

The Tar Heel

Nicaragua

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guerrilla group led by Augusto Cesar Sandino was organized to oppose U.S. intervention. U.S. forces left again in 1933 when the newly-created National Guard, commanded by Gen. Anastasio Somoza Garcia took over. In 1934 Sandino was assassinated, reputedly on Somoza's orders, but some of his followers (Sandinistas) continued to actively oppose the regime.

Somoza became Minister of War, then in 1935 seized power in a coup, becoming President in 1936. One of Somoza's own nominees succeeded him in 1947, but Somoza overthrew him and put his uncle in as President. In 1950 the uncle died and Somoza resumed power. He remained in office until 1956, when he was assassinated by a Sandinista. The Somozas remained dominant in Nicaraguan politics until 1979, however, with a family member holding the office of President or Commander of the National Guard.

The Revolution

The Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN) was formed in 1962 to overthrow the Somoza regime. The public gave little support to the FSLN for 15 years; however, several events which provoked anger at the Somoza regime, increased the popularity of FSLN. After the devastating earthquake of 1972, in which 10,000 Managuans were killed, Somoza imposed martial law, while at the same time increasing personal gain. In 1978 Somoza's government was implicated in the murder of Pedro Joaquin Chagua, editor of Nicaragua's most popular newspaper *La Prensa*. Amnesty International had reported in 1977 on the systematic torture and murder by the regime.

The revolution involved almost all sectors of Nicaraguan society. Most of the poor and working class were

organized into militias. Businessmen, professionals, the Roman Catholic Church and even the usually deferent opposition political parties supported the struggle against Somoza. From February 1978 when mass armed revolt broke out in the city of Masaya until the July 1979 revolutionary victory, the FSLN coordinated and organized what would have otherwise been a spontaneous mass revolt.

With the FSLN approaching Managua on five different fronts across the country, Somoza resigned and fled Nicaragua on July 17, 1979. He was assassinated in Paraguay in 1980. The National Guard disintegrated within 24 hours, and the guerilla commanders entered Managua and set up the Government of National Reconstruction amidst domestic and international goodwill.

But victory had come at a high price: 40,000 estimated killed, 100,000 wounded, and well over 100,000 left homeless. A United Nations' study estimated material damages to be \$500 million. Per capita gross domestic product fell by 25 percent in 1979. The economy was devastated, and Somoza had left \$1.6 billion in debts and a depleted government treasury. Even after confiscating Somoza's properties, the GNR estimated it would require 10 years to rebuild Nicaragua to its prewar capacity.

The Early Government

In August 1979 the GNR issued a 'Statute in Rights and Guarantees for the Citizens of Nicaragua,' insuring personal freedoms and the freedom of the press. They postponed elections until 1985 however, so they would have time to begin reconstruction.

Some foreign governments and multilateral lending institutions gave loans and grants generously to

Nicaragua, while others, including the U.S., gave to a lesser extent. With this money, the GNR set up many social programs and purchased vital imports. International aid did not, however, restore Nicaragua's productivity or address imbalances in the economic structure. In September 1979, in an effort to cut public spending, the government declared a one-year "state of social and economic emergency."

It soon became clear however that other factors were responsible for the economic problems, factors related to Nicaragua's political realities. After the victory, class-based social and political changes began primarily because all social classes had taken part in the revolution. By 1981, social tensions were growing.

Internal Conflicts

The lower classes benefited the most from the government's early policies, which included holding a literacy campaign that raised the number of functionally literate Nicaraguans from 50 to 87 percent, reducing rents by 50 percent, and expanding public health services. By 1981 however, these programs were threatened by inflation and the government's need to cut back on spending.

The private sector was FSLN's main opposition. They felt their role in overthrowing Somoza merited decisionmaking power and feared that the FSLN would continue to parcel out private property. The Sandinistas on the other hand were ambivalent toward the private sector. It would have been easy for the government to blame its troubles on their lack of cooperation, however, not only did it need their productive assets and managerial skills for reconstruction, but also foreign lenders demanded Nicaragua keep the freedom of dissention and maintain the private sector.

Other critics of FSLN included *La Prensa* and the Roman Catholic Church, both saying they supported a pluralistic society and that FSLN



was becoming increasingly autocratic. Three times during the summer of 1981 the government shut down the newspaper. Though the church at first supported the revolution, by 1981 most of the Catholic hierarchy openly opposed the government's drift towards "Marxist atheism."

The FSLN radicalizes

Although FSLN was not a political party, it appeared to be evolving into one. The three-member governing junta was Nicaragua's highest decisionmaking body, but policy was also debated in the nine-member National Directorate of the FSLN. Foreign observers could see a division in the directorate between the 'pragmatists,' who followed the politically pluralistic model, and the 'idealists,' who saw Cuba as their model.

With Nicaragua finding new direction, relations with the U.S. declined. In 1981, the Reagan administration claimed Nicaragua was channeling arms to the leftist insurgents in El Salvador, and cut off U.S. bilateral aid, giving \$10 million to support counter-revolutionary forces. Relations continued to sour as Nicaragua accused the U.S. of aggression. Feeling a counter-revolution attempt was inevitable, Nicaragua began building a large defense.

Remnants of the National Guard which had escaped to Honduras began raiding border towns as the first stage to a counter-revolution, and in 1982 a 30-day state of national emergency was declared. In an effort to stop Nicaragua from sending weapons to El Salvador, the United States gave an additional \$9 million for CIA covert operations to weaken the economic infrastructure of the country. With U.S. spy planes violating Nicaraguan air space and a military build-up in Honduras, Nicaragua feared an invasion. Relations improved in April however, when the United States offered an eight-point peace plan in which, among other things, it would end training of Somocistas and resume aid, if Nicaragua would stop sending arms to leftists in El Salvador.

In March 1982, after its sixth closure, *La Prensa* along with the rest of Nicaraguan media, was subjected to prior censorship for the 30-day period of emergency. This censorship was extended every month until July, when it was extended for six months. The emergency also restricted foreign and domestic travel and suspended all constitutional rights.

In January 1983 relations again deteriorated when Honduras and the United States started the 'Big Pine,' a series of extensive military maneuvers just to Nicaragua's north. At the same time anti-Sandinista guerillas in Honduras started new attacks. The most significant new development occurred in April, when Eden Pastora Gomez, who had resigned from his position as deputy minister of defense in 1981, now accused the FSLN of betraying its original ideals and formed the Sandinista Revolutionary Front to overthrow the government. Pastora became leader of non-Somocista opposition to the FSLN, and with his followers gained support from the moderate foreign governments that had aided Nicaragua for

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