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The Importance of the FSLN in Nicaragua

Central America has long been a hotbed for violence, social unrest, and political revolution. Guerrilla warfare against the major powers has continuously been a factor in Central American politics. Throughout the twentieth century, millions have fought and been killed in these countries. Perhaps the country that has seen the most violence, social unrest, and revolution is Nicaragua. Nicaragua's most violent years were after 1962 when the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), also known as the Sandinistas, formed. Owen Williamson, author of "Nicaraguan Guerrilla Victory," says that, "The Sandinista Revolution retains a unique place in history, as the last old-line leftist guerrilla victory of the Cold War era in Latin America."¹ The FSLN was one of the most important revolutionary guerrilla groups in Central American history because they successfully overthrew a corrupt dictatorship in Nicaragua, implemented one of the first socialist governments in Central America, and sparked constant United States intervention.

The most significant FSLN accomplishment was the overthrow of the corrupt Anastasio Somoza dictatorship in 1979. The uprising was the pinnacle of the FSLN's revolutionary movement. From the early 1960's, when the FSLN was formed, until 1979, they had conducted only low-scale guerrilla movements against the Somoza regime. In 1979, however, they finally led a victorious large-scale battle and were able to take control of the Nicaraguan government from Somoza. The Somozas (father and son) had long been

in power, enjoying total U.S. support without even having the support of their own citizens. In Nicaragua between 1934 and 1979, Somozas dictated with terror, repressing the views of the poor majority. They empowered a brutal National Guard, which nearly all of the county's citizens feared and hated. Whenever the Somozas' rule was challenged, they responded with the extensive use of torture, the suspension of civil liberties for the entire population, and the arrest or assassination of those who dared to speak out against their regime. Anastasio Somoza, fearing the rebel FSLN, routinely tortured anybody who he felt was associated with the rebellion. During the seven weeks before the FSLN took power, the brutal guard killed over 50,000 Nicaraguans alone, with eighty percent of them being civilians.² The Somoza family also owned the vast majority of the best land in Nicaragua, as well as most of the major domestic industries and factories.³ When Somoza finally fled the country in 1979, he left approximately \$1.6 billion in foreign debts and cleaned out the county's treasury.⁴ All in all, Somoza was worth nearly \$1 billion when he fled. The overthrow of Somozas' corrupt, repressive regime was truly a historical feat for the FSLN.

A second major significance of the FSLN was that they established an authoritarian, socialist government based on Marxist ideology after taking power in Nicaragua in 1979. The Sandinistian leaders made it clear that they wanted to rebuild their destroyed and bankrupt country using a mix of socialist principals, state ownership, and private capitalism. The Sandinistas were very popular among the vast majority in

¹ Owen Williamson, "Nicaraguan Guerrilla Victory," Military History (Aug 1999, Vol. 16): 58.

² Claribel Alegria and Darwin Flakoll, Death of Somoza, (Connecticut: Curbstone Press, 1996), 10.

³ Walter LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 162.

⁴ Claribel Alegria and Darwin Flakoll, Death of Somoza, (Connecticut: Curbstone Press, 1996), 11.

Nicaragua. Their revolution was a true grass roots, popular movement with participation by all sectors of society. They represented freedom from oppression and an opportunity for a more democratic Nicaragua.

The Sandinist government's most striking achievements have been in the area of improving the social welfare of all Nicaraguans. One of their first actions was to sponsor a literacy campaign throughout Nicaragua, teaching peasants to read and to write.⁵ The country's illiteracy rate was reduced from over 50% in 1979 to just 13% in 1986.⁶ The Sandinist government also provided all public education for free. They dismantled the idea of selling most medicines and started distributing them freely. They went on to further improve healthcare and nearly eliminated diseases such as polio, the measles, as well as dramatically reducing malaria.⁷ Under the Sandinist government, the infant mortality rate was cut in half and life expectancy was extended by seven years.⁸ Another accomplishment was the abolition of the death penalty. They had one of the best human-rights records in Central America and were one of the first to implement a 1980 U.N. proposal for Human Rights Programs. Overwhelmingly, the Sandinistas worked for the healing of the country and its poor majority.

The Sandinist government also did a great deal for the working class in Nicaragua. They reduced unemployment by over one-half and encouraged and greatly increased the number of trade unions in the country. Union membership increased from

⁵ Cochran III, Augustus B. and Scott, Catherine V, "Class, State, and Popular Organizations in Mozambique and Nicaragua," Latin American Perspectives (Spring 1992, Vol. 19): 105.

⁶ Peter Costantini, "An American Tragedy," New Internationalist (2000 June, Vol. 324): 34.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

6% in 1979 under Somoza to 55% under the Sandinistian government in 1986.⁹

They fought for better working conditions as well. Peter Costantini, author of “An American Tragedy,” says, “In many areas, the Sandinistas did the things that every government of a poor country ought to do.”¹⁰ They implemented the much-needed agrarian reform. Costantini goes on saying, “They conducted one of the largest, most effective land reforms in Latin American history, granting land titles to 184,000 poor families in the countryside and urban shantytowns.”¹¹ The Sandinistian reforms truly benefited the working class.

The United States constantly intervened in Nicaragua during the FSLN’s rule due to their socialist policies and procedures. Under the Somoza dictatorship, before the overthrow by the FSLN, the U.S. had financially supported and controlled the Somoza regime. Both Anastasio Somoza and his father had been mere puppets of the U.S. government when they were in power. The authors of Death of Somoza speak about Anastasio Somoza saying, “He was a ‘made in the U.S.A.’ product who spoke English better than he did Spanish.”¹² Every U.S. president between Franklin Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter supported Somozas despite their corrupt, repressive, brutal dictatorships. They allowed the U.S. to control them and control the citizens through the U.S. trained, Nicaraguan National Guard. Somozas also allowed U.S. big business to flourish and exploit the poor Nicaraguan citizens. Upon the overthrow of Somoza regime, the U.S. lost much of their control of Nicaragua and feared that the FSLN’s new governmental policies

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Claribel Alegria and Darwin Flakoll, Death of Somoza, (Connecticut: Curbstone Press, 1996), 12.

were communist and thus must be stopped through intervention. The common

U.S. belief was that if the Sandinistas weren't controllable then they were a direct threat.

The greatest U.S. fear was that the FSLN would allow the communist Soviet Union and Cuba to control and influence Nicaragua. U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who was President between 1980 and 1988, and his advisors decided if the FSLN was not with us then they will fall into the devious hands of the Soviet Union and increasingly threaten our territory just as Cuba had. The U.S. government also believed that if they let the new Nicaraguan government get away with not obeying the U.S.'s wishes then the other Latin America countries would see the U.S. as weak and then they too might rebel against their U.S. controlled governments. This would make the Western Hemisphere even more vulnerable to the Soviet Union being able to influence more countries and threaten our own hemisphere.

Reagan tried to make the FSLN's leadership in Nicaragua as difficult as possible. Despite the fact that Reagan ran on a platform that vowed to support the new Nicaraguan government saying, "We [Republicans] will support the efforts of the Nicaraguan people to establish a free and independent government,"¹³ Having said this, Reagan still greatly aided the Contra, anti-FSLN efforts. In November of 1981, Reagan approved a \$19 million CIA plan to undercut the Sandinista regime.¹⁴ As the U.S. provided generous monetary and military support to the counter-revolutionary Contra force in neighboring Honduras, confrontation continued to escalate between Nicaragua and the United States. Beginning in

¹³ Tyler Marshall, "Controversy Surrounding Nicaragua," *New York Times*, 13 July 1980, sec. 1A, p. 3.

¹⁴ Walter LaFeber, "The Reagan Administration and Revolutions in Central America," *Political Science Quarterly* (Spring 1984, Vol. 99): 22.

the summer of 1983 the United States stationed over ten thousand troops in Honduras, staged intimidating war games, orchestrated economic sabotage within Nicaragua, from hit-and-run attacks on small military outposts and peasant villages to the mining of harbors and the demolition of oil deposits.¹⁵ All of these efforts by Reagan and the U.S. government were used to oust the FSLN out of power.

From 1980 to 1990, the Reagan administration did everything it could to crush the Nicaraguan-FSLN government through military and economic aggression, intimidation, and threat. The CIA recruited, armed, and trained a Contra guerrilla force using the former Nicaraguan National Guard members and other peasants. This sparked constant battles that the FSLN had to contend with and caused them to have to increase their defense budget to 40% of the nation's budget.¹⁶ U.S.-Nicaraguan relations were especially strained when the FSLN regime nationalized many of Nicaragua's private industries, confiscated private property, and supported other Central American guerrilla movements. Thus, the United States suspended all aid to Nicaragua in 1981. In 1985, the Reagan Administration went on to impose a strict trade embargo with Nicaragua on U.S.-Nicaraguan trade and tried to block Nicaragua's attempts to secure financial aid and loans from other countries. Walter LaFeber, author of Inevitable Revolutions, says, "Washington aimed to make the Sandinistas' maintenance of the nation's infrastructure mission impossible."¹⁷ Reagan also attacked the Sandinistas for postponing the elections for five years after the rebellion, he said that was further evidence that they were communists.¹⁸ The new Nicaraguan

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Walter LaFeber, Inevitable Revolutions (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 307.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 239.

government finally held and won their first elections in 1984.¹⁹ The FSLN made great efforts to make sure that the elections were fair. There were even seven parties represented, all of which received free air time on TV and radio.²⁰ The government made special efforts to even ensure that there would be a Contra presidential candidate. All of the FSLN's actions were analyzed and countered by strong United States resistance creating almost unbearable tension for the Nicaraguan-FSLN government.

Nicaragua certainly served as a hotbed for violence, social unrest, and political revolution in Central America. Under the FSLN, Nicaragua put an end to the old U.S. puppet government and increased social welfare through such things as successful literacy and healthcare campaigns, all while fighting almost constant U.S. resistance. The FSLN was indeed one of the most important revolutionary guerrilla groups in Central American history because they successfully overthrow the corrupt Somoza dictatorship, implemented one of the first socialist governments in Central America, and sparked constant United States intervention.

¹⁹ Ibid, 309.

²⁰ Ibid.

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