

THE STORIES



OF THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION

Denis Lynn Daly Heyck

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Preface

The purpose of this work is to illuminate the experience of the Nicaraguan people during the Sandinista Revolution. This book is not an analysis of the clash of social or political forces, nor is it an apology for, or a denunciation of, the Sandinista government. Rather, it is a portrayal of the *human* dimension of the current conflict, of what it is like to be alive in Nicaragua today.

The United States, for better or worse, has chosen to intrude in the Nicaraguan revolutionary process. It follows from this fact that we North Americans ought to do what we can to understand the situation more fully, for the assertion of power carries heavy responsibility. Yet polls as late as August 1988 indicated that the majority of U. S. citizens surveyed thought that their government was supporting a democratic regime in Nicaragua against communist rebels.¹ Human lives hang in the balance of our ignorance.

There are many aspects to the Nicaraguan problem, some of which already have been widely discussed in books and articles, the global or strategic; the ideological; the economic; the historical; the military and the combat experience; the social and cultural, including the role of religion, the status of women, the place of poetry and the promotion of the arts, for example. This book seeks to communicate the *human* dimension; hence it allows the Nicaraguan people to tell their own story in a collective autobiography, a mosaic of hope and fear, triumph and tragedy.

Most of these life stories were collected in a series of conversations in Nicaragua during the summer and fall of 1987, while a few were gathered in the United States as early as 1986 and as late as 1988. Everyone with whom I spoke expressed him or herself freely. As will be obvious, no one felt any hesitation about talking candidly to me, just as they speak openly and with great animation to each other. Nicaragua is known as a nation of poets. Certainly nearly everyone I spoke with was highly verbal and articulate, whether they were formally educated or not.

I have chosen to group the stories that follow into three categories, political lives, religious lives, and survivors' lives, according to what emerged as the most basic value in each person's life, the wellspring of their thoughts and actions. Every life story has many themes. But the one that has strongest claim to authenticity is a person's *own* perception. What is presented here is each individual's sense of his or her story as it has unfolded during the Somoza regime and the Sandinista Revolution.

It was sometimes difficult to classify people as *either* religious *or* political, rather than *both/and*, for in Nicaragua today these categories are by no means mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are overlapping designations that reflect the fluid and complex reality of life. What was *not* difficult was to recognize the power of these two overarching values for the majority of the people with whom I came into contact.

As for the third category, survivors, it is intended to suggest the large number of people for whom the entire revolutionary experience has meant principally dealing with a new situation not of their making, like it or not. Some are coping by leaving; others, by staying; some, by criticizing; some, by supporting; others, by accommodating themselves to the new order. The people in this group are, above all, realists. For them, political and religious considerations, though very important, take a back seat to practical matters.

Any revolution is the conjunction of thousands upon thousands of individual biographies. This was never more the case than in the Sandinista Revolution, because although not everyone was involved in the revolutionary effort or in the later opposition to it, everyone in Nicaragua *has* been deeply affected by it. Further, everyone is coping with this revolution and the factors, internal and external, that are complicating and altering it.

This process does not impinge upon the lives of politicians and soliders alone. Far from it. Rather, the Revolution affects daily the lives of grandmothers and schoolchildren, comandantes and campesinos, business professionals and woodcutters, poets and cleaning women, clergy and bartenders. This complex, hamstrung revolution forceably intrudes into every home, demanding adjustments to existing world views, raising questions about individual and collective identity, and complicating the everyday chores of family maintenance so they become almost impossible to complete. The biographies here included, like those of the Nicaraguan people as a whole, form a kind of multi-layered collage intended to convey the powerful impact of such a dramatically altered reality.

The strategy underlying this book is very simple: to let as many people as possible, high and low, rich and poor, young and old, powerful and powerless, tell their own story in their own words. What readers will find here is a diverse collection of autobiographies that together reflect the Nicaraguan experience from the inside, as it has been lived and felt. These histories express vividly the bitter divisions within families; the intense heat of the political and religious controversies now raging; the constant uprooting of the people as they move like bedouins from one place to another; the crushing psychological stress of living under conditions of great danger and scarcity. Yet, the stories also tell of the deep and abiding religious faith of the people; their astonishing courage and forbearance; their inventiveness in adversity; their generosity in sharing meager resources; and, above all, their overwhelming manifestations of the power of love and hope.

Introduction

These Nicaraguan experiences of revolution, like all others, have occurred in a specific cultural setting and in a particular historical moment. The individuals whose stories follow naturally refer to people and events that are part of their everyday consciousness but are foreign to us. Some remarks about this context are necessary to understand and appreciate more fully the biographies that follow.

Land and People

The renowned poet Ernesto Cardenal recently described Nicaragua in these idealized terms:

Now we can already see the Masaya Volcano
and its smoke
rising from the crater, and the Masaya Lagoon, green,
further on, the Apoyo Lagoon, very blue,
the Sierra Mountains and the mountain ranges, sky-blue
out to the distance, the truth is
that our land is sky-blue,
still further on, you see it? The Pacific,
almost pure blue under the sky,
the truth is that we're in heaven and don't know it. . . .

In fact, Nicaragua is a hot, wet, extremely poor and beautiful tropical country about the size of North Carolina. It is the largest (57,000 sq. mi.) and the most sparsely populated (2.9 million) of the Central American republics. Nicaragua is separated from Honduras to the north by the Río Coco and from Costa Rica to the south by the Río San Juan. It is a land of unpredictable natural phenomena that have periodically rained destruction in the form of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, floods, and, in 1988, hurricanes. The varied topography of the country boasts lush tropical jungles, steamy coastal lowlands, high rugged mountains, majestic volcanoes, and brilliant blue lakes, the latter suggested by the indigenous name Nicaragua, meaning "place of much water." However, unrestrained use of pesticides and heedless deforestation have created serious environmental problems in what was once a natural tropical paradise.

Traditionally, Nicaragua has produced raw materials for export to Europe and the United States. Major industries are the cultivation of coffee, cotton, bananas, and sugarcane in the fertile western and northwestern portions, or Pacific region; cattle-raising and more coffee production in most of the central region; and gold mining, shellfish production, and the cutting of mahogany, ebony and other precious woods from the forests along the eastern, or Atlantic, coast. Lobstering and the extraction of

coconut oil are the economic mainstays of the tiny Corn Islands in the Caribbean. The coastal economy typically has had no linkage with the rest of the country. Its forests and gold were exported to foreign markets in Europe and the United States. In fact, the isolation of the east coast is such that it is easier to get to the coastal city of Bluefields from New Orleans than from Managua.

The ethnic composition of the population is roughly 69 percent mestizo, or mixed Indian and Spanish descent; 17 percent Caucasian, made up mostly of pure Spanish and some European immigrant families, especially German; 9 percent black; and 5 percent Indian. As in most Latin American countries, the Spanish and other Europeans have long formed the upper classes. Of the ethnic minorities, the Miskitu are the largest (67,000), followed by the Afro-Caribbeans (26,000), the Sumu (5,000), the Afro-Amerindian Garífuna (1,500), and the Rama Indians (600).² These minority groups traditionally have had more to do with the English and North Americans than with other Nicaraguans, and they have held on to their ethnic traditions and sense of separateness. The mestizo side of the country, for its part, has evolved in ignorance of the Caribbean peoples and their ways. The demographics of Nicaragua's ethnic groups are noticeably skewed. About 90 percent of the population, the mestizos and Caucasians, live on the Pacific side of the country, while only about 10 percent, the blacks and the Indians, spread themselves very thinly along the Atlantic Coast.

Spanish is the official language of Nicaragua, but English is widely spoken among the black population on the Caribbean side, as is Garífuna, the dialect of the Black Caribs, while the dominant Indian dialects are Miskitu, Sumu, and Rama.

The vast majority of Nicaraguans are Roman Catholic, about 90 percent, although evangelical Protestant groups are rapidly gaining converts throughout the country. Along the Atlantic Coast, the Moravian and the Anglican churches have historically been very strong. Wherever they live, however, Nicaraguans are a profoundly religious people. It is not an exaggeration to say that nearly everyone, at some time in their lives, has had an important engagement with religion. Some have fallen away because of a negative encounter, while others have become religious revolutionaries, and still others have become defenders of the traditional church; but hardly anyone has escaped the experience.

This observation may seem unusual to many North Americans, because while we can readily appreciate economic, historical, and cultural particularities, we cannot so easily identify with a spiritual difference that goes beyond these structures to define basic world views. The fact is that in Nicaragua religion is an integral part of people's daily lives, from church-sponsored social activities to the sacraments themselves, and not just something that happens in church on Sunday. Nicaraguans enjoy a remarkably inti-

mate, personal relationship with Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and all the saints, whom the faithful address with great familiarity and affection in their festivals and prayers.

Nearly every day some village in Nicaragua holds a procession in honor of its patron saint. Such religious festivals focus the social life for the entire village. It is here that people meet, celebrate, forget their troubles, renew relationships, and feel one with their community. It is not for nothing that the church occupies a central spot in the town square. The largest and most festive celebration of the year is La Purísima, the feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. It is celebrated with fireworks, flares, explosions, floats, dancing in the streets, and gift-giving as costumed youngsters go in search of treats and candy. The veneration of Mary, mother of Christ, is an integral part of the Nicaraguans' popular Catholicism. Theirs is a belief system rooted in the experience of the campesino, for whom Mary is the one who understands all pain, having endured the loss of her son. The strength of their religious beliefs has been a principal source of the stoic persistence and the victory over despair that have characterized the Nicaraguan people in their long history of struggle.

Officially, the population of Nicaragua is classified as about 60 percent urban, though constant migration both to and from urban areas, and recent massive government relocation efforts have made any authoritative "urban" designation impossible. In any event, *culturally* Nicaragua is a country of campesinos, wherever they may at present reside. The capital city of Managua and the traditional rivals León and Granada are the main centers of political and cultural leadership in the country.

Managua, home now to roughly one-third of the country's population, has swelled to bursting, as unplanned for and unwelcome migrants, nearly all of them poor, continue to arrive in droves. The city is grossly incapable of accommodating its burgeoning population, now about one million, as is clearly seen in the hastily erected, ephemeral and ever-present wooden shanties, and in the pirated power lines, whose overload accounts for frequent blackouts. Most of the newer residents are campesinos who were either evicted during the land-grabbing of the Somoza elite beginning in the 1950s, uprooted by the earthquake in 1972, or made homeless by the upheavals of the 1979 revolution and the subsequent contra war. The city itself is a bizarre monument to the forces of natural and human destruction. With its gutted buildings, vacant lots, and piles of rubble, Managua is a silent reminder of the earthquake and of Tachito Somoza's corruption in siphoning off international funds intended for rebuilding and relief.

Nicaraguan History to 1936

Beginning in 1520 when the Spanish pushed south from Mexico to conquer Central America and to found in 1524 the colonial cities of León

and Granada, Nicaragua's history has been one of exploitation of people and natural resources by imperial powers, Spain, England, the United States, and by local elites. The other side of the coin has been the story of the Nicaraguans' recurring struggle to regain or establish local autonomy. Nicaragua's importance on the world stage may be measured by the value to others of its strategic location and natural treasures. The most attractive feature has been the country's potential as a site for a transoceanic waterway, which was for most of the nineteenth century the focus of U.S. interest. Even after Panama was selected as the canal site, the U.S. jealously guarded Nicaragua from other powers eager to carve out a canal of their own. As for strategic considerations, these became more important as the U.S. had more commercial interests to protect in the area, including the Panama Canal, and as the cold war and rivalry between the superpowers has intensified in recent years.

A member of the Central American Federation, which declared independence from Spain in 1821, Nicaragua did not become an autonomous republic until 1838. This autonomy was short-lived however, for in 1855 the filibusterer William Walker, a North American adventurer invited to Nicaragua to defend the liberals of León against the conservatives of Granada, declared himself president of Nicaragua, reintroduced slavery, decreed English as the national language, and managed to hold on for two full years before being deposed. Meanwhile, what little economic development occurred was directed by entrepreneur Cornelius Vanderbilt, who operated a lucrative steamship line for transporting California-bound goods and people across the Nicaraguan short-cut, and who envisioned a Nicaraguan paradise for private capitalists investing in transportation and extractive industries.

As the roles of Walker and Vanderbilt demonstrate, Nicaragua's history from the 1820s on can hardly be considered without frequent reference to the United States. Beginning with the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the U.S. challenged British preeminence in the region and, by 1900, effectively controlled Nicaraguan political and economic life. Thus, Walker and Vanderbilt represent not isolated examples but the dominant pattern of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations—the combination of the stick and the dollar to secure the strategic and commercial interests of the “natural protector” of Central America.

Such a policy was not to go unchallenged, however, for many Nicaraguan leaders have resisted the roughshod treatment by their neighbors to the north. The first of these was the strongly nationalist dictator José Santos Zelaya, who came to power in 1893 determined to develop his backward country by whatever means necessary and to promote a Central American Federation with himself at its head. Ruthless and shrewd in his drive to modernize Nicaragua, Zelaya's ambition and nationalism ran head

on into North American dreams of manifest destiny, and U.S. troops were sent to overthrow him in 1909. This was the first occupation of Nicaragua by U.S. Marines, who returned in 1912 to quell an uprising by the liberal Benjamin Zeledón against a U.S.-backed conservative government, and who remained until 1925 to keep order.

Order was fleeting, however, and the marines returned again in 1926 to “mediate” in a civil war between the United States’ friend Emiliano Chamorro and deposed Vice-President Juan B. Sacasa, who was supported by the army under General José María Moncada. This time the marines stayed until 1933, training a native National Guard as a more efficient, less costly, and less unpopular (in the U.S.) way to maintain calm than sending U.S. forces, and to serve as a bulwark against the “bolshevik” influence from Nicaragua’s revolutionary neighbor to the north, Mexico. Twenty years of military occupation were enough to install baseball as the national sport of Nicaragua, but not enough to extinguish completely the embers of nationalist sentiment, for one of Gen. Moncada’s officers refused to lay down his arms, Augusto César Sandino.³

Though Moncada became president in 1928, followed by Juan Sacasa in 1932 in U.S.-sponsored elections, both men faded in importance beside the diminutive guerrilla leader Sandino, who swore never to cease fighting until the last marine had left his homeland. His rallying cry, “*Patria libre o morir*,” “Free homeland or death,” is still the motto of the Sandinistas today. In 1927, the U.S. found itself involved in the first guerrilla war in Latin America. Sandino took to the rugged mountains with a band of about 400 followers, where despite the 4,000 marines that President Coolidge sent after him, and despite savage aerial bombings, he fought the marines *and* the National Guard to a standstill. Sandino eluded and confounded his pursuers for six years, earning for himself the status of hero in the eyes of Latin Americans from Mexico to Argentina. Though the marines could never find *him*, Sandino knew *their* locations; he took pride in getting close enough to enemy encampments to take photographs, which he then sent on to marine headquarters with mocking messages.

Sandino was no campesino. He was raised in a wealthy home in an environment of books and classical music. As a young man, he worked for Standard Fruit and U.S. mining companies in various Central American countries and developed an anti-imperialist spirit as a result of the experience. He saw himself as the agent of a new Nicaragua, free of foreign domination, which he vowed to achieve. He was adored by the peasant population, who composed songs and poems in his honor, and who warmly received his troops, generously offering them food, lodging, and protection. Sandino seems genuinely to have respected the rights of the common people and required his followers to do likewise.

In contrast, the local populations offered no help at all to the marines,

partly because the ordinary Nicaraguans were loyal to Sandino, partly because the overwhelming presence of so many invaders increased anti-Yankee resentment, and partly because of the contempt with which the marines regarded the campesinos. Repeated reports of marine atrocities, torture, rape, maiming and unchecked depredations upon the civilian population began to filter back to the U.S. public. Though perhaps exaggerated, these reports reflected a basic truth.

These reports could neither be ignored nor explained away, and the U.S. war against Sandino became very unpopular at home, spurring President Hoover to speed up the replacement of U.S. Marines with a native National Guard. The right kind of National Guard would take the heat off the U.S. while also protecting its interests. The careful selection of the enthusiastically pro-U.S. Anastasio (Tacho) Somoza to head the Guard, and the naming of officers from elite families partial to the status quo, assured that the Guard, while appearing to be merely a national peace-keeping institution, would actually function as the military guarantor of U.S. interests in Nicaragua, a kind of wolf in another wolf's clothing.⁴

While this process was occurring, Sandino continued fighting until the last marine left in 1933. Then, as he had promised, he put down his arms, entered Managua to a hero's welcome, and began to work amicably with the government of Sacasa. Somoza, however, was the real power, and he wanted Sandino out of the way. Sandino was promised amnesty, but he was the victim of a double-cross. Somoza's men picked him up as he left a dinner at the National Palace, took him to an empty field, and machine-gunned him to death.

The Somoza Dynasty (1936-1979)

Sandino was murdered in 1934, less than a year after the inauguration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his Good Neighbor Policy. When F.D.R. was informed by his advisors that Somoza was a "sonofabitch," the president reportedly responded, "Yes, but he's *our* sonofabitch," reaffirming once more U.S. priorities in Nicaragua. Somoza became president in name as well as in fact in 1936 after a coup against Sacasa, thereby ushering in the longest and most corrupt tyranny, 43 years, in Latin American history.

A former used-car salesman in Philadelphia who often preferred American slang to Spanish, Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza García, also known as "El Yanqui" for his admiration of the United States, secured entry into his country's elite through marriage to the niece of President Sacasa. But it was his blessing by the U.S. that granted him undisputed control of the National Guard, the indispensable pillar of his reign. The highest offices of the Guard were always kept within the family. This total control allowed

Somoza to run the country like a medieval fief, enriching himself beyond the dreams of avarice, "*Nicaragua es mi finca*," "Nicaragua is my farm," he was fond of saying.

The Somoza dynasty's power depended on the support of the U.S. and the unwavering loyalty of the National Guard. Members were recruited, not drafted, from poor rural areas where opportunities were few, the illiteracy rate among the rank-and-file was over 50 percent, while the officers tended to come from the middle and lower-middle strata. Commissions were often passed from father to son, for membership brought bountiful benefits if one demonstrated loyalty to the Somozas: rapid advancement and a share in the institutionalized graft. In addition, separate schools, medical facilities, shopping and residential areas numbered among the perquisites set aside for Guard members and their families.

The Guard was universally despised by the populace for its corruption and cruelty. Despite the best efforts of U.S. advisors and many years of training, the Guard never developed a professional attitude. Rather, it always remained the personal instrument of the Somozas' will. Through a twisted code of loyalty expressed in acts of intimidation, extortion, torture, and murder, the Guard provided the muscle to back up the complex network of relationships and favors that extended into the farthest reaches of the commercial and political arenas as well. A combination of obligations and rewards made key elements in the military, civilian, business, and government sectors completely beholden to the Somozas, to the extent that not only their well-being but their very *fate* depended on the family's fortunes. And these fortunes, for a surprising number of years, soared.

When the first Somoza took power in 1936 he owned one dilapidated coffee plantation. By 1978 however, through the systematic elimination of competition and the use of government funds and foreign loans as sources of personal enrichment, the family's wealth rose to an estimated \$500 million. Foreign holdings included shares in U.S. Steel and real estate in Florida and California, among other places. In Nicaragua and other Central American countries, the Somozas owned vast agricultural estates, including roughly 30 percent of the arable land in Nicaragua; industrial enterprises, such as cement production and textiles; construction materials; processing industries in dairy, meatpacking, fishing, and refining; communications enterprises, such as newspapers, radio stations, and the country's only TV station; transportation industries, including airlines, shipping, and ports; these were only some of the items that swelled the family's bank accounts.⁵

From 1936 until his assassination in 1956 by the poet Rigoberto Pérez López, Anastasio Somoza ruled supreme because the Guard was available to crush revolts, the U.S. unreservedly backed his regime, the bourgeois opposition was either silenced, bought off, or coopted by sham elections,

and the populace was unorganized and intimidated. On the old man's death, the elder, more clever son Luis assumed the presidency (1956-67), and the younger, more ruthless son Anastasio (Tachito) became head of the Guard. After the assassination, thousands of suspected dissidents were summarily rounded up, jailed, and tortured. During the next several years, numerous plots against the dictator were brutally squashed, and the ill-fated invasion of Olama y Mollejones led by rebel patriots in 1959 was defeated as easily as swatting a *zancudo*, or mosquito, Somoza's name for minor political annoyances.

Upon Luis's death from a heart attack in 1967, brother Tachito, a West Point graduate, assumed the presidency. He had less interest than the two Somozas before him in retaining the fiction of elections and opposition parties. Thus, repression under Tachito was brutal from the start. Illegal financial transactions including extortion, racketeering, prostitution, drug dealing, and other corrupt activities of the Guard also increased markedly under Tachito. He ruled Nicaragua like a Mafia "family" godfather.

The dictator's disregard for the populace as a whole was absolute and abundantly clear. While Tachito and his North American mistress dined on imported wines and gave elegant parties for the 1 percent of the population that controlled over 50 percent of the country's land, the vast majority of Nicaraguans lived in conditions of abject poverty and disease. Illiteracy among the rural population stood at about 90 percent, the leading cause of death was intestinal parasites, over 50 percent of the children were malnourished, and Nicaragua had the lowest life expectancy of any Central American country.⁶ It is no surprise that during Tachito's tenure, Nicaragua was, after Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

Meanwhile, significant economic changes with consequences beyond even Somoza's control were making life more miserable for the average person, creating tensions between the government and the middle sectors, and beginning to erode the caudillo's personal power base.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the agricultural population declined seriously, accelerating a pattern begun in the mid 1950s with the increasing concentration of coffee and cotton estates in the hands of a few oligarchs, and with the rapid mechanization of agriculture. Displaced peasants moved to towns and cities, but they could not find places in Nicaragua's industries, which were nascent at best. During the 1960s the Alliance for Progress granted over \$50 million in loans to diversify agriculture, and the Inter-American Development Bank did likewise. These loans, however, went to benefit the agricultural enterprises of the oligarchy, who were evicting farmers from their fields and purchasing mechanical cotton-pickers in a drive to build up cotton production for export. Unfortunately, this short-sighted move continued the old problem of putting too many eggs in one basket; it made the economy *less* diversified and *more* dependent on

fluctuations in world prices, which entered a period of decline in the 1960s and 1970s.

Further, the environmental consequences of this shift in agricultural emphasis have been disastrous. Deforestation and the abuse of pesticides are the gravest ecological problems caused by Somoza's arrangements with multinational corporations. Deforestation has caused widespread soil erosion, dust storms, mudslides and flooding, particularly along the northeastern coast where, for a small fee to the Somozas, North American timber companies for many years were allowed to strip the area of coastal pines without having to reforest at all. Meanwhile, in the central portion, cattle-raising began to encroach upon neighboring rain forests, until by the 1970s Nicaragua had lost 30 percent of this delicate ecosystem, leaving people to ponder how so much could be destroyed so fast.

The expansion of cotton production in the 1950s and the growth of the cattle industry in the 1960s pushed peasants from lands they had tilled for years. Displaced persons moved to the rain forests, which they would clear in order to farm, soon causing erosion and exhausting the poor soil, at which point families would pull up stakes again, move further into the forest and repeat the cycle.

Meanwhile, in a drive to modernize, mechanize and increase cotton production, Somoza gave incentives to companies to experiment with pesticides in Nicaragua. Unable to resist such an invitation, the German company Bayer tried deadly pesticides, over twelve million pounds of methyl parathion in 1951 alone, resulting in death and illness among field workers in the area of León. The indiscriminate use of toxic substances continued for over two decades. As these entered the water table and the food chain, they caused more illnesses, but still their use was encouraged. By the 1970s, Nicaragua was a world leader in the use of DDT, a substance banned for years in many countries, including the United States. A study carried out in León in 1977 determined that the breast milk of mothers there contained 45 times the danger levels of DDT as set by the World Health Organization.⁷

Tachito's economic and ecological policies, disastrous and inhuman though they were, paled beside his response to the most significant event of his tenure, the earthquake of 1972. The quake devastated the center of Managua, leaving up to 20,000 dead and 120,000 homeless, destroying 75 percent of the city's housing and 90 percent of its commercial base. Tachito's contempt for human suffering and his insatiable greed soon became all too clear. Millions of viewers worldwide watched their TV screens in dismay as the dictator's cronies and Guard officers sold desperately-needed relief supplies, such as blankets, cots, and medicines from the Red Cross, on the black market. Guard members looted freely, abandoning their duty to keep order in the face of the disaster. The U.S. dispatched

600 marines to Managua to restore calm and control pillaging, and began its unsuccessful search for a substitute for Somoza.

Tachito personally exploited the earthquake to expand his already bloated financial kingdom, profiteering through his construction companies from the \$78 million in Agency for International Development (AID) funds and the \$54 million from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) that were earmarked for reconstruction. Further, Somoza's flagrant monopoly of funds came on the heels of a two-year drought, increased inflation, and unemployment for urban workers. Class tensions heightened sharply as workers and their families felt viscerally the combination of these factors, and as the depth of corruption of the system was exposed for all to see. Even those members of the bourgeoisie who had heretofore preferred to close their eyes and do business as usual now had to stand up and be counted. This pivotal opportunity was not lost on the tiny band of Sandinista revolutionaries out in the wilderness, struggling to overcome their isolation and to gain recognition as a force to be reckoned with. The Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN, began in earnest to cultivate contacts with urban workers, students, health personnel, teachers, and parish groups in order to establish bases among the populace.

The Church in the Crucible

An important factor that came into play in a significant way at about the same time was the growing separation of the Catholic church from the regime. As a result of the emphasis on social justice set by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), and of the “preferential option for the poor” sanctioned by the Latin American Episcopal Conference of 1968 in Medellín, the Catholic church in Nicaragua began gradually to dissociate itself from its previous support of the dictatorship. By 1968, Christian base communities, local study groups whose members seek to relate the Gospel message to their own lives, began forming in parish communities. Clergy also began training lay “delegates of the word,” to read Scripture and lead Bible study sessions in the absence of religious personnel. Throughout 1972, the Catholic church began seriously to address itself to the needs of the people, sending pastoral teams of priests, nuns, and lay persons to the remotest corners of the country in an effort to learn the needs of the people and to make the church more responsive to them.

Such bold steps led to the creation of the so-called “popular church” favored by advocates of liberation theology. The social direction taken by many priests and nuns grew into a religious and political consciousness-raising on their part and on the part of the poor. This orientation was harshly criticized by conservative elements in the church and in Nicaraguan society as subversive and even communistic. Many members of the

Catholic church hierarchy and of the middle sectors of society claimed that the popular church undermined the discipline and authority of the traditional church and of traditional social arrangements as well. After the earthquake, the Catholic churches not only became distribution centers for food and medicine, but also grass-roots organizations of political resistance and close collaborators of the FSLN. It is important to understand then, that from the early 1970s, the FSLN and the socially oriented wing of the Nicaraguan Catholic church worked together in a broad revolutionary movement.

The Opposition Grows

In the wake of widespread unrest following the earthquake, the government cracked down on criticism, whether it came from unemployed laborers, displaced farmers now reduced to squatter status, increasingly vocal student groups, opposition leader Pedro Joaquín Chamorro's newspaper *La Prensa*, or the fledgling guerrilla band of the Sandinistas. Though things looked bad for the regime, both Tachito and his CIA advisors regarded these various groups as no match for the intensely loyal 7,500-man National Guard, well-armed and well-drilled as they were in the latest antiriot techniques.

Meanwhile, political opposition became more organized. The Democratic Union of Liberation (UDEL) was formed in 1974 by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro as a democratic opposition party that included both conservatives and socialists in its ranks. It was a last-ditch effort to arrive at a political rather than a violent solution for the country. No one knows if UDEL might have gained in strength, because another more dramatic event stole the spotlight and provoked draconian measures of repression from the government.

On December 27, 1974, an FSLN commando group carried out a daring raid on a Christmas party at the house of "Chema" Castillo Quant, a leading Somocista, and took a dozen members of Somoza's inner circle prisoner. The commandos demanded and received ransom money, publication of their communique, and release of 14 FSLN prisoners, including Daniel Ortega, who had been in jail since 1967. After the raid, Somoza created the EEBI, an elite counterinsurgency unit composed of youths trained to kill on command, and he hired mercenaries with experience in guerrilla warfare. He declared martial law and "trial" by military tribunals in a reign of terror that resulted in the death of several thousand peasants, and, inevitably, further radicalized the people in support of the FSLN.

Somoza's Guard now had to put down student riots, labor union protests, work stoppages, general strikes supported by prominent business-

men, mothers' demonstrations, and marches by religious and neighborhood groups. Still, the unrest grew.

In October 1977, the opposition "group of twelve" formed. These were not Sandinistas but highly respected intellectuals and business and professional leaders who were the most radical elements of the bourgeoisie. They had come to accept that armed struggle was the only way to remove Somoza, and they believed that the FSLN was the only group with the military organization to succeed. They threw their support behind the so-called "tercerista" faction of the FSLN, a faction that espoused political pluralism and a democratic constitution.

The Sandinistas

The Sandinista National Liberation Front had been founded in 1961 by Carlos Fonseca, Silvio Mayorga, and Tomás Borge, who is today the sole surviving founder. The FSLN was created as an anti-imperialist, pro-nationalist guerrilla group. It was inspired by Sandino and by the example of Cuba, as well as by the charismatic figure of "Che" Guevara, and dedicated to the recovery of the national patrimony.

The principal Sandinista theme was, and is, autonomy. This theme has strong marxist, nationalist, and Christian components that are sometimes in conflict, but that on the whole are seen as contributing to the objective of national self-determination. From its inception, the FSLN was radical and revolutionary; its founding members foresaw a refashioned society in which the wealth was equitably redistributed and in which social justice reigned. The founders of the FSLN were convinced, like their mentor Sandino, that armed struggle was the only way to achieve their goal.

Their first task, therefore, was the formation of a guerrilla army composed of campesinos. Between 1962 and 1967, the FSLN worked toward that end. They suffered a number of military setbacks along the way, including the serious military defeat but important moral victory at Pancasán in 1967. A series of losses in these early years caused FSLN members to take stock of their situation and to recognize the need to build a political base in the cities and a long-range strategy for the country as a whole.

Two groups emerged from the post-1967 self-study but, unfortunately, they became bitter rival factions: the Protracted People's War (GPP), and the Proletarian Tendency. The former stressed the strategic significance of the countryside and the military importance of the peasant army, while the latter maintained the primacy of political work among the urban proletariat as the way to attain a broader base of support and eventual victory.

By 1976, the split threatened the very existence of the FSLN. Carlos Fonseca, the acknowledged hero of the FSLN, and Eduardo Contreras, a

fellow member of the National Directorate, returned to Nicaragua from their base of operations in Honduras to try to resolve the division. However, both were killed in combat with the Guard, and Tomás Borge, a representative of the GPP, was taken prisoner.

At this point, a third element in the Sandinista movement, the *terceristas*, acknowledged the importance of both factions and put forward their own strategy. The *terceristas* were pragmatists. They called for a series of coordinated military attacks which would then, they hoped, spark a popular insurrection. This was a critical juncture for the FSLN, because by 1976, the end of Somoza's Operation Aguila VI against the insurgents, the FSLN was reduced to only a few dozen members. By 1977, all three tendencies amounted to no more than 200 people. Though there were thousands of sympathizers, there were very few members. Thus, not only did the *terceristas* unify the Front, healing the life-threatening split, but they also won the support of "the twelve," whose adherence was crucial in attracting a broader political base and wider acceptability for the FSLN among the middle and professional sectors.

The Final Assault

The event that precipitated the final assault was the assassination on January 19, 1978, of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, murdered on the orders of Anastasio Somoza Portocarrero, Tachito's son. Chamorro had long been much more than a mere *zancudo* to Somoza, and it was beginning to look as though opposition would unite behind him. Further, Chamorro's recent exposé in *La Prensa* of the Somozas' shocking profiteering from a blood plasma center, called the house of vampires by the people, had angered the dictator. Chamorro had been a principal hope for a democratic future, and he was by far the most popular of all Somoza's opponents. His assassination sparked the largest mass protest in Nicaraguan history. An estimated 120,000 people spilled onto the streets of Managua during his funeral procession, which was followed by a massive *paro cívico*, or work stoppage. This was the first mobilization of the urban population in which both workers and the bourgeoisie participated jointly, lasting from January 24 to February 6.

FSLN uprisings followed in Rivas and Granada, and reached their most dramatic point in the insurrection of the Monimbó Indian community of Masaya, which claimed, among many others, the life of Camilo Ortega, Daniel Ortega's younger brother. The rebels, armed with rifles, homemade knives, rocks, and pots of boiling water, held out against the Guards' artillery, armored cars, tanks, and aerial bombings for nearly a week before succumbing in a bloody defeat.

Still, other opposition leaders continued to seek a political solution. In

March 1978, millionaire industrialist Alfonso Robelo formed the National Democratic Movement (MDN), which was replaced in May 1978 by the Broad Opposition Front (FAO), with a wider base of support. However, the time for political efforts was past, and the guerrilla band that at its lowest ebb had only a handful of members now embodied the hopes of nearly 3 million people. In July 1978, Somoza, still confident that he would remain supreme, bowed to international pressure and allowed the twelve to return from exile. He must have had second thoughts when tens of thousands of cheering Nicaraguans greeted the patriots at the airport.

On August 22, 1978, the terceristas carried out the dramatic takeover of the National Palace, capturing more than 500 members of the elite, including many of Somoza's relatives. The commandos, led by the charismatic Edén Pastora, demanded 5 million dollars, publication of a FSLN communique, and the release of Tomás Borge and 82 other FSLN members. They left for Panama with a hero's send-off.

In September 1978, FSLN attacks in Managua, León, Estelí, Chinandega, Masaya, and other towns sparked a generalized uprising of the people, as the terceristas had anticipated. Somoza retaliated by ordering bombing attacks on his own cities. This bloody tactic apparently was adopted by Somoza as a way to spare the Guard, who surrounded the cities, called in the airstrikes, and then entered in search of survivors. The Frente's forces were compelled to withdraw from the towns, with long columns of civilians fleeing with them, for staying behind meant certain torture and death. The Guard were told to take no prisoners, and they systematically murdered all boys over the age of 12 whom they could capture. The Catholic church, represented by Bishop Miguel Obando y Bravo, vigorously protested the murder of over 6,000 peasants, and, finally, publically broke with the dictatorship.

The FSLN continued working through popular organizations, 22 of which were under the umbrella structure of the United People's Movement (MPU), formed in July 1978. In February 1979, the National Patriotic Front (FPN) was created to bring together the MPU, the "group of twelve," the trade unions, and all other opposition groups. In addition to being the most effective of all the political organizations, the FSLN was also, in a sense, the army of the FPN. This was the final political front, and it included virtually everyone except the Guard. Thus, Somoza was reduced to total dependence on his National Guard.⁸

The final offensive by the FSLN was launched in May and June 1979, in a number of areas at once: in El Jícaro, Estelí and Jinotega to the north; El Naranjo, Peñas Blanca, Sapoa to the south; Masaya, Granada, and Carazo to the west. The numerous coordinated attacks forced the Guard, now swollen to 25,000 members, to spread itself thinly, and, at that point, the end was in sight.

In early June, a nationwide strike paralyzed all activity in the country; less than two weeks later a provisional government was set up in San José, Costa Rica. It included Sergio Ramírez from the twelve; Violeta Chamorro, widow of the late editor; Alfonso Robelo of the MDN; Moisés Hassan of the MPU; and Daniel Ortega of the FSLN. By mid-July, most major towns were under FSLN control; and on July 17, Somoza fled to Paraguay, (where in 1980 he and his armor-plated Mercedes were blown to bits). The Guard disintegrated. On July 19, the Sandinistas entered Managua in triumph, after 18 years of struggle, and at the cost of some 50,000 lives, most of them campesino civilians who fell victim to the savage reprisals of Somoza's Guard.

The basic units of the popular struggle all along were the campesino army of the FSLN; the neighborhood Defense Committees, which during the period were renamed Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS); the Christian base communities; the trade unions, which represented varied groups such as teachers and factory workers; and village or town FSLN headquarters. These organizations provided the military backbone and the essential political structure for coordinating logistical and supply efforts, for effective communication, and for carrying out all mobilization and resistance efforts.

Nicaragua Since 1979

It was clear from the beginning that the revolutionary movement as a whole and the FSLN in particular was committed to much more than overthrowing Somoza. They uttered repeated warnings about the dire consequences of continuing Somicismo without Somoza. The socialist direction of some junta members caused the two more conservative members, Violeta Chamorro and Alfonso Robelo, to resign in May 1980. By 1981, there was a three man governing junta and a nine person directorate in charge of the country. Discussions became polarized by disagreements between pragmatists and hard-line Marxists, a division intensified by the consequences of the U.S. decision that same year to cut off all assistance to Nicaragua.

With some exceptions, the pragmatists have tended to dominate. This is rather a remarkable feat, for the U.S. embargo, in effect since May 1985, and the contra war have placed great and constant stresses on the government. For example, the exodus of some 20,000 middle-class professional people to Costa Rica, Miami, and elsewhere has deprived the government of badly needed talent. The latest emigrés are campesinos, families and young men fleeing the violence, the draft, and conditions of extreme hardship.

The FSLN had included national elections as part of their program even

before the fall of Somoza. The elections of 1984, in which Daniel Ortega was elected president, were the subject of tremendous international scrutiny and publicity. This was the first time most Nicaraguans had ever voted, and it was the first presidential election since 1928 that the United States had not supervised or otherwise arranged. These elections were really a referendum on the FSLN's record during their first five years in power.

Six opposition parties participated in the contest. However, other than the FSLN, the group that received most of the attention was the party that did not participate: the extremely conservative and pro-U.S. Democratic Coordinating Committee and their candidate Arturo Cruz. The Coordinadora, as it is known, boycotted the elections, claiming that conditions did not exist for a fair contest. Most international observers disagreed, judging the 1984 contest a clean one, and determining that a meaningful internal political opposition does in fact exist. The FSLN won 67 percent of the vote, while 29 percent was divided among the three groups to the right, and the remaining 3 percent was taken by the three political parties to the left of the FSLN. Further, the opposition parties combined won 36.5 percent of the seats in the National Assembly.⁹

In 1979, when the revolutionaries came down from the mountains and assumed power, they were faced with the overwhelming task of rebuilding a bankrupt and spent country. The U.S., for its part, was confronted with a successful revolution that it had resisted until, quite literally, the last days of Somoza's rule. The Carter administration grew critical of the Somoza regime in 1979, but became uneasy with the provisional government in 1980, and all along sent mixed messages that misled some Sandinistas into a too-hopeful estimate of the effect that the administration's human rights advocacy would have in Nicaragua.

The mutual mistrust between the two governments increased exponentially after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, and beginning in 1981, his passionate support of the counterrevolutionary army, or *contra*, whose goal has been the overthrow by force of the Sandinistas. The Reagan administration viewed Nicaragua in the context of its global struggle with Soviet communism. It feared that the Sandinistas would export their revolution to other Central American countries, and that the Soviet Union would establish military and naval bases there. Therefore, U.S. policy was based on force or the threat of force, as it has been since the 1820s in Nicaragua and Central America as a whole.

Meanwhile, in the face of U.S. disapproval, the Sandinistas set about putting into practice their social and economic goals. First, the vast landed holdings of the Somozas and their friends were turned into state farms, which account for about one fifth of the nation's agricultural land. Under

the Agrarian Reform Law of 1981, the private property rights of all those who farmed efficiently were protected. However, abandoned or neglected fields were likely to be expropriated and turned over to cooperatives (CAS) or to small private farmers. Cooperatives are generally made up of around 15 or 20 farmers who together request title and land. They own the land and can pass it on to their children, but they cannot sell it. In the past few years, the government has distributed more land to individual farmers than before, recognizing the reluctance of many to make the leap to a cooperative arrangement. In addition, tenant farmers are protected by state regulation of rent.

The Nicaraguan agrarian reform program has provided the majority of campesinos either with new land or with titles to land they had already been working. On the other hand, agricultural production has not met government targets and by most accounts is seriously down from pre-1979 levels. In theory, all produce in rice, beans, coffee, and other staples is sold to the government, and many farmers resent this regulation. But the biggest difficulties facing the rural poor today are not lack of land, but the dislocations of war and contra depredations against local cooperatives, which have resulted in loss of life, intimidation of farmers, and loss of productivity.¹⁰

The government's environmental recovery efforts have followed a pattern similar to the agricultural plans. The greatest threat to the environment now is the war, while the greatest previous threat was the Somoza dictatorship. Since the revolution, the government has moved quickly to control or ban the use of pesticides and has embarked upon ambitious programs of reforestation, pollution control, the creation of national parks, and education of the populace to environmental responsibility. However, long-term ideals have run into short-term realities, for economic survival continues to depend on the exploitation of natural resources and on agricultural production for export. Further, the contra have ambushed and kidnapped environmental workers, sabotaged reforestation and flood control projects, while the U.S. embargo has halted the flow of badly needed spare parts.¹¹

Liberation through education was another Sandinista goal. Plans for the National Literacy Crusade were initiated even during the period of exile in San José. Immediately after the victory, teams of educators began studying the successful literacy programs of other countries, and they invited the reknown Brazilian educator Paulo Freire to visit Nicaragua and offer his advice. As of Somoza's defeat, the overall illiteracy rate was approximately 60 percent, but with widespread variations; for example, for poor, rural women, illiteracy was closer to 100 percent.

The goal of the literacy campaign, planned by Father Fernando Cardinal, later the minister of education, and Carlos Tünnermann, former

ambassador to the United States, was to bring functional literacy at about the third grade reading level to 50 percent of the population. The young “*brigadistas*,” as the teachers were called, left their homes and lived in rural areas with the campesinos from March through August 1980. Supplied with mosquito nets, hammocks, chalkboards, and lanterns by which to teach at night after having helped in the fields during the day, the teachers held class for two hours a night with five or six campesinos huddled around the gas lamp.

A second set of volunteers stayed at their regular work in the cities, homemakers, government workers, factory laborers, and taught in the urban barrios during the evening hours. These people were known as popular literacy teachers. In all, the literacy workers reached some 500,000 people, and government figures claim that the Crusade reduced illiteracy to 13 percent. Whatever allowances one may make for exaggeration of the statistics, the achievement is spectacular.

The health campaign followed almost immediately, mobilizing large segments of the general population to serve as volunteer health workers, immunizing against malaria, polio, and other diseases and providing rudimentary instruction in basic hygiene and sanitation. The eradication of polio was a major accomplishment of the campaign. Unfortunately, health workers were special targets of the contra, and health personnel were badly needed at the front. Other health problems, including outbreaks of malaria in centers of refugee concentration, exacerbated the problems faced by the campaign. Still, the successes are significant, and there is an obvious awareness today of the importance of sanitation, hygiene, and of inoculation of children against disease. Effective garbage removal in the city of Managua alone is one of the health victories of the revolution. Today, free medical care is a right of the public, but lines are long and supplies are short.

Another way to recover the national patrimony was to promote the “democratization of culture” as Father Ernesto Cardenal has called it. This was to be achieved through the rediscovery of native arts and crafts, dances, instruments, costumes, the sponsorship of poetry workshops, and a general appreciation of the national culture as against the *imperial* culture of polyester and plastic. Popular book festivals feature affordable editions of classics from Rubén Darío to Karl Marx at what are surely the lowest prices in the world.

The well-known Face the People, or “*De Cara al Pueblo*” sessions, televised nationally, and the Direct Line radio phone-in programs are often exercises in popular democracy. In them, citizens complain loudly and directly to government officials, who must explain themselves and account for their area of responsibility, or somehow get themselves off the hook.

Another accomplishment has been in the area of women’s rights.

Women comprised 20 percent of the guerrilla columns in the revolution, and several women led battalions into combat. Women make up 22 percent of the FSLN membership and occupy 37 percent of the party's leadership positions. In both the CDS's and the local militias, 50 percent of the members are women. Women have literally fought their way to a new status, challenging the centuries old preeminence of machismo. The Nicaraguan Women's Association (AMNLAE) claims 85,000 members and is a vigorous proponent of women's equality in the workplace and the home, and a vigilant guardian of the rights already won.¹²

Social services, including social security benefits, childcare centers, orphanages, homes for the elderly, and rehabilitation centers for the war wounded and the handicapped now exist where before there was virtually nothing available. Unfortunately, the war effort now consumes roughly 50 percent of the national budget, and expenditures in the areas of human services, health, education, and culture have been cut back drastically. Such programs today depend heavily on international volunteer efforts.

The Sandinistas like to give the impression that Nicaragua would be a utopia of social equality and harmony if it were not for the contra war; however, such is not the case. There are numerous areas of serious conflict within the country over important issues such as: 1) the government's educational program, regarded as propagandistic and socialistic by its opponents; 2) the proper political role of the church, in a country where church and state have never been separated in practice; 3) the treatment of coastal ethnic and racial minorities who are either indifferent or opposed to the revolution; 4) the abuse of authority by some state security personnel; 5) the incompetence of many government officials at the middle and lower levels, made worse by the flight of educated professionals; 6) the inefficiency of the large, unwieldy state bureaucracy, despite the administrative reorganization of 1988; 7) government censorship and/or monopolistic control of the media, even though the Constitution of 1987 explicitly provides for freedom of expression; 8) the Sandinistas' pursuit of social goals at the expense of individual civil liberties; 9) the government's readiness to identify opposition with treason; and, finally, 10) what constitutes the best economic system for the country. Still, Nicaragua after 1979 did not become a police state. It is rather an impoverished country engaged in a total war at the moment of major social disruption.

Many Nicaraguans have lost family members in the tragic contra war; many feel that in economic terms they fared better under Somoza than under the current government; and all are bone-weary of endless lines and exasperating shortages. Criticism of the Sandinistas is quite open, strong, and widespread. But so is support for the government and, above all, for the revolution.

Notes

1. Storer H. Rowley, "Shootout or Pullout," in *Sunday, The Chicago Tribune Magazine*, August 21, 1988, p. 12.
2. Philippe Bourgois, "Nicaragua's Ethnic Minorities in the Revolution," in Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer, eds., *Nicaragua: Unfinished Revolution*, New York: Grove Press, 1986, pp. 459–72.
3. For more on the history of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations, see Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1984.
4. For more on Sandino, the marines, and the creation of the Guard, see *ibid.*
5. *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol. 12, (Nov.-Dec. 1978), pp. 6–7.
6. Bourgois, in Rosset and Vandermeer, p. 396.
7. Joshua Karliner, Daniel Faber, and Robert Rice, "An Environmental Perspective," in Rosset and Vandermeer, pp. 393–408.
8. For an excellent account of political developments during the 1970s, see *NACLA Report on the Americas*.
9. Latin American Studies Association, "The Electoral Process in Nicaragua: Domestic and International Influences," in Rosset and Vandermeer, pp. 73–107.
10. David Kaimowitz, "Nicaragua's Agrarian Reform: Six Years Later," in Rosset and Vandermeer, pp. 390–93.
11. Joshua Karliner, et al., in Rosset and Vandermeer, pp. 393–408.
12. Maxime Molyneaux, "Women: Activism without Liberation?," in Rosset and Vandermeer, pp. 478–81.
13. For more general information in English on post-revolutionary programs and problems, see Rosset and Vandermeer, chapters 2 and 3, pp. 389–485. See also Teófilo Cabestrero, *Revolutionaries for the Gospel*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1986; Peter Davis, *Where is Nicaragua?*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987; Mike Edwards, "Nicaragua: Nation in Conflict," *National Geographic* 168, no. 6, pp. 776–811; Sheryl Hirshon and Judy Butler, *And Teach Them to Read*, Westport, Conn: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1983; Thomas Walker, ed., *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*, Boulder & London: Westview Press, 1987; Marc Zimmerman, ed., *Nicaragua in Reconstruction and at War: The People Speak*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985.

1 Reinaldo Antonio Téfel (b. 1925)



“ . . . the people have learned to speak. *That* is the most important thing. It’s extraordinary!”

At first glance, this soft-spoken, bespectacled intellectual seems an unlikely revolutionary. However, the courtly and refined Reinaldo Téfel’s revolutionary credentials are as impeccable as his manners. It is appropriate to begin the volume with his story because Mr. Téfel’s history is, in fact, also that of the political opposition to the Somoza dynasty beginning in the 1940s. The remarkable events of Mr. Téfel’s life not only provide us with a coherent chronology of the period, but also contribute a fascinating living history of the time.

From his early adolescence, Mr. Téfel, along with friends and coconspirators Pedro Joaquín Chamorro and Ernesto Cardenal, was a leading and intractable foe of the dictatorship . Though imprisoned, tortured, and exiled under the Somozas, this gentle man of indomitable spirit has remained an ardent champion of social justice and has been motivated and sustained in his lifelong political struggle by his deep commitment to Christian principles.

One of the original “group of twelve,” eminent Nicaraguan leaders who from their exile in San José, Costa Rica sought to gain international support for the revolution against Somoza, Mr. Téfel is currently a Cabinet minister in the Sandinista government. As president of the Nicaraguan

Institute of Social Security and Social Welfare (INSSBI), Mr. Téfel is responsible for all aspects of social security and welfare in a country that until a few years ago had virtually nothing to offer in these areas.



I come from a well-to-do family. My father was a businessman and I was educated in Nicaragua by the Christian brothers at the La Salle school, at both the primary and secondary levels. Afterwards came two years at Fordham University in New York, after which I returned to Nicaragua and studied law for three years, but I did not finish because Somoza closed the university and wanted all the students in Managua to go study in León, but, in rebellion, I didn't go. Fortunately, I obtained a scholarship and went to Spain to study political science.

That's pretty much all with regard to studies, but with regard to struggles against Somoza, well, from the time I was *very* young, twelve or thirteen, I participated in all the demonstrations, in everything. This caused some friction within the family, because my grandfather and my grandmother were friends of Somoza and they were pretty upset about me and my activities. Despite their disapproval, I think that my family tradition does have something to do with my precocious political activity. On my mother's side, Vélez, one of the oldest families in Nicaragua, there has been a great deal of participation in politics. For example, a great-grandfather of mine fought in the famous battle of San Jacinto, against the filibusterers of William Walker. He was a lieutenant then, and later was made a general. Such things have had their influence, but it is my education that has been particularly important.

Ever since I can remember, I have felt that my Christian conscience has obliged me to struggle. Even though the Christian brothers offered a traditional Catholic education, still, if one is formed in a Christian manner, one feels the obligation to struggle. That's the way it is, though there were certain contradictions. For example, I remember that when I began to be involved in politics, one of the brothers told me: "Don't get mixed up in politics, you can't win." However, in the classroom, they taught us differently! There was a contradiction between the way they lived and the way they told us to live. I pointed this fact out to the brother and told him that it was the Christian conscience that they had developed in me that motivated me, and that surely he was not opposed to Christian conscience.

I was still in secondary school when I organized a group called Nationalist Action (Acción Nacionalista), which had among its members, Ernesto Cardenal, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, Rafael Córdova Rivas, and many more youngsters. Arturo Cruz was also a member. All my life I have been

a friend of Arturo Cruz. We lived just a block apart; yes, then we were great friends and we would go to school together, everything. I founded Nationalist Action when I was about sixteen or seventeen years old, in about 1941 or '42; I'm not very good with dates.

I graduated from high school when I was seventeen, I was the youngest in the class, and then I came to the United States to study. My father and I made a deal; he wanted me to study in the States, but I wanted to study in Nicaragua. So we agreed that I would study two years in the United States and then I would return to study law in Nicaragua. My father kept his bargain.

For me, studying in the U.S. was a tremendous experience because, first, I had as a private tutor a high school teacher who was at the same time studying for his doctorate, and he became a good friend of mine. He knew a great deal, all the progressive Catholic writers in Europe at that time, like Jacques Maritain, Léon Bloy, Emanuel Mounier, and others. So, he introduced me to their writings.

After those two years, I returned to Nicaragua to study law, but then Somoza closed the university. That's when some of us students and a number of professors founded the Free University, the Universidad Libre. I was the general secretary of the students, but soon Somoza threw out the then president of the Republic, Leonardo Argüello, and with that, the Universidad Libre folded. That's when I received the scholarship to study in Spain.

My Spanish experience was mostly academic because I was already formed in terms of my values, and *franquismo*, the politics of General Francisco Franco, was not going to influence me. Quite the contrary, for I lived in a permanent state of polemics, intellectual and ideological, with *franquismo*. It is interesting to compare Franco's regime with that of Somoza. While *franquismo* was a fascist totalitarianism, Spanish style, Somocismo was a vulgar, rapacious dictatorship. It was a different style but, of course, the same harshness, the same hard hand. It's not so much that Somoza clamped down with regard to intellectual life *per se*. Rather, it was that Somoza did not consider ideas to be important. Strange, isn't it, but none of the Somozas thought that ideas were of any significance; in fact, they were viewed as quite superfluous.

Speaking of ideas, I nearly forgot something important. It was during my time at the university in Managua that I founded a newspaper called *El Universitario*, a weekly, which grew to have the largest circulation of all the newspapers of that time. *La Prensa* existed, but it was very conservative. *La Noticia* existed, which was called liberal, but it too was conservative. There was *Flecha*, which was liberal, but anti-Sandinista, also Somoza's *Novedades* and a few others, but they each had a very small circulation. *El Universitario* had the largest circulation, an extraordinary

occurrence. I was the editor, and I can tell you that it was the first Sandinista newspaper in Nicaragua; in fact, we published a lovely article by Ernesto Cardenal and Pedro Joaquín Chamorro on Sandino. That must have been in 1946.

I also founded another organization at the university, the National Popular Action Union (Unión Nacional de Acción Popular, UNAP), in 1948, whose membership was more or less the same as in the other groups I mentioned. The difference was that UNAP was a lot larger, and it also enjoyed some influence in national politics even though it was a relatively small university group.

We were able to organize and meet openly, although this must sound a bit unlikely. You see, sometimes they [the Somozas] would give some freedom which they would let grow until it began to become strong, and then, *pow*, they would crack down again. That's how the two sons operated too, not just the old man; it was the same politics.

Along with other members of UNAP, I participated in the April '54 movement to overthrow Somoza. After it failed, I went underground for more than a year. During that time, Carlos Fonseca, while still a high school student in Matagalpa, wrote me saying that he had organized a UNAP cell there. Later, when I came out of hiding and into the public light, the first two persons to greet me, with no connection between them, were Ernesto Cardenal and Carlos Fonseca. By then, Fonseca, who was now librarian at the Instituto Nacional in Managua, no longer considered himself an *unapista*, or member of UNAP. He told me in all honesty that he no longer read Maritain, but that he now read political scientists and was much more advanced in his thinking. That's when he separated from UNAP and our political paths parted.

It is interesting how I was able to come out of hiding after the failure of the 1954 movement. Remember that a large part of my family on my father's side was Somocista, right? Well, a first cousin of mine, who now is in Miami, used to play poker with the old Somoza, in spite of their great age difference, and one night he said: "General, I would like to ask you please to let my cousin go free. If I win this poker game, will you let him go?" Well, he won and then Somoza took a piece of paper and wrote: "Reinaldo Téfel can go free to dedicate himself exclusively to his work. A. Somoza". So I got out of jail because of a poker bet ! I framed the note and now have it hanging in my house. I will show it to you so that you will have an idea of how the old Somoza was.

His was a carrot and stick policy. He was a complete cynic. He had pictures of Hitler and Mussolini in his office, and when World War II broke out, he took them down and put up portraits of Roosevelt and Churchill and declared war on Germany the day before the United States did. When he found out that the United States was going to declare

war, that Congress was going to meet, he hurried, gathered together his Congress and declared war on Germany. A total opportunist, shameless and cynical, but of course, he was intelligent, clever, and he spoke English, which gave him excellent communication with the United States embassy. He had also learned popular English, he knew all the slang, and this made him even more attractive, especially to the ambassadors' wives, with whom he had well-known affairs. At any rate, that's the story of how I was able to come aboveground.

Remember that I was free to come aboveground to dedicate myself to my work. I was working in agriculture with my brother, we grew cotton, and at the same time I had a bookstore with Ernesto Cardenal. We two were partners. The store was called *Nuestro Tiempo* (Our Time), but of course it did not provide a living, especially as it was a pioneering bookstore in that we stocked all the latest books from all over the world. When Ernesto decided to go study in Kentucky to become a Trappist monk, we closed the bookstore because one person alone couldn't keep it going. As for my farming, I really couldn't dedicate myself to it because I was always either oppressed or in hiding. My younger brother helped me, but we couldn't make a go of it. Then I worked for a brief time with my father.

In 1956, immediately after the poet Rigoberto López Pérez assassinated the old Somoza, I was picked up when they rounded up 3,000 opposition leaders. They took me away in my pajamas, and I stayed in jail just like that for a long time without my family knowing my whereabouts. Pedro Joaquín Chamorro and I shared the same cell, and we were brutally tortured, as described in Pedro Joaquín's book, *Estirpe sangrienta*. (Bloody Heritage).

This was also a time of great polarization between the Conservative and the Liberal parties, and UNAP was losing political ground. We decided, the majority of us, to join the Conservative party, which had a strong popular base then, and to transform it into a modern Christian Democratic party. So, I became the political secretary of the Conservative Party; I was named to this post while I was imprisoned.

The success of the Cuban Revolution had an energizing effect on all of us, and we began to hope that maybe we could create our own guerrilla group. Pedro Joaquín Chamorro and I had the same idea, and we, along with other opposition leaders, went to Cuba to see Castro and to request his support for our plan. He told us that he regretted that he was already committed to a Nicaraguan exile group, and we left empty-handed but not discouraged.

We returned to Costa Rica, where we planned the invasion known as *Olama y Mollejones* [1959], led by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, and in which I was leader of a column. This was the first airborne invasion in Nicaragua,

and in Latin America for that matter. We landed in Chontales province, and we were to meet up with the internal front, which was supposed to provide us with support and communications, but they failed utterly, and we were soon surrounded by the guardia. Pedro Joaquín and I were imprisoned for more than a year until Somoza declared a general amnesty, the result of considerable national and international pressure.

When I got out, I worked hard in the Conservative party until a *caudillo*, or strongman, Fernando Argüello, began to betray the party. So, I broke with him, left the Conservative party and joined the Nicaraguan Social Christian party (Partido Social Cristiano Nicaragüense, PSC). Soon, I realized that it too was more or less like the others and I left it also.

From about 1965 to 1972, I taught various sociology courses at the Catholic university (UCA). Separate from my academic position but during the same period of disillusionment with the PSC and other existing political parties, I founded the Human Development Institute (Instituto de Promoción Humana, INPRHU), of which I still serve as president. INPRHU satisfied the need I perceived for a structure that was truly revolutionary, one that could bring about deep social change and was not bound by the limitations and traditional weaknesses of the political parties. Through INPRHU we carried out work that was profoundly Christian.

For example, at that time we were dedicated to promoting and supporting trade organizations, cooperatives, community development groups, housewives, youth groups, and the like. It was a grass-roots, popular, organization. We also introduced the method of Pablo Freire in Nicaragua, his consciousness-raising or *concientización*. Of course, this type of work did not provide enough to live on, and the university paid very badly, so I also gave human development workshops to large businesses on the weekends.

I continued with INPRHU working directly with the people, and by about the tenth anniversary my position was completely revolutionary, and I viewed INPRHU as a truly revolutionary coming together of Christianity, socialism, and nationalism. While still deeply involved with INPRHU, I also held meetings at my house every Monday evening of intellectuals, professional people, and workers who all wanted to found a Socialist Democratic party. All those who used to come to these meetings are currently working in the revolution. This was for about a year, and would've been during '77; yes, that's right, because Pedro Joaquín was murdered in January of 1978, and that same month I joined the "group of twelve."

I was also on both of the National Strike Committees, one took place in February and the other in September of 1978. Other members included Sergio Ramírez, Miguel D'Escoto, a Socialist Party leader, a representative of the private business sector, and so on. It soon became clear to me