground and made preparations to leave the country. Letter Bayardo Arce to Mónica Baltodano, December 6, 1976. CHM-MR, E-002, C-021, 000611. Castillo and Segovias, *La tradición oral en la conformación de la identidad histórica-cultural del municipio de Condega*, 96–97.

They tied my feet with electric wires. One of them sat on my hands, another on my feet, and another one on my stomach... They told me that me that I must be well paid by the Frente [for refusing to give them information]. He told me, 'You're going to tell us the truth,' and immediately gave me an electric shock. But because I didn't tell them anything, they gave me so many shocks I lost consciousness. They broke my nose, smashed my teeth and forced me to eat them. I didn't say anything, I preferred that they kill me and not the young people (*los muchachos*) that I knew were from the Frente. They took me to the shower and then again to that room, where they connected [the wires] to my little toe and my ear... They asked over and over again. Because I didn't say anything, they beat me with their rifle butts, connected the wires and kicked me. They also kicked my testicles. To this day, they get inflamed when I walk too much.<sup>377</sup>

The experience was similar to that of campesinos from other communities such as the man from Santa Cruz arrested with his wife and three small children (ranging in age from one month to four years) following the shoot-out near their home. Once in the GN base, he said:

They treated us in a disgusting way: hitting us, blindfolding us and giving us electric shocks. The infants weren't tortured but my wife, yes. They hit her and they tortured another one of my kids. We were all prisoners until the investigators came and they couldn't find culpability.<sup>378</sup>

In both cases, the campesinos' ability to maintain silence in the face of such brutality stood as a marker of commitment to the revolutionary cause.

A number of the captured men were not only tortured but in fact murdered following their arrest. Christian activists Luciano and Ricardo Sánchez Alvarado from Cusmapa had their throats slit in front of fellow prisoners in the Ocotal military garrison. Their corpses were never found.<sup>379</sup> "They were brave men. They didn't surrender," their cousin José Eulogio Hernández

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<sup>377</sup> Testimony of TRC, Condega: Trib. Esp. No. 6, Case 147, September 9, 1980, p. 19-20.

<sup>378</sup> Interview, 1ª.702, Llano Redondo, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980..

<sup>379</sup> Los Exiliados Políticos Nicaragüenses, "Las Torturas Comprobadas," p. 19; Los Prisioneros Sandinistas al Pueblo de Nicaragua, "Las golpizas y 36 días de huelga de hambre no amilanan a los Sandinistas," January 5, 1977. CHM-MR, CHM-MR, E-002, C-016, 000474.

remembered, describing how they were forced onto their stomachs as two Guardias stood atop the backs of each. “They pulled their heads back,” José Eulogio continued, “and used their bayonets to slit their throats. I witnessed this. Luciano was soaked in blood and four or five Guards they took them away.”<sup>380</sup> A campesino from Santa Cruz, Asunción Valdivia Pérez, was beaten to such an extent during his torture that he that he died in the process. A friend imprisoned with don Chon, as the victim was known, later narrated the events: “They blindfolded us, put us against the wall with our hands up and beat the hell out of us. The compañero died, his body torn apart by the kicks and the blows from the rifles.”<sup>381</sup> In the same series of arrests, another Catholic community supporter from Santa Cruz pregnant at the time of her capture was tortured until she miscarried.<sup>382</sup>

The long-term effects of the repression varied across individuals, families and communities. In Santa Cruz, Padre Julio noted, “some lost hope and got scared, in other people, it strengthened their belief in the revolution.”<sup>383</sup> José del Carmen Araúz recalled that during this period, only six of the Christian Youth Movement’s 18 members decided to continue the fight while “the others ended up having the fear of God to participate in fighting for justice. They said, ‘Who cares how we live on the Earth? In Heaven, we’re going to have Eternal Life!’”<sup>384</sup> Other residents even blamed the priests for getting them involved in “subversive activities” which had led to such repression. A woman in Santa Cruz recalled that Padre Julio induced them to

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<sup>380</sup> Interview C111, José Eulogio Hernández, Las Sabanas, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>381</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-725, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980

<sup>382</sup> Letter Bayardo Arce to Mónica Baltodano, December 2, 1976. CHM-MR, E-002, C-021, 000611

<sup>383</sup> Interview, A219, Julio López, Estelí, 2010

<sup>384</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-715.714.703, José del Carmen Araúz (El Segoviano), Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980.

participate for vague goals, telling him “You made us into Sandinistas,” while another replied with a mix of emotions that, “In this community, all that is good *and* all that is bad is the result of Padre Julio.”<sup>385</sup> Carmen, for his part, joined the FSLN outright and went on to gain renown under the nom de guerre El Segoviano. In Cusmapa, auxiliary teachers of the Radio School were required to register with National Guard base for surveillance. A number of the prisoners recalled returning home from jail only to find the town’s houses plastered with Anastasio Somoza’s photo in a show of loyalty for the regime.

Elsewhere, the torture and killings furthered the communities’ resolve, such as rural Condega, where the captures prompted repudiation of the regime’s harsh treatment of friends, relatives and neighbors. “It was hard when they got free,” the father of one of the prisoners from Canta Gallo said

I was in the park and it made me want to cry. Two of them could fit into one pair of pants. They didn’t know where they were, they were disoriented. But there was so much admiration for them. Everyone that saw them became *compañeros* [Sandinista supporters].<sup>386</sup>

Their tales of woe bore witness to the regime’s brutality and were passed on in hushed whispers. Christian base community leader Moisés Calero from Condega notes that in the Catholic seminars, they often spoke of the power of love and the cruelty of the dictatorship in abstract

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<sup>385</sup> Centro de Investigaciones Taguzgalpa, “La herencia colonial en los minifundios de Santa Cruz (Estelí),” in *El universo de la tierra: las culturas campesinas en el Pacífico y centro de Nicaragua : una investigación socio-antropológica de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua, [Escuela de Ciencias Sociales, Sección de Antropología]*, by Leo Gabriel and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua (Editorial Universitaria UNAN-Managua, 1993).

<sup>386</sup> Interview CNA.1b -242, Fermin Zedilla Peralta, Robledalito, Condega, Estelí, 1980.

terms. “But then came the repression,” he remembered, “and the more repression the Guardia carried out the more they sealed with their actions what we said with words.”<sup>387</sup>

The violence exacted against the peasants and others was so damning that it became a parallel motif alongside that of class inequality in the Sandinistas’ appeals. On the occasion of the 12<sup>th</sup> Cursillo de Cristiandad in Estelí, the FSLN regional command wrote an open letter calling on participants to take a stand against abuses of the regime, “given that in the Church’s action, HUMAN BEINGS are fundamental and the essence of Christianity is to LOVE THY NEIGHBOR.”<sup>388</sup> Writing of campesinos taken prisoner or “disappeared,” they called asked cursillo participants to protest before the authorities for the physical safety of those in custody. “We conceive the duty of the Christian in Nicaragua today to be reflection... AND OF ACTION,” they wrote in their statement on praxis. “What is important is that you do not remain with your arms crossed and your mouth closed.”<sup>389</sup> In this letter, the goals of social justice and equality were inseparably linked to regime’s tyranny against suspected guerrilla sympathizers. In Estelí, the blueprint for an ever-deepening alliance between the Christian communities and the FSLN had been further solidified.

## **Conclusion**

Justina Merlo, a campesina from Cusmapa, looked back incredulously at the period and noted that she and her fellow campesinos “went from not knowing how to read one day to supporting a revolutionary movement almost overnight. It all happened so fast... Everything

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<sup>387</sup> Interview, CNA.1b -13.14 Moisés Calero, Condega, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>388</sup> Letter from FSLN (destacamento del norte) to the 12th Cursillo de Cristiandad, February 1976, CHM, Fondo Movimiento Revolucionario, E-002, C-021, 000609, p.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

happened so fast.”<sup>390</sup> The speed and novelty with which participants described of their transformation was in stark contrast with accounts accounts of peasant consciousness in Nicaragua. As we will see in the later chapters, these consciousness-raising activities of the Church proved decisive in the guerrillas’ ability to challenge the regime militarily in both the urban and rural areas.

On the one hand, this close reconstruction of this movement’s formation and linkage with the FSLN gives support for Jeffrey Gould’s critique that the most narratives of the Revolution have downplayed “the revolution’s rural components,” incorrectly privileging “the political rather than social character of the revolution.”<sup>391</sup> Even some sympathetic observers have attempted to downplay the Marxian elements from Sandinista praxis or liberation theology, yet both were linked by the use of class analysis to criticize social inequality. Previously unknown terms like “exploitation” and “injustice” served as tools for a remapping of social relationships and for normative critiques of abusive landowners and inequality. The movement grew through this keen insight into everyday life, and not through appeals at simply overthrowing Somoza or millenarian visions of the world turned upside down.

Of course, the Church’s accomplishments were not merely spiritual or discursive. The painful social transformations discussed in previous chapters provided the raw material for these arguments to take root in certain communities and falter elsewhere. More limited political goals—centered on the Somocista regime and the GN *as such*—emerged only when the regime

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<sup>390</sup> Interview, C151, Justina Merlo, 2010.

<sup>391</sup> Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979*, 276.

responded to organizing with arrests, torture and murders. In the process, the government “sealed with actions” what Catholic activists had “said with words.”

At the same time, there are numerous variances with Gould’s account of the campesino experience in Chinandega. First of all, conflicts over land ownership and demands for land reform were not what mobilized large numbers of campesinos to the cause. Contrary to what his case study, a lengthy meshing of tradition and elite discourses was also not part of the process of forming an opposition identity in Estelí. In their own recollections, grassroots participants saw their transformation from “blindness” or “sleep” to class consciousness and revolutionary aspirations as occurring practically “overnight.” Scholars of peasant politics—anxious to celebrate the inherent inconformity of the poor—have insisted “hegemony” is constantly contested and resisted even when there appears to be submission, apathy or even support for iniquitous power relations from below. When we allow the subaltern to speak in this case, however, the reality is quite other and is suggestive of the intrinsic importance of the analytic tools for the re-coding of social life provided by the discourse of liberation theology.

This brings us to the larger issue of radical Catholicism and religious mobilization. Contrary to Michael Lowy’s suggestion that anti-capitalism was deeply embedded in Church doctrine or Roger Lancaster’s view of liberation theology emerging “from below” in the utopianism of popular religiosity, neither applies to the situation pre-revolutionary Nicaragua. Instead, it was only with the shift of the post-Medellín Church that specific members of the clergy and laypeople attempted to break with previous religious conceptions: in liturgy, institutional structure and popular religiosity. To the extent that traditional practices were retained rather than challenged, they were increasingly secularized and demystified in order to

break with the “providentialism” and “superstitions” of traditional practice. For campesinos, “putting the Gospel into true practice” called for the use of Biblical stories as metaphors through which the inequities of everyday life could be contrasted with a normative vision of justice. Liberation theology thus approached through intellectual history or close readings of leading theologians or statements by the bishops, but needs to be understood as the lived experienced of grassroots participants. At the most local level, liberation theologians and Sandinistas alike mobilized men and women around terrestrial, quotidian needs for access to basic social services (particularly, healthcare and education), better wages and honor. Their greatest aspiration, as Juan Antonio put it, was “to be treated as human beings.”



**Chapter 5.**  
**“They Planted Corn and Harvested Guards”:**  
***Campeños, the National Guard and Mobilization for Terror***

**Introduction**

In the period following the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution, former members of the National Guard were brought before Special Tribunals established by the new government to investigate all those that had served in Somoza’s military. Though the death penalty was quickly abolished, each soldier faced a maximum sentence of 30 years behind bars. Letters and testimony poured in from across the country accusing many of these young men of dastardly acts carried out in the context of the urban and rural warfare of 1978 and 1979. The father of one murdered guerrilla from San Juan de Limay wrote to the courts denouncing two captured Guardias whose pictures he had seen in the newspaper:

The events occurred in La Ranchería or El Pastoreo in the jurisdiction of Estelí after five days of combat. It was during the retreat that they captured them, torturing them day and night in the following ways, according to the campesinos: they peeled off their skin, pulled out their nails, castrated them, stabbed their legs with needles... three Guardias stood on top of them, jumping up and down until they broke their ribs. They also broke their teeth with their gun butts. The campesinos heard the cries day and night and especially “X” and “Y”—the one who slit their throats—were those who most participated in this massacre. These two individuals are from here in San Juan de Limay. From the mouth of the man himself, that is to say from the ex-Guard “X,” we found out that he had participated in the massacre when he shouted in the streets of Limay that he had killed my son for being a Sandinista and communist.<sup>392</sup>

Another Limay resident arrived to testify that a month after the killing he heard the soldier brag about what he had done:

‘These kids think they can beat us but we’ll roll over them’... He said that he knew who the others were that were with the Sandinistas and that General

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<sup>392</sup> Letter from CARC, Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 1, Caso 87. September 6, 1980, p. 31.

Somoza was possibly going to give him a scholarship to study in Chile. He was dressed as a civilian and seemed to be somewhat drunk.<sup>393</sup>

In another trial, a committee of campesinos from Santa Isabel in the department of Madriz wrote accusing a former soldier of mistreating the population, telling them “that he was the law in Somoto... [and] if he heard that anyone in the town was working with the Sandinistas, he would grab them and kill them no matter who they were.”<sup>394</sup> The record of the National Guard of Nicaragua—and particularly its final murderous year, which we will focus on in depth in the last two chapters—is filled with similar crimes, both large and small. The helmeted, khaki-wearing Guard with his Garand rifle became for many the ultimate symbol of repression and violence: the Somocista regime incarnate.

Yet there were other sorts of letters that also poured into the Tribunal offices, particularly from the area around the city Somoto, famed as a recruiting ground and bastion of support for Somoza’s military. “*En Somoto, siembran maíz y cosechan Guardias*” went the adage: “In Somoto, they plant corn and harvest Guards.” One salesman from the city testified in defense of a young man who had been soldier on the losing side of the revolutionary war:

In Somoto, they made these flattering proposals... They took unwary youths to fill the ranks of the army, telling them that they would rise economically and educationally and many times I saw them convince these young people to enter the National Guard. Some of them did it due to a lack of political clarity: As everyone knows there were not many Sandinista cells in Somoto that could orient the people and the youths not to join the army... From my perspective, [the GN] was an organization belonging to the state, but a corrupt state in which many people were unknowingly entangled in this institution as it brought benefits to a determined group of people”<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Testimony, BME, Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 1, Caso 87. September 6, 1980, p. 36

<sup>394</sup> Letter marked “Written Testimony” submitted from Santa Isabel, Somoto, Madriz in Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 2, Caso 70. May 23, 1980, p. 29.

<sup>395</sup> Testimony, Manuel Benavides, Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 2, Caso 287, p. 20.

This “entanglement” serves as a entry point for understanding why and how so many young men came to participate in this “organization belonging to the state, but a corrupt state” as the witness put it.

The military during the period of the Somoza period has been treated in the literature as a caricature of state terror, patrimonialism and venality. The National Guard has been seen only through the figure of Somoza, its structural role as ballast for the political and economic elite, and as an “occupying force” and tool of US intervention. Indeed, much of the literature on military-society relations in Latin America in general emphasizes only the relations between elite social groups, state leadership and the top generals of the region’s militaries.<sup>396</sup> Only recently have scholars begun researching the military ideologies and internal power struggles between cliques (often *tandas*, the graduating classes of from the military academies) in order to dissect on how such regimes came to carry out such brutality.<sup>397</sup> Many observers also ignored much of the organization’s history, leaping directly from its formation as an “occupation army” in repressing the anti-imperialist rebellion of the 1920s to the twilight of indiscriminate state terror in 1978 and 1979. In the process, they erase its long decades of quotidian practice and transformation

By analyzing the GN as essentially the direct extension of the dictator, his family and the corrupt, officer corps it fostered, scholars also leave out the thousands of Nicaraguans who filled

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<sup>396</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Harvard University Press, 1981); Alain Rouquié, *The Military and the State in Latin America* (University of California Press, 1989); Karen L. Remmer, *Military Rule in Latin America* (Unwin Hyman, 1989).

<sup>397</sup> William Deane Stanley, *The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador* (Temple University Press, 1996); Jennifer G. Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); Shawn C. Smallman, *Fear & Memory in the Brazilian Army and Society, 1889-1954* (UNC Press Books, 2002).

its ranks over its many decades of existence. The National Guard, like all militaries, was staffed by those at the bottom of the socioeconomic and ethnic order. In his review of the Nicaraguan historiography, John-Paul Wilson argued that facile clichés made the GN a major lacuna in the literature. He writes that:

hatred of Somoza was far from universal as evidenced by the sheer number of Nicaraguans employed in the National Guard. For the most part, the National Guard was portrayed as an institution that was despised by most of the country. But how did it become this massive employer?<sup>398</sup>

This chapter examines this very question of how most impoverished and victimized sectors of society came to join the GN in its repression of the movement for change.

This chapter sets out to explore this hidden aspect of national life and begin to unpack the sociological, military, and cultural formation of the armed forces during the Somoza period. I build upon historical studies examining military service not merely as a function of underlying structures but an important site for the formation of identity in terms of ethnicity, masculinity and social class.<sup>399</sup> This requires bringing together the international context and the regime's patronage structure with the lived experiences of the army's grassroots integrants. I argue that, rather than a "total institution" detached from society, the GN was located firmly within the daily

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<sup>398</sup> John-Paul Wilson, *Political Bias in Historical Writing : A Case Study Nicaragua's Sandinista Revolution and Its North American Historiography and Social Science: 1981-1990* (Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris, 2006), 250. Michael Radu says that some estimates are that up to 1 in 166 Nicaraguans were employed by the National Guard. "The Nature of the Insurgency," p 409 – 432 in *The Continuing Crisis: US Policy in Central America and the Caribbean*. Edited by Mark Falcoff and Robert Royal, Ethics and Public Policy Centers. 1987, p. 413.

<sup>399</sup> Nicola Foote and Rene D. Harder Horst, *Military Struggle and Identity Formation in Latin America: Race, Nation, and Community During the Liberal Period* (University Press of Florida, 2010); Peter M. Beattie, *The Tribute of Blood: Army, Honor, Race and Nation in Brazil, 1864-1945* (Duke University Press, 2001); Brian R. Selmeski, "Sons of Indians and Indian Sons: Military Service, Familial Metaphors, and Multicultural Nationalism," in *Highland Indians and the State in Modern Ecuador*, by A. Kim Clark and Marc Becker (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007); Lesley Gill, "Creating Citizens, Making Men: The Military and Masculinity in Bolivia," *Cultural Anthropology* 12, no. 4 (November 1, 1997): 527–550; Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford University Press, 1976); Cynthia H. Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers: State Security in Divided Societies* (University of Georgia Press, 1980).

rhythms and practices of everyday life and politics. Rather than “false consciousness,” those that joined the military apparatus and fought to defend the dictator were responding to their own material interests and identities. Once inside the army, their notions of self and the world were further burnished through military training and combat. In the second half of this chapter, I chart out the transformation of the repressive apparatus during the latter half of the 1970s as it was “modernized” and “professionalized” to meet the guerrilla challenge. US influence deeply influenced the National Guard by introducing a politics of counterinsurgency, as discourses of nationhood and “outsiders” were linked to class resentment and fear.

### **From Peasants into Somocistas: The Geography and Materiality of Military Recruitment**

The defining feature of the Somoza dictatorship without question was its control over the National Guard and its monopoly of coercive force. Founded by the United States during its military occupation in 1927 and forged in battle against the nationalist uprising of Augusto César Sandino, the GN was the standard-bearer and backbone of the Somoza dictatorship during its four decades in power. In contrast to revolutions the world over, it is notable that not a single unit of the National Guard passed over to the side of the revolutionaries during its final hours. The revolutionary insurrection became as much a war against the National Guard and its unconscionable abuses as a struggle for social change and the overthrow of the Somoza family.

Rather than viewing the National Guard as a foreign imposition, we must turn to the discrete geographic spaces in which the GN was, Michael Schroeder writes, “deeply embedded in the social fabric of the region... [and] its families, communities, towns, farms, ranches,

haciendas, indigenous communities and patronage networks.”<sup>400</sup> The department of Madriz (particularly the zones around Somoto and its neighboring municipalities in the department of Estelí) was an area that gained an early reputation as the “breeding grounds” and “nursery” (*vivero*) for the “production” of National Guard soldiers. The region of the Segovias, the proverbial land of Augusto César Sandino and his anti-occupation struggle, provided a number of *soldados rasos* far out of proportion with its rather small population. Given the region’s links to Sandino, recruitment originally served the counterinsurgent purpose of bringing many over to the side of the government. An FSLN member who organized in the Segovias decades later noted that Somoza’s policy had been successful and that most “families were in some way or another involved with the National Guard.”<sup>401</sup> Indeed, the same economic and political marginality that had drawn the rural population into alliance with Sandino now galvanized allegiance to Somoza regime.

These family continuities between what may appear to be irreconcilable political positions to outsiders were the result of a particular notion of party identity linked to regional social networks.<sup>402</sup> From the 19<sup>th</sup> century, campesinos throughout the region had been recruited to fight in the internecine warfare between Liberals and Conservatives elites. This military participation led many in the region to identify with the Liberal Party. Sandino’s followers, for instance, initially joined with him in order to fight against the Conservative elite based in the city

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<sup>400</sup> Michael Schroeder, “The Sandino Rebellion Revisited: Civil War, Imperialism, Popular Nationalism, and State Formation Muddled up Together in the Segovias of Nicaragua, 1926-1934.” In *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, ed. Catherine C. LeGrand and Ricardo D. Salvatore Gilbert M. Joseph (1998), 248-249.

<sup>401</sup> Arias, *Nicaragua, revolución*, 95.

<sup>402</sup> Interview A254, Sonís, Somoto, Madriz, 2010.

of Ocotal and their supporters in the countryside. Following Liberal Somoza García's rise to power, these traditional enemies of the Sandinista peasants were now disenfranchised and subordinated by the regime. An indigenous *campesino* from Totogalpa that entered the Guardia in the 1940s (and rose to serve as a bodyguard and telegrapher for the Somozas) recalled that his "grandfather fought for the Liberal Party. Sandino came here to our house and met with all of the Liberals from the town, [while] all of the Conservatives fled to Honduras when they heard he was coming."<sup>403</sup> Another former Guardia from the indigenous community of San Lucas noted that his father and three uncles had fought in the mountains alongside Sandino. "The *gringos* imprisoned all those that participated with Sandino," he explained. "My father was prisoner in Ocotal for a year, building a runway. An uncle of mine was imprisoned there just because he helped both sides."<sup>404</sup> Despite their direct suffering at the hands of the GN, he says that his family supported his decision to enlist in the military.

The social and ecological conditions in the department gave further impetus to military enlistment. Somoto resident Manuel Maldonado, whose brother was killed by the GN, wrote defending a former soldier explaining that:

The previous system caused great problems in this department and took advantage of all of these factors so that a majority of the *campesinado* would serve to perpetuate the regime in power: primitive agriculture, a lack of factories, almost no commerce and a very backwards culture. With this panorama, there was no other path but to turn into an *oreja* [secret police informant] or a Guardia.<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Interview B47, Totogalpa, Madriz, 2008.

<sup>404</sup> Interview B273, San Lucas, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>405</sup> Letter to Tribunal Especial, written October 4, 1980 in Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 8, Caso 176, September 9 1980, pg.11.

Large numbers of recruits came from the valleys surrounding the city of Somoto, such as Santa Isabel, Sonís and Santa Rosa, as well the indigenous communities of Cusmapa and San Lucas to the south. While the land had been satisfactory for in previous decades, ladino landowners and lumber businesses usurped a great deal of “the commons” in the 1950s and 1960s. While the coffee and cotton harvests provided work for few months a year, this still left at least nine months without income.

These problems were only further aggravated by the recurrence of cyclical drought (*sequía*). Though a constant problem, the worst drought in living memory occurred in 1971 and 1972. Nicaragua’s National Bank declared it to be a “critical situation... that could cause millions of córdobas of losses in agriculture” and “bring ruin to the country.”<sup>406</sup> While some campesinos fled to the agrarian frontier in the eastern Nicaragua to make a new life, other campesinos poured from their scattered farms to the military base in Somoto to apply for employment.

In explaining their reasons for entering the Guard, many emphasized necessities caused by loss of land and a lack of precipitation. “A son-of-a-bitch who had a handful of land wouldn’t put himself in the Guard if he had a place to work,” remembered one ex-Guard from Estanzuela outside of Estelí. “The only ones who went into the Guard were the *campesinos*, day-laborers (*jornaleros*) who worked on other people’s haciendas. Because of poverty.”<sup>407</sup> A soldier from Santa Isabel testified that he signed up 1959, “because there were about three years in which it didn’t rain and so the rich didn’t give work to the poor so I lost all of my money. Poverty made

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<sup>406</sup> *La Prensa*, June 14, 1971

<sup>407</sup> Interview D64, Estanzuela, Estelí 2008.



me enter the army.”<sup>408</sup> An campesino from San Lucas recalled that he had inherited a patch of land from his father within the indigenous community but a wealthy ladino (“*un rico*”) had stolen it “left them lying in the street. We had to look for a way to make a living.”<sup>409</sup>

In the military, these men received low wages, but the pay exceeded what they could earn on the haciendas. In addition, the GN provided food, clothing, housing and medical services. “We may have earned sixty pesos there,” recalled one Guard from Sonís in Somoto who joined in the 1940s, “but out of that salary, we had everything left over for spending. They didn’t take us by force! We went under our own free will!”<sup>410</sup> Joining the National Guard offered as what one author called a “local version of the American dream” of social mobility.<sup>411</sup> Young men who had never traveled beyond the nearest market town were whisked away in military vehicles to the bustling capital of Managua and the other far corners of the Republic. Many remember peasants who had set out from their village in *caites* (traditional, artisanal sandals) returning several months later with boots, a uniform, a military haircut and a pocketful of *córdobas*. These material benefits were enhanced by the symbolic and arbitrary power granted their uniform and American-made Garand rifle.

This sense of impunity at times manifested itself in quotidian relations with the rest of the population, particularly in conflicts over women, gambling and drinking. On other occasions, soldiers convicted of crimes were court-martialed or transferred to distant military bases. Take, for example, the case of a Guard from Yalagüina who was denounced by members of his

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<sup>408</sup> Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 4, Caso 137, p. 7.

<sup>409</sup> Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 3, Caso 63, May 28, 1980, pg. 4.

<sup>410</sup> Interview A254, Sonís, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>411</sup> Black, *Triumph of the People*, 51.

community for “a crime he committed in Somoto in a cantina in which he killed a seven to ten year old child, stabbing him in the stomach.”<sup>412</sup> Whether or not this specific accusation had merit, it gives a sense of masculine culture of sociability and expressive within the GN. Indeed, the military journal *Acción Cívica* was filled with articles about alcoholism, suggesting the depth of the problem within the GN.

Given the patronage structure of the military, those loyal to the dictator were rewarded, creating an institutional culture of total-subservience and dependence. Some described the Guard as “an armed political party” or “a separate military caste, loyal only to their own leader, not to the nation as a whole.”<sup>413</sup> A former GN officer and close associate of the dictator explained the leader’s relationship with his troops:

Somoza is a real godfather type. He can pass an ordinary soldier and say, ‘I hear your mama is sick.’ Then he’ll reach into his pocket and peel off thousand dollar bills and say, ‘This is for the airfare and this is for the clinic in Miami.’ You cannot talk against him, but you feel that if he likes you, he’ll never let you down.<sup>414</sup>

The celebration of subservience is highly evident in the account of a National Guard from the valley of Sonís who was trained to be a “personal assistant” to the dictator by the US Embassy in Managua. He recalls with great pride that when other participants in the course refused to take the final exam—the testing of supposed poison—he simply downed the liquid. As he tells the story, the American instructor was surprised and somewhat taken aback:

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<sup>412</sup> Letter from the Sandinista Defense Committee of Salamasi, Yalagüina, Madriz to the Tribunales Especiales de Justicia, Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 1, Caso 203. November 4, 1980, p. 18.

<sup>413</sup> Francisco Fiallos Navarro, “La Guardia Nacional ¿Un ejército de ocupación?” in *La Prensa*, August 6, 1978; Richard Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 198.

<sup>414</sup> Black, *Triumph of the People*, 51.

“Look, did you know that was poison?” “Yes, Sir.” “Then, why did you drink it?” “Because I am taking a course and the instructions were clear.” “But why are you going to die for this person?” “You know why?” I told him. “Because there are tons of people of my quality [*porque la calidad mía somos todos los que habemos*] but a person of the quality of a president or a first lady, there is only one. There are tons of us—thousands—but the quality of these people, only a few. It is worth dying for this person.” The *gringo* [instructor] hugged me and lifted me up in the air. “That’s it! Give your life for theirs!” He jumped up and hugged me. The gringo really liked that.<sup>415</sup>

For giving the right answer, he would later find himself serving as a personal assistant, cook and food-taster for the Somoza family. This anecdote suggests the highly-disparaging view of the self: a consciousness embedded in everyday practices and inequalities vis-à-vis the powerful, here represented by both Somoza and American power. At the same time, the soldier’s behavior and story reflect a keen ability to maneuver within the complex of utterances and deferent comportment those in power both cherished and rewarded.

Within the military, Somoto (and its ethnic, racial and class markers) were re-codified as signifiers of loyalty and subservience to the regime. Both the dynasty’s founder, Anastasio Somoza García, and his son, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, surrounded themselves with the indigenous peasants-turned-soldiers from this area, including their cooks, drivers, secretaries and bodyguards. Urban ladinos at times explained the campesinos’ deep commitment to the regime through ethnic essentialism, suggesting that indigenous soldiers were simply following their traditional loyalty to tribal chiefs or caciques. Yet this regional-ethnic identity was often embraced by the soldiers themselves as a positive marker of distinction—those marginalized and excluded now had a direct affiliation with the most powerful men in the land. *El soldado somoteño*, recalled by a former National Guard and infantry soldier:

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<sup>415</sup> Interview A254, Sonís, Somoto, Madriz, 2010.

is a humble and hard-working soldier, with discipline. The sweetness that a *somoteño* has as a soldier is his: ‘Sí, señor!’ This ‘yes, sir!’ was not only how they answered but they actually did what they were told. The soldiers from other departments were always more disobedient.<sup>416</sup>

He remembered with pride the evenings on which Somoza Debayle swung by the GN barracks in Managua to take the soldiers from Somoto to one of his many estates for a night of hard drinking.

This relationship was imbued with stark sense of hierarchy and dependence, formulated in the paternalistic language of gifting. A former Guard from Yalagüina who fought against the Sandinistas commented, “When one enters in battle for a cause, it doesn’t matter if you die.” Asked for his personal cause, he paused and smiled. “We were... [pause]... We loved Somoza very much. He was our leader... [pause]... And we loved Nicaragua.”<sup>417</sup> An indigenous campesino who worked as a bodyguard and telegrapher for both “Tacho Hijo” and “Tacho Viejo” stated that, “they were very good to me. Why should I lie? We received everything we needed: clothes, shoes, slippers, and a tie to go out. They gave us more money for expenses.”<sup>418</sup> Another soldier and Evangelical pastor proudly declared that that in 15 years of service, he did not miss a single day of military service: “Those that were well-behaved got scholarships to study other things. We always dreamt of a better future. They helped me become what I am today... They helped me.”<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> Interview D65, Somoto, Madriz, 2008.

<sup>417</sup> Interview A278, Yalaguina, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>418</sup> Interview B47, Totogalpa, Madriz, 2008.

<sup>419</sup> Interview A257, Somoto, Madriz, 2010.

As we saw in our examination of political culture in a previous chapter, the Guard acted as a “collection agency” or a protection racket for all manner of illicit businesses: prostitution, gambling and drugs. A former GN officer later wrote that his fellow officials made a great deal of money due to the “special legal privileges and access to the corruption that thoroughly infected the institution’s far-flung administrative domain.”<sup>420</sup> In more profitable bases, like Chinandega or León, the commanding officer could acquire between 80,000 and 120,000 *córdobas* each month.<sup>421</sup> Within the Guard, though, there were significant class divisions. Few of the benefits that accrued to the comandantes that ran each military base trickled down to the soldiers at the bottom of the institution. For these soldiers, the primary form of illicit enrichment was extortion through small-time bribes (*mordidas*) for traffic violations and the like.<sup>422</sup>

Low-level officers who advanced through the ranks without having attended the Military Academy—known as *oficiales de corbata negra* (“black tie officers”)—were increasingly wedded to the system through this corruption leaving them trapped in “labyrinth of corruption from which they cannot escape.”<sup>423</sup> Some men went from campesinos with nothing more than an adobe hut in rural Madriz to the owners of houses and small businesses in various Managua neighborhoods. The Somozas’ personal cook reflected back on his success:

In Reparto Schick, I built a house. I had a little store in San Judas, I had a bar in Las Mesitas, a beer hall in Reparto Schick. It was a very sinful place [*muy zángano*]. God punishes you for these businesses; they’re bad news [*tungos*]. A bar with pretty girls... the Bible says that we should not eat the flesh of a poor

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<sup>420</sup> John Booth, *The End and Beginning*, p. 56.

<sup>421</sup> Justianino Pérez, *Sempre Fidelis*, p 46.

<sup>422</sup> Justiano Perez, *Los Mitos de la Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua*, p. 59.

<sup>423</sup> Francisco Fiallos Navarro, “La Guardia Nacional...”

woman, or sell it. Or even worse: liquor and cigarettes. I owned all these kind of businesses.”<sup>424</sup>

Despite such regrets, he nonetheless remained proud of the social mobility he had achieved thanks to his employment in the military.

Military and city lifestyle were trying for many soldiers, but attempts at desertion ironically served to help the military maintain a constant labor supply. Some who entered the Guard for economic reasons quickly tired of taking orders and living far from their family. Many smallholder campesinos who enlisted later missed the autonomy of farming and hoped for little more than to return to their land. In many cases, these men deserted from military service and headed back to their village when the weather had improved. Considered criminals for violating their contracts, if caught, these soldiers were given the choice of lengthy prison time or extended military service. National Guard records are filled with numerous cases of desertions, capture, court martial and re-enlistment for longer terms. One man from San Lucas served eight months before deserting and heading back to the countryside where he worked in agriculture for about a year. When a spiteful neighbor denounced him to the authorities as a deserter, he was captured and sent to prison in Managua. “I was there seven months,” he remembered. “The comandante asked me when they took me out of jail if I wanted to return to the army.”<sup>425</sup> After the time behind bars, he jumped at this opportunity and would remain in the military for many years more. In this way, the three-year GN contract was similar to previous forms of labor coercion—such as signing bonuses, debt peonage and labor passbooks—which had been used historically to compel campesinos to work on haciendas against their better wishes.

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<sup>424</sup> Interview A254, Somoto, Madriz 2010

<sup>425</sup> Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 1, caso 117, August 11, 1980, p. 3.

## **From Patronage to Anti-Communism: US Cold War Doctrine and the Stalled Transformation**

From its origin as a project of the US occupation, the National Guard was deeply intertwined with the Inter-American “defense system” controlled by the Pentagon. While its dependency on the Americans may have limited nationalist legitimacy, affiliation with the superpower provided a certain degree of pride and sense of proximity to power, even among the institution’s most subordinate members. “All of the military tactics were from the United States,” recalled a beaming ex-Guardia from Totogalpa. “Everything that we used was American: the clothes, the hat and the boots. It was all from the United States.”<sup>426</sup> Another former soldier from San Lucas spoke in even more blunt terms, saying: “The Guard was *norteamericano*. The Somozas were *norteamericanistas*. It was a government helped by the United States in cash [*billetes*] and arms... To have an army, you need cash.”<sup>427</sup> Thus, the United States offered billetes and weapons to Somoza, which (from the Guards’ perspective) was then passed onto them. This homology of gifting was linked to the discourse of social mobility to which many Guards were drawn.

The fact that so many Guardias continued to conceptualize these relations in terms of patronage rather than ideology suggests the failure of later efforts by the Americans to institutionalize the GN and push the soldiers towards a more political worldview. For officers and soldiers that ascended to a certain level, all-expense-paid training programs were carried out by the US Military, either in Nicaragua itself or in the School of the Americas (SOA) located as

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<sup>426</sup> Interview B48, Totogalpa, Madriz, 2008

<sup>427</sup> Interview B273, San Lucas, Madriz, 2010.

Fort Gulick in the Canal Zone of Panama.<sup>428</sup> Between 1950 and 1965, a total of 808 officers were trained in the United States or at the Canal Zone, making Nicaragua the country in Latin America with the highest ratio of US-trained officers.<sup>429</sup> These numbers were fairly constant, with an additional 52 Nicaraguan officers sent to American military academies and 303 trained at the School of the Americas between 1970 and 1975.<sup>430</sup> For the average soldiers, these experiences generated a feeling of accomplishment. “I studied in Panama in the School of the Americas in Fort Gulick and in Fort Sherman,” a campesino in Yalaguina recalled. The courses he passed included “jungles, parachuting, tank mechanics and armory. I was there three times for trainings that lasted three months each. The instructors were all gringos.”<sup>431</sup>

Following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the US and the regime attempted to transform the traditional constabulary to meeting this threat of guerrilla insurgency. This required not only the development of a new skill set but altering the very worldview of the soldiers as well. As with military forces throughout the continent, the National Guard was refashioned to combat “internal enemies” in urban and rural counterinsurgency.<sup>432</sup> In these classes, the United States emphasized the ideology of “National Security,” which posited the defeat of “communist” insurgents as existential necessity. To appeal to nationalist sentiments, the GN presented the Sandinista

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<sup>428</sup> Lesley Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). For a lengthy exposé celebrating the SOA from a GN officer perspective, see *Revista de la GN*, April 1972, p. 19-27

<sup>429</sup> Table 5-9 in Wickham-Crawley, p. 79.

<sup>430</sup> Micahel Radu, “The Nature of the Insurgency,” in *The Continuing Crisis: U.S. Policy in Central America and the Caribbean*, ed. Mark Falcoff and Robert Royal (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1976), 413.

<sup>431</sup> Interview A278, Yalaguina, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>432</sup> Martha Knisely Huggins, *Political Policing: The United States and Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (University of Chicago Press, 2004).



National Liberation Front as symbolically outside of the nation, a “façade organization dependent on Moscow whose comandante is Fidel Castro, who has the responsibility of developing subversion in Latin America.”<sup>433</sup> Guerrilla combatants were projected as Cubans, Russians or other foreigners, rather than fellow Nicaraguans. This language inverted the FSLN perspective, which presented Somoza and the GN as little but puppets of the United States and the extension of its foreign occupation.

Rather than loyalty to the caudillo, a more pragmatic approach was taught to GN officers, emphasizing anti-communism over devotion to any one individual. In response to the grievances voiced by the FSLN (such as socioeconomic inequality, foreign intervention, dictatorship and corruption), the new discourse sought to neutralize these claims not through outright denial but rather by explaining them away as *cultural* rather than *political* attributes. The counterinsurgent social theory apparently taught by the Americans provided an anti-normative vision of the society as a natural result of cultural unworthiness. Upon his return from an American training, GN ideologue Major Emilio Padilla wrote in *Acción Cívica* that:

The terrorists know how to phrase their struggle as a conflict between weak countries and the strong; the oppressed against the oppressors; the small against the large. They take advantage of people’s need for subsistence. Revolutionary action may also come out of the socio-economic antagonisms of each country.<sup>434</sup>

In this way, the GN argued that “subversives” misdirected their ire towards the ruling political and economic groups rather than accepting the cultural roots of poverty and backwardness found within the population at large. The “poorly-named dictators that are given the blame for our own misrule,” Padilla argued, should not be critiqued for their errors, as they were little more than the

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<sup>433</sup> Emilio Padilla, “Infiltración y Subversión, pt. 1,” *Acción Cívica*, April 1976, p. 33.

<sup>434</sup> *Revisita de la Guardia Nacional*, December 1971, p. 115.

product of an uncivilized people. His analogy compared Somoza to “an artisan that only has mud” and thus, “cannot be expected to make a work of fine porcelain.”<sup>435</sup> In a later piece, he again pinned blame for the regime on the Nicaraguan people as a whole, enjoining the opposition not to pass judgment on a regime based in popular complicity:

What the terrorist doesn't understand is that the system itself is not responsible for the disaster of the system, rather it is he himself and all of those that live in the society. It's fair to recognize that no system is perfect but—as ‘corrupt’ and ‘inefficient’ as its opponents wish to call it—it is not possible without the explicit or implicit acceptance of the groups it governs.<sup>436</sup>

This interpretation of Nicaraguan society negated FSLN critiques by suggesting that social structures (“the system”) were the product of the collective inadequacies, rather than the root of the problem. Though written for a literate, officer-level readership, this naturalization of hierarchies and inequities was not without its popular adherents throughout the ranks. One need only recall the soldier guzzling what he believed to be poison because “*la calidad nuestra somos todos los que habemos.*”

Given family histories of Sandinismo among many Guardia recruits from the Segovias, the GN at times stressed the differences between that previous effort and the contemporary “terrorist” organization. FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca, they wrote,

lost much of his originality by incorporating the name of Sandino... Sandino was a confused man. He did a lot of damage to the Fatherland. He killed, mutilated and burnt alive thousands of his fellow citizens who did not agree with his politics. He was a confused man, we repeat, but his ideas were *saturated with undeniable nationalism*. Sandino was depraved but not a communist.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>436</sup> Emilio Padilla, “Consideraciones sobre la subversión y la violencia,” *Acción Cívica*, December 1977, p. 37.

<sup>437</sup> Emilio Padilla, “Infiltración y Subversión, pt. 1,” p. 34.

In this interesting passage, GN ideologues towed the Somocista line regarding Sandino's "depravity" while at the same time giving countenance to legitimate memories of support for that effort. Many Guards, on the other hand, had little awareness of Sandino's struggle. Dr. Emilio Flores Obregón recalled that while treating wounded Guards at his medical office in Pueblo Nuevo, they spotted a portrait of Sandino on the wall and asked, "Is this the man they want to be president?" I had to tell them, 'No, this man is dead already. Your boss's father killed him.' What ignorance they kept these people in!<sup>438</sup>

The National Guard incorporated class antagonism into its vision of Nicaraguan society for consumption by the recruits, but in a far different manner than the FSLN. Rather than directing criticism at the landholding elite or the political class, the GN suggested that emerging middling-sectors—particularly high school and university students—were to blame for conflict and the true enemies of the common man. In *Acción Cívica*, it was argued that,

Statistically, it has been shown that 95 percent of the members of the group known as the Sandinista National Liberation Front are bad students, drug addicts and young people with family problems. Where they have shown a certain ability to whip up support is by offering unwary campesinos lands that already have legitimate owners.<sup>439</sup>

Students are here posited as corrupt, relatively privileged "outsiders," criminal troublemakers responsible for tricking hapless campesinos into illegal actions. Contrary to previous revolutions which appealed to workers and peasants, the GN was told that in the emerging conflict "of primary importance is *the student*, who in a state of violence is capable of generating the

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<sup>438</sup> Interview CNA.1D-5. Emilio Flores Obregón, Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>439</sup> Emilio Padilla "Infiltración y Subversión, pt. 2," *Acción Cívica*, May 1976, p. 29

conditions for a revolution.<sup>440</sup> Thus, the fundamental division was not between rich and poor but between those who accepted their subjugated place in the existing hierarchy and those—perhaps slightly above them in terms of wealth—who refused to accept the status quo.

As with Cold War dictatorships the world over, the Somoza regime relied heavily on anti-communism as a catchall response to opposition, presenting a dystopian vision of dispossession and mass murder that would follow in the wake of a Sandinista victory. Repeated daily in Somoza's media outlets such *Radio X* in the newspaper *Novedades*, this perspective gained a certain currency among campesinos in the Segovias and elsewhere.<sup>441</sup> Somoza himself referred to the Segovias, bragging to the US ambassador that:

In what was supposed to be the heart of 'Sandino land,' some seven hundred recruits volunteered. You, yourself, could ask these young men, why did you volunteer for the National Guard, and they would tell you they are defending their home and their property.<sup>442</sup>

While we have seen that ideological reasons rarely prompted military enlistment, once inside the institution they were bombarded with this doctrine. A soldier from San Lucas remembered being that Sandinistas wanted to impose communism, which the officers described as system in which the government "gave you all your food. They told us, even though you don't have a place to live, you have freedom. At least you can go out and take a stroll. With communism, you won't have the right to do anything."<sup>443</sup> Another stated that they were taught the FSLN were their enemies "because they were people who came helped by Cuba and Cuba is communist, so the

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<sup>440</sup> *Revisita de la Guardia Nacional*, December 1971, p. 120

<sup>441</sup> *Latin American Political Report*, September 22, 1978, XII: 37, p. 299

<sup>442</sup> Anastasio Somoza and Jack Cox, *Nicaragua Betrayed* (Boston: Western Islands, 1980), 369.

<sup>443</sup> *Tribunales Especiales*, Trib. 3, Caso 63, May 28, 1980, p. 5.

same thing that happened in Cuba was going to happen here. Our family members were going to be killed.”<sup>444</sup> This threat posed by the insurgents to the soldiers and their families further solidified a collective identity and stake in the system as the conflict intensified.

In May 1965, the National Guard joined an Organization of American States “peace-keeping force” led by the US Marine Corps in the invasion of the Dominican Republic. Also providing troops were the anti-communist dictatorships of Paraguay, Honduras and Brazil. Though often forgotten in accounts of Nicaraguan history, the invasion and occupation many members of the GN for the first time sent into battle against this amorphous enemy about which they had been warned. Though they were sent essentially to stave off the fall of a US-backed regime, a soldier recalled that, “they told us that we went to prevent communism... I didn’t want to go and almost no one wanted to go but we had to because those were the President’s orders.”<sup>445</sup> Other soldiers were told it was a battle against “the troops that Fidel Castro had there [sic]. I went for two and a half years. We saw little combat because the US Army had things under control, but there was always some combat.”<sup>446</sup>

From the late 1960s, as the Sandinistas attempted to establish guerrilla fronts in places such as Pancasán, Zinica and Waslala, this war against “communism” was brought home to the mountains of northeastern Nicaragua. The GN was sent to crush these efforts and eradicate their social bases of support. At the same time, the Guard engaged in Alliance for Progress-style civil service projects known as Acción Cívica (Civic Action), building roads, constructing schools and

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<sup>444</sup> Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 6, Caso 345. November 4, 1980, p. 4.

<sup>445</sup> Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 1, Caso 35.

<sup>446</sup> Interview A278, Yalaguina, Madriz, 2010.

delivering vaccines to bolster the image of the army and the regime. Between social projects and targeted terror, the National Guard was largely successful in stymieing guerrilla efforts. To the US and the top officials, though, it was increasingly apparent that the threat of an all-out military confrontation loomed on the horizon. Even with increased training and ideological formation, the anachronistic National Guard with its institutional culture of corruption seemed as though it could not be reformed adequately to defeat an insurgency with popular support.

### **The EEBI Elite Unit: Making a Counterinsurgency, Making Counterinsurgents**

The National Guard's ineptitude was definitively exposed on December 23, 1974, when the FSLN successfully took a number of leading Somocistas hostage during a Christmas party in Managua. Following this failure, Anastasio Somoza Portocarrero, the dictator's son, emerged as the leading figure in efforts to refurbish the military. Referred to contemptuously by *La Prensa* and the public as "El Chigüin" (Nicaraguan slang for "the little kid"), Somoza Portocarrero had studied at Harvard University and received military training at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. Enamored with the US Military and its Special Forces, he joined with other junior officers in the renovation of the GN for its new counterinsurgent purpose. The new branch of the National Guard that they formed would produce a more battle-ready force able to meet the guerrillas on their own terms.

Rather than retrain the GN's aging and often overweight "policemen" who had never served in combat, Somoza Portocarrero and his associates were given control of the Basic Infantry Training School (*la Escuela de Entrenamiento Básico de Infantería*, EEBI). When El Chigüin became its director in late 1976, the annual budget was increased to 16 million córdobas and weighty investments were undertaken in armaments, uniforms, foreign trainers and

improved facilities. Compared to the traditional GN, the EEBI much more closely approximated what Erving Goffman would refer to as a “total institution,” dominating every aspect of the entrants’ lives. The first issue of the school’s magazine, *El Infante*, opened with an editorial heralding its “modernization, including the renovation of equipment, re-training and specialization of the personnel, the formation of ‘cadres’ for a more effective and massive training with the goal of increasing the number of soldiers to 15,000 men.”<sup>447</sup> Rather than the inefficient and pusillanimous GN, the EEBI promised to create “*a new type of Soldier...an authentic citizen... A Spartan warrior trained for war because it is necessary in order to live in peace.*”<sup>448</sup> Though intended as a training facility for the wider military, the EEBI came to function with great autonomy as an elite counterinsurgent unit, if not a second, parallel National Guard.

The exact role of the United States in the gestation of this new elite brigade is not exactly clear from the currently-available documentation. In popular memory, the EEBI is considered to be a project of the United States to protect the flagging Somoza regime against the threat of guerrilla warfare. However, a 1975 CIA report found American intelligence somewhat wary of Somoza’s idea to bring in foreign trainers in order to create a new counterinsurgent unit to beat back the FSLN. With startling prescience, the memo stated:

If a foreign-trained Guard unit is created, Somoza will provide both the FSLN and conventional opposition groups a new, potentially damaging issue. His opponents are certain to condemn the instructors as foreign mercenaries and play on fears of foreign intervention. If the reported Guard unit should adopt aggressive tactics, there is a good chance of excesses that would outrage civilian sensibilities and

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<sup>447</sup> *El Infante*, September 1978, p. 1.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*

enhance the FSLN's prospects for new recruits and further successful operations.<sup>449</sup>

Once the process had begun, the US took a central role in training EEBI officers in counterinsurgency at the School of the Americas and facilitating additional assistance from the dictatorships in Brazil, Chile, Guatemala and El Salvador. US Colonel Luis Flores of the SOA made a high profile visit to the EEBI installations, ecstatically praising Somoza Portocarrero's "motivation, leadership and professionalism."<sup>450</sup> A pair of American mercenaries, including Vietnam War veteran and martial arts expert Mike Echanis, arrived in Managua to directly lead the training. Whether Echanis was sent by the CIA or directly recruited by El Chigüin has never been clearly established.<sup>451</sup> In the eyes of the recruits, though, the American Echanis was the school's central figure along with Somoza Portocarrero.<sup>452</sup>

Reporting back from a course on "Urban Counterinsurgency" held at the SOA during this period, Major Padilla declared the GN had to "adjust their doctrine in the same way the revolutionaries use their own guerrilla combatants, increasing—if necessary—to the same level of criminality (juridical repression)."<sup>453</sup> These open references to "criminality" and "juridical repression" suggest a new willingness by both the GN and the SOA to countenance the

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<sup>449</sup> "Hired Guns for Nicaragua", CIA Staff Notes, Latin American Trends, July 2, 1975. Declassified Documents DDRA, p. 8-9.

<sup>450</sup> *Acción Cívica*, May 1978, p. 58-59.

<sup>451</sup> Dora Luz Romero "Maquinas Para Matar", *Magazine, La Prensa*, April 18, 2010, p. 20; *Soldier of Fortune: Journal of Professional Adventurers*, February 1979, p. 50

<sup>452</sup> "The Black Berets of Hwa Rong Do" in *Black Belt Magazine*, September 1978.

<sup>453</sup> GN Emilio Padilla, "Consideraciones sobre la subversión y la violencia," *Acción Cívica*, December 1977, p. 39.



application of state terror against civilians in order to respond to the threat of irregular enemies often indistinguishable from the population.

Though they continued to recruit campesinos, the EEBI now only accepted teenagers at the height of physical ability to the highly rigorous training program. From the wee hours of the morning, soldiers trained in an attempt to burnish their fighting credentials and formulate a particular mind state. They were drilled in marching for hours on end, did continuous aerobic exercise, were taught to cross rivers and navigate mountain passes, and learned to fight using both judo and karate.<sup>454</sup> An 18-year-old from Yalaguina remembered his schedule as followed:

From four to six in the morning, we did two hours of running. From six to eight, we rested while we ate breakfast. From eight to ten, we lined up for marching and military formation. From 10 to 12, we received classes on assembly and disassembly of arms. At noon we had lunch and they gave us an hour for clean-up. From one to three, we did push-ups, rowing, just exercise. At three, we did chores. On Fridays, they showed us films—cowboys, shoot-outs and all of that. They also taught those who didn't know how to swim.<sup>455</sup>

The day-to-day drills and hazing were highly brutal with beatings and psychological harassment serving to break the men down. One soldier from Somoto explained that, “the training was hard. Passing through the famous EEBI made one into a man [*tener cara de hombre uno*] because they spit on us, they kicked us. They basically tortured us in order to make a soldier.”<sup>456</sup> Sand was thrown in their faces, said a recruit from Santa Isabel, and they were forced to eat large numbers of chilies.<sup>457</sup> In a certain sense, passing the degrading training and not leaving indeed gave one a sense of masculinity and physical supremacy. The alleged EEBI slogan, “¡*Arriba la Guardia!*”

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<sup>454</sup> Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 8, Caso 51, May 19, 1980, p. 5.

<sup>455</sup> Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 9, Caso 51, September 23, 1980, p. 5.

<sup>456</sup> Interview A259, Somoto, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>457</sup> Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 2, Caso 70, May 23, 1980, p. 4.

*¡Abajo el Pueblo!*” (“Up with the Guard! Down with the People!”), as well as a military cadence which declared the EEBI were “tigers” that “drank the blood of the People” show the levels of indoctrination involved.<sup>458</sup> An EEBI soldier from San Juan de Limay in Estelí later testified that at his training rotation at the Cibalsa military base they were told that “they were training us to take us to the mountain to kill the *compas*... the guerrillas.” While they marched, they were told to chant: “‘You want the blood of the People!’ We had to say it because if you didn’t, they beat us and said, ‘Don’t be cowards. One day, you’re going to be good little soldiers.’”<sup>459</sup> These forms of brutalization and brainwashing radicalized these young men in their perceptions of threats and understanding of violence. Many of these campesinos were in fact “ordinary men” transformed through the EEBI’s indoctrination and hierarchy into counterinsurgents capable of great acts of cruelty.<sup>460</sup>

The training program was divided into four climatic sequences: the “mountain phase,” the “dry phase” in desert conditions, the “humid phase” in swamplands with frequent rain, and the “coastal phase” on the Atlantic littoral.<sup>461</sup> Those who stood out were given the chance to study abroad and return to serve as instructors at the school. One EEBI soldier recalled that he and peers were sent to West Point Military Academy, Fort Sherman, Fort Gulick, the Canal Zone, Chile, Petén in Guatemala and El Salvador. Somoza Portocarrero, he said, “was attuned of everything you needed as a soldier. ‘You have to advance, not remain as a simple soldier.’ He

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<sup>458</sup> Henry Briceño, *Un ejército dentro de un ejército: bajo el genocidio somocista* (s.n., 1979), 67.

<sup>459</sup> Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 2, Caso 80. June 14, 1980, p. 4.

<sup>460</sup> I take the phrase from Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (HarperCollins, 1993).

<sup>461</sup> *Acción Cívica*, December 1977, p. 49.

called us into his office. ‘You’re going to Fort Sherman to a pilot’s course.’ ‘You’re going to Chile to study jungle combat. It’s for your own good to advance as a soldier.’”<sup>462</sup> One man from Las Sabanas entered in 1977 he was sent to the EEBI, “where he remained under the direction of the Chigüin, who designated him as an instructor of these troops due to his technical capacity... acquired in a course he took in 1978 in the Salvadoran armed forces.” Of the 15 men who took this parachute course in El Salvador, he recalled proudly, four did not finish the course due to broken limbs.<sup>463</sup>

Compared to the GN as a whole, these new recruits were given numerous perks and privileges: superior housing, medical assistance, food, clothes and a monthly salary of more than 550 córdobas.<sup>464</sup> At an exclusive store on the base, EEBI soldiers could buy televisions, consoles, stereos, radios, whiskey, clothes, perfume and other imported goods duty-free.<sup>465</sup> Such perquisites led to tensions with the older National Guards—officers and soldiers—who now felt passed over by their own institution. Despite the intense training, the clientelistic nature of the army could not be excised given these material benefits and the centrality of Somoza’s son to the new project. Even in the EEBI, a massive portrait of the dictator hung on the wall, watching over their dining hall. A soldier from Santa Rosa, Somoto, noted that when they crossed paths with El Chigüin they were told to shout, “For you, Sir, I will give my life for yours!”<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Interview A258, Somoto, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>463</sup> Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 1, Caso 54, p. 6.

<sup>464</sup> *Acción Cívica*, February 1976, p 38-39

<sup>465</sup> Henry Briceño, *Un ejército dentro de un ejército (Bajo el Genocidio Somocista.)* San José, Costa Rica, 1979, p. 24.

<sup>466</sup> Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 8, Caso 51, May 21, 1980, p. 5.

When the cities broke out in insurrections in 1978, the demand for new soldiers led the Guard to carry out forced recruitment. In Somoto, the period of intense revolutionary warfare in September had passed without a shot fired and the rural population remained isolated from detailed knowledge about the violent clashes taking place in the cities. With a mixture of fear and material enticements, the GN were able to rapidly expand its membership virtually overnight. Active-duty Guards and paramilitaries gathered young campesinos from the communities of San Lucas, Las Sabanas and Cusmapa and brought them to the city of Somoto. From there, they were sent to Managua and other military hotspots via *aviocar* airplanes.<sup>467</sup> In the nearby valley of Santa Rosa, a neighbor explained, the head of the Civil Reserves arrived to:

...forcefully recruit several young men to go to the army base. They took several by force and if they refused to go, they were told they'd be seen as enemies [*contrario*].... They sent them in an airplane that made three trips a day and landed on a runway near the base. They recruited them and offered them 500 córdobas which was a great deal [*ganga*] because with that money you could buy anything. This place is totally broke [*palmado*] and this money was much needed to buy food and other things.<sup>468</sup>

Unlike the peaceful periods in which recruitment was voluntary and even desirable, recruitment now blended material appeals to the campesinos with the latent threat of force. Almost overnight, the National Guard is said to have increased in size from 7,000 full-time members to perhaps double that figure, many drawn from the northern regions of the Segovias along the border.<sup>469</sup> These recruits were given an abridged version of the EEBI training in order to prepare them to enter directly into combat against the guerrilla. As the regime's power crumbled, though, some

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<sup>467</sup> For example, Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 1, Caso 40; Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 2, Caso 287, p. 2; Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 3, Caso 370.

<sup>468</sup> "Inspección Ocular" from Santa Rosa in Tribunales Especiales, Trib. 1, Caso 157, p. 17.

<sup>469</sup> Radu, "The Nature of the Insurgency," 413–416.

enlistees were simply thrown into ill-fitting uniforms, handed a gun and sent to the front lines as cannon fodder for the dying regime.

## **Conclusion**

The forms of state terror and repression that the National Guard engaged in during its final two years in power reached extremes previously unseen in the country's history. As we will see in the final two chapters, the GN fired on political marches, bombed cities and carried out summary executions of civilians. The process of militarization and radicalization undertaken assured that the military would respond in this very manner as it defended Somoza against all challengers. The irony is that at the very moment the FSLN hoisted the banner of the poor and dispossessed, the regime drew on this same group of people to carry out acts of violence against the revolutionaries and the population at large.

In this chapter, I examined the social origins of military enlistment located in the material conditions, local political traditions and social linkages to wider patronage networks. Once inside this organization structure, the regime attempted (at times clumsily) to emboss them with an ideology, status and power that would serve the needs of the institution and its goals. In my analysis of the military's internal culture, I mapped out the different forms of identity—involving ethnicity, gender and social class—through which other subalterns social came to be “guardians of the dynasty,” believing themselves to have a stake in the maintenance of the Somoza regime. Rather than posit this consciousness as “false,” I have contextualized their worldview within both the social, cultural and institutional milieu in which they were formed and made choices. As Eric Van Young wrote of Mexican history, scholars often use the concept of agency “in explaining subaltern resistance or sly forms of adaptation” and not to explain “why people allow

themselves to be co-opted into a given social configuration.”<sup>470</sup> These members of dominated social groups that joined the GN did not contest power and hierarchy at every turn, but rather hoped to merge into them in order to assure their survival, if not social mobility.

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<sup>470</sup> Eric Van Young, “The New Cultural History Comes to Old Mexico,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (May 1, 1999): 245.

**Chapter 6.**  
**“The Tongue Has No Bones, But it Breaks Bones”:**  
**A Social Anatomy of the Secret Police and Popular Espionage in Northern Nicaragua**

**Introduction**

With the rise of the Sandinista National Liberation Front in the Segovias from the mid-1960s, the regime responded with mass captures and torture of civilians accused of supporting the insurgents. However, the police state manifested itself not solely in the actions of the National Guard as such but through the arrival of intelligence agents, armed and dressed in civilian clothes. The agents and torturers sent from the Office of National Security (OSN) made Estelí a “center for operations” in 1965 and opened a permanent office in the city four years later.<sup>471</sup> This nucleus of investigators increasingly buttressed themselves with webs of clandestine civilian informers scattered throughout the region’s neighborhoods, towns and villages. These included people from all walks of life: high school students, truck drivers, popsicle sellers, radio technicians and leather workers. The state’s increasing infiltration of society at its grassroots marked a major shift its prior reach and laid the groundwork for the intense violence of the Somoza dictatorship’s final two years.

While virtually absent from historical accounts of the regime and the revolutionary movement, *orejas* (“ears”), as the civilian informants were called, are omnipresent in popular accounts of state violence. In a representative account, a campesino from San Lucas, remembered a neighbor who denounced him for allegedly delivering food to a nearby guerrilla encampment, saying:

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<sup>471</sup> *La Prensa*, May 17, 1970

This man was one of the *soplones* (“whistlers”). Of course, they were helped by the Guard, but they were our persecutors (*zánganos*) and had the help of the Guard. They passed their time idly in the military base and did whatever they wanted. If someone even looked at them the wrong way they beat them. They took prisoners and thousands of things like that. They were that type of person.<sup>472</sup>

A popular trope even contends that “the orejas were worse than the Guards,” in that the information provided by a single informant could lead to the arrest or deaths of countless others.

The adage used as this title’s chapter came from a campesina’s reflection on the role of informants in the murder of thirteen of her neighbors in the final months of the dictatorship.<sup>473</sup>

In an interesting way, the exculpatory accounts of former National Guards mirrored the revolutionaries’ emphasis on popular espionage as a key factor in repression. “I give most of the blame to those people we called the orejas,” a former GN officer from Somoto said of the repression:

Eight out of ten times they informed to us, it was just because they didn’t like someone. If the Guard is here in their base, they don’t know what’s going on in that community. So someone comes and says so-and-so is doing this and you had to go respond. Maybe you went there and there was actually nothing but in the process someone died and that’s where the accusations against us came from.<sup>474</sup>

While such an account obscures as much as it reveals, the parallel with revolutionary accounts suggests a major gap in the historiography. For while orejas, *soplones* and *sapos* (“frogs”) are a constant factor in accounts of political surveillance and repression, analysis of the secret police forces and their networks of grassroots informants are virtually absent from writing on the history of Latin American dictatorships.

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<sup>472</sup> Interview, CNA.3H-5, Edgardo Beltrán. San Lucas, Madriz, 1980.

<sup>473</sup> An event considered in Chapter 8.

<sup>474</sup> Interview A267-268, Anonymous, Somoto, Madriz, 2010.



On the one hand, this may be the result of a lack of sources. Archives of the secret police forces are rarely accessible to researchers and former informants are not wont to discuss these experiences. Likewise, studies seeking to expose culpability for human rights violations rightly analyze state repression from a “top-down” perspective, privileging state leadership, institutional frameworks and the wider geopolitical context. At the same time, the romantic conception of “the subaltern” or “the community” inherently resisting state power has likewise left little room for analysis of popular collaboration. In the Nicaraguan context, this was especially pronounced due to the Sandinista narrative of the revolutionary struggle of “the People” against a “universally” reviled Somoza regime. Recent work on denunciation and the secret police forces of modern European dictatorships, however, has opened an important debate, offering a rich set of questions through which to analyze internal political espionage. Some of the best research to date has been done on the infamous Russian and German cases, demystifying and exposing the inner workings and practices of the czarist Okhrana and the Soviet KGB, as well as the Nazi Gestapo and East Germany’s Stasi.<sup>475</sup>

In this chapter, we turn to the history of Somoza’s secret police, the Office of National Security (OSN), with a particular focus on its activities in Estelí and Madriz. As the arm of the National Guard responsible for surveillance and interrogation of the political opposition, the

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<sup>475</sup> Claire M. Hall, “An Army of Spies? The Gestapo Spy Network 1933—45,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 44, no. 2 (April 1, 2009): 247–265; Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, “Introduction to the Practices of Denunciation in Modern European History,” *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4 (December 1, 1996): 747–767; Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, eds., *Accusatory Practices: Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789-1989* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Robert Gellately, “The Gestapo and German Society: Political Denunciation in the Gestapo Case Files,” *The Journal of Modern History* 60, no. 4 (December 1, 1988): 654–694; Gary Bruce, *The Firm: The Inside Story of the Stasi* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Charles A. Ruud and Sergei A. Stepanov, *Fontanka 16: The Tsars’ Secret Police* (McGill-Queen’s Press - MQUP, 1999); Fredric Scott Zuckerman, *The Tsarist Secret Police in Russian Society, 1880-1917* (New York University Press, 1996).

OSN was implicated in numerous acts of violence during dictatorship's final years. From its origins, I argue, it functioned not only to torture and extract information but also to canalize traditional oral cultures of denunciation and *chisme* (gossip) into a more cohesive intelligence-gathering system. These efforts were assisted with massive US support for Cold War-era intelligence modernization. Against the mythic vision of an all-seeing state, however, the OSN never approximated the paradigm of Bentham's Panopticon, converting "the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long hierarchized network," as Foucault famously put it.<sup>476</sup> With its relatively few numbers of active agents, the OSN remained a crude apparatus linked to traditional structures of patron-clientelism and little sophistication to its methodology.

The question still remains, however: who were the men and women that were drawn into this institution and, in turn, played a fundamental role in targeting the regime's violence? With this micro-study, we examine the social origins and motivations of *orejas* and the important internal differentiation of roles within the institution: as intelligence agents and torturers, as official or unofficial civilian informants, and (with particularly deadly results) as former revolutionaries coerced or bribed into collaboration against their erstwhile *compañeros*.

### **Intelligence in Diapers? : Spying, Torture and US-Supported Modernization**

In the mountains of the Segovias, oral cultures of gossip and denunciation to state authorities had long been an integral element in the Nicaraguan political structure. During the US occupation and the guerrilla uprising of the 1920s and 30s, community members often denounced personal enemies for having supported the opposing band and swift justice was meted

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<sup>476</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* (New York: Random House, 1977), 214.

out—by the Marines, Guards and the insurgents alike. The presence of campesino authorities, the jueces de mesta, in the villages and hamlets allowed for a direct link between the central government and even the most remote communities.

This traditional system with its dependence on spontaneous denunciation lost efficacy as Nicaragua became increasingly urbanized and the Somoza family's perpetuation in power fostered wide-ranging opposition. In the context of assassination threats and coup attempts, Anastasio Somoza García founded the Office of National Security in the late 1940s as the G-2 intelligence branch of the GN in order to systematize the surveillance and interrogation abilities of the regime. Given the United States' role in the creation of the National Guard, it little surprise that an American agent, Richard Van Winckle, was brought to Managua from Bangkok, where he had been training Thailand's secret police force.<sup>477</sup> Van Winckle helped form the intelligence corps with contemporary FBI techniques in interrogation, surveillance and personal security for leaders.<sup>478</sup> The facilities of the nascent OSN were established in Managua, alongside the dictator's mansion and the military compound on Tiscapa Hill. A dozen or so loyal officials were assigned to la Seguridad, including numerous men who later gained great notoriety as cruel and even sadistic torturers.<sup>479</sup>

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<sup>477</sup> *Spokesman-Review*, September 26, 1956.

<sup>478</sup> This infamous foreign trainer was re-baptized "Sartorious Van Wynckle," the villain in Sergio Ramirez's novel which deals with the context of the Somoza assassination in León. *Margarita, está linda la mar* (Alfaguara, 1998)

<sup>479</sup> Among the names recalled by a National Guard member were Oscar Morales, Ruperto Hooker, Gregorio Pichardo, Agustín Torres López, Carlos García and Lázaro García. *La Prensa*, June 21, 2000. Their use of electric shock machine (*la maquinita*) on political prisoners' testicles began so infamous that Somoza himself responded to these claims in an interview with *Time* magazine. "Oh, hell, that thing isn't so bad," he laughed. "I've tried it myself—on my hand." *Time* November 15, 1948.

The 1956 assassination of Somoza García at the hands of a young poet in León, though a failure on the part of the intelligence apparatus, ironically served to strengthen the hand of OSN. In response, its agents captured, interrogated and tortured many leading opposition figures in a witch-hunt for an alleged nationwide conspiracy that had supposedly facilitated the shooting.<sup>480</sup> The regime likewise intensified its intelligence efforts, both domestically and abroad, as numerous armed movements challenged the rule of the late dictator's sons. Despite a fearsome reputation, the OSN's range of operations during these years was extremely limited and focused largely upon prominent regime opponents in Managua.

Anastasio Somoza Debayle placed the OSN in the hands of his loyalist allies, GN officers like Gustavo Montiel and Samuel Genie Amaya. The officers affiliated with the OSN were among the most privileged in the National Guard, recalled a former GN lawyer, with mansions provided along on the waterfront and cars imported duty-free.<sup>481</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, the Cuban Revolution in 1959 gave new momentum to longstanding US attempts to modernize the methods of its Latin American allies to meet the "threat of communist subversion." Much of the OSN's counterintelligence training came directly from the United States Military at the School of the Americas in Panama.<sup>482</sup> However, the new wave of counterintelligence training began was Lt. Ricardo Lau of the OSN was sent to begin the Phase I

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<sup>480</sup> Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, *Estirpe Sangrienta: Los Somoza* (México: Patria y Libertad, 1957); Agustín Torres Lazo, *La saga de los Somoza: Historia de un magnicidio* (Managua: Hispamer, 2000)..

<sup>481</sup> Interview CNA.3<sup>a</sup>-77, Sergio Lesama, Somoto, Madriz, 1980; Pérez, *Semper fidelis*, 96.

<sup>482</sup> Among those trained by the SOA were Samuel Genie, Gustavo Montiel, Bayardo Jirón, Oscar Morales ("Moralitos"), Iván Alegrett, Ronald Sampson, John Lee Wong, Agustín Torres López ("El Coto,") Gonzalo Lacayo ("Lacayito").

of the counterintelligence training at the SOA in 1966.<sup>483</sup> Fifteen officers were sent over the coming two years, including many accused of torture.<sup>484</sup> As with the training system in general, upon returning to Nicaragua, these officers were responsible for teaching other soldiers for the fight against “subversion.” Out of this counterintelligence training, the GN would form the Anti-Communist Service (*Servicio Anticomunista*, SAC), a highly selective OSN branch with only 40 highly ideological agents which focused exclusively on the capture or assassination of the Sandinista guerrilla leadership.<sup>485</sup>

The United States also supported the secret police through the Office of Public Security (OPS), part of the US AID with links to the CIA which provided assistance with surveillance techniques, the recruitment and use of informants, as well as practical skills such as wiretaps, filing systems, databases and fingerprinting.<sup>486</sup> In 1964, OPS developed a teletype system linking the Central American dictatorships so they could share “the identity, movement, activities and plans of subversives, insurgents, and common criminals” in order to combat the “continued efforts by Central American communists to improve inter-party cooperation and pool their strength.”<sup>487</sup> In February 1971, the OPS established a permanent mission in Nicaragua, sending Gunter Wagner, a German-born American to help enhance the regime’s intelligence capabilities,

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<sup>483</sup> Lau, mentioned later in the context of the case study of Mao Gómez, was later identified by United States as the material assassin of Archbishop Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero while saying mass in El Salvador in 1980.

<sup>484</sup> SOA Graduates Database, SOA Watch.

<sup>485</sup> Baltodano, *Memorias de la lucha sandinista. Tomo I: De la forja de la vanguardia a la montaña*, 33; Enrique Peña-Pérez, *Secretos De La Revolución Sandinista* (E. Peña-Pérez, 2004), 67.

<sup>486</sup> Robert H. Holden, “Securing Central America Against Communism: The United States and the Modernization of Surveillance in the Cold War,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 41, no. 1 (April 1, 1999): 4.

<sup>487</sup> Byron Engle, OPS, to Gordon Chase, White House, “Proposed Central American International Security Telecommunications Network,” March 23, 1964, US AID. DDRS. See also: Paul Katz, “Central American International Security Telecommunications Survey Report,” February 1964, USAID-OPS. Declassified document.

as he had previously done in South Vietnam and the Dominican Republic.<sup>488</sup> When the OPS was shut down in 1976, following claims of having taught torture to the police forces of dictatorships, Wagner stayed on as a private employee of Somoza.<sup>489</sup>

Though often referred to by the collective name “orejas,” the secret police included a diversity of roles and levels of sophistication: Security Officers, Security Agents, the Investigation Police (attached to the local GN bases rather than the Managua-based OSN) and Civilian Collaborators.<sup>490</sup> Agents were career military men who focused on domestic intelligence gathering related to the political opposition. Given the hidden nature of their work, these men formed a collective identity not present in the GN as a whole. As Georg Simmel has noted in his sociological study of secret society, the secret nature of membership in the apparatus becomes an end in and of itself. “[A]s soon as a whole group uses secrecy as its form of existence,” he wrote, “the significance becomes internal: the secret determines the reciprocal relations among those who share it in common.”<sup>491</sup>

Some leading GN officers have reflected in retrospect on the perceived incompetence of the spies and their lack of efficacy. Capitan Justiniano Pérez, for instance, wrote that even among trained agents:

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<sup>488</sup> Elmer H. Adkins, Jr. and Morris Grodsky. "Termination Phase-Out Study. Public Safety Project: Nicaragua." April 1974. USAID-OPS in DEC; *NACLA*, 1976, Vol. 10, 24.

<sup>489</sup> United States. Congress. House. Committee on International Relations. Subcommittee on International Organizations, *Human Rights in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador: Implications for U.S. Policy: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, Ninety-fourth Congress, Second Session, June 8 and 9, 1976* (U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1976), 229–230.

<sup>490</sup> Peña-Pérez, *Secretos De La Revolución Sandinista*, 97.

<sup>491</sup> Georg Simmel and Kurt H. Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (Simon and Schuster, 1950), 345.

the modus operandi of the OSN was artisanal... they dressed ritually in *guayaberas* to hide their standard issue revolvers and traveled about in Land Rover jeeps, childishly hindering the spy operations. In the mountainous north, they were sent based on intelligence reports that turned out to be—in most cases—assumptions, which caused physical wear and a waste of resources. They acted more out of instinct than trying to verify claims. Intelligence was in diapers in the OSN. The OSN could never infiltrate the FSLN and it never used women in its spy activities...<sup>492</sup>

While his final two claims are demonstrably false, his critique of the institution's crudity is not without basis. Even the "interrogation" of prisoners, which Pérez interestingly does not mention, relied largely on sheer physical brutality rather than sophisticated psychological manipulation. Electric shocks, fists, boots and gun butts were the main tools of the trade and in many cases served as much as a form of punishment as a technique for extracting information. The *capucha*, or hood, was a black sack placed over a prisoner's head for weeks or months at a time became a trademark of the secret police in their treatment of political prisoners.<sup>493</sup> Though Col. Torrez Yáñez of the SAC later insisted that he did not participate in torture, a fellow GN officer also involved in repression of the guerrillas laughed off his claims:

In all organizations formed by a dictatorship, Political Police needs to have one group that tortures and another that doesn't torture. We have to recognize that the Guard killed to ingratiate themselves with Somoza. I even got to the point due to their perversity that I thought that to kill a communist was not a crime.<sup>494</sup>

This admonition resonates with the story of a high school graduate with top grades from Somoto who was accepted to the Military Academy and later into OSN. Initially, he worked as a bodyguard for (and likely, spied on) high-ranking members of the opposition Conservative Party

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<sup>492</sup> Pérez, *Semper fidelis*, 96–97.

<sup>493</sup> Amnesty International, *The Republic of Nicaragua: An Amnesty International Report Including the Findings of a Mission to Nicaragua, 10-15 May 1976* (Amnesty International Publications, 1977), 32. See the interview with Samuel Genie, *La Prensa*, January 11, 1969.

<sup>494</sup> *La Prensa*, July 17, 2000.

who had joined Somoza's government due to the *Kupia Kumi* pact. For his success, he was transferred to the SAC and given advanced training in fingerprinting and photography, which he used to monitor participants in anti-Somoza protests.<sup>495</sup> But his job does not appear to have only involved spying. A woman later testified that while she prisoner of the GN, he had tortured her and though he dressed in civilian clothes and "wore blue jeans, the Guards called him 'boss.'"<sup>496</sup> Though their superior, some of the Guards even spoke out against his rough interrogation methods, telling the agent, "She's a woman, don't treat her so bad." However, the victim later testified that the agent simply responded, "'She's not a woman, she's a *yeica* (a derogatory term for guerrillas)' and went on to open something that I suppose was a box or something metallic and he applied the tip of a cable to my ears."<sup>497</sup> Once the torture was over, she came to and realized that the two men tortured alongside her were now dead. This account is suggestive of the sadistic fervor of committed cadres of the secret police.

A profound weakness of the OSN as an intelligence apparatus was its utter inability to manage public opinion. The Permanent Military Court of Investigation was formed to try the arrested FSLN prisoners and expose their subversive conspiracy before the public. These judicial efforts backfired in the most devastating manner by generating vast public awareness of the Sandinistas and amplifying their reach. An OSN officer noted in retrospect that the trials' "lengthy speeches, live radio transmissions, witnesses' testimonies, defense lawyers' and military prosecutors' declarations to the media were slowly facilitating Sandinistas' campaign of

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<sup>495</sup> Trib. Esp. 3, February 2, 1980, p. 4-5

<sup>496</sup> Testimony of GRB, Trib. Esp. 3, February 2, 1980, p. 35.

<sup>497</sup> Testimony of GRB, Trib. Esp. 3, February 2, 1980, p. 35.



proselytism.” The OSN’s “ignorance of psychological warfare methods” ironically gave the guerrillas “free propaganda,” sending “an ideological and revolutionary message to the Nicaraguan people, especially the youth.”<sup>498</sup>

### **“They Sold Humanity like You’d Sell a Horse:” Honorary Agents and the Political Economy of Denunciation**

The famous Spanish proverb “*pueblo chiquito, infierno grande*” (small town, large hell) is a reflection on the nature of village life with its manifold jealousies, rumors and gossip. In such small communities, the general lack of anonymity made secret police agents rather unnecessary.<sup>499</sup> Serving this function in the countryside were the jueces de mesta and *capitanes de cañada*, campesinos in each village and hamlet granted power over their neighbors. Jueces regularly denounced the presence of outsiders—whether suspected cattle rustlers, trade unionists or guerrilla cadres—to the local GN base. Though the romantic view of rural society perceives rumor as a form of resistance or rebellion, in divided communities, gossip served primary role in the perpetuation of the system and its ability to target victims.<sup>500</sup>

Given the massacres in which a number of jueces were implicated, the very job title itself has been endowed with a touch of the macabre. In fact, the vast majority of jueces de mesta were merely village elders drawn from among the campesinos and were not involved in repression. In times of peace, these quasi-judicial authorities could range from relatively benign

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<sup>498</sup> Peña-Pérez, *Secretos De La Revolución Sandinista*, 44.

<sup>499</sup> As Simmel recognizes, social distance is the most important factor at play. “In a small and narrow circle,” he writes, “the formation and preservation of secrets is made difficult even on technical grounds: everybody is too close to everybody else and his circumstances, and... the secret is not even particularly needed, because this type of social formation usually levels its members.” Simmel and Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 335.

<sup>500</sup> Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*; Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

to heavy-handed, depending on individual personalities and the conflicts between community-level factions. When the Sandinistas arrived in a given region, however, the panorama changed as jueces de mesta revealed the location of the insurgents and the names of their supporters. A historical account of the early FSLN notes none of the early guerrillas “appreciated the ruthless efficacy of the National Guard and its network of jueces de mesta and campesino informers throughout the country.”<sup>501</sup> At times, jueces even joined directly in the repression, marching alongside the GN and shooting it out directly with the guerrillas. The FSLN responded with a policy of assassinating jueces de mesta, which eventually was abandoned once the guerrillas realized that they would do better to win the jueces over to their side.

Seguridad agents were largely based in urban or in semi-urban locales where they recruited civilian informants, known as *colaboradores* or honorary agents.<sup>502</sup> For their information, a former official noted, these grassroots informers “were given a great deal of economic benefits.”<sup>503</sup> In the typology of police informants, many of these individuals were “Outside Multiple Event Informants” or “snoops,” who were recruited because they belonged to the social groups or geographic locales from which threats were perceived as emerging.<sup>504</sup> In many ways, the networks of informants closely paralleled the map of the regime’s networks of patronage, with public employees, Liberal Party activists and former National Guards the mostly

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<sup>501</sup> Darwin J. Flakoll and Claribel Alegría, *Nicaragua, la revolución sandinista: una crónica política, 1855-1979* (Anama Ediciones Centroamericanas, 2004), 145.

<sup>502</sup> Peña-Pérez, *Secretos De La Revolución Sandinista*, 66–67.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid.

<sup>504</sup> Steven Greer, “Towards a Sociological Model of the Police Informant,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 3 (1995): 510.

likely recruits.<sup>505</sup> The various electoral organizations affiliated with the PLN, such as the Somocista Liberal Youth (*Juventud Liberal Somocista*), the Somocista Retired Soldiers and Campesinos Association, (AMROCS) and the Liberal Feminine Wing (*Ala Feminina Liberal*), were all likewise considered to be filled with regime informers. As a Catholic activist from Cusmapa put it: “Just by hearing that so-and-so worked for the government, you knew immediately that they were a ‘Guardia.’ Even if they didn’t wear a uniform or carry a gun.”<sup>506</sup>

In many communities, orejas were not perceived of as a small segment of the population, with many responding “that’s what we had the most of” (“*era lo que más había*”). The younger brother of a guerrilla from Somoto killed due to a denunciation was even more emphatic, insisting:

Being an oreja was the only job anyone had here for the Somoteños. As there are no factories or jobs, it was not to make money. It was just to meet their needs that the people sold the youth... Just by denouncing one person, they had enough to eat. You can’t call these people revolutionaries because they caused the deaths of so many people. They sold humanity like you would sell a horse.<sup>507</sup>

In addition to direct monetary benefits, an OSN membership card given to “honorary agents” functioned in much in the same way as the *la Magnífica*, a red PLN card given to Somoza voters and required for employment in the public sector or at the haciendas or factories owned by Somocistas. The OSN card indeed exceeded the Magnífica in that it provided a certain sense of impunity from the GN to its carrier. Some even purchased OSN cards, such as a truck driver who

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<sup>505</sup> Enrique Martínez Fariñas, *Nicaragua: lucha, llora y muere : para ser libre!* (Producciones Editoriales, 1979), 12.

<sup>506</sup> Interview, Anonymous, San Jose de Cusmapa, 2010.

<sup>507</sup> Interview CNA.3<sup>a</sup>-53, Anonymous, Somoto, Mardriz, 1980.

paid 100 córdobas for his ID so that he could carry more passengers between Estelí and Managua.<sup>508</sup>

Secret police—unlike the non-state secret societies Simmel describes— fall somewhere between the two ideal types he laid out: “societies in which elements live in the most frequent interactions; but the fact that they form a society... [is] a secret” and those in which “the formation of the group is completely known, while the membership, purpose, and the other specific rules of the association remain a secret.”<sup>509</sup> In this way, the dramaturgical aspect of membership as a clandestine informant determined the ways in which individuals and the apparatus itself were perceived by the population. Erving Goffman’s distinction between impressions one “gives” and those they “give off” is highly important here, for while an official secret, some made their role as orejas (and its consequent power) manifest through verbal and non-verbal cues.<sup>510</sup> “We know better than to open our mouths in front of any random person,” one FSLN supporter recalled. “The orejas and the jueces de mesta did not have any training in how to camouflage themselves and for that reason so many of us survived.”<sup>511</sup> Oftentimes, these orejas were referred to as people who were “bigmouths” and “talked a lot” (*muy dado a la lengua*) rather than people with radically pro-Somoza politics. From the perspective of the system, however, it did not really matter whether information was passed along due to political consciousness, material incentives or pure spite.<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> Trib Esp. 5, Case 29, April 30, 1980, p. 4-5.

<sup>509</sup> Simmel and Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 346.

<sup>510</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1969), 14.

<sup>511</sup> CNA.1d-24, Asunción Merlo, Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>512</sup> Gellately, “The Gestapo and German Society.”

Some of the most recognized orejas became infamous for their role in denunciations, and their mere presence inspired fear. Many were referred to solely by their *malapodos*, or nicknames, such as Hueso Fino and El Zanate in Estelí. The latter, who owned a travel agency, felt himself in the position to speak down to the local National Guard comandante, parking in violation of traffic laws and rejecting soldiers' attempts to buy travel tickets on credit. "He pretends to be a friend of the government and the National Guard but it's not true," the local top commanding GN officer wrote to Somoza. "He didn't accept our promissory notes, saying that with these pieces of paper neither he nor his family can eat and the Guard never pays for them. And that they are all a bunch of thieves and killers."<sup>513</sup> That an oreja was in a position to speak in such a way to the National Guard without retaliation suggests of the parallel source of power located in the secret police force.

Informants often shared a culture of masculine sociability with the soldiers and officers of the local GN base. One of the accused informants in the town of Condega was an elderly man, who spent the day lounging in the town park before heading to the Guardia base for some late-night gambling over rounds of the card game *desmoche*. This agent, a neighbor noted, "pretended to be very humble and dumb to carry out his work, but he received a monthly salary of 400 córdobas."<sup>514</sup> In Estelí, a gun salesman known for drinking, shooting dice and playing cards with GN officers was among those recruited to the OSN. Though from a Somocista family, he later insisted that he only voted for the PLN because "they came to the poor neighborhoods and took us to vote and they told us if we voted this piece of paper (*La Magnífica*) would help

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<sup>513</sup> Comandante of Estelí to President Schick and Anastasio Somoza, August 19, 1965. AGN, Fondo Guardia Nacional, Sección Estado Mayor, Caja 22, Expediente 314.

<sup>514</sup> MININT Declaration, Romeo González Espinoza in Trib. Esp. 2, Case 330, November 20, 1980, p 18.

with many things.”<sup>515</sup> In an interesting parallel suggestive of the affinity between the two forms of patronage was the statement of a friend of his who testified that, “even if he was part of the OSN as they say he was, I think many people did it just for the access it provided to government offices.”<sup>516</sup> A neighbor claimed that the OSN provided the gun salesman with a document with the names and photos of known guerrillas with the order that if he saw one, he was to “denounce them immediately to help capture the people who appeared on the list... he’d go around with them and point out which houses were identified with the Sandinista struggle.”<sup>517</sup> Other neighbors accused him of informing on young people and “working with members of the Seguridad Somocista, hosting meetings of all the paramilitaries in the city. Everyone here was afraid of him.”<sup>518</sup>

Not surprisingly, there was occasional overlap between the state security apparatus and common criminal elements. For instance, cattle thieves, gambling den/cantina owners and others served as part of the structure, spying on their neighbors and providing information. Given the National Guard’s stake in semi-illegal businesses such as brothels, gambling dens and cantinas, the owners of such establishments were also called on to work as orejas. This blurred boundary is present in the case of five sons of an elderly Guard from Madriz who had served since the US occupation. They were “five brothers, Guardias and Somocistas and they made themselves respected,” a former Guardia from San Lucas recalls.<sup>519</sup> Many residents, however, remembered

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<sup>515</sup> Declaration MINT, Trib. Esp. 4, Case 11, February 4, 1980, p. 46.

<sup>516</sup> Testimony of PBM, Trib. Esp. 4, Case 11, February 4, 1980, p. 41.

<sup>517</sup> MINT declaration of ECC, Trib. Esp. 4, Case 11, February 4, 1980, p. 56.

<sup>518</sup> MINT declaration of JCA, Trib. Esp. 4, Case 11, February 4, 1980, p. 49.

<sup>519</sup> Interview, Anonymous, Somoto, Madriz.

these men as repressive paramilitary agents who behaved in an arbitrary manner. Though technically civilians, the five brothers were men of confidence in the GN bases and appear to have taken full advantage of the subjective power they were granted. For instance, one of the brothers was said to have been murdered a worker in a cantina in Estelí (in a dispute over an unpaid two peso drink) at the very time that he was supposed to have been behind bars for stabbing his first wife to death in Pueblo Nuevo. Jaime González later testified that “with the chronic corruption of the dictatorship, this individual was given his freedom and appeared in Jalapa working as member of the Investigation Police.”<sup>520</sup> While perhaps exaggerations, these stories give a sense of the sort of political culture of criminality which intersected with the OSN.

Though many of the most recognizable agents were men, there were a number of women who played an important role as orejas. One of the most infamous was Porra Azul, an ambulant saleswoman, who gained access to “all of the houses because she sold cigars as a subterfuge in order to find out everything.”<sup>521</sup> Among those she allegedly denounced was the top Sandinista leader sent to Estelí in late 1971 to reactivate the movement in the city. Denis Zamorán, having studied in the Soviet Union and undergone military training at Palestinian camps in Jordan, was sent to this city due to its strategic importance.<sup>522</sup> Under the pseudonym of Iván he moved from house to house in order to avoid detection. Shortly after his arrival in Estelí, he and a number of those who had given him shelter were arrested by the National Guard. A fellow activist captured that same day recalls seeing Denis in the back seat of the GN’s jeep:

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<sup>520</sup> Testimony Jaime González Almedárez in Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980., p. 29.

<sup>521</sup> Testimony, Domingo Gómez, Trib. Esp. 2, Case 83, June 18, 1980, 34.

<sup>522</sup> *La Prensa*, November 23, 1971.

...with his hands tied back and his head and shirt soaked in blood... Lieutenant Vega came close and pistol-whipping him said, 'You're not going to talk, you son of a bitch?' and proceeded to hit him so he'd tell where Filemón Rivera was, to which compañero Zamorán didn't say thing, he just complained about the beating.<sup>523</sup>

It was the last time Zamorán would be seen alive. The following day, the National Guard declared in an official communiqué that the FSLN organizer had “thrown himself from the vehicle while it was moving at 80 kilometers an hour and crashed against the pavement,” a version of the events which was greeted with universal skepticism.<sup>524</sup> The murder of this Sandinista organizer brought the clandestine efforts in Estelí to come to a screeching halt as state terror achieved its intended effect. “With Zamorán’s death, we had to disband ourselves,” said the taxi driver. “If we had remained, they would’ve smashed us all to little bits.”<sup>525</sup> The message to the local activists from the leadership who identified the cigar saleswoman as the responsible party was clear as day: “Beware of Porra Azul!”<sup>526</sup>

One of the most expansive networks of informants in the region was based in Condega and run by “Gustavo,” a mechanic in his fifties who was related to General Gustavo Montiel. A neighbor whose son joined the FSLN had known the mechanic for nearly three decades and noted that:

The denunciations are understandable because that was his job, but I don't know if he ever killed anyone... I wouldn't say he was our 'enemy' but without doubt there was a problem because, although he worked as a mechanic, his [real] job was to check on us.<sup>527</sup>

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<sup>523</sup> Testimony of Luis Alberto Salgado, Trib. Esp. 2, Case 83, June 18, 1980, 58.

<sup>524</sup> *La Prensa*, November 23, 1971.

<sup>525</sup> Testimony Domingo Gómez, Trib. Esp. 2, Case 83, June 18, 1980, 34.

<sup>526</sup> Testimony Domingo Gómez, Trib. Esp. 2, Case 83, June 18, 1980, 34.

<sup>527</sup> Testimony of Santiago Baldovinos Chávez, Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980.,p. 25.



The lengthy reports Gustavo forwarded to the OSN included in great detail the names and addresses of families he accused of being civilian supporters of the FSLN, including student activists and Catholic groups, as well as the location of guerrilla training camps and arms stashes.<sup>528</sup> In his spy operations, Gustavo worked in close association with a traveling medicine and clothes salesman who frequently passed through the towns farther to the north and east. Regularly traveling the route to Jalapa and Teotecacinte and the highway leading to Santa Clara and Wiwilí, he fostered contacts and informants in the villages along the way. The two submitted comprehensive reports every fifteen days and were monetarily rewarded for their efforts. “We discovered bit by bit and with some work that this network really did exist,” Jaime González testified, “but it was much larger and with its interconnections, it encompassed practically all five departments of the Segovias.”<sup>529</sup> It was with the 1976 burial of guerrilla Santiago Baldovinos that the entire civilian structure of orejas became visible as they were called to patrol the mass held nine days after his funeral. “The Guard imagined that there could be a riot,” the father of the murdered guerrilla recalled, “so they sent elements from Ocotol, Somoto and Estelí to Condega so we could see all the elements connected to the Guard.”<sup>530</sup> In the town of Condega alone there were an estimated 45 members of this “secret society” including men both prominent (former mayors, landowners with histories of stealing land, the local judge) as well as the somewhat less perceptible (campesinos, cantina owners, convicted thieves.) A number of these men were later

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<sup>528</sup> Summary of Denunciations (June 15, 1977; May 24, 1978; July 19, 1978; July 20, 1978; July 29, 1978; March 28, 1979; April 19, 1979); “OSN Report de Información,” June 15, 1977 and “OSN Reporte de Información” April 19, 1979 in , Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980, p. 57-64.

<sup>529</sup> Testimony Jaime González Almedárez in Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980., p. 29.

<sup>530</sup> Testimony of Santiago Baldovinos Chávez, Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980.,p. 25.

seen in a high-speed chase after another vehicle through the town. Days later, the fire department removed the body of an unknown young man from a well alongside on the road to Yalí.<sup>531</sup>

Gustavo carried out his intelligence gathering in a highly crude and personal manner. In order to closely monitor the González family, he moved his mechanics to the patio directly adjacent to the family's home, although its small driveway had little room for repairing vehicles. Jaime González recalled one evening at around eleven, seeing:

...something strange in a *mamón* tree that was in the house where Gustavo lived. This strange form was Gustavo himself who had climbed the tree having heard the noise of the cars pulling into our garage and was spying inside, probably trying to see who was entering the house. He had probably been doing this for a long time.<sup>532</sup>

Having lived in the community for decades, Gustavo built business, family and friendship ties with both the National Guard as well as potential objects of surveillance. For instance, he asked Catholic activist and opposition journalist Henry Vargas to serve as godfather to one of his children and later offered him employment at Somoza's paper *Novedades*, complete with a professional camera and travel to the United States.<sup>533</sup> When Vargas refused, Gustavo's OSN report identified him as newspaper correspondent "writing articles against the government and the GN."<sup>534</sup>

Santiago Baldovinos and Raúl González, the sons of the town's leading families who had joined the Sandinistas, were gunned down in 1976 and 1977, thanks in part to the steady stream

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<sup>531</sup> Testimony Jaime González Almedárez in Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980., p. 29.

<sup>532</sup> Testimony of Jaime González Almedárez in Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980., p. 29.

<sup>533</sup> Testimony of Henry Vargas, Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980, p. 25-26.

<sup>534</sup> Untitled document, chronology of OSN denunciations (entry July 19, 1978) in Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980,

of information from the orejas working in the region. In 1978, Vargas, his fellow lay preacher Moisés Calero and the Catholic priest Padre Westher López were captured and beaten the neighboring municipality of Palacagüina, where they had gone to hold a mass in the liberation theology style. Had it not been for a threatened mobilization by Condega to free their friends, they likely would have faced a far worse fate.<sup>535</sup>

Gustavo's work was limited by the structural differences between the OSN and the wider GN. To friends, he allegedly "bragged that General Montiel had given him the orders and he had documents which permitted him to transfer any GN comandante if they did not obey the recommendations that he gave them to capture any *compañero*."<sup>536</sup> In one of his reports, for instance, he denounced "subversive" meetings held in the Baldovinos family motel as well as the local GN's lack of action. "Most of the time," the June 1977 report stated, the intelligence agents "inform on subjects painting [revolutionary] graffiti, they are captured and less than 24 hours later they are freed by the GN in Estelí, yet we do not know by what means or form they are able to free themselves."<sup>537</sup> What he implied was that the deep social ties and nepotism linking the GN officers to town notables like Baldovinos and González led them not to act against their children. Gustavo pleaded to come directly to the OSN offices in Managua to bypass the channels of the GN base so that he could give "the complete names of all the people that are in one form or another collaborating with the FSLN so that the OSN can have better information of

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<sup>535</sup> Testimony Moises Calero Calderón, Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980, p 33; Untitled document, chronology of OSN denunciations (entry July 19, 1978).

<sup>536</sup> Testimony of Guillermo Sovalbarro Rodríguez, Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980., p. 25.

<sup>537</sup> "OSN, Reporte de Información," June 14, 1977 in Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980, p 60.

the way, where and who are working in these activities.”<sup>538</sup> When his denunciations again seemed to come to naught, he even reported alleged FSLN infiltrations within the Guard, including secretaries working below the GN comandante in Estelí.<sup>539</sup> In May 1979, as we will see in the final chapter, a death squad arrived in the town and systematically executed a number of people whose names had appeared on the lists forwarded by the OSN agents.

### **The Fascination of Betrayal: Infiltration of the FSLN, Self-Making and the Targeting of GN Violence**

If informants served as the eyes and ears of the National Guard, the repressive apparatus successfully achieved significant reach within the guerrilla organization itself in the wake of the crackdown of 1975-1976. With such a large number of students, campesinos and urban workers captured, it was guaranteed that a number could be “flipped” to provide access to the internal plans of the Sandinistas.<sup>540</sup> Simmel emphasizes that the secret contains in itself the “fascination of betrayal” or the sense of in which the superiority found in knowledge of the secret is only made manifest by betraying it.<sup>541</sup> Guerilla leader Mónica Baltodano later noted that the presence of OSN and SAC informants within the Sandinista during this period and their bloody

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<sup>538</sup> “OSN, Reporte de Información,” June 14, 1977 in Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980, p. 60.

<sup>539</sup> Untitled document, chronology of OSN denunciations, (entry May 24, 1978), photocopied in Trib. Esp. 6, Case 31, April 12, 1980, p. 57.

<sup>540</sup> Given the general belief that those tortured had informed the OSN under torture, many of these compromised men were avoided by the FSLN. The voices of the tortured thus were silenced even in the Sandinista narratives given the sense of complicity with the regime which having fallen into their hands applied. The case is similar in other countries, as seen in Harry G. West, “Voices Twice Silenced,” *Anthropological Theory* 3, no. 3 (2003): 343 – 365.

<sup>541</sup> Simmel and Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 333–334.

consequences had been largely ignored in the history of this period.<sup>542</sup> These “*infiltrados*”—former Sandinista supporters tortured, coerced and/or bought off by the regime—would facilitate the capture and death of numerous FSLN members and civilians.

Among those recruited from the Sandinista to provide information for La Seguridad was a young man from Wiwilí, whose father and grandfather and fought alongside Sandino in the 1920s and 30s (a cause for which the grandfather had died.) At age 12, he began working with the FSLN in the countryside in the early 1960s, alongside many of the first FSLN members from Estelí like Fausto García, Filemón Rivera and Enrique Lorente Ruiz. While working as a carpenter in Estelí in 1974, he was captured, taken to Managua and tortured:

What the Seguridad did was to compromise me so that the Frente would kill me....When they were torturing me, [the OSN agent] “Henry” arrived and told me if I didn’t work with them they were going to kill me... The FSLN thought I was dead already because [my arrest] hadn’t been mentioned on the radio or in the newspaper. But even after two months, they were still torturing me. Maybe due to ignorance, I committed an error due to my lack of education. If I had had been prepared, I never would have accepted anything. I realize that I made a mistake.<sup>543</sup>

Garnering his release, he was given the OSN pseudonym of “Viet Cong” and had reports marked as “very important” due to his lengthy tenure with the guerrillas.<sup>544</sup> Though now completely out of touch with the FSLN, he held monthly meetings alongside the Pan-American Highway with the OSN agents. “They wrote down what I said because I don’t know how to read,” he explained in his testimony. “I made things up and gave them information on the old *compañeros* because I

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<sup>542</sup> Baltodano, *Memorias De La Lucha Sandinista. Tomo I: De La Forja De La Vanguardia a La Montaña*, 33.

<sup>543</sup> Testimony, Trib. Esp. 8, Case 24, April 19, 1980, p. 5-7.

<sup>544</sup> Testimony, Trib. Esp. 8, Case 24, April 19, 1980, p. 6.

knew they weren't in the country anymore."<sup>545</sup> Though he was outside of the loop, the OSN kept him on board for the next four years, giving him 500 córdobas for medical treatment when he was gravely ill with pneumonia.<sup>546</sup>

Given the importance of students to the FSLN, it is not surprising that a number of former activists were recruited by the secret police as well. “Ernesto” was the Sandinista pseudonym for a high school student of Chinese descent at the Institute of Condega who worked with the guerrillas. Recruited by his mechanics teacher, his tasks included transportation of clandestine packages between Somoto and Condega, where the guerrilla organizers Mónica Baltodano and Bayardo Arce were hiding. Though the guerrilla cadres often attempted to recruit him into joining the rebels in the mountains, it seems he was hesitant to make the leap into armed struggle.<sup>547</sup>

With the onslaught of repression, Ernesto—like so many others—fell into the hands of the GN. Prior to any torture, though, he was approached by Captain Ricardo Lau, a well-known OSN officer of a Chinese descent who secured the student's release and promised to visit him at the Chinese restaurant in Managua owned by Ernesto's uncle. When he arrived unexpectedly one day, Ernesto recalled, the official sat him down in a booth to explain:

‘The damage that the guerrilla movement was causing with its Marxist theories among high school students and in some sectors of the people... The student leaders were wielding Marxist theory to trick the average students at the schools.’ He made me an invitation [to collaborate with the OSN] and said that as were supposedly ‘fellow countrymen’, I should cooperate and help him in his work.

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<sup>545</sup> Testimony, Trib. Esp. 8, Case 24, April 19, 1980, p. 6.

<sup>546</sup> Testimony, Trib. Esp. 8, Case 24, April 19, 1980, p. 6.

<sup>547</sup> Testimony, Trib. Esp. 8, Case 245, October 14, 1980, p. 3.

Drawing on the example of the Communist regime in China, Lau emphasized their ethnic backgrounds to convince Ernesto of the threat posed by the FER leaders, who “according to them, were the ones that riled up and indoctrinated the student masses and then selected from their activists those who went to join their efforts in the mountains.”<sup>548</sup> Given the affinity with his own experiences at the Institute of Condega, we can assume this explanation likely had some appeal to the teenager. While Ernesto was initially hesitant, Col. Lau remained insistent, telling him, “We’re going to make it easy for you to study and help you in whatever problems you might have.... Think it over, man. Don’t be stupid, you’ve got nothing to lose.”<sup>549</sup> On a later visit to the restaurant, Lau offered 300 córdobas per month, gave Ernesto the OSN pseudonym of “Mao Gómez” and introduced the agent with whom he would be meeting on a biweekly basis. Compared to the case of Viet Cong, the recruitment of Mao Gómez relied more on persuasion than on coercion, though of the threat of torture or death was latent given the OSN’s notoriety. He reported on student activism at the National University (UNAN) in León, as well as the situation back in Condega. His denunciations in late 1976, for instance, focused on a student leader at Institute of Condega and the suspicious figures with whom Mao Gómez saw him consorting.<sup>550</sup> By May 1979, he was providing reports on the location of guerrilla encampments in the Cerro El Fraile and Sandinista plans for a general uprising.<sup>551</sup> Despite his important role in surveillance, the information provided by Mao Gómez does not appear to have been directly

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<sup>548</sup> Testimony, Trib. Esp. 8, Case 245, October 14, 1980, p. 4.

<sup>549</sup> Declaration, Trib. Esp. 8, Case 245, October 14, 1980, p. 33-34.

<sup>550</sup> OSN “Reporte de Informante, 15 de Octubre 1976, 09:00 horas: Actividades del FSLN en Condega, Mao Gómez” in Trib. Esp. 8, Case 245, October 14, 1980, p. 32; OSN “Reporte de Informante, 29 de Octubre 1976, 17:30 hrs, Condega, FSLN, Mao Gómez” in Trib. Esp. 8, Case 245, October 14, 1980, p. 33.

<sup>551</sup> OSN “Reporte, 7 de mayo 1979, 11:00 hrs, Mao Gómez” in Trib. Esp. 8, Case 245, October 14, 1980, p. 25.

linked with any arrests or murders. In other cases, however, OSN informants did in fact provoke the murder of FSLN leaders and militants.

The death of Augusto Salinas Pinell reflected the ability of the regime to use civilian informants and onetime FSLN supporters in the targeting of repression. By 1976, the idealistic young schoolteacher from Somoto who had led Sandinista organizing efforts in the region was one of the most wanted men in Nicaragua. During the public trials of the previous year, nearly all of those interrogated had fingered him as a leader, mentioning his name or one of his pseudonyms, Mauricio and Humberto.<sup>552</sup> Due to the repression, Salinas Pinell and his small squad were pushed further afield to areas in the municipalities of Condega, Telpaneca and San Juan del Río Coco in Madriz. Though they had few supporters in the region, Salinas had once worked as a schoolteacher in this area and visited former friends to beg for help.<sup>553</sup>

On June 26, 1976, Salinas—by now thin and sickly—ambled along the highway outside of San Juan disguised as a campesino in search for food and supplies for his men. A local man with the nickname “Chispero,” in whose home Salinas Pinell had stayed during his teacher days, happened to be driving along the highway. “He asked if I knew who he was and I said yes,” Chispero later testified. “He got inside and asked about my family. More than anything, he was very happy to see someone he knew.”<sup>554</sup> Salinas hitched a ride as far as Las Cruces, where the highway splits towards Jalapa and Quilalí, and the man apparently gave him some food and money. Perhaps due to fears that he had been spotted in Salinas’ presence, he headed to the local

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<sup>552</sup> *La Prensa*, October 30-31, 1975, July 6, 1976.

<sup>553</sup> *La Prensa*, July 14, 1976.

<sup>554</sup> Testimony, Trib. Esp. 4, Case 63, May 28, 1980, p. 5.



GN base to inform of the presence of the wanted man in the area. “He told us that he had seen him at eight in the morning,” the GN comandante testified, “and he arrived at eleven a.m. So I told him to take us to the spot where he had left him and he didn’t want to. He said he no, because they would say he was going around denouncing.”<sup>555</sup> In the afternoon rain, three patrols were dispatched from various nearby bases to capture Salinas whose death remains unclear. Salinas’ family found his cadaver a half decade later with money from various countries still in the pockets, suggesting a speedy execution and burial.<sup>556</sup> The National Guard, for its part, proudly announced the death of “the leader of the group that indoctrinated campesinos in the northeastern zone of the country” and declared he had been gunned down when he resisted arrest.<sup>557</sup>

Though Chispero had long been a member of Somoza’s Liberal Party and participated in its elections, he was interrogated by Seguridad agents and emphasized that he had given the report that led to Salinas’ killing.<sup>558</sup> “At this time I was accused of being a communist,” he testified, but following the apparent betrayal, “the officer congratulated me and said that he was going to assign me personally. This same man gave me the OSN card for which they asked for a photo.”<sup>559</sup> His Honorary Agent card was “signed by Samuel Genie himself. He just shook my hand and told me to behave.”<sup>560</sup> Soon after his induction into the secret police, Chispero went

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<sup>555</sup> Trib. Esp. 6, Case 353, June 11, 1980, p 6.

<sup>556</sup> Interview, Alba Salinas, Somoto, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>557</sup> Guardia Nacional, Oficina de Leyes y Relaciones Públicas, “Informe Oficial” in *La Prensa*, June 28, 1976.

<sup>558</sup> OSN File, Trib. Esp. 4, Case 63, May 28, 1980, p. 29.

<sup>559</sup> Testimony, Trib. Esp. 4, Case 63, May 28, 1980, p. 5.

<sup>560</sup> Testimony, Trib. Esp. 4, Case 63, May 28, 1980, p. 5

into to business with the GN comandante in Somoto, Aurelio Somarriba, in the running of illegal gambling dens in the homes of two women in the town. They earned a great deal of money from these gaming tables, with Comandante Somarriba's cut alone reaching between 3,000 and 5,000 córdobas per month.<sup>561</sup> Not only did his collaboration with the Guardia protect him from punishment, it allowed Chispero to accumulate wealth and solidify his own role within the system of patronage.

The most sophisticated and consistent infiltration of the FSLN, however, took place in Somoto and from 1976 to 1979, the OSN archives filled with a continuous stream of secret reports on the internal functioning and strategy of the FSLN in that town. The National Guard eventually responded to these reports, leaving in their wake a trail of coffins. "Jaime," the man accused of providing the information to the OSN had been a member of the FSLN for several years. Born in Somoto, at a young age he had gone to the department Estelí with his mother, an experience which he credits with opening his eyes to the regime's nature. In Pueblo Nuevo, Jaime interacted with opposition political parties and in the 1960s, participated in Marxist reading circles led by Dr. Dávila Bolaños in Somoto.<sup>562</sup> He later studied at the Technical Vocational Institute in Managua where he was arrested for joining in the 1969 schoolteachers' strike. A letter from the Institute's executive board called for his immediate release and blamed "any violation of the physical and mental integrity of this compañero on the Inhumane and

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<sup>561</sup> Testimony, Trib. Esp. 4, Case 63, May 28, 1980, p. 5

<sup>562</sup> Testimony of Reynerio Espinoza Tercero in Trib. Esp. 8, Case, 106, August 6, 1980, p. 40

Unconstitutional Office of Security (OSN), directed by Samuel Genie.”<sup>563</sup> Around this time, he was recruited to the FSLN by student activists in the FER.

Upon graduation, he returned to Somoto to work as a teacher and mechanic while helping with the clandestine guerrilla efforts underway. In the town of Somoto, Jaime later reflected:

The Sandinista Front was never able to gain a social base, it could not penetrate. Those of us who supported them could be counted on one hand. It was very scary to work here. The ideology just didn’t enter. In Estelí, it did... Estelí is a town that participated... a town of martyrs. A heroic town. There were different types of people over there. There were workers who had a better vision of what Somoza was. There was lots of education and effort. And a great work of consciousness-raising among the masses. Even the *campesinos* in the department of Estelí became anti-Somocistas thanks to the political work [of the Church.] Here the people were more dependent and poor. The doctrine could not enter.<sup>564</sup>

The inability to garner large numbers of supporters in this Somocista town which “produced Guardias” made Jaime’s work particularly challenging. During the period of repression, Jaime was again arrested in November 1975 and sent to the OSN installations in Managua. However, unlike many of his peers that were put on trial, Jaime was quickly released and returned to Somoto. This raised some eyebrows in the FSLN, especially as he had a brother who worked in the National Guard.

The importance of the border region to the FSLN lay in their plans to develop a clandestine trail for passing arms, people and money across the border from Honduras through porous frontier to the west of Somoto. FSLN leader Bayardo Arce, for instance, ordered Jaime to:

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<sup>563</sup> Document, “Comunicado de la Junta Directiva del Instituto Técnico Vocacional,” August 25, 1969, Trib. Esp. 8, Case, 106, August 6, 1980, p. 45.

<sup>564</sup> Interview, “Jaime,” Somoto, Madriz, 2010.

Learn the route and MASTER IT, to such a degree that we can bring [an FSLN leader] with all of the guarantees for his person: Detail, be precise, where it will cross, the system of security, hiding spots, etc., appropriate places for the entrances and exit people and/or goods on both sides.”<sup>565</sup>

The FSLN sent a young organizer, Socorro Sirias, to live in Jaime’s home and “find the mystery of life” in town, drawing up maps of the town and lists of local organizations, political parties and professionals.<sup>566</sup> Unbeknownst to the FSLN, these strategies, plans and membership rolls were immediately accessible to the OSN in the detailed reports filed from Somoto.<sup>567</sup>

Jaime’s loyalties appear to have been constantly doubted by both the Sandinistas and the National Guard. Given that the SAC’s counterintelligence was autonomous from the local army bases, their actions at times conflicted. In one report, the informant begged to come to the main office in Managua as the local commanding officer in Somoto had publicly questioned his identity at a baseball game in San Lucas:

Comandante Señor Coronel Somarriba has doubted the identity of the source as well as that of [OSN agent] K-47, because contact K-47 has the same last name, and he says they are BROTHERS, and as brothers, K-47 is taking HIS SIDE... he [the comandante] said that the OSN has not told him anything about la Seguridad working in Somoto and he was going to do what he thought was necessary.<sup>568</sup>

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<sup>565</sup> Letter from Bayardo Arce to Mónica Baltodano, February 3, 1977, CHM-MR E-002, C-021, 000611

<sup>566</sup> Letter from Mónica Baltodano to Bayardo Arce, “Conclusion of the meeting with Silvia, Trabajo en Mas Uno [Somoto]” October 24, 1976, Letter from Bayardo Arce to Mónica Baltodano, February 3, 1977, CHM-MR E-002, C-021, 000611

<sup>567</sup> “OSN Reporte de Entrevista,” Somoto, September 12, 1976; “OSN Reporte de Entrevista,” Somoto, September 13, 1976 in Trib. Esp. 8, Case, 106, August 6, 1980, p. 53-56; “OSN Reporte Operacional,” Managua, March 3, 1976; “OSN Reporte Operacional: Actividades Subversivas,” Empalme Palacagüina, Somoto, April 29, 1976; “Reporte de Informante: Informe de Interés” February 23, 1977, Somoto in OSN file “Bayardo Arce,” CHM-MR, E-001, C-017, 000488.

<sup>568</sup> Reporte de Informante: Informe de Interés” February 23, 1977, Somoto in OSN file “Bayardo Arce,” CHM-MR, E-001, C-017, 000488.

At the same time, the FSLN was increasingly questioning of Jaime. He lacked “Sandinista attitudes,” said Baltodano, as he was arrogant, a gossip (“*cuechero*”) and even betrayed “a certain interest in money, to such a degree that he wouldn’t do certain activities unless we paid for his expenses.” At the same time, she said, the Frente felt dependent on him. “[H]e was the only person in Somoto that responded to us and so we could not stop working with him.”<sup>569</sup>

If coercion and torture initiated the initial revelations, it appears that the informant over time began to sympathize with the secret police in their efforts. For instance, when he met with Bayardo Arce in Estelí in September 1976, he recalled spotting an OSN agent trailing them. “He imagined or thought that maybe there was a plan,” the report declared, “so he stepped aside to give the young man a chance to carry out his operation, but the young man just stepped off the sidewalk and passed by without looking back.”<sup>570</sup> Prior to a similar meeting the following February in the city, he preemptively sent word that “if the OSN believes it to be convenient to ‘break him’ [*quebrarlo*], do it and don’t worry about me.”<sup>571</sup> Once again, the agents refused to strike against the guerrilla leader, hoping that the functional border route would provide them greater opportunities.

Thanks to the detailed information the OSN possessed regarding movements between Nicaragua and Honduras, the GN was able to carry out numerous attacks. The wave of violence began in July 1977, when Mónica Baltodano was arrested, hours after her car was fired on by

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<sup>569</sup> Letter from Mónica Baltodano to Tribunal Especial No. 8, in Trib. Esp. 8, Case, 106, August 6, 1980, p. 35-36, 39.

<sup>570</sup> “OSN Reporte de Entrevista”, September 13, 1976 in Trib. Esp. 8, Case, 106, August 6, 1980, p. 54.

<sup>571</sup> “Reporte de Informante: Informe de Interés” February 23, 1977, Somoto in OSN file “Bayardo Arce,” CHM-MR, E-001, C-017, 000488.

unknown assailants. “In jail,” she later wrote, “I came to the conclusion that that only [Jaime] or the other compañero could have been involved in this attempted murder. He was the only person I had met with on this occasion.”<sup>572</sup> In August, two FSLN members, Raúl González and Juan de Dios Muñoz, were killed by the National Guard shortly after dropping Jaime at his home in Somoto in what the GN claimed had been a shoot-out.<sup>573</sup> González’s autopsy carried out by his brothers—doctors at the hospital in Estelí—suggested that he had been captured and brutally tortured by the OSN prior to his death and the shoot-out had been yet another false confrontation, writing:

There were no firearm wounds but rather evidence of having been victim of cruelest of tortures: wounds and fractures of the skull, face and neck; numerous punches on the chest and back; both clavicles, sternum and twelve ribs fractured; wounds and bruises on his stomach; crushed testicles; multiple fractures, abundant lesions and abrasions on his arms and legs.<sup>574</sup>

Despite these events, on April 13, 1978, Jaime was again entrusted by the FSLN to travel to Honduras and escort guerrillas Doris Tijerino, Mauricio Cajina and Omar Hallenslevens back across the border via the route. As they entered Nicaraguan territory, they came face to face with two National Guards who were apparently waiting for them as they crossed an isolated country fence.<sup>575</sup> Cajina, a shoemaker from Somoto, was shot dead while Doris Tijerino, the first female FSLN member and a top leader of the organization was as captured and paraded before television cameras. Based on the questions asked in her interrogation, Tijerino began “to deduce that, from the information the OSN had ... there was a possible infiltration as few people that

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<sup>572</sup> Letter from Mónica Baltodano to Tribunal Especial No. 8, in Trib. Esp. 8, Case, 106, August 6, 1980, p. 37.

<sup>573</sup> *La Prensa*, August 8, 1977.

<sup>574</sup> Document “La voz de denuncia en el asesinato del Ing. Raúl González A”, CHM-MR 001, C-016, 000468.

<sup>575</sup> *La Prensa*, April 13, 1978.

passed through that location had reached their destination as the majority had been killed or imprisoned.<sup>576</sup> Back in Somoto, a perturbed Jaime went door-to-door collecting money for the family of the deceased Cajina and aroused little suspicion with regards to the previous night's events.<sup>577</sup>

The deaths and capture of these FSLN militants, though, were outdone only by the assassination of José Benito Escobar, a top leader of the GPP faction of the FSLN with many years in the organization. Only July 15, 1978, Escobar was shot down by Seguridad agents in the streets of Estelí moments after meeting with Jaime at a restaurant and hotel along the Pan-American Highway. In the wake of the shooting, Tijerino wrote a letter to the guerrilla leadership detailing her suspicions and suggesting the organization immediately halt all work in Somoto. "There were so many coincidences," Baltodano later wrote, "we had no doubt that it was this man was the one who handed over all of these compañeros."<sup>578</sup> It was a painful revelation for Baltodano who had spent time in Jaime's home, played with his young children and seen the poverty in which they lived. The final OSN report filed from Somoto in 1979, in the midst of the revolutionary upheaval was handwritten on a torn piece of notebook paper, betraying a sense of urgency. The informant wrote that he had run into with Bayardo Arce at the bus station who had told him that, "he would visit me some day in the future... that he wanted to

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<sup>576</sup> Testimony, Doris Tijerino, in Tribunal Especial No. 9, in Trib. Esp. 8, Case, 106, August 6, 1980, p. 31-32.

<sup>577</sup> Testimony, Manuel Maldonado Lovo in Tribunal Especial No. 9, in Trib. Esp. 8, Case, 106, August 6, 1980, p. 39.

<sup>578</sup> Letter from Mónica Baltodano to Tribunal Especial No. 8, in Trib. Esp. 8, Case, 106, August 6, 1980, p. 38.

talk to me about my capture and my freedom and why they didn't take me before the Court like they did with the others."<sup>579</sup>

Following the 1979 Sandinista victory and the opening of the OSN archives, Jaime was arrested, tried and convicted for his role in the death of Escobar. He was forced to give a public confession at a press conference and expressed his repentance for having "betrayed the People and led their best children to their deaths."<sup>580</sup> In the courtroom the following year, though, he had changed his story and now insisted that communications warning his brother in the GN of the imminent Sandinista victory had been misconstrued as informing. Looking back on his trial and time behind bars, Jaime emphasized:

They consider me to be a traitor, but I don't consider myself as a traitor. I consider myself part of a historical process. The FSLN went through a series of problems... and some compañeros were killed in many places. I was linked to a few of the people who died so they blamed it on me. If it had been true, they would've killed me (*me hubieran palmado.*) They executed a number of people.<sup>581</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we focused our attention upon the least studied aspect of the Somoza regime: its secret police force and informants. As we saw, the intelligence apparatus was quite limited in its reach and ability, functioning more through brute force and traditional patronage methods than through the creation of a Nicaraguan Panopticon. The same issues of regional political economy and political culture important in recruitment for the National Guard and the Liberal Party also fostered the formation of an "army" of orejas and jueces de mesta ready to

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<sup>579</sup> OSN Report, undated [1979], CHM-MR, E-002, C-017, 000491.

<sup>580</sup> *La Prensa*, September 14, 1979.

<sup>581</sup> Interview, "Jaime," Somoto, Madriz, 2010.



provide information to the regime. Many of these men and women emerged from the same social milieu as these other groups and, with their tongues, would break many a bone. This was accomplished through the canalization of traditional oral cultures of *chisme* and rumor to serve the needs of the intelligence apparatus of the regime organized by the United States. The infiltration of the FSLN, with its disastrous effects, likewise straddled a grey area between pure coercion and material incentives through which the regime functioned.

As we will see in following chapters, during the regime's final hours, orejas provided key information to the military as it committed numerous massacres across the region. At this moment, the firepower and battle prowess of the advanced counterinsurgent EEBI brigades was brought together with the surveillance of extensive web of informants producing great acts of violence. The deeper argument in this chapter, however, is that to understand the functioning of dictatorship, we cannot merely observe the institutions, rulers and elites but must also understand the daily practices at the grassroots level. While "agency" for the repression did not emerge at the local level, the intelligence services relied on a dialectical relationship with local-level cleavages and material self-interest. Rather than a purely top-down phenomenon, the regime's power was predicated on these "everyday forms of collaboration."

**Chapter 7.**  
**“You Need a War to Get Consciousness”:**  
**Urban Space, Neighborhood and Youth Participation in the Sandinista Insurrections,**  
**1976-1979**

**Introduction**

In September 1977, the National Guard comandante of Estelí, Colonel Carlos Edmundo Vergara, wrote a profile in the military’s magazine, *Acción Cívica*, heaping great praise upon the city where he was stationed. He championed the town for its rapid economic growth and dynamism, noting that it was the county’s fastest growing city outside of the capital. He concluded by stating:

The youth of Estelí are healthy, studious and responsible. In this, one has to admire the frank collaboration given to us by their parents. We have not had any problems with the youth, as they don’t believe in the siren songs of the professional agitators who show up in these parts from time to time.<sup>582</sup>

Though this statement likely includes a certain amount of trepidation about FSLN organizing among the young people, that the GN could publish such statements speaks volumes about how quickly things changed over the coming year. Indeed, the essences of what Vergara suggests—namely, that social peace was the norm among students in Estelí in the mid 1970s—is borne out by the documentary records, newspapers and the accounts of the participants.

However, in just twelve months, the situation had changed completely. The FSLN’s Final Insurrection, launched on September 9, 1978, and its bloody suppression by the National Guard and Air Force converted the once-thriving city into rubble. “Estelí has stopped being a city and become a geographic speculation,” described the shocked correspondent for *La Prensa*. “The

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<sup>582</sup> *Acción Cívica*, September 1977.

sign is still in the same place, but the city doesn't exist. It was wiped off the map.”<sup>583</sup> The newspaper described the repression in the city as “Dante-esque” as “northern refugees with reddened eyes and bitter faces... described the bloodcurdling way in which the people of Estelí were massacred.”<sup>584</sup> The same young people that Vergara had celebrated as “healthy, studious and responsible” had participated massively with the FSLN and were now in the mountains, training for future insurrection.

The events of the final year and a half of the Somoza dictatorship are among those most documented in the history of Nicaragua. From foreign journalists and diplomats to guerrilla strategists and even Somoza himself (with Jack Cox), the heroic insurrection and the abandonment of the regime by Washington have been treated in great detail.<sup>585</sup> The chronology of uprisings, negotiations and proposals, as well as the alphabet soup of “front organizations” and guerrilla factions are found in numerous publications.<sup>586</sup> Yet we are totally lacking analysis of how these events and organizations appeared to ordinary Nicaraguan men and women, how they came to participate in them and their reasons for doing so.

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<sup>583</sup> *La Prensa*, September 20, 1978.

<sup>584</sup> *La Prensa*, September 22, 1978

<sup>585</sup> Julio López, *La caída del somocismo y la lucha sandinista en Nicaragua* (EDUCA, 1979); Lawrence Pezzullo and Ralph Pezzullo, *At the Fall of Somoza* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994); Anastasio Somoza and Jack Cox, *Nicaragua Betrayed*, 1st ed. (Western Islands, 1980); Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling: A Case Study of Washington at Work* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1990); Robert A. Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Humberto Ortega Saavedra, *La Epopeya De La Insurrección* (Managua, Nicaragua: Lea Grupo Editorial, 2004); Mauricio Solaun, *U.S. Intervention and Regime Change in Nicaragua* (University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

<sup>586</sup> Booth, *The End and the Beginning*, 157–170; Black, *Triumph of the People*, 100–118; Darwin J. Flakoll and Claribel Alegría, *Nicaragua, la revolución sandinista: una crónica política, 1855-1979* (Anama Ediciones Centroamericanas, 2004), 313–337.

How do we explain this extremely rapid transformation of the city's population—particularly its young people—from virtual quiescence to armed revolutionary fervor and integration into the FSLN? I argue that in effect we need to disaggregate revolutionary actors into two groups. The first group—a minority but a critical mass nonetheless—included those that joined the contentious back-and-forth politics in the pre-insurrectionary period beginning in 1977. These activists, often members of student organizations, had an acute awareness the political situation in the country and significant understanding of the insurgents' platform. In addition to these organizations, central to construction of revolutionary effort were territorial organizations known as Civil Defense Committees, which grew out of the Christian communities and neighborhood improvement groups. These CDCs formed around the cross-class organization of men and women based in their places of residences.

The second group—and reversing causality from the “inevitable” revolutionary narrative—were those that joined in through the process of upheaval itself. I argue that the urban warfare of the insurrection and the GN's repression of the city as a whole (beginning in September 1978) had the effect of mobilizing large numbers of young people in an act of self-preservation that in some cases had nothing to do with ideology. These *combatientes populares*, as they were called, emerged in the heat of battle in the working class *barrios* and served as the base for the armed guerrilla army that would topple the regime. This age cohort quickly became the operative target during this period of repression and mobilization and non-participation no longer remained the safer of two options.

## **Organizing Youth: Regime Co-optation and Student Organizing**

With the arrest, torture and murder of FSLN supporters described in previous chapters, Sandinista organizers such as Mónica Baltodano drew back from the semi-rural areas to the city of Estelí. The crackdown following the declaration of the state of siege declared by Somoza tested the solidity of the Frente as a cohesive unit and the organization was found wanting. The deaths of numerous leaders—most importantly, FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca Amador in October 1976—only accelerated the divisionism within the organization. Debates over the nature of Nicaraguan society and its political system, as well as revolutionary strategy, led to the tripartite split of the organization into different “tendencies.” These factions disagreed over the question: Who is going to serve as the “social subject” of the revolution and what is the strategy to follow to mobilize this group?

The faction known as the Prolonged Popular War (*la Guerra Popular Prolongada*, GPP) endorsed a time-consuming process of organizing different sectors—particularly, students and campesinos—who would go on to fight a lengthy war to continue in the case of a US intervention. In many ways, this is the very strategy which the FSLN had followed from its inception. Many of the guerrilla activists prominent in Estelí and Somoto, such as Bayardo Arce, Mónica Baltodano and José Benito Escobar, were all members of this faction. The first schism in the Sandinistas led to the formation of the Proletarian Tendency (*Tendencia Proletaria*, TP) which called for the creation of a Marxist-Leninist party of factory and rural wage-workers. This minor tendency had almost no supporters in Estelí or the adjacent regions areas. The final faction, the *Tendencia Insurreccional*, also known as the Terceristas, differed from the GPP and the TP in several ways. It called for an immediate armed, *urban* uprising against the Somoza

dictatorship; was in favor of forming an alliance with the anti-Somocista bourgeoisie; and had access to money and arms from Venezuela, Cuba and Panama. This faction was be central in the insurrection and led in northern Nicaragua by Francisco Rivera, the younger brother of one of Estelí's first FSLN members, the union leader Filemón Rivera.<sup>587</sup>

Guerrilla organizers hoped to draw on the inherent rebelliousness of the student population in Estelí yet in late 1976 and 1977, the youth betrayed little sign of serving as a dynamic agent of revolution. Surely, there were young people interested in guerrilla activities but they were not a significant minority of the population. Drugs and alcohol—given free reign with state and National Guard encouragement, as we have seen—formed part of the city's politically apathetic youth and student population during the 1970s.

Those who graduated high school and college with technical degrees now searched out government employment in the various social programs which had sprung up in recent years to counter guerrilla support. One such organization created with USAID assistance was INVIERNO (*Instituto de Bienestar Campesino*—the Institute of Campesino Wellbeing, acronym lit. “winter”), which provided credit, training, fertilizer and benefits to the campesinos located in zones where the FSLN had been operating. In a December 1976 speech in Estelí, Somoza promised a revolutionary change for “the poor campesino with a straw hat” and declared that INVIERNO's goal was “to redeem our campesinos, our indigenous people, our *mestizos* [mixed race people], who for reasons of underdevelopment have never received the help they do

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<sup>587</sup> On the tendencies, see: Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution*, 197–240; Nolan, *The Ideology of the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution*, 32–65.

now.”<sup>588</sup> By improving living conditions and providing support to regime supporters, the program hoped to limit the appeal of the social project that the FSLN promised its campesino supporters.

The essentially counterinsurgent nature of these reform projects was amplified by the strategy of hiring young professionals from the city (who in the previous decade might have joined the FSLN) to work as agronomists and veterinarians. In a certain way, these linkages mirrored the guerrillas’ own hopes of building an alliance between the urban youth and campesinos. Gustavo Gómez Casco, INVIERNO’s general manager told the Estelí crowd that these young workers, with an average age in their 20s, demonstrated “the possibilities that this country and their families have given to the youth so they could be adequately qualified... The noble mission of these young people is to serve the country’s campesinos so they too can achieve new goals of overcoming.”<sup>589</sup> He juxtaposed these noble youths with those who had “been absorbed by the dialectic and the tactics of terrorism of the imperialism of our time, International Communism” and applauded the National Guard for “defending the peace among Nicaraguans.”<sup>590</sup> For those that were able to get work for INVIERNO there were luxuriant wages of 2,500 to 3,000 córdobas per month, access to state vehicles and unlimited gasoline. Leonel Raules, who worked for the institute for nearly four years, noted that:

Even though we had our roots in the People, we lost our roots and started supporting Somoza. The INVIERNO employee ID gave you all of the same privileges. We were kept in our own shell of indifference. For the technician, it

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<sup>588</sup> Instituto de Bienestar Campesino (Nicaragua), *Informes sobre el desarrollo del Instituto de Bienestar Campesino*. (Estelí, Nicaragua: INVIERNO, 1976), 10, 13.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

was an honor to have a government car, bordering on prepotency. I would go to the cantinas in the vehicle and no one said a word.<sup>591</sup>

Given the relative efficacy of these counterinsurgent efforts among people in their 20s, the FSLN set their sights on organizing far younger people and forming a strategy with various levels of integration. As a first step, students joined such organizations such as the Movement of Secondary Students (*Movimiento de Estudiantes de Secundaria*, MES) and the Association of Secondary Students (*Asociación de Estudiantes de Secundaria*, AES). Upon her arrival, Monica Baltodano helped organize four MES groups, “one for each high school,” and held three assemblies in El Calvario inviting people “via *moscas* [lit. flies. Tiny pieces of paper with messages,] posters and by word of mouth.”<sup>592</sup> Though their initial efforts began dramatic actions including bonfires, public protests and hunger strikes, the strategy became difficult as the National Guard “called many parents and made them sign a document taking responsibility for not letting their children going around ‘doing these things.’”<sup>593</sup>

Though this more aggressive approach was abandoned, Baltodano and Socorro Sirias, another guerrilla organizer sent to Estelí, began planning for actions around more quotidian concerns such as “city improvement, planting trees in parks, establishing medical dispensaries in the different neighborhoods, cultural activities such as recitals, panels and student theater.”<sup>594</sup> From there, the goal was to begin with agitation through “the planting of doubts... insisting on student motivations, then onto the concrete social problems of the students and, if it is possible,

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<sup>591</sup> Interview CNA.2A-54.55.56, Leonel Raules, Ocotal, Nueva Segovia, 1980.

<sup>592</sup> Mónica Baltodano to Bayardo Arce, “Informe del Trabajo,” Oct. 24, 1976. CHM-MR, E-002, C-021, 0006111.

<sup>593</sup> Mónica Baltodano to Bayardo Arce, Jan. 19, 1977. CHM-MR, E-002, C-021, 000611.

<sup>594</sup> Socorro Sirias to Bayardo Arce, August 6, 1977. CHM-MR, E-002, C-021, 000611.



onto national politics.<sup>595</sup> It was a model that had worked well in the late 1960s in Estelí. In theory, through these student groups the guerrillas would be able to penetrate the barrios to organize community organizations and labor unions.<sup>596</sup> Interestingly, while the FSLN encouraged community services and baseball games, getting students together to play chess was not acceptable. “This so-called scientific game is alienating,” Bayardo Arce wrote, criticizing their plans for a chess club. “The kids later will only think about this subject and they forget their concrete problems. The regime and the GN support this game... holding tournaments and giving away boards.”<sup>597</sup>

Those students who proved themselves committed on political issues were invited to join the FER, the most important student organization. While AES and MES operated fairly openly, the more clandestine FER was organized along lines of strict compartmentalization, in which members of one cell were not permitted to know the identities of other circles. FER members were responsible for revolutionary propaganda and direct action in order to raise political awareness. Arce suggested groups of five or less who would meet weekly to study “historical documents, sociology, Marxist philosophy, political strategy and tactical publications... security methods and the principles of the organization, etc.”<sup>598</sup>

Finally, outstanding cadres from the FER were to be drawn recruited to *pre-militancia* (pre-membership) in clandestine FSLN urban guerrilla groups. “We have to make it clear that MES, FER and FSLN membership are all A MEANS and not an end,” Arce explained in his

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<sup>595</sup> Bayardo Arce to Mónica Baltodano, August 20, 1976. CHM-MR, E-002, C-021, 000611

<sup>596</sup> Socorro Sírias to Bayardo Arce, August 6, 1977.

<sup>597</sup> Bayardo Arce to Mónica Baltodano, August 20, 1976.

<sup>598</sup> Bayardo Arce to Mónica Baltodano, August 20, 1976.

letter. “The MES is a means to pull in students [*jalar al seno*], the FER to pull in MES, the FSLN to pull in FER, so that the People pull in the FSLN through popular revolutionary armed combat.”<sup>599</sup> Often though, these gateway political activities had little appeal, Baltodano recalled, as many Estelian youths wanted to proceed directly to armed actions, considering the slow work of organizing to be too passive and ineffective for the risks.<sup>600</sup>

### **Insurrectionary Sparks and Mass Participation in Conflict, January-July 1978**

The January 10, 1978 assassination of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, publisher of the leading opposition paper *La Prensa* and perennial Somoza adversary quickly mainstreamed opposition to the regime. For the population that read his denunciatory newspaper columns or tuned into his denunciations of the dictator’s crimes and malfeasance on the radio, his murder generated a sensation of fury against the regime that (correctly or not) was assumed to have been behind his death. Many recall feeling a great sense of fear and indignation that such a prominent, respected and wealthy opposition leader and journalist could be gunned down with impunity. There were hunger strikes, marches and riots throughout the country. While in retrospect the death of Chamorro has been written into the narrative of the Sandinista victory, we have to distinguish between public opinion and that of the guerrillas. The truth is that Chamorro had never been an ally of the Sandinistas and was quite antagonistic towards militant left. One student activist recalled:

We as members of the student movement and pre-militants [of the FSLN] considered the death of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro to be one of the great errors of the dictatorship and an instrument we could use to consolidate the work of the movement. Now with respect to the people in general [*la gente*], they were

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<sup>599</sup> Bayardo Arce to Mónica Baltodano, August 20, 1976. CHM-MR, E-002, C-021, 000611.

<sup>600</sup> Baltodano, *Memorias de la lucha sandinista. Tomo II*, 52, 56.

hysterical! For many reasons: he was a public figure that had created an image as defender of the poor, which was not a real image because of his class status. But the lack of clarity of the people made them rise up infuriated. We used this conjuncture to consolidate this movement.<sup>601</sup>

Another activist who had been critical of Chamorro, noted that “many people [*gente*] saw a liberator in him. But the people [*la gente*] are like that. If they say Mr. X is a great leader, they become rather *caudillista*... So the death of Dr. Chamorro really pained them.”<sup>602</sup> It is interesting to note the discursive register changing: when the actions were revolutionary and act in line with FSLN ideology, the population was conceptualized as “el pueblo”—the People—but when they were outside of that framework, they became the far less enthusiastic form, “la gente.” In Estelí, Chamorro’s killing was met with protests but they were not on the scale of the riots in Managua and Masaya.

Following the assassination, the private sector entered the fray, with the Chamber of Commerce declaring a general strike against the Somoza regime. In April, the FER occupied the high schools as part of a nationwide strike plan demanding better prison conditions for two Sandinista leaders, Tomás Borge and Marcio Jaen, then being held in solitary confinement. Led by Felipe Escobar, the high school students took over the Cathedral and several high schools, creating what Monica Baltodano calls a general political “effervescence. For the first time, the people mobilized in the streets, painted walls, lit bonfires and defied the National Guard.”<sup>603</sup> At

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<sup>601</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>.137. Barrio El Calvario, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>602</sup> Interview CNA.1C. 26. Salvador Maldonado, San Juan de Limay, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>603</sup> Baltodano, *Memorias de la lucha sandinista. Tomo II*, 56.

this point, however, the regime did not respond with open repression, with *La Prensa* noting that protesters “were monitored by the GN [but] they were not bothered at any time.”<sup>604</sup>

The role that Chamorro’s murder played nationally as a spark for anti-Somoza fervor had a more local parallel in the city of Estelí. On April 23, a “children’s protest” was held in Estelí in which young children mimicked the high school students, burning tires and dolls representing Somoza and calling on the dictator to step down. The son of Fermín Meneses—the National Guard officer and landowner implicated in the 1969 shooting deaths of two students—was accused of driving by the protest in his blue plate-less truck (high on marijuana, according to the GN) and firing off a series of shots in the direction of the children. The bullets tore directly into the children’s flesh. “Don’t let me die,” were 12-year-old protest leader Wilfred Valenzuela’s final words as his small corpse slumped, letting out its last breath. Two other children aged four and six, lay wounded nearby. In shock and protest, a crowd stormed towards the mansion of René Molina Valenzuela, the all-powerful Somocista diputado, smashing the windows of the town’s two movie theaters along the way. From the balcony of the Molina residence, National Guards fired live rounds of ammunition to keep the crowd back, hitting and injuring another six people. That evening, the city filled with bonfires and barricades, while the Guard intensely patrolled the city in fear of popular reprisals. From the death of this young child, the urban conflict took on the universal pattern of martyrdom and upheaval: demonstration met by repression; followed by a funeral and a chaotic riot.<sup>605</sup> The death of Wilfred, said one young man, “provoked the fury of the People [*el pueblo*], it lit the fuse... the streets were overflowing.

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<sup>604</sup> *La Prensa*, April 8, 1978.

<sup>605</sup> *La Prensa*, April 24-25, 28, 1978

Everyone had to help.... it was a great help for waking the spirits of the people.”<sup>606</sup> It was as though Wilfred became “a symbol for those men who had been conformists. It forced them to react completely,” explained the leader of the Parents’ Association of Estelí (*Asociación de Padres de Familia de Estelí*),<sup>607</sup>

The following day, the city awoke to a general strike and twelve bonfires still smoldering across the city. Following the burial of young Wilfred, a crowd of thousands marched from the Cemetery back to the city center via the main boulevard, now re-baptized “Sandino Avenue.” With the National Guard standing by, René Molina’s house was looted and burned by an estimated “3,000 young people, adults, women, of all social strata,” who then set the local offices of Somoza’s Liberal Party on fire. The Church in El Calvario was taken over by protesters and a hail of teargas canisters rained on protesters, sending 30 to the hospital.<sup>608</sup> The following day a protest in El Calvario was itself dispersed with gunfire from two hovering helicopters.<sup>609</sup>

The cycle of violence that had been started that day continued throughout May. When a group of children occupied the Teacher’s College, demanding justice for their deceased friend Wilfred, the National Guard stormed the building with guns blazing. An eight-year-old was hit with bullets, and the population again responded with riots, lootings and burning in the city. Popular anger, though, was not randomly directed: the cars and tobacco warehouses belonging to Somoza’s Cuban business associates (including Victor Tabaco and El Padrón) were burnt, as were the buildings belonging to the Menseses family. The local Chamber of Commerce

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<sup>606</sup> Interview, CNA.2ª-54.55.56, Leonel Raules, Ocotal, Nueva Segovia, 1980.

<sup>607</sup> Interview, CNA.3a.80.81, Bernadero Valladares, Somoto, Madriz, 1980.

<sup>608</sup> *La Prensa*, April 25, 1978

<sup>609</sup> *La Prensa*, April 26, 1978.

estimated that property damage was approximately 12 million córdobas, with 18 buildings destroyed. On the other hand, “the wicks were not sparked” at the the “Estelí” department store when the owner, a man of Arab descent, pleaded with the crowd that he was not a Somocista. Meanwhile, the GN tore fifteen children from the René Schick School while supporters outside were shot by the Guard.<sup>610</sup> By May 28, Somocista mayor Francisco Moreno Torres had tendered his resignation, criticizing the GN’s failure to respond to the chaos and writing that, “for the past several weeks entirely in the hands of subversive groups... without the least minimum of protection on behalf of those who have the obligation to impose order.”<sup>611</sup>

Indeed, the level of mass participation in rebellious activities in the city far exceeded that found throughout the rest of Nicaragua, aside for the neighborhood of Monimbó in Masaya. In July 1978, the FSLN organizer José Benito Escobar wrote that Estelí was likely to be a major theater of operations in the coming guerrilla warfare due to the high levels of opposition. He even went as far as to suggest that fully 100 percent of youths age 16 to 20 and nearly 75 percent of those over 25 years of age supported the FSLN. Strangely, among those aged 21 to 24, Escobar believed only one-quarter were in support of the guerrillas, perhaps due to the efficacy of the employment opportunities which targeted them such as INVIERNO.<sup>612</sup>

In response to the upheaval and repression, the wealthier middle-class opposition members living in the city’s center began organizing as well. Women—particularly the mothers

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<sup>610</sup> *La Prensa*, May 25-26, 1978, *Novedades*, May 25-26, *Boletín Sandinista*, “Estelí Responde Con Fuego” s/f, CHM-MR2, Box 8, No. 49.

<sup>611</sup> Letter Francisco Moreno Torres to Antonio Mora Rostrán, Minister of the Interior, May 22, 1978, published in *La Prensa*, May 27, 1978.

<sup>612</sup> José Benito Escoabar, “Situación política de Estelí”, July, 1978, p. 2; cited in Diócesis de Estelí, “Presencia cristiana en el proceso revolucionario,” 48.

and wives of guerillas or political prisoners—formed the Association of Women Facing the National Problem (*Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional*, AMPRONAC). In their first statement, they denounced the “barbarously primitive attitude of the Guardia in the use of the force of bayonets against the weak shouts of children. For a while it has been a crime to be young. NOW IT IS A CRIME TO BE A CHILD!”<sup>613</sup> Local affiliates of the new national organizations began forming on a daily basis, such as the Broad Opposition Front (*Frente Amplio Opositor* FAO) and the National Democratic Movement (*Movimiento Democrático Nacional*, MDN).<sup>614</sup>

Rather than purely spontaneous acts of civil society, each of these groups had some organic ties with the FSLN cadres within the city. The Tercerista faction of the Sandinistas was developing plans for a nationwide insurrection involving the major urban areas of the country. The Carlos Fonseca Amador Northern Front, led by Francisco Rivera, was integrally involved in weaving these organizations into a cohesive effort. The city again erupted in protest in July when longtime FSLN leader José Benito Escobar was shot dead in the city.<sup>615</sup> The arrival the following day of *los Doce* (the Twelve), a group of prominent and respected dissident figures allied with the FSLN, was the time of great mobilization and tension in the city. The urban space served a key role in the procession as the Doce headed to key points in the city—for instance, leaving flowers where the child Wilfred Valenzuela had been shot down and laying a wreath to the

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<sup>613</sup> Comunicqué of AMPRONAC Estelí in *La Prensa*, May 26, 1978.

<sup>614</sup> *La Prensa*, May 3, 30, 1978.

<sup>615</sup> *Novedades*, July 17, 1978.

families of Barrantes and Herrera, the two students killed in 1969. One of los Doce, Jesuit priest Fernando Cardenal spoke of generational divisions saying:

The problem of Nicaragua is that we adults never got involved in politics and because of this the kids and young people are dying. And because the earlier generations didn't get involved in politics, the gangsters or the mafia have taken over politics to the disgrace of Nicaragua.<sup>616</sup>

That night, a wake and mass were held for José Benito in barrio Bella Vista and the following day a protest demanded that the Guard hand over his body. The demonstration came under fire by the GN, leaving 23-year-old student Vladimir Hidalgo dead with a bullet in his chest in front of the Escuela Anexa. A 13-year-old boy who came to his support was likewise hit in the arm. Again, the youth came out massively and the barrio of El Calvario became a virtual battleground between protesters and the National Guard sent to repress them.<sup>617</sup>

### **Organizing Territory: Civil Defense Committees, Neighborhood and the Campo**

As the city became enveloped in protest activities, repression and rioting, it is not surprising that the church of El Calvario was at the center of all that was happening. As we saw in previous chapters, this Church and its priest, the Colombian Padre Julio López, had played a key role in the oppositional movement. In the cycles of youth protest that swept over the city in 1978, the church at El Calvario served as the starting point for all of the marches that headed downtown to the central park, which was flanked by the Palacio Departamental and the Cathedral.

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<sup>616</sup> *La Prensa*, July 16-17, 1978.

<sup>617</sup> *La Prensa*, July 20, 1978.



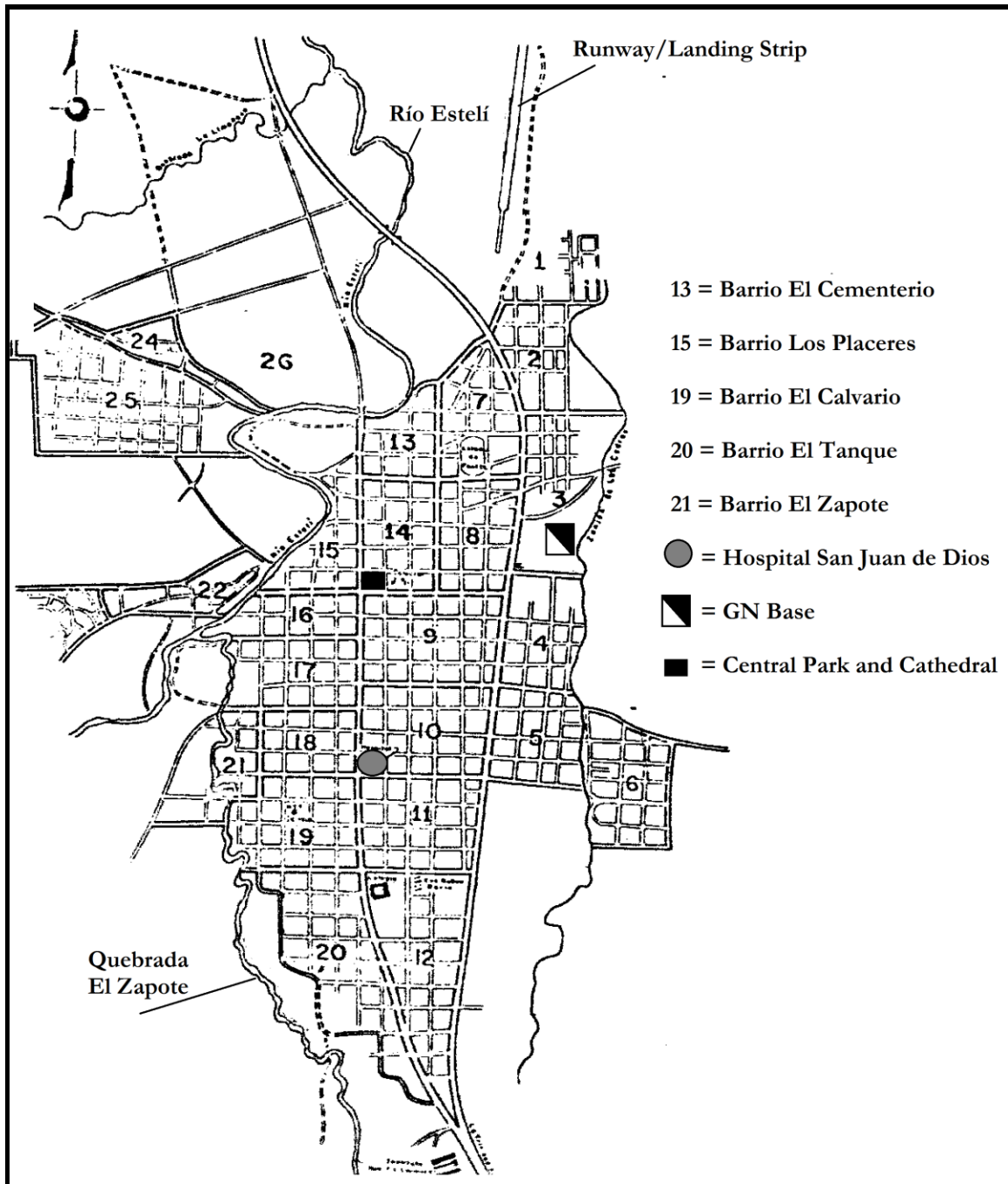


Figure 6. Map of Urban Estelí. Adapted from map in Myrna Mack, *Organización y Movilización: La propuesta nicaragüense de los 80 para Centroamérica* (Fundación Myrna Mack, 1995)

As this polarization increased, the direct language of confrontation rang out from the priest's dais. Even non-Churchgoers began to attend Mass in El Calvario. A woman who had worked 20 years as a schoolteacher explained:

I'm not religious, but the pulpits were the trenches. In the Masses, they gave us reports. It was a means of information, a point of reunion that was 'respected' to a certain degree by dictatorship. But if all the people participated, it wasn't a question of religious creed. Within the clergy, there was always a progressive part and another part that blessed the bombs and guns [of the National Guard.] From my perspective, there were always both reactionaries and revolutionaries [in the Church.]<sup>618</sup>

At the church, students read out newsletters and communiqués from the FSLN and the civic movements, while Padre Julio's sermons denounced the regime and its elite backers. A youth music group established under Julio's guidance played the "La Misa Campesina" (The Peasant Mass), with the music of Carlos Mejía Godoy. While many of the wealthy families continued to attend Sunday mass in the Cathedral with the Bishop, the working class and campesinos flocked to El Calvario, and the small church overflowed with those anxious to hear the words of Padre Julio.

The levels of state repression reached very high levels. Orejas denounced neighbors as FSLN collaborators, the menacing Special Anti-Terrorist Brigade (*Brigada Especial Contra-Terrorismo*, BECAT) jeeps captured up young people, and marches were inevitably dissolved by tear gas canisters, *culatazos* or "warning shots" that left many bloody and wounded on the pavement. The leading cursillistas, such as Rodolfo "Chilo Negro" Rodríguez, his wife Chepita, the couple Felipe and Mery Barreda, along with Padre Julio, began establishing clandestine self-defense organizations that would come to be known as Civil Defense Committees (*Comités de*

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<sup>618</sup> Interview CNA.1A-33. Anonymous, Esteli, 1980.

*Defensa Civil*, CDCs) and grew directly from the neighborhood betterment and Christian community groups. Though first formed in El Calvario to demand the release of prisoners, the CDCs quickly spread to the other neighborhoods of the city and even into the nearby countryside. As two participants explained:

Padre Julio: They got lawyers, doctors and started to teach first aid. The women with a little bit more income formed an organization called AMPRONAC to help those that were imprisoned. At this time the Cathedral was taken over, and we all tried to participate in different ways. There was a sociologist who helped us do surveys. El Calvario was very united, very family-oriented. All of the kids were out protesting. There was such a beautiful environment. I think it is very difficult to imagine it without having lived through it.<sup>619</sup>

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Magdalena Derruti: It was a perfect organization born in the Church, made up by the religious and the non-religious. There were 62 Christian communities. It was formed by getting together men and women and picking a secretary, a treasurer... and defense. We looked for a lawyer and formed a committee of supplies and put together a bodega between all of us because we were preparing for the strike. We elected our representatives, very democratically, and distributed thousands of flyers with simple and clear instructions. We also had a commission for water that cleaned the wells. The meetings were constant, the activity was permanent. And it functioned very well.<sup>620</sup>

Organizations such as AMPRONAC and the civic groups of doctors, lawyers, teachers, parents and so forth were spread throughout the city while student groups had their locus of action in the high schools. The CDCs served as a way to move beyond this logic to organize political participation and self-defense in a territorial sense. The issue of urban space—trumping class or age group—emerged as the key dynamic. A student activist noted its importance, recalling that the distance between school and neighborhood both psychologically and in terms of organic social networks put a brake on activity.

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<sup>619</sup> Interview A219, Padre Julio López, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>620</sup> CNA. 1A-210, Magdalena Derruti, Barrio Milenia Hernández, Estelí, 1980.

The youth were organized in the student movement but it was very spread out. They may have been active at their school but in their neighborhood, there was no place for this attitude. For this they formed the CDCs. It united all of campesinos, workers and students with revolutionary yearnings. You couldn't go looking for your compañeros from school. [The CDC] included everyone whether they were from the student movement or not.<sup>621</sup>

And it was not just youth that became involved, as the CDCs drew on the “natural leaders from the sector,” adult men and women elected to form a community directorate.<sup>622</sup> Such committees functioned in wealthy areas as well as in poorer, marginal neighborhoods. Rather than highly selective groups, the CDC was open to “all of the neighbors, men and women independently of their ideology... the only requirement is to be anti-Somocista.”<sup>623</sup>

The CDCs marked the transformation of neighborhoods from fear and isolation to a democratic system of popular participation, organized in a ladder hierarchy of increasing responsibility. In some ways, it was the antithesis of the Somocista system of co-optation and surveillance in that power largely flowed from below. Beginning with the most micro-level of the *manzana* (lot), a leader was chosen who then formed a committee with the rest of the *cuadra* (city block). Likewise, the elected leader of the block committee formed a higher-level committee with the three neighboring block leaders, who in turn elected a representative before the Executive Committee. At each level, the CDCs created a system of commissions in preparation for the coming conflict: health, supplies, propaganda, self-defense and security.<sup>624</sup> In addition to mobilization around social issues such as the rising cost of living, better streetlights,

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<sup>621</sup> Interview CNA.2A-54.55.56, Leonel Raules, Ocotul, Nueva Segovia, 1980.

<sup>622</sup> MPU, “¿Qué son los Comités de Defensa Civil (CDC)?” IHNCA, CDC No. 0012, p. 1.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>624</sup> MPU, “Líneas particulares para los CDC,” document, IHNCA, CDC No. 005.

roads and schools they attempted to “develop a collective spirit and political solidarity between their neighbors.” In some cases, holes were even broken between the walls dividing the patios, literally changing the map and creating clandestine passageways. In a manner mimetic to the regime’s intelligence structure, the groups developed lists, maps and strategies to monitor the actions of the orejas.

In the rural valleys such as San Roque, La Montañita, Santa Cruz and El Regadío, the same general idea of the CDC was put into place, but with an organization based on *comarcas* and valleys rather than the cityscape. The same model of territorial control was established in neighboring Condega—but was much less widespread in Pueblo Nuevo, Limay or La Trinidad. It was virtually nonexistent in the Somoto region. Ironically, assisting in the organization in the rural areas was the dictatorship’s own counterinsurgent program INVIERNO, whose representatives began using the rural program to make contacts with campesinos on behalf of the FSLN. Bernardeo Balladares, a technician for the institute, recalled that although the goal had been to combat the guerrillas, the staff “raised consciousness of social development and how the regime was trying to indebt them and rope them into the system.”<sup>625</sup> When these efforts were discovered, many were fired or transferred. Some campesinos even came to consider INVIERNO a “hidden way of speaking to the campesinos” and noted that “all of the technicians were revolutionaries.”<sup>626</sup>

By June 1978, the CDCs were made part of the organizing strategy of the Terceristas, led by Francisco “Chico” Rivera, who had returned to his native city in preparation for the

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<sup>625</sup> CNA.3<sup>a</sup>-80.81, Bernadero Valladres, Somoto, Madriz, 1980.

<sup>626</sup> Interview A203, Julio Valenzuela, Miraflor, Estelí, 2010.

insurrection. The presence of the Terceristas, known for favoring military action and voluntarism over political organization, prompted GPP leader Bayardo Arce to write “it seems that they have understood that a spontaneous uprising of the people is not a sure thing.”<sup>627</sup> The United People’s Movement (*Movimiento Pueblo Unido*, MPU), a Tercerista umbrella organization used Estelí’s committees as a model to be applied throughout the country to lead “the masses to participate in their locales in the total confrontation that we are heading towards with the dictatorship.”<sup>628</sup> Interestingly, though, the MPU did not insist on controlling them directly, rather viewing them as “embryos of Popular Power” to all those who opposed Somoza. Though a project of his Tercerista rivals, Bayardo Arce of the GPP was insistent that his cadres “prove themselves organizing CDCs and leading them because they are the embryo of a very important mass movement in the process of forming and our future influence depends on what we do right now.”<sup>629</sup>

Interestingly, the question of social inequality—long the leitmotiv of all Sandinista discourse over its nearly two decades of existence, now vanished from public discourse practically overnight. Now, the FSLN spoke instead of cross-class coalition in the fight against Somoza, in which the wealthy were not enemies but allies of the People. As popular participation grew, Tercerista slogans propagated through the CDCs focused on solely on the removal of the dictatorship and the Guardia, the restoration of national sovereignty and basic freedoms, and the

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<sup>627</sup> Bayardo Arce to Felipe Escobar, June 23, 1978. CHM-MR, E-002, C-021, 000637

<sup>628</sup> MPU, “¿Qué es un CDC?” IHNCA, CDC-0013, p. 4.

<sup>629</sup> Bayardo Arce to Felipe Escobar, August 20, 1976. CHM-MR, E-002, C-021, 000637

promulgation of a land reform affecting only the holdings of the Somocistas.<sup>630</sup> Perhaps such statements were used to garner the widest popular and elite support possible for the efforts against the Somoza. In private communication to Francisco Rivera captured by the regime, Humberto Ortega explained that the class project of the movement had not been abandoned:

The fact that we [cannot] establish socialism immediately after overthrowing Somoza does not mean that we are planning a capitalist-type social-democratic or similar development policy; what we propose is a broad, democratic and popular government which, although the bourgeoisie has participation, is a means and not an end, so that in its time it can make the advance towards a more genuinely popular form of government, which guarantees the movement towards socialism.<sup>631</sup>

Thus, the Tercerista leadership hoped to garner the support of the elite in efforts to topple the dictatorship—thus dropping the references to class struggle and socialism—hoping that after the fall of Somoza they would be able to reengage with “the social question.” When a second major strike by the private sector through Chamber of Commerce was called in September, the Guardia arrested leaders of the Chamber in Estelí, such as Iván Kauffman and Luis Irías Barreda, and traditional opposition leaders like Braulio Lanuza of the Conservative Party and Alejandro Dávila Bolaños of the PSN.<sup>632</sup> The city rose up in insurrection on September 9 similar attacks were carried out against the GN bases in Masaya, León, Matagalpa and Chinandega

### **“A Crime to be Young”: Spaces of Rebellion and Terror in the September Insurrection**

The September 1978 insurrection represents a quintessential parting of waters in the narrative of revolution. Particularly in the case of Estelí, the effort launched by the Tercerista

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<sup>630</sup> “Líneas particulares para los CDC,” IHNCA, CDC No. 005.

<sup>631</sup> *Novedades*, January 7, 1979.

<sup>632</sup> *La Prensa*, August 28, 1978, Dávila Bolaños, *El interrogatorio*.

faction of the FSLN resulted in the conversion of large sectors of the population to the revolutionary cause. In the wee morning hours of September 9, a small group of professional guerrillas led by Francisco Rivera (under the name of “René”), armed with only four FAL machine guns and a number of hunting rifles and pistols entered the city’s western barrios. Rallying the population, they laid siege to the barracks of the National Guard. As the battle raged, the hospital began filling with the wounded and injured.<sup>633</sup> At the same time, Facundo Picado (with the nom de guerre of “Martín”) held off the GN reinforcements arriving from the Condega to the north.

To a certain extent, the logic of the insurrection flowed directly from that of previous five months of intense protest and reprisal. The very neighborhoods which had been bedrocks of the protest movement now served as bases of the Sandinista insurrection, including El Zapote and El Calvario along the river. Likewise, campesinos from the valleys which had embraced the *cursillos*, such as San Roque, La Montañita and Santa Cruz, poured into the city with hunting rifles and joined in the battles as well. The population-at-large, primed by months of repression and resistance, threw themselves into action as guns were seized and distributed. The most prominent aspect of the was the centrality of young people in this new effort, as teenagers took up arms, manned barricades and tossed homemade bombs.<sup>634</sup> Divisions within the Frente faded as the GPP faction led by Julio Ramos decided to help in the insurrection, manning its own barricades and coordinating with the Terceristas.<sup>635</sup>

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<sup>633</sup> *La Prensa*, September 10, 1978; Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, “Parte de Guerra, No.1” September 10, 1978 cited in *Lucha Sandinista*, October 1978, p. 35-36.

<sup>634</sup> *La Prensa*, September 12, 1978

<sup>635</sup> No. 14, “Informe Militar,” CHM-MR2, Box 6, File 89; *La Prensa*, September 13, 1978.



Resisting against the National Guard became a citywide phenomenon as everyone contributed “their grain of sand” towards the battle. Central to the rebellion were the women who gave rise to the expression that “the revolution is not just a gun, but also a tortilla.”<sup>636</sup> The battle was the product of an alliance between the young people who took up arms and city’s older men and women that supported them in these efforts. It was a collective effort, which was often described as the formation of a citywide family, linking “los muchachos” and “las madres.”

These women of Estelí, guerrilla leader “El Segoviano” recalled:

... were collaborators, messengers, ran safe houses and meeting points, got food, medicine information, organized their sector, cooked food, attended to the wound. In the sector where the war happened, almost all of the women helped. Including in El Calvario, it was the women and not the men! The men wear the skirts here, the participation of the women as a support network was fantastic.<sup>637</sup>

In many cases, these middle-aged women were the mothers, aunts or grandmothers of the very youths who joined in the fight. “We were all one family,” Magdalena Derruti, a recalled. “There was a great solidarity, a single family against a single adversary. There were no class distinctions. The Frente could never have done it alone. It was the work of all of us.”<sup>638</sup>

Given the city’s strategic position along the highway to the northern border, control of the city became an important objective for both the guerrillas and dictatorship. On September 14, Air Force jets, or the *mariposas de la muerte* (butterflies of death) as they were called, began bombing guerrilla positions and homes, leaving hundreds of civilians dead and wounded. Entire families were incinerated within their homes, and the urban landscape was eviscerated through

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<sup>636</sup> Pisani, *Los muchachos*, 105.

<sup>637</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-715.714.703, José del Carmen Araúz, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>638</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-210, Magdalena Derruti, Estelí, 1980.

the indiscriminate bombardment from above. The psychological impact of the smoke and overwhelming noise in the sky shifted the conflict dramatically, a GPP report saying that as “the aviation had begun sporadic attacks and shootings, the population started its exodus from the city.” By September 17, EEBI counterinsurgent brigades of the National Guard began an assault against the northern part of the city near the cemetery with heavy artillery and tank fire, leaving 180 civilians dead and 200 wounded in that sector.<sup>639</sup> When Juno Rodríguez looked back on those days, she particularly remembered, “Those incredible days of bombing. It was horrible: the sound of the aircrafts, the destruction of part of the neighborhood. Our homes were considered the safest places until this happened.”<sup>640</sup>

While an extension of the earlier polarization, the insurrection marked a significant watershed in the history of the conflict. For the first time, violence was against unarmed civilians on a massive scale, directed not only at clear opponents but also at large numbers of innocent bystanders. Rather than a moment of strength, the GN showed itself as weak and unable to combat the popular challenge. The September insurrection and the regime’s response mark two parallel and integrated processes which were endogenous to the process of political identity formation. First of all, a targeting for de facto execution based on geographic location, i.e. residence in certain cities and neighborhoods or within those cities. Secondly, membership in a certain age cohort—from about age 13 and 25—also became grounds for a murder. A guerrilla, Leonel Raules, reflected:

In my experience, the repression before the insurrections was a more of an orderly repression. But from September, it wasn’t just against the leftists and the students, it was

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<sup>639</sup> No. 14, “Informe Militar,” CHM-MR2, Box 6, File 89.

<sup>640</sup> CNA.1ª-268, Juno Rodríguez, Estelí, 1980.

against the people (*el pueblo*), it became about eliminating everyone. That was their idea. As a consequence of this repression—this disorderly repression—they even bombed the houses of Somocistas!<sup>641</sup>

While insurgent violence is often naturalized as justified and heroic, for the participants there remained ethical contradictions embedded in this baptism by fire. As one insurgent recalled, his embracing of warfare was linked to a specific event which he experienced during the conflict:

An incident that favored my participation was when the Guardia bombed the house of a family and they murdered them—including a pregnant woman who was slowly bleeding—and a *compañero* of mine, Oscar Gámez. Before that, one looked at the enemy as a human being. Well, I did at least. To a certain extent, it helped me because I became more integrated into the war mentality. After that, I tended to be somewhat cold. It strengthened my warrior mentality. But, emotionally, it destroyed me as a human being.<sup>642</sup>

After a week of holding out, on Sunday the FSLN ordered the withdrawal from the city, exiting as a much-inflated guerrilla force with the *combatientes populares* that had integrated in the heat of the battle. While only 15 combatants had entered the city, there were now hundreds up in arms and led by the guerrillas, as well as numerous civilians escaping the wrath of the GN. .

Once the city was in the hands of the GN, the EEBI battalions began carrying out the infamous *Operación de Limpieza* (Clean-up Operation) in which the young people who had not fled were systematically executed. The Guardia went from house to house to search for young people on which to take their revenge.<sup>643</sup> If it had been “a crime to be young” before the uprising, it now became a capital offense. A former EEBI member who participated in the *Operación Limpieza* in Estelí defended their actions:

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<sup>641</sup> Interview CNA.2A-54.55.56, Leonel Raules, Ocotal, Nueva Segovia, 1980.

<sup>642</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-137, Lizero López Lacayo, El Calvario, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>643</sup> *La Prensa*, September 20, 1978

Many say that the battle ended and we grabbed every civilian who was there. As members of the army, we went into each house, searched it and if we didn't find any arms, the family was fine... But if we found weapons, or guerrilla pamphlets, or red-and-black-flags, we knew that these people... [pause]... I mean, we didn't kill the whole family like they said later, we just grabbed the elements and killed him. Those were the orders we had.<sup>644</sup>

Another National Guard that served in the 1978 insurrection said that,

When we were in combat, they were dressed as civilians. So if we caught them alive, they were killed [*iban de viaje*] and if we caught them surrendering, they were killed because they were from the Frente. All of those that were their spies and civilians too, they were killed too.<sup>645</sup>

Padre Julio Lopez, for instance, just barely escaped murder by the GN, fleeing the city under the orders of the FSLN as the insurrection ended. His colleague, Padre Chico Luis Espinoza—the founder of Estelí's first high schools—was shot dead by the National Guard on September 13 as he drove into the city of Condega. Apparently rushing a pregnant woman to the hospital to give birth, he and the woman were killed along with José Norberto Briones, the head of Estelí's fire department. Their corpses were left abandoned as the GN tore apart the vehicle, stealing their money and the car's radio.<sup>646</sup> It was said that the first and last cries of the newborn were heard for a few moments following the shooting.<sup>647</sup>

In such a climate of terror, it became increasingly impossible to remain in the city and *not* join the guerrillas. "Estelí is practically abandoned," a communiqué from Rivera's Carlos Fonseca Amador Northern Front announced. "The majority of the population and especially the

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<sup>644</sup> Interview Anonymous, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>645</sup> Interview, Anonymous, San Lucas, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>646</sup> *La Prensa*, September 9, 20, 1978; Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional "Del Estado Mayor del Frente Norte 'Carlos Fonseca'", November 18, 1978, cited in *Lucha Sandinista*, January 1979, p. 25.

<sup>647</sup> Carmen Hidalgo v. de Terán, *Crónicas de Estelí* (Managua: Teranhidal, 2007), 206–207.

youth of Estelí form part of the FSLN guerrillas or, better put, the Sandinista Army we are forming. No young person can safely stay in the city.”<sup>648</sup> The National Guard was now repudiated with the epithet of *los genocidas* in popular parlance for the acts of mass murder they carried out in the cities, particularly the tank attacks, aerial bombardments and the summary executions. One man who supported the FSLN argued that:

This is what made Somoza fall. The way he treated the people; the repression. To be more specific: the *Limpieza* of the young people. If he had found another approach and not this repression, it would’ve been much harder to defeat him. Because the kids [*muchachada*] would never have gone to the mountains. The kids who went because of their ideals, had already gone. But the rest of them all went afterwards because of the repression. From my perspective, they were forced to go. So many kids didn’t want to get involved in real guerrilla things but at that moment, they had to go.<sup>649</sup>

The FSLN factions remained divided in their assessments of the insurrection’s impact. While the Terceristas were thrilled, the GPP which traditional endorsed rural guerrilla warfare were less enthused. Bayardo Arce, for instance, wrote to a fellow GPP leader regarding the “consequences of the Tercerista insurrection,” explaining that “the repression made Estelí practically disappear, the infrastructure of our work was decimated and hundreds of our civilian supporters have fled.”<sup>650</sup> Omar Cabezas, likewise, was extremely hesitant to embrace the urban warfare in the city they called “Estalingrado.” However, the GPP guerrillas that participate wrote with pride that the uprising “left footprint of strength and bravery on our Estelian brothers; it was

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<sup>648</sup> Comunicué “Del Estado Mayor del Frente Norte ‘Carlos Fonseca.’” November 11, 1978, published in *Lucha Sandinista*, January 1979.

<sup>649</sup> Interview CNA.1D-31, Modesto Venegas, Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>650</sup> Bayardo Arce to “Toño”, October 6, 1978. CHM-MR, E-002, C-021, 000637

in these moments of combat that I realized that the FSLN flag waves with most force and brilliance in the streets of Estelí.”<sup>651</sup>

While the National Guard was responsible for the vast majority of the civilian deaths, the Sandinistas also carried out a number of attacks against civilians. Most infamous were the *ajusticimientos* (executions) of those that were accused of serving in the OSN’s local surveillance networks.<sup>652</sup> These were the orejas discussed in previous chapter, blamed for the arrests, disappearances, torture and murder of numerous young people. These men and women faced summary “trials” by their neighbors and many, including the most notorious orejas such as Porra Azul, Zanate and Hueso Fino, were summarily shot. This aspect of the insurrection is often left out of the heroic memories of the period, as some of the victims were of dubious culpability. The GPP later reported that when the moment came to retreat, the guerrillas’ makeshift headquarters was “full of oreja prisoners, in total about 25 or 30. A selection of them was made and we proceeded with the firing squad.”<sup>653</sup> While some were released, the following year witnessed a repetition of these events by the insurgents. We will return to this topic in the following chapter when we examine the massacres of civilians and the impact of these events on collective memory and political identity.

### **Consciousness after Mobilization: Ethic of Equality and the Transformation of the Youth**

Throughout Nicaragua, the FSLN was dramatically transformed overnight as a consequence of the Tercerista uprising. While it had been a small, tight-knit group of committed

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<sup>651</sup> No. 14, “Informe Militar,” CHM-MR2, Box 6, File 89.

<sup>652</sup> *Novedades*, September 23, 1978.

<sup>653</sup> No. 14, “Informe Militar,” CHM-MR2, Box 6, File 89.

militants, it had grown rapidly with many new recruits unclear about the guerrillas' goals. The small Carlos Fonseca Northern Front which Francisco Rivera led into Estelí in September 1978 had multiplied exponentially with many youthful combatants retreating with the guerrilla columns to escape the National Guard's sweep.

There was a spectrum of motivations for heading to the mountains—private and political—and, in many cases, survival depended on doing so. Rivera reported to the FSLN leadership over the radio that “there were too many people whose disciplinary behavior in combat was not very correct” and hoped to rectify this through training.<sup>654</sup> Some of those who headed to the guerrilla encampments were common criminals—drug addicts, thieves, armed robbers—hoping to escape justice. The difficult life in the rural encampments would instill identities and forge combatants from those that had fled the city. “It was *there* that they showed who had consciousness,” the student-turned guerrilla Martha Úbeda recalls.

Because some of them went along just because they were scared of getting killed in the city. It was very hard; we had to walk from five in the morning to five at night. From six to eight, we had criticism and self-criticism. This was very important, the political and military preparation.<sup>655</sup>

In the political speeches, the guerrillas explained that the FSN was not fighting merely to overthrow the National Guard. Lizero Lacayo noted that:

Politically, we tried to clarify our political ideas and the basic principles of our struggles the new *compañeros*: the right to housing, health care, education, the right to have land. We explained what the dictatorship, imperialism and the revolutionary movement were. They learned war ballistics, firing positions, assaults against bases, artillery assaults, explosives, sabotage, anti-tank strategy,

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<sup>654</sup> Francisco Rivera, CHM, Sonoteca 103

<sup>655</sup> Interview, CNA.1e-15, Marta Ubeda, La Trinidad, Estelí, 1980.

mortar weapons like the FAL and the RPG-2, machine guns like the M-42 and 30.<sup>656</sup>

Given that military training took up most of the time, the combatants did not develop an intensely political or Marxist framework. Indeed, many recalled prayers, songs and games far more than political speeches. In many ways, the ideological elements taught were less important than the lived practice.

Many of the traditional hierarchies in Nicaraguan society—between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, urban and rural, male and female—began to break down in the context of the guerrilla war. Warfare led to social leveling and there was a collective dependence on one another for survival through the Guard’s attacks. “It was a life of *compañerismo*,” guerrilla Leonel Raules remembered of his friendships with campesinos in the guerrilla encampments. “These were friendships you can never forget. No one distinguished between one person and another.”<sup>657</sup> This *practical* orientation to equality became central to the movement’s development as the vision of the future society. Miguel Córdoba, a cursillista and CDC leader explained that:

The fact we turned to a socialist style organization consolidated the communitarian spirit that is very deep in the city. We have a collective consciousness that is very developed and the war and the pain have influenced this. When we share the food and we offer someone a product they don’t need, they almost always turn it down. In times of shortage, this is shocking.<sup>658</sup>

In the guerrilla encampments, this feeling of shared sacrifice was often reflected in the trope that “if we had one tortilla, we all shared it.” Statements such as this were taken by many as a reflection of the ideals and values they hoped would inspire the revolutionary Nicaragua. This

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<sup>656</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-137 Lizero Lopez Lacayo, El Calvario, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>657</sup> Interview, CNA.2<sup>a</sup>-54.55.56, Leonel Raules, Ocotal, Nueva Segovia, 1980.

<sup>658</sup> Pisani, *Los muchachos*, 105.



ethic of equality found in the metonym of the shared tortilla is similar to Che Guevara's ideal of the "New Man." In retrospect, this time of hardship and collective action serves as something of a utopia to which the present of injustice and inequality can be juxtaposed.

This ethic of practical equality even began to expand into the relations between men and women, given the important role women in supporting the insurrection. A number of young women also took up arms and fought in guerrilla brigades, challenging machista stereotypes and patriarchal gender norms. Most notably these included Fátima Pavón, daughter of a GN officer from La Trinidad, and Martha Úbeda, a student athlete sharpshooter and sibling of numerous FSLN combatants.<sup>659</sup> While most of these young women were students from the city of Estelí, some came from the rural communities outside of the town.

Martha Úbeda insisted that, contrary to optimistic assessments, there were very few women in the guerrilla army. In her column for instance, there were six women and 250 men. "There were lots of [male] high school students and campesinos. A lot of women didn't go because the conditions were rough," she said. Even though there were barriers to entry, she said, once inside the army, "one didn't look at whether you were a man or a woman, we were all the equals. The treatment was the same, mutual respect."<sup>660</sup> Aura Estela Talavera, a young woman from Condega who joined during the September insurrection agreed with this interpretation. She recalled the protection "even sleeping in tents surrounded by hundreds of men—including many criminals—there was *total respect* for women. No one would've dared lay a finger on a woman

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<sup>659</sup> Pavón was killed in combat in Estelí on June 22, 1979. She was three months pregnant at the time of her death.

<sup>660</sup> Interview 214, Marta Úbeda, Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí, 2010.

against her will.”<sup>661</sup> Many of these young women would earn great respect from their fellow combatants for their abilities in battle. This marked a major difference with the GN, which was almost completely male and carried out gendered forms of repression throughout the countryside.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined the pre-insurrectionary mobilization of students and the institutions of popular participation in the form of the neighborhood committees. I looked at the spiraling cycles of protest, repression and rioting in the city of Estelí and the way in which indiscriminate state terror against the civilian population in the urban areas led to massive integration into the guerrilla army in September 1978. The social geography of urban space thus mapped onto the structure of popular mobilization which, in turn, laid the groundwork for the insurrection. I focused on the ways in which regime’s increasing tyranny manifested itself through successive modes: highly-targeted repression of actual and suspected FSLN militants that almost barely affected non-participants prior to April 1978; a disorderly and occasionally murderous repression of marches, demonstrations and riots that between April and September; and finally, the generalized terror and mass slaughter carried out by the GN during the war period. I also disaggregated participants in the revolutionary movement into a spectrum including a range of motivations. During this period, it became “a crime to be young” and age cohort and locality emerged as markers for targeting regardless of whether one joined with the Sandinistas or not.

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<sup>661</sup> Interview A229-230, Aura Estela Talavera Pérez (Rebeca), Estelí, 2010.

When Esteliano youths headed out to other towns following the revolution, they were amazed to find the population was largely indifferent—if not outright hostile—to Sandinista movement and the fall of Somoza. One teenage former guerrilla working in the literacy campaign in Somoto noted the local population’s total “lack of consciousness... They need to a war so they can get consciousness (*se necesita una guerra para meterse consciencia*).”<sup>662</sup> The young man’s somewhat strange comment gets to the heart of the role of state terror as an endogenous factor in identity formation. The evidence in this chapter suggests that violence, rather than a mere *effect*, also served as an important *cause* in the emergence of political identities (ex post facto) in complex ways linked to personal experience. The practical ethic of equality developed in the guerrilla encampments and the CDCs likewise came to form the basis for visions of a post-revolutionary society of equals. Divisions (between rich and poor, young and old, male and female, rural and urban) were dissolved in the very structure of warfare itself. Though they would be constituted again following the war, the experience provided a baseline of justice from which to critique the inadequacies of the new society.

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<sup>662</sup> CNA.3<sup>a</sup>-47, Alfredo López, Somoto, Madriz, 1980.

## Chapter Eight.

### The River of Blood:

#### Fractional Geographies of Counterinsurgency, Cataclysm and Community, 1978-1979

On the fourth day, high on marijuana and hate,  
they climbed into their airplanes with two crisscrossed triangles  
and from the sky  
—oh, our pure northern sky—  
spinning in black orbit  
with satanic precision and calculation, they let fall on us  
the shriek of bombs, machine guns, napalm and rockets  
opening deep ditches with cries of destruction and fear without limits  
in what was once our city of life, song and peace,  
for seven days it rained flaming lightning bolts of fire.  
We buried our dead sons in the same patios where they grew up  
next to our dead brothers  
next to our dead grandparents.  
below the rose patch, we buried them all,  
and we couldn't even spill tears because the terror had left our eyes dry,  
and we couldn't shout because the pain had taken our voices.

-Alejandro Dávila Bolaños, December 1978<sup>663</sup>

### Introduction

In his linguistic studies, Dr. Dávila Bolaños argued that the etymology of the name Estelí was found in the combination of two indigenous languages: *Eztli* meaning blood in Nahuatl and *lí* meaning river in the indigenous language of Matagalpa. Likely a reference to the reddish brown riverbed, by mid-1979 the name had taken on new meaning as counterinsurgent terror took its toll on the region's residents. A river of blood had been shed by this region's population—including Dávila Bolaños himself—with warfare extinguishing thousands of lives and galvanizing the region behind the growing fury of the FSLN insurgency.

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<sup>663</sup> Dávila Bolaños, *El interrogatorio*, 16–17.

This river of blood cut its gruesome path across the landscape in variegated manners, leaving many traumas in its wake. Though a relatively brief period of time in the lengthy story we have traced, the events between January and July 1979 have been discursively inflated in popular accounts given their importance as a watershed moment. Still, they are largely missing from many histories of the Revolution. The historical memory of this disastrous moment of massacre and resistance is central to this dissertation's explanations for political identity amid revolutionary upheaval. One of the community elders of La Montañita, don Santos noted that:

Each of the people that [the National Guard] killed, threw so many families on top of them. It was impossible to defend themselves against so many, many families. And so they started realizing that everyone was fighting against them due to this very situation.<sup>664</sup>

While a succinct overview of what transpired, the events require a closer view given the great variation scrod communities and regions.

Unlike the other Central American civil wars of the period—in El Salvador and Guatemala—the effects of counterinsurgency in Nicaragua have received almost no attention or analysis. In Nicaragua, this campaign against the guerrillas and their civilian backers lasted only ten months given the defeat of the National Guard in July 1979. In the neighboring countries, on the other hand, the periods of state repression lasted more than a decade and gained greater intensity once the United States, traditional elites and the military governments had been spooked by the events in Nicaragua. Throughout the 1980s, the repressive behavior of these regimes reached levels far beyond those of the Somoza regime.<sup>665</sup>

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<sup>664</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-677B. Don Santos, Las Labranzas, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>665</sup>In Guatemala, the so-called “genocidal campaigns” in the indigenous highland destroyed 626 Mayan villages and left more than 150,000 dead, with the truth commission declaring that 93 percent of the deaths were at the hands of the state. In tiny El Salvador, 75,000 men, women and children were killed, of which that country's truth

That the experience of massacre at the hands of paramilitary death squads and counterinsurgent brigades is central to the Central America's contemporary history is evident in the rich anthropological literature documenting these tragic events and their long-term effects.<sup>666</sup> Revisionist scholarship, on the other hand, has inverted causality, blaming the Left for provoking violence in these countries, suggesting that the civilian population found itself caught "between two demons" or "between two fires": guerrilla outsiders and the repressive military brigades.<sup>667</sup> Such an approach made a contribution by clarifying that revolutionary upheaval did not spontaneously bubble up from below and that civilians were not always of one mind with insurgents. Still, these revisionists came dangerously close to suggesting that the massacres of the civilians were somehow "justified" responses to rebel "provocations." Interestingly, the "two fires" trope is practically unheard in Estelí, where much of the population came to identify with the guerrillas and saw GN violence as a far greater threat. As we will see, few identified as pure victims and many linked their suffering with the wider cause of the revolution. Importantly, the Sandinista victory—unlike in the rest of Central America—gave such memories a certain official

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commission estimated 95 percent were killed at the hands of the government forces, trained and funded by the United States. United Nations Comisión de la Verdad para El Salvador, *De la locura a la esperanza: La guerra de 12 años en El Salvador* (United Nations, 1993); Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, *Guatemala: memoria del silencio* (CEH, 1999).

<sup>666</sup> Robert M. Carmack, *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1992); Ricardo Falla, *Masacres de la selva: Ixcán, Guatemala, 1975 - 1982*, 1st ed. (Editorial Universitaria, 1992); Beatriz Manz, *Paradise in Ashes: A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2005); Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala*, 1st ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Daniel Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala* (Duke University Press Books, 2004); Judith Zur, *Violent Memories: Mayan War Widows in Guatemala* (Westview Press, 2001); Linda Green, *Fear as a Way of Life* (Columbia University Press, 1999); Leigh Binford, *The El Mozote Massacre: Anthropology and Human Rights* (University of Arizona Press, 1996).

<sup>667</sup> David Stoll, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala* (Columbia University Press, 1994); Jorge G. Castaneda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War*, Vintage Books ed. (Vintage, 1994); Yvon Grenier, *The Emergence Of Insurgency El Salvador: Ideology and Political Will*, 1st ed. (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998).

legitimacy and source of pride. A counterrevolutionary memory justifying state terror was hardly spoken aloud even by opponents of the rebels.<sup>668</sup>

Aside from a few impressionistic accounts, there are no works closely documenting the crimes committed in the final months of the regime and their effects.<sup>669</sup> The massacres described in this chapter are not found in any of the multitude of books on the Sandinista Revolution, yet are an integral element in the life experiences of a generation. To this day, they remain central determinants of the political identities of families, communalities, towns, cities and regions. Yet the regime's counterinsurgency was not a monolith which took homogenous forms across the regional landscape. Nor were memories of this violence integrated into popular narratives in a straightforward causal relationship. Instead, the events and how they are understood are highly differentiated and worthy of analysis.

In this chapter, I pursue a two-pronged approach to the study of counterinsurgent massacres at the hands of the National Guard through a series of case studies or vignettes from the city, towns and rural areas of Estelí. I will identify the strategies, methods, agents (both local and within the military) and geographic reach of the different forms of violence. Out of the seemingly chaotic and nightmarish repression of these months, we are able to delineate a typology of diverse forms of mass killing and violence. In this way, we seek to understand the empirical reality of the how and why certain communities came to be victimized by the

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<sup>668</sup> Jeffrey L. Gould and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920–1932* (Duke University Press Books, 2008).

<sup>669</sup> An exception is the following volume: Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo, *La Insurrección popular sandinista en Masaya* (Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1982). Intended as the first in a series of oral histories of the insurrection in Nicaragua, this book featured interviews documenting the experiences of guerrillas and their supporters in the city of Masaya. Plans for later volumes on other cities were apparently shelved as the Contra War of the 1980s picked up in earnest and the previous cycle of violence became less of a nostalgic moment.

military.<sup>670</sup> By analyzing the military logic of counterinsurgency and rebellion, I do not seek to follow political scientist Stathis Kalyvas in finding “violence” itself as a sui generis determinant of civil war and the control of territory as something detached from previous conditions.<sup>671</sup> The political, social, economic and cultural history of regions determined the geographic strategies of both sides, while the introduction of mass violence heightened its saliency.

This prior history likewise conditioned the understandings of those that suffered or observed this repression. Communities which experienced remarkably similar attacks were to develop quite different understandings and ways of speaking about the events through which they had lived. In their work on Punjab Sikh communities, Veena Das and R. Singh Bajwa rejected “the common misunderstanding that community formations occur independently of modern structures of power and governance” and emphasized “the extent to which violence plays a role in defining community.”<sup>672</sup> In their work, they juxtaposed two different models through which communities are defined by violence: “martyrdom,” in which the language of sacrifice comes to characterize the experience; and “feud,” in which violent memories produce consistent divisionism and back-and-forth conflict. Drawing on this model, we focus attention on the ways these events were inscribed in community narratives. We identify the tropes, idioms, symbolic language and the discourses of agency, innocence and victimhood that are at the heart

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<sup>670</sup> The groundbreaking work examining counterinsurgent strategy and patterns of violence by Jennifer Schirmer on Guatemala and William Stanley on El Salvador has been helpful in understanding the ways in which instrumental and institutional logics produced such shocking brutality. Stanley, *The Protection Racket State*; Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project*.

<sup>671</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>672</sup> Veena Das and Rajiv Singh Bajwa, “Community and Violence in Contemporary Punjab,” in *Violence/non-violence : Some Hindu Perspectives / Edited by Denis Vidal, Gilles Tarabout, Eric Meyer*, ed. Denis Vidal, Gilles Tarabout, and Eric Meyer (New Delhi :: Manohar, 2003), 279–280.



of survivors' accounts. Through these memories and narratives, individuals, communities and regions came to define themselves politically and continue to do so.

### **Continuing Urban Warfare in Estelí: Waves of Insurrection and Limpieza**

With the outbreak of open insurrection in September 1978, the military and political context shifted substantially. As we saw earlier, the Somoza regime and the National Guard had in the mid-1970s begun to carry out a series of fundamental reforms aimed at transforming the corrupt “constabulary” into a modern, Cold War counterinsurgent force. The renovation revolved around the creation of new, highly trained infantry battalions for anti-guerrilla combat and the expansion of the counterintelligence apparatus in order to target the opposition. In such efforts, the regime and its backers ran up against highly entrenched institutional cultures of patronage and corruption, as well as an incredibly low technical level. Plans to rapidly and exponentially increase the size the National Guard through the EEBI (Escuela de Entrenamiento Básico de Infantería) program directed by the dictator’s son were still in the incipient stages when the urban insurrections erupted.

US President Jimmy Carter’s decision to end support for long-time ally Somoza due to human rights abuses ratcheted up pressure against the regime, although outside arms continued to arrive until the end (particularly from Israel and Argentina). In response, as we have seen, the dictatorship revealed its vulnerability and lack of sophistication as the counterinsurgent brigades were sent to rescue prostrate military bases surrounded by poorly-armed popular militias. In addition, these months saw the arrival of foreign troops into the conflict, particularly anti-communist mercenaries from Vietnam and battalions sent by the military regimes of neighboring

countries. During this period, the regime also began using paramilitary death squads to murder civilian opponents for the first time.

Following their exit from the city, the now-inflated guerrilla columns based themselves in rural encampments in the adjacent countryside, virtually encircling the city. The following month, the GN struck against the guerrilla encampments and the FSLN responded by attacking neighboring towns such as Pueblo Nuevo and Condega. The guerrillas also attacked the city of Estelí on February 20—the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Augusto César Sandino’s assassination—burning down a cigar factory and robbing banks and stores to accumulate funds for arms purchases.<sup>673</sup>

The second insurrection in Estelí took place during Holy Week and closely followed the pattern laid out in the September uprising detailed in the previous chapter.<sup>674</sup> This time, though, the uprising was not part of national military strategy but was an isolated case while the rest of the country remained quiescent. Given the utter brutality of repression in September and the continued killings throughout early 1979, the population spontaneously responded to a guerrilla incursion on April 8 by throwing up the barricades and joining in the fight. “Sometimes I reflect,” guerrilla Antenor Rosales reflected, given the city’s ire directed at the GN, “if at this moment we really broke the schema of the books because the vanguard let itself be led by the masses.”<sup>675</sup> In order to divide reinforcements, guerrillas attacked the National Guard bases in Santa Cruz, Condega and San Juan de Limay (Estelí), Achuapa (León) and San Rafael del Norte

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<sup>673</sup> Rubén (Francisco Rivera) to Dirección Nacional del Frente Sandinista, “Evaluación del Estado Mayor del Frente Norte, Carlos Fonseca Amador, sobre la insurrección de Estelí y los combates de Condega, El Sauce y Achuapa,” Abril 1979, CHM, Fondo Frentes de Guerra, Folder 6.

<sup>674</sup> Flakoll and Alegría, *Nicaragua, la revolución sandinista*, 354–355.

<sup>675</sup> Baltodano, *Memorias de la lucha sandinista. Tomo II*, 127.

(Jinotega). However, only in Condega and Santa Cruz did the civilian population give support to these efforts. Indeed, guerrilla squadrons in Condega shot down two Air Force planes sent to bomb Estelí.<sup>676</sup>

The spatial logic of warfare was again central to the practices of violence used by the GN and the insurgents. The Prolonged Popular War (GPP) forces led by Julio Ramos (13) and the Terceristas under Juan Alberto Blandón (Froylán) and Francisco Rivera (El Zorro) staged their attacks by again basing themselves in the parts of the city perceived to be the most sympathetic to the guerrillas. These included the working class barrios to the west of downtown such as El Calvario and El Zapote, as well as Santa Cruz, the peasant community to the south which had participated widely in the Catholic *cursillo* movement.<sup>677</sup>

Compared to September, the military panorama was quite different as the National Guard quickly occupied the highest points in the city, including the Cathedral, the girls' parochial school El Rosario, the National Bank and the telephone company installations. The National Guard sent reinforcements, including the forces of the Central American Defense Council (*Consejo de Defensa Centroamericana*, CONDECA) from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, to bolster the Somoza regime in the north. When the guerrillas attempted to stop the arrival of these troops, the regime responded with aerial bombardments of the countryside and the city.<sup>678</sup> The National Guard once again called out the Air Force to bombard the remaining shell of the city and the forces of the EEBI recaptured the city from the insurgents. Juan Alberto

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<sup>676</sup> Rubén, "Evaluación..."

<sup>677</sup> Baltodano, *Memorias de la lucha sandinista. Tomo II*, 126–127.

<sup>678</sup> Rubén, "Evaluación..."

Blandón, the guerrilla leader commanding the operation, was among those killed in combat. The guerrillas gathered up the civilian population—2,500 men, women, children—and led them on a mass exodus to Tomabú hill where a makeshift camp had been constructed.<sup>679</sup> In the retreat, the FSLN claimed to have lost only eight men while breaking the GN's siege, while the Guardia declared that 50 had been killed.<sup>680</sup> As in the previous insurrection, the violent conflict generated polarization and young people poured into the guerrilla columns in search of safety and vengeance.

In the recaptured city, the EEBI proceeded to execute the remnants of the guerrillas and their civilian supporters in another Operación Limpieza as a heavy rain poured down on the city.<sup>681</sup> Mercedes Mendoza testified that nearly 50 National Guards arrived at her house in search of her nephew and arrested not only the teenager but her husband and ten other young people who lived nearby. She remembers that when her husband refused to climb into their truck, the Guards yelled at him, “‘You’re not going to get on board, you son of a bitch?’ So they forced him... after that, they disappeared. We found them seven months and 12 days later on the airstrip with the ten others, their bodies destroyed and riddled with bullets.”<sup>682</sup> The period following the April insurrection is filled with countless stories like this one, often involving the torture, rape and murder of those who remained in the city.

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<sup>679</sup> Quintero and Ramírez, *La marca del Zorro*, 212., Rubén, “Evaluación...”

<sup>680</sup> René Rodríguez Rodríguez M. and Antonio Acevedo Espinoza, *La Insurrección nicaragüense, 1978-1979: la lucha armada del FSLN y el pueblo contra la dictadura somocista en la prensa nacional y extranjera* (Banco Central de Nicaragua, 1979), 106.

<sup>681</sup> Hidalgo v. de Terán, *Crónicas de Estelí*, 198.

<sup>682</sup> Written Testimony, Mercedes Mendoza, Trib. Esp. 3, Case 42, April 30, 1980, p. 12.

The central figure in the accounts of the repression was a man named Cherry, a former National Guard from Santa Cruz. Upon leaving from the army and moving to the neighborhood of El Calvario, Cherry joined with the guerrillas in the fight against the Guard in September and the retreat to their rural encampments. Sometime following his participation with the FSLN, he deserted from the FSLN and again joined the GN and played a key role in the repression. Some accounts of his desertion suggest that he had been sent to spy while others insist he fled the guerrillas after attempting to rape a female combatant—punishable by death in the guerrilla camps. The son of an American highway contractor and a campesina from Santa Cruz, the physical appearance of Cherry likewise garnered him great infamy. A guerrilla recalled that he was, “light-skinned with green eyes and yellow hair, a big man... a real North American.”<sup>683</sup> Though practically foreign in appearance, he was dangerous due to his intimate knowledge of local communities and neighborhoods.<sup>684</sup> Amid the battalions of helmeted, uniformed and anonymous Guardias, Cherry served as a unique and identifiable figure. FSLN leader Francisco Rivera recalled the brutality of Cherry towards his erstwhile compañeros, noting that campesinos’ bodies were found, “with their hands tied, visible sights of torture and beatings, with the burn marks of the electrical wire and wounds.”<sup>685</sup>

The massacre at San Juan de Dios Hospital in the wake of the FSLN was the most dramatic act attributed to Cherry. He arrived as part of the Operación Limpieza along with EEBI forces under Franklin Montenegro. Storming the hospital, they captured and killed dozens of

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<sup>683</sup> Interview A216, Jaime Talavera Olivas, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>684</sup> Hidalgo v. de Terán, *Crónicas de Estelí*, 197.; A185, Josefa Ruiz Lorente, Estelí, 2010; A296, Felipe Urrutia, El Limón, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>685</sup> Quintero and Ramírez, *La marca del Zorro*, 205.

those undergoing treatment as suspected guerrillas. In addition to the patients, Dr. Alejandro Dávila Bolaños, Dr. Eduardo Selva and their nurse Cleotilde Moreno were dragged at gunpoint from the operating room and executed. Rosa Celinda Bellorín, whose 17-year-old son was among the dozens killed in the hospital, described his final minutes. “They took off his clothes,” she recounted:

Then they took Dr. Selva and Dávila Bolaños who they’d put on the floor and told them to get up, along with my son. The witnesses saw them take them outside of the hospital, because they didn’t kill them inside the hospital. They heard the machine guns blasts and it seems like it took place somewhere nearby because that’s where the wife of Dr. Dávila Bolaños found his glasses and pen.<sup>686</sup>

Teenager Juan Ramón Medrano Dávila was torn from his hospital bed where he was suffering from appendicitis after being identified by Cherry as a Sandinista. He was never seen again despite his father’s pleas to the GN for information.<sup>687</sup>

Dávila Bolaños, though the founding father of left-wing politics in Estelí, had never been a supporter of armed struggles. In his final diary entry, written on April 8, he described the arrival of the guerrilla columns into the city and his plans to head to the hospital to help with the wounded. “How much freedom costs!” he wrote. “All this young blood sacrificed! Let us never forget this. This price should remain in everyone’s conscience.”<sup>688</sup> When time came to retreat from the city, Lizero López, a guerrilla recalled trying to convince the doctor to leave:

He told me, ‘I’m not going to put my hands down until the Revolution triumphs. I’m going to the hospital because there are many people to save. If they kill me fine... If not, I’ll find some way to catch up with you.’ The important thing I

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<sup>686</sup> Testimony Rosa Celinda Bellorin, Tribunal Especial 5, Case 331, November 15, 1980, p. 28.

<sup>687</sup> *La Prensa*, May 5, 1979; Written Testimony Juan Ramón Medrano, Tribunal Especial 5, Case 331, November 15, 1980, p. 33

<sup>688</sup> “Testimonio de Alejandro Dávila Bolaños,” 8 de abril 1979, CHM, Fondo Nuevo, Caja 23, No. 18.

heard was that he was conscious of the fact they could kill him. But he knew that many patients would die without his help. That is to say, he risked his life for his patients and for this I consider him a true hero.<sup>689</sup>

In a communiqué, the FSLN denounced the “cowardly” way these doctors were killed while carrying out the “sacred duty” of the Hippocratic Oath; in homage, the three were posthumously granted the title of Medical Officer in the guerrilla army.<sup>690</sup> After the triumph of the Sandinistas, the hospital would be renamed after Dávila Bolaños as would the military hospital in Managua.

The GN’s indiscriminate violence in the wake of the uprisings was prominent in the accounts of both civilians and FSLN combatants. As the only city to rise up in April, the city suffered the full force of repression, garnering the moniker of “three times heroic.” Following the April insurrection, Estelí was reduced to ruins, hollowed-out buildings and craters encircling a bullet-riddled National Guard barracks. For this reason, the role of civilian participation was far less in June when the Sandinistas launched their third and final “war” in the city, a month-long battle which would end with the regime’s fall.

The guerrilla army’s own policy of killing of civilians accused of being orejas, on the other hand, has been left out these accounts of victimhood and redemption. In the September insurrection, a number of the city’s most infamous orejas were executed following summary trials with participation from neighbors. Other OSN informants apologized and begged for clemency, yet many returned to their traditional roles after the guerrillas’ departure. In April, they were again captured and when time came to treat from the city, the leadership made the decision to kill them. “It was not possible to take them with us,” Comandante Francisco Rivera

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<sup>689</sup> Interview Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-137, Lizero López Lacayo, El Calvario, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>690</sup> Frente Norte Carlos Fonseca, “Parte de Guerra,” April 21, 1979, CHM, Fondo Frentes de Guerra, Caja 15 Folder 9

said in his memoir, “and letting them go would have been an injustice.”<sup>691</sup> A group of 30 prisoners was sent before guerrilla firing squads and their cadavers were left behind in a trench to simulate dead combatants. “It’s painful to say it,” a guerrilla combatant reflected, “but all sorts of things happen in war. For the safety of the families of those of us who were in the guerrilla army, we had to silence these people because they were a great danger to us.” Another guerrilla, reflecting back on these events, argued that:

In my own personal opinion, we shot the people that we shouldn’t have. Because I think the ones who gave the orders were much guiltier; the intellectuals, not the little guy. I don’t know why it happens that the poor always defend the powerful. Just in April, a ton of these people were killed and in September too. In all of these actions, there were some injustices. Unfortunately, arms corrupt a person. Maybe some of these people had nothing to do with the war and were killed out of personal vengeance. It was not all rose-colored or the most just thing to do.”<sup>692</sup>

Such contradictory or ambiguous memories are often obfuscated in popular accounts of revolution in search of clearer narratives of state terror and popular resistance. The presence of injustices within those targeted remains a sore point for families in the city who lost love ones falsely accused of being orejas. Discussion of these events inevitably raises painful and divisive memories, and they are often ignored in light of GN’s far more deadly repression of the population as a whole.<sup>693</sup>

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<sup>691</sup> Quintero and Ramírez, *La marca del Zorro*, 247.

<sup>692</sup> Interview, Anonymous, Estelí, 2011.

<sup>693</sup> These issue of revolutionary, guerrilla violence—often depicted as pure—and its long-term effects were the subject of an important debate over the Salvadoran civil war between two anthropologists. Philippe Bourgois, “The Power of Violence in War and Peace,” *Ethnography* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 2001): 5–34; Leigh Binford, “Violence in El Salvador,” *Ethnography* 3, no. 2 (June 1, 2002): 201–219; Philippe Bourgois, “The Violence of Moral Binaries,” *Ethnography* 3, no. 2 (June 1, 2002): 221–231.



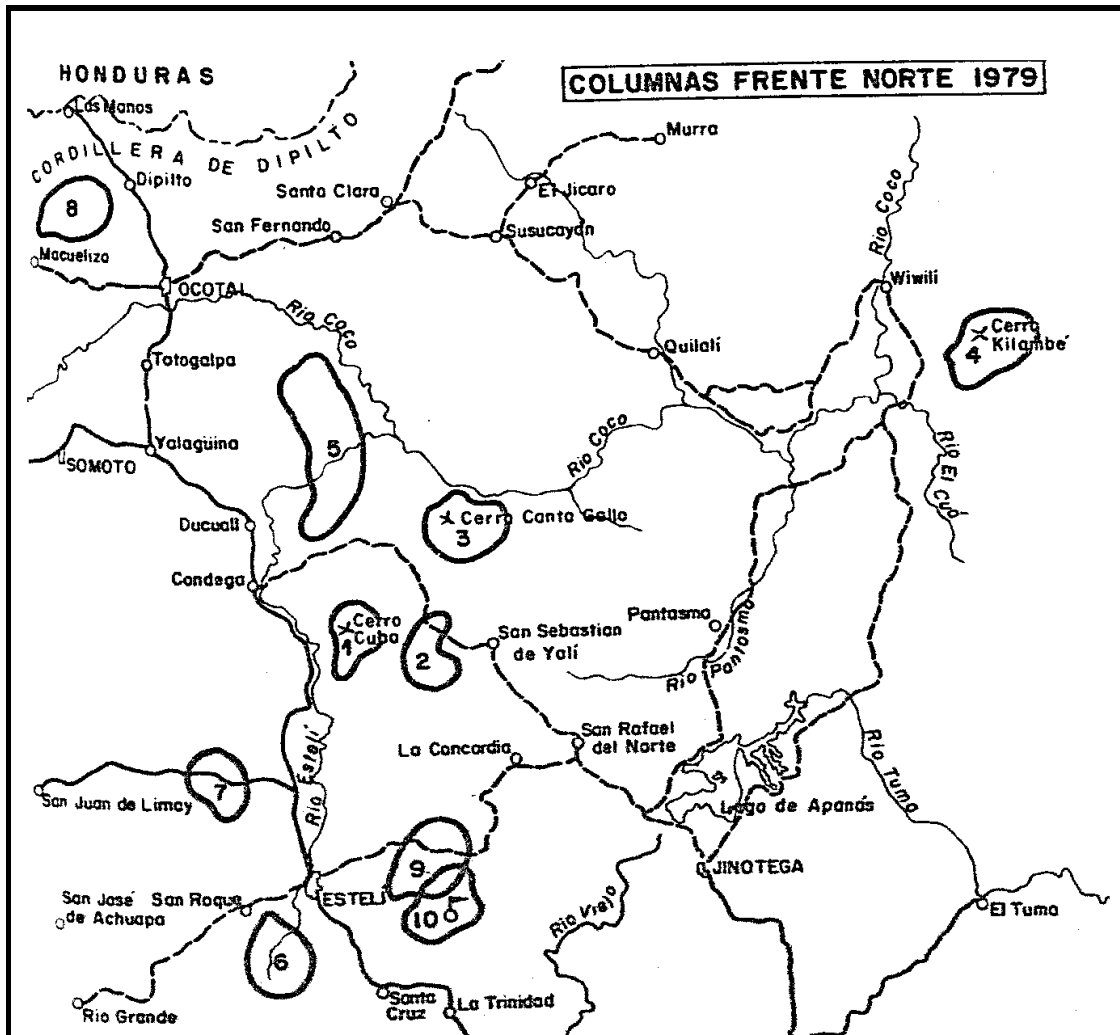


Figure 7. Map of Guerrilla Encampments, 1979. Francisco Rivera Quintero and Sergio Ramírez, *La Marca Del Zorro: Hazañas del Comandante Francisco Rivera Quintero* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua), p. 233. Original map in CHM, Fondo Frentes de Guerra, FNCF.

### Making Sense of Counterinsurgency in El Tular, January-April

“If the city of Estelí was boiling with Guards, the countryside and the villages were boiling with guerrillas,” Comandante Francisco Rivera later explained.<sup>694</sup> In the rural areas where the FSLN held military sway from September, they developed networks of supporters

<sup>694</sup> Quintero and Ramírez, *La marca del Zorro*, 191.

among the campesinos to provide logistical support, food and information on enemy movements. With over 800 combatants, numerous camps were established at various locals in San Roque to the west of the city (6 on the map), Santa Cruz to the south and east (9, 10), El Regadío to the northwest (7), and Canta Gallo and Cerro Cuba in Condega in the northeast (1, 3.)

It was not merely FSLN military dominance over the zone that led the population to support the guerrillas. Their previous experience in the Catholic cursillos and retiros was instrumental in permitting the guerrillas to gain a foothold among the local campesinos. Where the population had encountered the discourse of liberation theology and its critique of the regime, they were far more open to the guerrillas' message. These visions of social justice were cited time and again by campesinos as to why they chose to risk their lives by giving support to the FSLN. A campesina from El Tular—where the guerrillas had their main camp—remembered rising at one in the morning to begin preparing food for the “los muchachos” to collect at dawn. “We knew that if the Guard came, they would kill them and us,” she said:

That's the way it was: those that helped the Frente were killed. If they killed a guerrilla, maybe a Guard would get killed too [because the guerrillas were armed]. But the house of someone who gave food to the Frente was burned down and they killed the whole family.<sup>695</sup>

The GN policy of murdering campesino families accused of giving food to the insurgents was one that emerged in the early months of 1979. Initially, GN search-and-destroy missions focused solely on armed guerrillas, but as they found themselves unable to best the FSLN in battle, they began targeting the civilian population. One campesino compared the Guards that came in December who “didn't mistreat anyone and just asked if we had seen unknown people”

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<sup>695</sup> Interview A206, Andrea Centeno Palacios, San Roque, Estelí, 2010.

with those that arrived in late January with “very serious faces. They didn’t ask questions, they just aimed rifles at us.”<sup>696</sup> The GN appeared to limit wanton killing in cities given the international condemnation of human rights abuses. In the countryside, however, areas coded as guerrilla support bases found themselves the victims of brutal public acts of terror.<sup>697</sup> The GN view that campesinos were legitimate targets was solidified following attacks against guerrilla encampments in late November 1978 in El Guaylo and in early January in El Tular.

The battle at El Tular, beginning on New Year’s Day saw 150 guerrillas escape from 500 National Guards, backed by Air Force and foreign troops sent by CONDECA.<sup>698</sup> Despite being outnumbered, the FSLN claimed 50 Guards had been killed while they only lost six guerrilleros.<sup>699</sup>

The GN again directed their vengeance towards the population suspected of providing food to the guerrillas. Salomé García attempted to convince his brother Plácido to flee with him, but he remained behind: “He didn’t have political opinions, he was clean. He helped with what he could, but he helped very little. Including him, sixteen family members were killed.”<sup>700</sup> Those killed and burned inside their home ranged from an infant less than a year old to an elderly woman, aged 76. A human rights commission sent to excavate the bodies found 21 civilians

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<sup>696</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-647, Anonymous, Los Araditos, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>697</sup> This parallels the designation of “red zones” in the Guatemalan counterinsurgency of the 1980s. Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project*.

<sup>698</sup> Estado Mayor, “Informe de Rubén,” op. cit.

<sup>699</sup> FSLN “De la comisión exterior del FSLN al Pueblo de Nicaragua,” January 8, 1979 and “Partes de los diferentes frentes de guerra,” January 14, 1979, CEDEMA.

<sup>700</sup> Interview CNA.1B-132, Salomé García, El Tular, Estelí, 1980..

killed in the village, including children “still wearing their little rubber boots.”<sup>701</sup> As a result of the massacre, campesinos from neighboring communities began fleeing their homes and the Guard arrived to burn all coffee, beans, corn and sorghum that were left behind.<sup>702</sup>

In the soldiers’ abandoned backpacks found near El Tular, guerrillas claimed to find hundreds of dollars in *lempiras*, *colones* and *quetzales*, the currencies of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.<sup>703</sup> The guerrillera Lupita who fought in the battle remembered finding:

...a piece of barbed wire which had the underwear of seven women they had raped and killed, like it was a trophy. They carried them on this little piece of wire. And they had marijuana and liquor. That’s how they fought and what they did. They killed kids and old people, they didn’t care who they were. In the countryside, they had a thirst for killing.<sup>704</sup>

The iconography of such discoveries speaks to both the gendered nature of the violence and the brutal details which horrified many that had not taken a side in the conflict.

While random in its actual choice of victims, GN violence against civilians functioned as a clear form of retribution towards civilians and an attempt to eliminate the civilian support for the FSLN. Documentation regarding “los desaparecidos,” those captured by the regime and “disappeared,” showed that such episodes of forced disappearance always occurred in the immediate aftermath of combat between the two armed groups. The first disappeared campesinos vanished in early January, when twelve men, women and children remained unaccounted for in the area of El Tular. At the end of that month, five people “disappeared” from the area along the border with León. During the months February and March—periods of relative calm—there

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<sup>701</sup> *La Prensa*, February 21, 1979.

<sup>702</sup> *La Prensa*, January 22, 1979.

<sup>703</sup> FSLN “Partes de los diferentes frentes de guerra,” January 14, 1979, CEDEMA.

<sup>704</sup> Interview A192, María Magdalena García Lazo, Estelí, 2010. This accusation is also found in the January 14 FSLN communiqué.

were no reports of disappeared people in the department of Estelí. But with the guerrilla uprising in Estelí during Holy Week, nineteen people were disappeared by the GN that month: eleven in the city itself and the other eight from the nearby rural communities, Santa Cruz and La Montañita, to whose stories we now turn.<sup>705</sup>

### **Fire on the Mountain: Silence, Solidarity and Martyrdom in La Montañita**

La Montañita, as we saw earlier, was a hardscrabble village with a history of marginality, violent conflict and alcohol abuse. Its interaction with Catholic cursillo organizing, however, led to a rapid transformation of community relations. The population later provided clandestine support to a number of nearby guerrilla encampments.<sup>706</sup> The particular forms of terror visited upon the impoverished population of this valley were linked to a particular political identity and narrative of popular participation. In La Montañita, the massacres committed by the GN formed part of an unambiguous narrative of sacrifice, community solidarity and resistance.

The village's traditional factionalism was by early 1979 split along insurgency/regime lines, with the juez de mesta and his family the only openly Somocista loyalists in the area while many other families threw in their lot with the FSLN. These political divisions were connected to community-level struggles over resources with many accusing the juez and his sons of using their military connections to accumulate land at the expense of neighbors. One campesina, Silveria Cruz, noted that:

They all went around with the Guard. They promised to finish all of us off so that all of the land would belong to them. All they talked about was getting the land,

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<sup>705</sup> Comisión Permanente de Derechos Humanos (CPDH), "Los Desaparecidos: Un abominable crimen somocista," p. 14-16, available in Princeton University Latin American Pamphlet Collection, "Human and Civil Rights in Nicaragua," Reel 2.

<sup>706</sup> It is located roughly between camps 6 and 7 on the map above.

so that they would be the sole owners of all of this. So the Guard protected them and didn't protect us. And they protected the Guard. They all had their rifles and pistols and went around armed carrying a portrait of Somoza.<sup>707</sup>

After one of the juez's sons—a GN reservist—was killed in a shoot out with the FSLN, he provided lists and maps of the various Montañita households that gave aid to the guerrillas to the GN base in Estelí. Given the social proximity of the community, the juez was not a distant authority or anonymous Guard, but related by blood or marriage to many of those he was said to have denounced. The split between this family and the community as a whole provided a clear dividing line of culpability in narratives of the violence.

Following the denunciations, National Guard troops arrived and captured a number of community members on January 22, tearing seven campesinos—men and women—from their *ranchitos*. The GN tortured their victims, demanding to know the location of the guerrillas, and looted the houses of their few humble possessions. The narratives of the survivors in La Montañita suggest the role that these events played in solidifying the political identity of the valley and finding meaning after violence. Featured prominently in these accounts of violence were the moments of solidarity between family members in the face of the repression. Venancia Olles, for instance, recalled telling the Guards that if they were going to kill her brother:

Then they should take me too and kill me as well. So they told me, 'Woman, I would love to take your life. You better get out of here,' and they threatened me with their rifles. I asked them, 'What's his crime?' They said, 'We'll send you away too, woman.' I told them, 'You are supposed to be the authorities but you go around robbing people.' That's what I told them.<sup>708</sup>

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<sup>707</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-674-675, Silveria Cruz Zedilla, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>708</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-659, Venancia Olles Briones, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980.

Rebellious statements to the attackers, form a vital part of their stories by emphasizing the vital to self-sacrifice and solidarity and the limited forms of resistance available to the campesinos in this situation.

Survivors also emphasized their agency in silence and dissimulation as responses to GN demands for answers. Petrona Cruz Briones, whose husband was captured that day, remembered the abuse to which he was subjected by the GN:

At 10 in the morning, they tortured him in front of us. Then at eleven, they took him into our bedroom and keep him there until one in the afternoon. They were mistreating him; there were cries of pain. As his wife, I was there with our five children and they put a gun against my chest and told us to say how we had helped the guerrillas. We didn't say anything, so they told me that they were going to kill him. I said that they could take my life instead but I could not tell them anything. 'Of course you can,' they said. 'They eat here.' I knew that I gave them food and my husband did too, but to save myself and out of fear, I had to lie to them.<sup>709</sup>

When he emerged from the bedroom with blood pouring from his nose, the GN dragged him away and did not permit Petrona to offer him a handkerchief.

Community members at first assumed that the Guard had come to merely arrest and interrogate their family members, but by late January the military's threshold for killing had lowered significantly. Women, previously considered somewhat exempt from public violence, were beaten and raped in order to inspire both fear and shame among the campesinos. "One of the women they killed," Venancia recalled, noting a particularly traumatic event, "was raped in front of her husband. The husband said, 'I'd rather you kill me than do this to my señora.' They put her on the floor naked in front of children and the elderly."<sup>710</sup> This horrific story was reported

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<sup>709</sup> Interview, CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-662, Petrona Cruz Briones, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>710</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-659, Venancia Olles Briones, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980.

to the GN base in Estelí when family members headed to the city to attempt to secure their family members' release but the army denied they had even been captured.<sup>711</sup>

The arrested had been taken not to the city but rather to a nearby hacienda house where they spent the night being brutalized by the soldiers. Some of the men were electrocuted and their heads beaten until their eyes came out. A young woman was repeatedly gang raped by multiple soldiers. In seeking to explain how she had endured such abuse without revealing the guerrillas' location, another local woman speculated: "She said, 'It's better I die and don't tell them where [the guerrillas] are,' because if she died, it would just be her. But if she if she told them, many more would die."<sup>712</sup> This imagined thought process parallels those of the community members who spoke up to the GN or remained silent to protect others. The following day, the seven prisoners were taken blindfolded with their hands tied behind their backs to a nearby river embankment. They had their throats slit and a stone fence was dumped on top of them. By the time they were found two days later, vultures and dogs had already picked apart their corpses.

Unfortunately, these events were not the last time that La Montañita was targeted by the GN. Following the insurrection during Holy Week, the Guardia again returned to the village, storming the houses of three families. They slit their throats, doused the homes with gasoline and set them ablaze. Dogs trapped in one of the houses let out howls of terror as the buildings blazed around them. Doña Silveria, who saw the glow of the fires from her home remembered with deep pain, saying to her husband, "'Look, there's a flame. I wonder who they could be burning.'

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<sup>711</sup> *La Prensa*, January 25, 1979.

<sup>712</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-663, María González Zelaya, vda. de Cruz. El Edén, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980..



There were three houses burned in a single day.”<sup>713</sup> Many of the 29 people killed, were children, women and the elderly.

Sara Hernández remembered that, first the Guards “burned the house of Lorena Cruz and burned her, with two unmarried daughters and her son, her nephew and my husband’s nephew,” while in another home they killed the family of Francisco Cruz, “a humble man who didn’t bother anyone and lived with his mother-in-law and two other elderly people.”<sup>714</sup> Unlike their earlier targeting of residents fingered for providing food to the guerrillas, doña Silveria noted, the GN now killed many “innocent people who knew nothing about the muchachos or where they were. They also killed two kids who didn’t know anything; they just ran into them on the path and killed them.”<sup>715</sup> Important to community narratives of the violence was the relationship between the juez de mesta and the National Guard in the days following the murders. The soldiers set up camp at the juez’s home and with the livestock stolen from murdered families, “they took care of them as though it were a party: with meat from slaughtered cows and pigs.”<sup>716</sup>

What remained of their victims’ carbonized corpses were later removed from the homes and buried by their family members. Others suspected of collaborating with the guerillas were sent to the city to be tortured. “I figured I was going to die either way,” Horacio Briones recounted. “So I told them, ‘*Hombre*, stop burning all of this gasoline, because gasoline is worth

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<sup>713</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-674-675, Silveria Cruz Zedilla, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>714</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-672, Sara Hernandez Zelaya, vda. de Cruz. El Edén, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>715</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-674-675, Silveria Cruz Zedilla, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>716</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-663, María González Zelaya, vda. de Cruz. El Edén, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980.

more than our lives.’ It almost cost me a rib, but I said it.’<sup>717</sup> His denunciation fits closely with the community’s vision of its resistance and solidarity in the face of terror.

As in the city of Estelí, the violence visited on the community solidified the revolutionary masculinity of youths who now joined the FSLN en masse to avenge the murder of their family members. For some of the young people who lost family in the massacres, the events gave legitimacy to similarly vicious treatment towards the National Guards captured by the Sandinistas. A guerrilla combatant whose family had been killed in La Montañita reflected:

They burned them alive, to laugh about it. So it got to the point where when we grabbed one of them, we had to do the same. We had to do what they did. They grabbed one of ours and they hurt them. So we had to do the same thing that they did... [*long pause*] To burn them alive. We took away what was useful for us, that is to say arms, munitions, shoes, boots and clothes. We took what we needed.<sup>718</sup>

For these teens, visions of sacrifice and victimhood were a stepping-stone to resistance and vengeance. Though such actions were not common, in describing how they occurred, he repeatedly referenced the GN’s abuses in order to rationalize the insurgents’ own brutal murders of enemy prisoners.

### **Massacre of the Well: Victim Identity, Blame and Resistance in Santa Cruz**

The community of Santa Cruz to the south of Estelí had been an early participant in the Christian movement led by Padre Julio and had a long trajectory of involvement with the FSLN. A guerrilla squadron had been formed in 1976 and numerous campesinos were arrested, tortured and even killed during the period of repression. Following the September insurrection, Santa Cruz hosted no less than three guerilla encampments in its territory with the active support and

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<sup>717</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-660, Horacio Briones, La Montañita, 1980

<sup>718</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-651. Don Santos, Las Labranzas, La Montañita, Estelí, 1980.

complicity of a large part of the local population. In the months between September and July, guerrilla leader El Segoviano from Santa Cruz, recalled that in his community:

There were 38 civilians killed by the Guard. Out of these 38, those who had some connection with us were very few... maybe five or six. The rest were innocent people. They killed a ton of people here who didn't have to die and they were murdered in the cruelest manner.<sup>719</sup>

The National Guard's most repudiated act of repression in Santa Cruz took place on March 9, when a large EEBI contingent arrived in pursuit of small number unarmed guerrillas hiding out near the valley of Buena Vista. When the guerrillas fled from the scene, the GN proceeded to capture 13 civilians, who were dragged to the location of the camp near an artesian well. Those detained included eleven members of the Girón and Lanuza families and two campesinos who had been cutting firewood in the forest nearby. A campesino from the community spotted the Guardias and tried to alert his family but found the house already empty. "I thought they all ran away," he said. "I didn't know they had them all up near the well. That's where they killed them."<sup>720</sup> His wife and four children between age three and 18 were among the dead. As in other cases, the GN interrogated the campesinos on the whereabouts of the guerrillas and again, their silence is emphasized by survivors. "Our slogan was that we had to die with our limbs ripped out or die torn apart by machine guns but to never tell them anything," Marco Orozco, a guerrilla from Santa Cruz, remarked. "We started to study the Bible and we decided it was better to die one and not die an entire community. So they denied everything."<sup>721</sup> The GN

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<sup>719</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-715.714.703, José del Carmen Araúz, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>720</sup> Interview CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-720, Julio Girón, Buena Vista, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>721</sup> CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-691.688, Marco Orozco Espinoza, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980.

beat their faces with tree branches, which were later found riddled with teeth and pieces of scalp.

A neighbor remembered seeing “almost 700 guards,” who:

...captured them at six in the morning and did what they wanted with them. They took earrings from the girls, little girls, four and six years old. They raped them and did horrendous things. I know this because a Guard who was captured in Matagalpa after this had happened told someone here from Buena Vista. ‘I was there,’ he said, ‘in the patrol and the chief told me to rape these two girls but I didn’t want to.’ They did horrible things and then they killed them.<sup>722</sup>

While her appeal to the direct testimony of a participant perhaps lacks veracity, the discovery of the children’s bloody underwear lent credence to these claims. Once they had sprayed the group with their machine guns, the thirteen corpses were dumped down the well on top of one another other. A cement washbasin was thrown atop their corpses and explosives detonated to destroy the evidence. Seventy-six -year-old Espectación Jirón, father and grandfather of many of the deceased reported that around seven in the morning they heard “loud blasts of machine guns and grenades for about eight minutes and around one in the afternoon we saw flames and smoke coming from the place they had taken the detained.”<sup>723</sup> The Guards left behind utensils, cans of food and other refuse when they marched down to the highway to return to Managua. To the surprise of locals, the Guardia released a communiqué that afternoon describing “a combat” with a “nest of insurgents” that left eleven guerrillas dead and no casualties among the GN.<sup>724</sup>

The experience of the massacre in Buena Vista differs from the case of La Montañita given the FSLN’s lack of a major presence in the area and the continued ambiguity as to who had

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<sup>722</sup> Interview A243, Isabel Moreno, Buena Vista, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>723</sup> Testimony, Espectación Jirón Cruz to Comisión Permanente de Derechos Humanos, April 10, 1979, cited in *Gaceta Sandinista*, no. 3-4, 1979, p. 36.

<sup>724</sup> *Gaceta Sandinista*, no. 3-4, 1979, p. 35.

alerted the GN. Community members remain adamant that there was “never was, never has been and never will be a guerrilla camp in Buena Vista” due to the limited tree cover and its easily accessible location. Rather, the guerrilla presence amounted to a handful of wounded muchachos without guns, munitions, food or medicine recovering under a nearby tree. The denunciation to the GN appears to have occurred after a family member of the victims brought a man from Managua—who claimed to be a revolutionary from El Salvador—to meet with the guerrillas. The decision to trust this individual and bring him to the village remains to a painfully divisive memory. Valentín Girón Lanuza, a brother of those killed emphasized that those who were killed:

...were not people who had gone to the *cursillos* and *seminarios*. They didn't really understand what was going on. There's a saying “*adonde va Vicente, va la gente*” (where Vicente goes, the others follow.) They didn't have the experience we had acquired from our work with the priests. We would never have let a man like this leave, we would've handed him over to the guerrillas. And they not only did they let him leave, they gave him the tiny amount of money they had so he could buy arms and medicine for the guerrillas. Instead, the massacre came. The guerrillas hid and fled, running away. There was no one here who could fight. I tell this story because I lived it and all of my people ended up in that well.<sup>725</sup>

Some in the community insist that origin of the denunciation was never discovered rather than risk igniting old passions and mutual recriminations.

Despite these ambiguities, the events were quickly assimilated into the wider narrative of revolutionary resistance. Catholic priest Agustín Torranzo was among those who arrived three days later to excavate the well and witnessed evidence of the shocking crimes. In his eulogy for the deceased, Torranzo shocked the 500 or so attendees, publicly identifying the National Guard as the guilty party and calling on the men to stand up for the population. “Those *huevos* you have

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<sup>725</sup> Interview A247, Valentín Girón Lanuza, Buena Vista, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 2010.

are not just to get women pregnant!” Torranzo is said to have told the crowd, using vulgar language. “But so you stand up for yourself and don’t let them kill us all like they killed these people”<sup>726</sup> Regardless of the exact words used by the priest, his widely-remembered appeal to masculinity served to transform the shocking gendered violence of the regime into part of a narrative of resistance. Numerous campesinos headed to the nearby guerrilla camps to volunteer to fight. The well in which the bodies were so crudely tossed by the Guardia was later converted into a tiny but dignified chapel. It lists the names of the 13 victims and is decorated in red and black, the colors of Sandinistas. The civilians murdered that day in March are identified as “heroes and martyrs,” murdered for their support of the Sandinista Revolution.

#### **“You’re Next”: The Mano Blanca and Community-as-Martyr, Condega**

Such massive acts of public violence carried out by infantry brigades, however, were a specific modality of counterinsurgency. We turn now to a far more targeted set of massacres that took place between the April insurrection and the guerrilla offensive in June 1979. The regime now targeted those in the regional towns, mere blocks from the National Guard barracks and under the cover of night. Unlike the counterinsurgent massacres elsewhere, the victims were not campesinos in isolated villages that could be raped, tortured and burned publicly by men in uniform. Instead, they were prominent families of the small-town middle class whose executions needed to be done secretly and with plausible deniability.

For such purposes, the OSN allegedly formed on a death squad known as the Mano Blanca (“White Hand”) to kill those families accused of helping the guerrillas. An EEBI soldier based in Estelí during this period explained that:

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<sup>726</sup> CNA.1<sup>a</sup>-691.688, Marco Orozco Espinoza, Santa Cruz, Estelí, 1980

The famous Mano Blanca were Guards from the Managua, from la Seguridad. If someone said that in a house there were Sandinistas, they came at night and boom. These Mano Blancas were people that were in jail for killings, rapes, robberies... all of the garbage that the Guard had in the La Modelo prison. They took them out to fight, organized them in this way so they could come and do this kind of thing... they knew that by giving this type of men weapons and letting them loose that they would be do terrible things.<sup>727</sup>

At times, they wore National Guard uniforms and in other cases they were given olive green fatigues and red and black bandanas in order to implicate the FSLN through “false flag” actions. In Estelí itself—practically empty following the April insurrection—these groups were blamed for the killings of Dr. Orlando Ochoa of the Red Cross, his wife Miriam and their young housekeeper, as well as the Ocampo, her husband Luis Manuel Mantilla and their young daughter.<sup>728</sup>

In Condega, the death squads focused their attacks against the González family, longtime opponents of the regime. This family, as discussed in previous chapters, had fielded the leaders of the civic movement against a corrupt mayor and later a number of the sons had joined the guerrilla army. In the period prior to the April insurrection, Aura Velia González and her sister Wilma had served as leaders of the Association of Women Confronting the National Problem (Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional, AMPRONAC), which organized resistance by the population against the regime of the kind we saw in the previous chapter. These women and their husbands—slaughterhouse employee and storeowner Juan Francisco Guillén and schoolteacher Julio Castillo—also served on the central committee of the United People’s

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<sup>727</sup> Interview, Anonymous, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>728</sup> Cabestrero, *No los separó la muerte*, 188; Hidalgo v. de Terán, *Crónicas de Estelí*, 202; Andrew Reding, “Central America: Some of the Truth, A Journey in Search of Context,” *Christianity & Crisis* 44, no. 18 (November 12, 1984).

Movement (Movimiento Pueblo Unido, MPU). Through these organizations, they coordinated first aid training and the storage of supplies in preparation for the guerilla attack in April. A friend of the González family recalled Aura Velia's passionate pleas explaining to them what they needed to do. "She told us that not only the men could fight," Rosa Zeledón remembered. "She told us to remember the disgusting things the Guard was doing. She gave us this information and also told us that we had to have to consciousness and join in the struggle. And that we women had to defend ourselves even if with rocks."<sup>729</sup>

In early February and April, the GN base in Condega was besieged by the guerrillas, while brothels and bars owned by Somocistas were destroyed and numerous orejas shot. Following the guerrillas' withdrawal, the GN tore apart the town searching houses for signs of collaboration with the insurgents.<sup>730</sup> When a buried stash of bomb-making material was discovered in a sack with the monogram JFG (the initials of Aura Velia's husband), Juan Guillén was captured and tortured.<sup>731</sup> By the first days of May, rumors began to circulate that the OSN agents had written up a hit list that included the González sisters and other prominent oppositionists. Given the widespread support for the guerrillas and the number of young people who had joined the guerrillas, many in the town feared that they too might be in the bulls-eye of the National Guard.

Following a shooting at a GN checkpoint on May 4, the Guard sent patrols to search the houses of the González sisters. When they found nothing, they returned to their base and an eerie

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<sup>729</sup> Interview CNA.1b -2, Rosa Zeledón, Barrio Mildred Centeno, Condega, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>730</sup> Rubén, "Evaluación..."; Estado Mayor "Informe de Rubén"

<sup>731</sup> Testimony, Luis Romeo González Almendárez, Trib. Esp. 5, Case 115, August 22, 1980, p. 64.



calm set over the town with the curfew beginning at sundown. At around 11 in the evening, the Guard's death squad headed to the home of Juan Guillén and Aura Velia. While Juan was beaten, the Guards demanded jewels and money from the couple and threatened their 11-year-old daughter Rebeca and an infant grandchild. Unbeknownst to the attackers, the couple's teenage sons, Eduardo and Uriel, were in their bedroom overhearing the attack. "I heard her say, 'Don't kill them, don't kill them,' with cries of despair," Uriel later testified. "The thugs said, 'Where are the jewels?' My mother told them where they were and again started saying, 'Don't kill them, don't kill them.'"<sup>732</sup> Eduardo, for his part, remembered hearing his mother "tell them to kill her but not to do anything to the others. The Guards told her to lie down on the floor. I heard a shout. It wasn't like a scream, but as though she was being drowned."<sup>733</sup> They heard their sister Rebeca cry out but her voice quickly fell silent as well. Once the death squad has departed, the sons emerged to find their mother and sister face down in a massive puddle of blood with their throats slit. Their infant niece was left behind crying in her crib. The boys' father, clutching his newborn granddaughter Carlita, had apparently been dragged from the house by the GN along with the looted goods. The two sons took off towards the hacienda of their grandparents to warn them of the murderous rampage.

From there, the Guards moved on to Vilma's home down the block, where she was gunned down along with her husband Julio Castillo. Their four-year old toddler Axel was shot in the cheek in her bed, leaving a piece of bone on the floor, while bullets missed the couple's two

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<sup>732</sup> Written Testimony, Uriel Guilen González, Trib. Esp. 5, Case 115, August 22, 1980, p 32.

<sup>733</sup> Testimony Eduardo Guillén González, Trib. Esp. 5, Case 115, August 22, 1980, p. 71.

other young children.<sup>734</sup> Castillo's corpse was tinsel with black and red typewriter ribbon, apparently in order to create the illusion that the crime had been carried out by the FSLN. Gun shells from a Garand, the GN's standard issue weapon, were also left on the floor.<sup>735</sup> By the time the GN reached the home of the women's father, Romeo González, he and his wife Lilliam had been warned and were able to escape. With no one to kill, they looted the farmhouse and set it on fire.<sup>736</sup> The following morning around dawn, the cadavers of Juan Guillén and his granddaughter were discovered several kilometers from the town, dumped along the road to Yalí, with signs of having been stabbed to death by bayonet.<sup>737</sup>

As with the narratives of the murders in La Montañita and Santa Cruz discussed above, the discovery of the families' remains featured prominently in local accounts. The bodies of Aura Velia and Rebeca were discovered by their 24-year-old housekeeper, Andrea Duarte, who arrived to work in the morning to find the bloody scene and the victims' faces "visibly imprinted with the macabre image of terror."<sup>738</sup> A family friend, Virginia Rivera, rushed to the house. She later wrote that that "it was a horrible image. We all started crying; I had never felt such a great sadness. In addition to grieving, I felt totally disoriented."<sup>739</sup> When the GN and local authorities arrived to recognize the bodies, she recalled a particular face among the group. "I'll never forget

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<sup>734</sup> *La Prensa*, May 4, 1979.

<sup>735</sup> Written Testimony, Lidia Ubau, Trib. Esp. 5, Case 115, August 22, 1980, p. 31; *La Prensa*, May 4, 1979.

<sup>736</sup> Written testimony, Luis Romeo González Almendárez, Trib. Esp. 5, Case 115, August 22, 1980, p. 33..

<sup>737</sup> Testimony, Trib. Esp. 3, Case 101, July 11, 1980, p. 5.

<sup>738</sup> *La Prensa*, May 4, 1979.

<sup>739</sup> Virginia Rivera de Moncada, "La Masacre de Condega," read in CNA.1A-11, Virginia Rivera, Estelí, 1980.

his cynical smile,” she wrote. “They looked at me with a mocking smile as if to say, ‘You’re next.’”<sup>740</sup> The Guardia ordered a rapid burial that no one in the town was permitted to attend.

For its part, the GN denied that a patrol had been in the area the previous night and blamed armed bands of criminals disguised as National Guards.<sup>741</sup> Attempts to shift blame were not successful, given that the residents were aware of the political positions taken by the murdered families. That the blame lay squarely with the National Guard was evident in the denunciatory tone of *La Prensa* which asked, “How could the Guard not hear the shots given how close they were? How was the vehicle of the murderers able to drive around with such freedom at such late hours?”<sup>742</sup>

The massacre of these two families definitively wedded the local population to the guerrilla army and a Sandinista identity. Shortly following the burial, the residents of Condega began fleeing and the town “remained completely empty as the murdered were highly esteemed by the population.”<sup>743</sup> There was a sense in which the town itself had been targeted and anyone who stayed behind risked being killed. A mass exodus estimated at 5,000 people from the area streamed across the border to Honduras while many of the young people headed to the mountains to join the guerrillas.<sup>744</sup> Each year since the events, the massacre has been commemorated by the town and is considered by many to be the foundational event in the town’s Sandinista identity.

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<sup>740</sup> Ibid.

<sup>741</sup> *La Prensa*, May 4, 1979.

<sup>742</sup> *La Prensa*, May 5, 1979

<sup>743</sup> Testimony, Trib. Esp. 3, Case 101, July 11, 1980, p. 5.

<sup>744</sup> *La Prensa*, May 6, 1979.

## **A Tale of Two Massacres: “False Flags” and Selective Memory in La Trinidad**

In La Trinidad, to the south of Estelí, the Mano Blanca is believed to have carried out the massacre of another family the following month. Here, however, the events would not have such a lasting impact on local popular memory or community identity. Unlike Condega, where the town’s leading citizens like the González family had gravitated towards Sandinismo, La Trinidad remained staunchly Somocista and had steered clear of activism overtaking Estelí. When local high school students took over the Instituto to prevent a party being held for Somocista diputado René Molina, local parents largely supported the Guard’s decision to remove them from the building.

When the Mano Blanca struck in this town, its primary target was the family of Padre José del Carmen Suazo, the Catholic priest who had helped to organize opposition to the regime in Somoto. Originally from Sutiaba in León, Padre Suazo brought his mother and sisters to live in La Trinidad, where he took his first job as a parish priest. His family stayed in the town after he had been transferred to Madriz. Though widely loved, Padre Suazo was arrested by the GN in early 1979 and accused of having provided food to the FSLN. Though protests by campesinos forced the Guardia to release him, Suazo and his family were now considered targets by the Guard. Padre Suazo’s sister-in-law spirited her eldest son away out of the country for a fear of retaliation and the priest’s other nephew was denounced by local informants for painting pro-FSLN graffiti in La Trinidad.<sup>745</sup>

On the evening of June 8, the Suazo family was celebrating the birthday of a close friend of 17-year-old Oscar Suazo, one of the Padre’s nephews. Unbeknownst to them, a van arrived

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<sup>745</sup> Interview A291, Blanca Rosa Castillo Díaz, La Trinidad, Estelí, 2010.

and dropped off a group soldiers in the town square, where they sat drinking and waiting for an opportune moment to strike. Following a knock on the door around eight o'clock, "the Guard came in and it killed everyone it found," remembered Blanca Rosa Castillo Díaz, the mother of a number of the victims. "They killed them because they were looking for Padre Suazo. When they couldn't find him, they killed the others. We didn't even know the Padre was with the Sandinistas," she explained, still astounded."<sup>746</sup>

Once inside the home, the Guard furiously beat the boy celebrating his birthday, before shooting him dead. Doña Blanca's teenage sons, Oscar and Pablo, and her 5-year-old, Saúl, were among those gunned down by the Guards. They then trained their weapons on the adults, shooting down Padre Suazo's 70-year-old mother, doña Rosita, and his sisters, Paz and Francisca. One of two survivors, 13-year-old Javier Suazo, recalled the words of resistance his brother offered to the attackers:

My brother told them that we were not going to die where they wanted us to. No, we would die in our own home. So they killed him. My brother told me, 'They've killed me.' He'd been hit by a bullet but he was still alive. He told me that if I survived, I had to become a [guerrilla] combatant. ...That I had to fulfill that promise. Then they shot my little brother. That was the most painful for me because he was only five years old. They shot him with a .45 with something like thirty bullets. In total, seven people died there. I saved myself by climbing into the bed. I don't know why, but I saw my salvation in the bed and while hiding there, four bullets came close to me. I hid myself between the bed and the wall. When they turned the lights out, I covered my arms with blood and lay on the floor so they thought I was [dead.] And they kicked my little sister. After that, they killed my aunt. She told them they could rob whatever they wanted, but to not kill the kids. They killed my mother, my father and my little grandma. Then my other aunt. And then they left. After that, I grabbed my little sister who was pouring blood and took her to my uncle's house and knocked on the door. We left that house and Guard arrived there to continue killing.<sup>747</sup>

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<sup>746</sup> Interview A291, Blanca Rosa Castillo Díaz, La Trinidad, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>747</sup> Interview CNA.1e-2, Javier Suazo, La Trinidad, Estelí, 1980.

Javier's testimony of the events contains many of the very forms of resistance and solidarity embedded in the other narratives of violence. Whether apocryphal or an actual dialogue, his oath to his dying brother to join the FSLN linked the massacre with participation in the uprising as in the other cases discussed above. Unlike those massacres, however, the Suazo's family's experiences were not grafted onto the town's collective memory.

As happened in the case of Condega, the Mano Blanca attempted to create the impression that the FSLN had been responsible for the killing, even spraying FSLN graffiti on the house. The news media promptly declared that "insurgents" had attempted to murder Padre Suazo and had decided instead to kill his family. In addition to the Suazos, the GN struck that evening against a number of other households. One young woman was raped before being killed and an evangelical pastor was shot dead. A young man from the Úbeda family was apparently tricked into leaving his hiding spot after the disguised Guards shouted the FSLN slogan "Patria Libre o Morir." He was killed with a grenade to his head.<sup>748</sup>

A number of town residents were so appalled by the Guardia's violence that they decided to take up arms against the Somoza dictatorship. The sitting Somocista mayor, Alcides Molina—in what was likely a unique case in Nicaragua—resigned his post and headed off to join the guerrillas in the attack against Estelí.<sup>749</sup> But it was not a simple causal relationship as seen elsewhere. By and large, though, the local population did not know how to process the massacre given that it contradicted the vision of Somocista political identity dominant in the town. While the memory of these events was emphasized by local FSLN leadership during the 1980s, today there

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<sup>748</sup> Interview A214, Martha Úbeda, Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>749</sup> Interview A289, Francisco Alcides Molina Miranda, La Trinidad, Estelí, 2010.

is neither a plaque marking the event nor an annual commemoration of the massacre.<sup>750</sup> Many in the town chose instead to embrace the “false flag” interpretation, laying blame for what had occurred at the feet of the hated Sandinistas who, they believed, had killed the family in a Machiavellian ploy to create martyrs and spark unrest in the towns. Unlike the death squad assassination in Condega, notions of martyrdom and fears of potential victimhood were not embraced by the town as a whole.

While interpretations blaming the FSLN convinced many in the town, it is interesting that none of the former National Guards interviewed for this project denied GN culpability. Unlike Somocista civilians with a stake in embracing misrepresentation, there was no cognitive dissonance for former Guardias in recognizing the OSN and the Mano Blanca as the perpetrators. A former soldier from San Lucas, asked for the responsible party, responded matter-of-factly, “The Guard and la Seguridad.”<sup>751</sup> Another National Guard soldier from La Trinidad stationed in Estelí even reported overhearing an oreja denounce the Suazo family and regretted that he had been unable to get word to the doña Rosita of the imminent attack.<sup>752</sup>

What is so intriguing about the silencing and misrepresentation of the events in La Trinidad is that another mass bloodletting which occurred a month later *does*—in fact—continue to draw the town’s condemnation. The day following the killing of the Suazos and the others, the FSLN began its final campaign to capture the city of Estelí. After a month of intense urban

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<sup>750</sup> Canuto Barreto, *Nicaragua desde Nicaragua* (Centro de Estudios Ecueménicos, 1984), 73.

<sup>751</sup> Interview B273, Anonymous, San Lucas, Madriz, 2010.

<sup>752</sup> Interview A93, Anonymous, La Trinidad, Estelí, 2010. That this soldier had protected innocent civilians in his hometown on other occasions was noted by the large number of letters and testimony on his behalf during his trial in 1980.

warfare, Estelí fell to the Sandinistas on July 16. Guerillas were sent to capture known orejas throughout the rural areas, including six from La Trinidad and two from nearby San Isidro in the department of Matagalpa. The alleged informants were taken to El Guasimal—the large hacienda once owned by Somocista leader Hector Mairena—and killed in retribution for the massacre of the Suazos. Among the group executed were a former mayor of La Trinidad, an owner of a gambling den and others identified as orejas. “They were all Somocistas, but they weren’t involved in anything,” insists one town resident. “They grabbed them from their homes, took them to El Guasimal and then killed them in the most sadistic of ways.”<sup>753</sup>

The guerrilla who stands accused in popular opinion of killing these suspected orejas was one of only a handful of young people from La Trinidad who joined in the struggle against the Somoza dictatorship. For his role in the death of these men, he remains ostracized by many of his fellow townspeople more than three decades later. “They blame me for executing the orejas,” he explained.

I was the one who captured them but I didn’t know they were going to shoot them.... And they shot all eight. That’s why these people hate me here. I *did* go and bring them there, but I swear I didn’t know they were going to kill them [*que los iban a palmar*].<sup>754</sup>

Unlike the forgotten massacre of the Suazos, the executions at El Guasimal were seen as the opening act of brutality of a Sandinista regime that the town would come to oppose. There is a striking parallel with the manner in which GN attacks in Condega and the other neighboring rural communities discussed above solidified a popular Sandinista identity. In all of these cases, the killings were carried out against civilian members of the community’s majority political

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<sup>753</sup> Interview.A297, Anonymous, La Trinidad, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>754</sup> Interview A295, Anonymous, La Trinidad, Estelí, 2010.



faction, apparently for the *mere “crime” of being members of that faction*. The generalized sense of fear and polarization of identities provoked by the attacks functioned in a similar way.

Likewise, the murder of the members of minority factions within towns and villages consistently vanished from popular memory.

La Trinidad strongly opposed the process of land reform that the FSLN carried out during the 1980s, which took land from many of the town’s leading patrons. Popular ire against the Sandinistas reached such an extent that La Trinidad gave aid to the military attempts to topple the Sandinista regime. During the 1980s, when the CIA-backed Contra forces—including many former National Guards—attacked in the area, they received material aid from the population of La Trinidad. This remained the case even as their forces marauded, destroying schools, health clinic and cooperative farms in the area. Upon the resumption of elections in 1990, La Trinidad has voted as consistently in favor of the Liberal Party, as Estelí and Condega have for the Sandinistas.

### **“Just for Fun”: Making Sense of the Senseless Along the Honduran Border**

The descriptions of counterinsurgent massacres have shown the underlying military logic to the use of mass terror: to dry out the proverbial sea in which the guerrilla combatants swam. Only July 16, the FSLN captured Estelí and in short order had killed the GN Comandante Vicente Zúñiga, the hated Cherry, and numerous jueces de mesta who had come to the base to fight alongside the regime. Hundreds of National Guards were captured, including the infamous torturer who had long terrorized the population.

At the eleventh hour of the battle in the city, a stream of Guardias had fled from the base towards the border with Honduras and abandoned the fight.<sup>755</sup> Having hunkered down within the GN base during a month of combat, they had developed a visceral hatred of the civilian population which they perceived as inherently hostile and a threat to their survival. En route to the border, this Guardia convoy marched through the cool mountainous coffee-growing region between the municipios of Pueblo Nuevo and San Juan de Limay—an incredibly secluded and quiet area of the department which had remained peaceful during the previous ten months of violent conflict.

Even there, the campesinos had heard over the radio that the regional capital of Estelí had fallen to the guerrillas. When the EEBI recruits, disguised in red and black bandanas, headed through the communities adjacent to the coffee plantations shouting “Patria Libre o Morir,” they were received with cheers. One of those who rushed to offer support was Zoraida Pérez, a schoolteacher who owned a small store in Laguna Negra near Comayagua. “Undoubtedly,” her uncle said, “she was using the store to supply the guerrillas because she had lists of the” locals who supported the guerrillas.<sup>756</sup> Upon the arrival of the “muchachos,” it is said that she gathered together those who had opposed the regime to offer them food and celebrate the victory. In accounts of the massacre’s origin, this *engaño* (trickery) of the schoolteacher figures prominently. Shortly thereafter, the GN proceeded to massacre a number of people in the area, including the schoolteacher.

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<sup>755</sup> Interview A216, Jaime Talavera Olivas, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>756</sup> Interview, CNA.IC-8, Carmen Castellón, San Juan de Limay, Estelí, 1980.

The fleeing Guards continued on to the area near the coffee plantations La Máquina and La Fraternidad. “My wife’s uncle was captured,” a man from Pueblo Nuevo recalled, “they took him prisoner and killed him in this same place, in La Máquina. There was a massacre of so many people. The Guards just started killing, they killed just for fun.”<sup>757</sup> Still posing as guerrillas, they called on all males from the area to join them in an attack against the GN base in Somoto. A man who was fifteen years old on that fateful day explained:

We campesinos couldn’t tell that we had been tricked because they put all the young Guards up front and the old men stayed behind. They came along tricking people and taking them with them...Whoever they found in the path that day: whether they were little boys or old men. From La Fraternidad, they grabbed all of those who were coming from work. They also grabbed a bunch of the kids who were walking around here with no shoes on. They said ‘Tell your wives to make some tortillas so you’ll have something to eat when you get back,’ but it was a lie.<sup>758</sup>

The campesinos from this area, as well as some from the town who were working at the plantations, joined in and soon found themselves hostages of the defeated National Guard. He continued his account, saying:

They told us, ‘We’re going to take you in groups of three to see if you know how to shoot a .22 [rifle].’... So groups of three went off, three by three, and we heard the shots. When we heard them shooting, we started to see that they were actually the Guardia. They came through with horses loaded with guns and now the old men came too. We saw it was the Guardia but we couldn’t escape. From there, they kept on taking us and taking us and taking us. Finally, it was the turn of my grandfather, my father and I... The Guard said, ‘Walk straight, don’t look around’... because the area was filled with the blood of those they were slaying. As we were walking, we saw them with their bayonets dripping blood; they seemed to just love slitting throats. We were walking and we couldn’t make any movements and we couldn’t say anything. They took off my father’s hat as he walked by... then came the first machine gun blast. I saw him fall to the ground. And they went on happily shooting their guns. When they got bored and left, my

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<sup>757</sup> Interview CNA.1C-64, Despacio Blandón Morales, La Ceibita, San Juan de Limay, Estelí, 1980.

<sup>758</sup> Interview A216, Anonymous, El Colorado, Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí, 2010.

father stood up. ‘You survived, my son?’ ‘I did. And you?’ ‘I’m fine.’ We walked to another ditch and saw that it was a hole in which my grandfather had fallen. He was taken from there and they went to kill him in San Francisco. They captured more people farther ahead, an uncle and a little 13-year-old boy. And they just kept going and going. Some people have asked me how many of them there were. Well, you could see the entire trail in both directions and all you could see was guns. Just for fun, they killed all those they got a hold of.<sup>759</sup>

How does this spasmodic violence of the regime’s final hour fit into the stories which local people wove to comprehend their victimization and define their identities? The experience of El Colorado is quite unlike the stories of the campesinos burned in their homes by the GN in La Montañita or dumped in the well of Buena Vista, in which victimhood could be conceptualized as acts of sacrifice and resistance through silence. As the war had already ended, there was no way to claim that the murders would be vindicated through the youth’s integration into the guerrilla.

Rather than the logic of warfare, the events in El Colorado were imbued with an otherworldly horror in their lack of an explanation. Many of the second- or third-hand accounts suggest that the murdered campesinos had “their throats slit and the Guards took their blood in bags to drink.”<sup>760</sup> Thus the “bloodthirsty” National Guard, became literal in the mythology swirling around their actions. In other accounts, the defeated GN killed the campesinos in order to cannibalize their corpses, given their starvation after the long weeks of siege in Estelí. “The Guards that were fleeing ate the campesinos,” one man recalled. “They ate them. They took off [their flesh] with knives and they ate them after roasting it. One campesino was able to save

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<sup>759</sup> Interview A216, Anonymous, El Colorado, Pueblo Nuevo, Estelí, 2010.

<sup>760</sup> Interview, CNA.1C-8, Carmen Castellón, San Juan de Limary, Estelí, 1980.

himself and he ran away.”<sup>761</sup> Such stories are never offered as witness accounts, but prefixed with the phrases such as “*según versiones*” (according to stories) or “*algunos dicen*” (some say). While perhaps not accurate descriptions of what occurred, these stories served to elevate metaphor into lived reality. Given the utter senselessness of the crimes, the population grasped for alternative explanations for the brutal treatment of innocent campesinos. The events did not simply fit into the narrative of the “struggling masses” allied with their “vanguard” being victimized in their attempts to topple the Somocista regime.

While the wanton murder carried out by the soldiers against the civilian population made little sense at the time. The killings politicized much of the local population through an anti-Somocista identity which over time was linked to the wider narrative. A large obelisk was erected alongside the dirt road in El Colorado memorializing the names of eighteen men and women executed by the National Guard during this final death march. This monument is the site of annual commemorations and outpourings of grief, and is pointedly decorated in a fresh coat of red and black in order to manifest the political nature of this victimhood. “Before that day, we didn’t have political ideas,” the daughter of one of the murdered men recalled, “but ever since then we have been with the Frente. We can never forget what they did to us.”<sup>762</sup> When former National Guards—now part of the Contras—began making attacks from Honduras in the 1980s, numerous campesinos from the area enlisted in the Sandinista Army to fight against those who they blamed for the death of their loved ones. In this way, the events were re-coded

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<sup>761</sup> Interview CNA.3<sup>a</sup>-43.44, Marcial Torruño, Somoto, Madriz, 1980.

<sup>762</sup> Interview, Anonymous, El Colorado, Estelí, 2010.

posthumously, linking the experience of those assassinated to a greater struggle in which very few of them chose to participate.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we focused on the experience of counterinsurgent massacres and violence as the crumbling Somoza regime struck out against those accused of supporting the FSLN. Rather than a simple equation, this violence took diverse forms in different places and times over the course of these final months. These included rural massacres by infantry brigades, death squad assassinations in the towns and the fitful explosions of vengeance as the GN fled the country. Given the diversity of previous histories in each of the communities, accounts of the terror took on various modalities from repudiation of the regime, active resistance or even outright amnesia. Though they do not find a place in the heroic narrative of the revolution and its history, these episodes of suffering were the paramount events of the period.

These narratives were described in such a detailed manner not only to depict the human rights abuses that have never been documented but also because these stories are vital to the political identities which emerged in their wake. Specific turns of phrase and tropes of survivors' testimonies are not obscure detail. In fact, what is emphasized or highlighted in these accounts clearly suggest the manner in which these tragic events were understood and projected onto visions of community. While a brief moments which occurring over a period of several months, these stories—recounted over and over again and passed between generations—form the bedrock of contemporary political visions and solidarities which exist to this day.

## **Conclusion.** **Conjuring Up the Spirits of the Past**

And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language... In like manner, the beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue.

– Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*<sup>763</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

On July 16, 1979 the guerrillas of the FSLN finally defeated the National Guard in Estelí. On that day alone, the guerrillas bombarded the GN barracks with a newly anointed Sandinista “Air Force” (a crop duster painted in red and black) and used an unmanned tractor to break down the walls of the military base. Both of these acts reflect the popular ingenuity which went into the struggle against the regime. The following day, a young guerrilla remembered, “We had a meeting in the city where they were telling us that Somoza was going to leave, but we had to finish off the Guardia and make a new army of campesinos, workers, students and honest intellectuals.” As they were speaking, word came over the radio of the dictator’s departure. “Somoza left.... Somoza left! He left! He left! He had left. I looked around and everyone was crying.”<sup>764</sup> The caretaker president would not last 48 hours in power and the city of Estelí again broke into delirium and celebration on July 19.

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<sup>763</sup> Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford University Press, 2000), 329.

<sup>764</sup> Interview CNA.1C-15.12, Anonymous, San Juan de Limay, 1980.

After so many months of warfare, the city was totally in ruins. “Estelí has nothing now,” Red Cross head Luis Irías Barreda told reporters from the *New York Times* as he surveyed the scene. “All business is gone, all the hospitals, schools and banks have been burned down and even our headquarters has been destroyed.”<sup>765</sup> Though accurate figures are not available, it has been estimated that 75,000 Nicaraguans lost their lives during the final two years of the Somoza regime and the insurrection. It was in the ruins left behind by the dictatorship that the Nicaraguan people would begin constructing their new future, always under the shadow of those whose lives were cut short by violence.

In this dissertation, I have emphasized the set of factors which led to the diverse pathways to political consciousness through the construction of “regions” of political identity. Rather than an “inevitable” process given the Sandinista legacy, even in the heartland of Augusto César Sandino, history played out in diverse forms and generated both rebellion and collaboration with the regime. Indeed, all of the historical actors in this dissertation were in one sense or another walking “in the footsteps of Sandino” given the numerous historical linkages and legacies of that earlier period throughout the region. Yet none of the participants in this drama were able to appropriate the complex collective memory of General Sandino in the straightforward manner which they desired. As Marx wrote in the epigraph above, it is precisely during moments of upheaval in which revolutionaries seeking to create a new world that they seize upon the “names, battle slogans and costumes” of the past.

Throughout this dissertation, we have observed the centrality of geographic space and locality in determining the way in which social conditions, political culture and military violence

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<sup>765</sup> *New York Times*, August 4, 1979.



were experienced. First, I examined the economic transformations that took place under the Somoza regime with the expansion of coffee, cattle and tobacco production for agro-export. The patterns of capitalist development mapped onto the geography of revolutionary mobilization and the resultant state terror in somewhat counterintuitive ways. Rather than a cliché of “deteriorating conditions” sparking upheaval, inequalities and uneven development were generated in the region producing stark differences in access to income, social services and opportunities. What this study showed is that inequality *within* regions gave credence to the Sandinista proclamations and garnered the guerrillas numerous supporters among wage laborers, sharecroppers and students. At the same time, the vast inequality *between* zones led many groups in the poorer areas to attach themselves as dependents in any way possible to the regime—whether through patronage or even military service.

The second factor on which I focused was the local articulations of political culture found in Nicaragua over the course of the Somoza regime as well as in the mobilization of the guerrilla army. The Somoza dictatorship has been treated in the literature as purely instrumental, serving the will of the single ruling family, the dominant agro-export elite or the Monroe Doctrine system of US supremacy. To understand the pathways of political action and behavior on the local level, we need to move beyond form and gain a better understanding of the cluster of symbols, meanings, experience and practices that made up local political culture. At its most basic level, we can delineate a patron-client or mafioso system in which employment and benefits (on the estates of Somoza-backed landowners or from the state itself) cascaded downward and outward across the physical and social space, creating alliances of factions on the local level which manipulated the control of resources in situations of inequality and scarcity. As

was mapped out, a network of relationships and “a way of doing things” via a semi-privatized state apparatus was varied in its attendant features. It was this system, particularly via the Liberal Party and National Guard, which drew many former Sandino supporters deeply into the Somocista system, providing individual mobility or mere survival at the expense the wider social collectivities. The forms taken by this culture of the state were not homogenous across the region and varied greatly according to the economic and social conditions reigning in a given locale.

The breakdown of this political culture was most pronounced where educated groups and urban workers were socially significant groups and where the middle and upper class were divided in their opinions of the regime. Even in these contexts, however, traditional political culture played an important role in guerrilla movement as factions and family groups excluded from corruption and power—often through the opposition Conservative Party and dissident groups within Somoza’s own Nationalist Liberal Party—formed the basis for the first networks of support for the guerrillas. The FSLN, struggling to mobilize supporters in the cities and countryside, drew on the traditional ideological power of the Catholic Church over the population. As a part of the hegemonic bloc, the Church was central in the introduction of new discourse, focused on “exploitation” and “inequality.”

Finally, the direct experience of violence in its spatialized forms was directly related to the production of political outcomes. Violence, I argue, needs to be analyzed not only as an effect of these underlying economic, social and cultural dynamics, but as a transformative factor which shifted local dynamics. At its essence, the Somoza regime was predicated on a monopoly of violence held by the National Guard, and created, trained and organized by the United States. But its use of violence was not uniform across time and space. In the wake of the massacres of

Sandinista and his supporters in 1934, violence against the population was greatly subdued until the 1960s and 1970s when new threats emerged to the dictatorship's power. The transformation of the National Guard with American assistance in the wake of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 placed a new emphasis on intelligence and counterinsurgency. These novel developments, rather than a constantly murderous orientation, would produce great acts of brutality which shocked the population.

This attention to violence and military strategy was likewise behind Estelí's important geographic location as an intermediate point between the capital city, the mountainous bases of the guerrillas and northern border with Honduras. The massive repression of 1978-1979 in the cities and semi-urban areas, analyzed here in depth, provoked a total realignment of the population of the Estelí-Condega arc into the guerrilla movement. At the same time, an emphasis on the tyranny of the regime, led the FSLN to shift from a class-based movement to a cross-class movement to bring an end to mass slaughter and overthrow the Somoza regime. Brutal murders of entire families perceived as "community outsiders" effectively quieted rebellion while massacres in the localities identified with the guerrillas, such violence solidified Sandinista identities and provoked further upheaval.

### **Postscript: After the Fall**

The decade that followed the defeat of Somoza was marked by a series of events which evolved directly from the very dynamics underway in the process of revolution. In the early years of the Sandinista regime, they set about putting their Historic Program into practice. A massive National Literacy Crusade was carried out, sending idealistic high school students to live in the countryside for several months to teach people to read. In a less than a year the

illiteracy rate was reduced from 50 to 13 percent of the population. Schools were established on a scale previously unheard of and a reconstruction plan for economic development put into place. Health care was rapidly expanded, with an emphasis on preventative medicine as series of vaccination campaigns against traditionally common diseases. The infant mortality was drastically lowered thanks to these initiatives and Nicaragua was considered a model for the developing world.

The lands and properties of the Somocista landowners was confiscated and turned over to the campesinos as cooperatives that were offered ample credit through the state. The mansion of René Molina, looted and burnt by protesters in 1978 was now confiscated and turned into a cultural center, as was the former National Guard base and torture center in Condega. There was genuine popular enthusiasm for these projects and the CDCs which had played such an integral role in the revolution were now baptized CDS, the *Comités de Defensa Sandinista*. Rather than mass executions of former National Guards, the death penalty was abolished and trials held for those accused of having participated in the repression.

Estelí was celebrated for its revolutionary heritage and emerged as one of the most passionately pro-Sandinista cities, with much of the town engaged with the various tasks of the revolution. Each year, the population pours into the streets to celebrate the triumph of the insurrection and to mourn the countless young people lost in the struggle. Somoto, which had remained largely Somocista until the end, now “added a black patch to their red [Liberal] flags” and “woke up as Sandinistas on July 20,” as popular quips had it. A number of the villages in the region, however, had few adult men as they had been jailed for serving in the GN or fled across the northern border.

The new revolutionary regime, however, was not given much of a respite and soon was fighting its own counterinsurgency against a guerrilla force directed by the CIA from US military bases in Honduras. Though it began as raids by former member of the GN, over time the conflict developed into a genuine civil war as campesinos were recruited through fear, monetary incentives and the same ideological anti-communism of the Somoza period. Carrying out terror attacks against school, health clinics and cooperative farms, the Contras bled the Nicaraguan economy and forced the Sandinista government to dedicate more than half of its annual budget to military defense. In addition, an American trade embargo and diplomatic pressure damaged the country as time went on. The economy crumbled, inflation ran rampant, rationing was instituted and the early hopes for social progress were dashed.

Most damaging, however, was the compulsory military service that the Sandinista government was forced to instate which infuriated many who saw their sons sent to die at the front. The mystique of revolutionary fervor was now supplanted by the state coercion as the Nicaraguan army grew into the largest in Central America. In the 1980s, this new conflict would claim an additional 25,000 lives between Contras, soldiers from the Sandinista Army and civilians. When the Nicaraguans voted the Sandinistas out of office in 1990, the primary issue on their minds was ending the bloodshed of the Contra war.

The great irony of the revolutionary decade of the 1980s was that the very factors which had permitted the Sandinistas to succeed were the ones that now created this wave of challenges. The decision of US President Jimmy Carter to withdraw support from the Somoza regime which allowed his defeat now found its obverse in Ronald Reagan who gave ample aid to the Contra rebels, even when the US Congress attempted to block this help due to human rights concerns.

The mistakes of the Sandinistas in power—of which there were many—pale in comparison to the grave national threat created by the Contra war.

The essentially urban nature of the insurrections meant that the FSLN was able to defeat the GN firepower in the cities of the Pacific primary without the help of the majority of the country's population. While the regime fell somewhat quickly following this decision to openly confront its force, much of the rural population remained untouched by the upheaval and unclear about the revolutionary cause. It was from these distant geographic locales along the agrarian frontier and border with Honduras—exactly where Sandino had battled the US occupation—that the Contra forces now recruited many disgruntled campesinos with both coercion and material incentives. In addition, the lack of campesino participation in the revolution led the FSLN to implement economic plans which privileged the interests of the cities over those of the campo. With little input from smallholder campesinos, the Sandinistas' land reform aimed initially at building of large cooperatives, out of line with campesino aspirations for land ownership. The traditional patron-client relations on which the Somoza regime had relied, were now utilized to mobilize entire rural communities in favor of the Contras.

Likewise, the role that the Catholic religion played in legitimizing the Sandinista struggle came back to haunt them as Vatican-aligned hierarchy strongly opposed the new “communist” government. The decision of the FSLN to abandon its anticlerical approach and wrap their message in the traditionally hegemonic authority of the Church had been a boon to the revolutionary movement. When the new government attempted radical social change, the Church hierarchy quickly returned to their traditional role in favor of the status quo. Many later gave their support behind the counterrevolution which, given their continued pull over the Nicaraguan

public, diminished popular support. Radical interpretations vanished over the course of the 1980s as the situation polarized. The 1983 visit of the Pope to Managua marked the definitive breaking point between revolutionary Christianity and the Catholic faith as such.

Finally, the indiscriminate violence of the Somoza dictatorship had permitted the revolutionaries to construct a mass coalition which only agreed on the departure of Somoza (“*Después de Somoza, cualquier cosa*”). Following the Revolution, the private sector and local elites that had supported the revolution were increasingly alienated from the regime and would throw their support behind the counterrevolution. This lack of a clear political or social analysis on the part of many of those who joined in the rapid toppling of the Ancien Régime made it difficult to extirpate the Somocista legacies and mentalities which remained. Overtime, a clientelistic vision of power and mobilization was instituted in revolutionary garb, with many old habits reemerging under the FSLN. The integration of many former orejas and jueces de mesta into the structures of Sandinista Defense Committees as well as the adoption of the OSN’s forms of spying on neighbors and denunciation bred further cynicism. And while a commitment to high moral standing was cheered during the 1980s, when the Sandinistas were voted from power in 1990, these ethics were jettisoned practically overnight. A number of top FSLN officials quickly privatized public companies into their own names and emerged as a new class of Sandinista capitalists. This laid the groundwork for the form of neo-Sandinismo which exists today.

By the time FSLN leader Daniel Ortega returned to the presidency in 2006, he ran on a very different platform than the FSLN of the 1980s—let alone the social revolution the Sandinistas promised as guerrillas. His electoral coalition included business elites, former Contras, Somocistas and members of the Catholic hierarchy who had denounced the revolution.

Though slogans celebrating “the poor” and “the people” were still used, radical change was completely off the table. Never before has the adage of history repeating itself as farce and tragedy been more apropos. In 2011, after changing the provisions barring reelection in the Constitution the Sandinistas had written in 1986, Ortega was overwhelmingly returned to power for a second term. In Estelí (La Trinidad aside) and all of Madriz, the population voted massively in support of Daniel Ortega’s neo-Sandinista government, which much more closely mimicked the populist patronage, popular Catholic religiosity and caudillismo of the pre-revolutionary era. The FSLN party membership card was now required for state employment mirroring la Magnífica in the time of Somoza. Business contracts and foreign aid were systematically distributed out to loyal allies and family members of the Ortega regime. Although there are huge differences between Ortega’s government and the military regime of the Somoza, the parallels in other aspects are quite visible.

Though most remain loyal Sandinistas to this day, those Nicaraguans who participated, were tortured and lost family members in the 1970s, have seen little change in their life chances since that time. The vast majority of those interviewed for this project continue to live in intense poverty. In many towns, these families are far removed from the wealth and power monopolized by Sandinista party cadres (including onetime Somocistas) who have captured the state apparatus for personal interests. These social conditions are true of the former National Guards as well as of the Contras used as cannon fodder in 1980s by the superpower simply to assure Nicaragua return to anonymity. All of these men and women deserved—and continue to deserve—a better future and a chance “to be treated as human beings.”



And yet despite all of these setbacks and missed pathways, the memory of Sandinista Revolution remains what Sandino's legacy once was: a slowly-fading subterranean vision of collective action and solidarity still embedded unknowingly within everyday life. Forged through labor unions, student activism, Catholic cursillos, Civilian Defense Committees, guerrilla encampments, literacy campaigns and land reforms, the fundamental truths of social justice, human rights and the equality of the shared tortilla remain quietly vibrant in thousands of daily interactions. Even if the FSLN leadership has long since jettisoned such a worldview, the Revolution continues to profoundly shape the experiences, visions and analytic tools even to those who would never identify as Sandinistas. Like the memory of Sandino decades after his passing, the Revolution's heritage can be utilized for any of a range of possibilities, both marvelous and noxious.

For every action of corruption and clientelism so reminiscent of the dark days of the Somoza regime, there are sometimes less apparent counteractions. These legacies are found not in the heights of Sandinista political party but in the mutual aid of neighborhoods for their less fortunate members, workers that stand up for their rights, communities that fight for social services and grassroots cooperatives that provide for their members and their families. They are present in the persistent national pride and identity found in the celebration of cultures once seemingly destined to obliteration. They are in the dignity of the Mothers of the Heroes and Martyrs who maintain a humble museum in Estelí featuring the photographs, uniforms and personal relics of those children who lost their lives toppling the dictatorship or defending the country from foreign intervention. The Nicaraguan people have an incredibly rich reservoir of experiences to draw upon as they continue their search for solutions to the myriad injustices and

inequalities in which they find themselves. They will continue on in the footsteps of all those who lost their lives far too early in the hurricane of violence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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