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Early History

The Pre-Columbian Period to the Mid-1930s

The history of Nicaragua is among the most turbulent and interesting in all of the Americas. If, on the one hand, it features incredible elite exploitation, mass suffering, and foreign interference, it also includes a significant element of popular resistance, national pride, and human nobility.

THE PRE-COLUMBIAN PERIOD

Even before the arrival of the Spaniards in the sixteenth century, the territory that we now call Nicaragua apparently was not a land of human tranquility. A demographic outpost of various Meso- and South American Indian groups, Nicaragua was an ethnically complex region. The most obvious dissimilarities were between the various indigenous tribes related to South American peoples who lived in the rain forests and savannahs to the east of the Central Cordillera and the Meso-American groups that inhabited the more hospitable western regions. The former, though primarily hunters and gatherers, also engaged in slash-and-burn agriculture, as do some of their descendants today. The more culturally sophisticated inhabitants of the western regions, on the other hand, were sedentary agriculturalists who raised corn, beans, and vegetables and lived in established towns with populations sometimes numbering in the tens of thousands. The western tribes spoke a variety of Meso-American languages reflecting

several distinct waves of settlement from what is today Mexico and northern Central America. Though the western Indians rarely had anything to do with their more primitive counterparts across the mountains, contact and conflict among the tribes of the west were common. Warfare, slavery, and involuntary tribute by the weak to the strong were among the basic ingredients of pre-Columbian life in the west. In a sense, then, many of the traits that characterized colonial rule existed long before the first *conquistadores* set foot in the land.

THE COLONIAL PERIOD: 1522–1822

The Spanish conquest of Nicaragua was an extension of the colonization of Panama, which began in 1508. Plagued by internal conflict, disease, and Panama's inhospitable natural environment, the Spaniards were not in a position to expand their control to the immediate north for well over a decade. It was only in 1522 that Gil González, commanding a small band of explorers under contract to the Spanish crown, finally set foot in Nicaragua. The purpose of his expedition—like that of other *conquistadores*—was to convert souls and to obtain gold and other riches from the native population. Considering that he managed to convert close to 30,000 Indians, carry off nearly 90,000 pesos worth of gold, and discover what appeared to be a water link between the Caribbean and the Pacific, González's venture into Nicaragua was a clear success.

It was not without its anxious moments, however. Though at first submissive, some Indians eventually decided to resist the bearded strangers. One of these was the legendary chief Diriangén, from the region around what is today the city of Granada. Several days after an initial meeting with González, in which he promised to bring his people to the Spaniard for conversion, Diriangén returned to attack the outsiders with several thousand warriors, causing them to retreat overland to the Pacific Ocean. To make matters worse, before they reached the safety of their Pacific fleet, González and his men were also set upon by warriors under the command of another chief, Nicarao. It was 1524 before the Spanish, under Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, returned to Nicaragua and imposed their control over the region.

The early years of the colonial period had a profound and lasting impact on the nature of Nicaraguan society and politics. The most important

and tragic result of the conquest was demographic—the near total destruction of the large Indian population of the region. Incredible as it seems, it appears that Spanish chroniclers and early historians may have been fairly accurate when they reported that an original native population of around a million was reduced to tens of thousands within a few decades of the arrival of Gil González.[1] This incredible depopulation was the result of several factors. The outright killing of natives in battle, probably accounting for the demise of a few thousand, was the least significant factor. Death by exposure to diseases brought to the New World by the Spaniards was much more important. The fact that Indians had little natural immunity to such common ailments as measles and influenza resulted in an immediate and dramatic reduction in their numbers throughout the Americas. It is likely that hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguan Indians perished of disease within a few decades.

Slavery was a third important factor that reduced Nicaragua's native population. Claims by writers of those times that 400,000 to 500,000 natives were gathered and exported into bondage during the first two decades of the colonial period seem to stand up to close scholarly investigation. The archives of the times show that there were enough slave ships of sufficient capacity making frequent enough trips to have accomplished this exportation.[2] The demand for slaves throughout the Spanish colonies—and especially in Peru in the 1530s—was very high. Though the Spanish themselves captured some slaves, many more were turned over to them by "friendly" Indian chiefs as a form of obligatory tribute. The life expectancy of these unfortunate souls was short. Many—sometimes 50 percent or more—died during the sea journey from Nicaragua to their intended destination. Most of the rest perished in slavery within a few years. As a result, supply never caught up with demand and, although the Spanish crown tried unsuccessfully to stop this lucrative trafficking in human life, the slave boom came to an end only when the resource was all but depleted. By the 1540s the Indian population of western Nicaragua appears to have plummeted to between 30,000 and 40,000—and it declined gradually for several decades thereafter.

The result of this demographic holocaust is that Nicaragua today, instead of being a predominantly Indian country, is essentially mestizo in racial type and almost exclusively Spanish in language and other aspects of culture. Though most of the cities and towns of the country bear Indian

names reflecting the culture of their founders, few of the people who walk their streets today are aware of what the names mean or who the original inhabitants were.

Another legacy of the colonial period—this one primarily political—was the rivalry between the principal cities of León, to the northwest of Lake Managua, and Granada, on the northern shore of Lake Nicaragua. Though both were founded by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba in 1524, they differed from each other in important cultural, social, and economic characteristics. As it was originally felt that Granada would be the political capital of the colony, the more "aristocratic" *conquistadores* chose to settle there. Spanish soldiers of lower rank and social status were packed off to León to defend the colony against incursions and claims by other Spanish adventurers from the north. As it turned out, however, León, not Granada, became the administrative center of the country, and Granada found itself forced to submit to the rule of a series of corrupt administrators based in what it considered a culturally inferior city. To make matters worse, there were significant differences in the economic interests of the two cities. The wealth of the self-styled aristocrats in Granada was based largely on cattle and on trade with the Caribbean via Lake Nicaragua and the San Juan River. Though cattle also were important in the region around León, many of the Leonese were also involved in such middle-class occupations as shipbuilding, the procurement and sale of pine products, and government service. International trade in León was oriented almost entirely toward the Pacific. The Catholic Church hierarchy, though stationed in the administrative center in León, sympathized with the aristocrats in Granada. Mutual jealousy and suspicion between the Leonese and Granadinos festered in a controlled form until independence allowed it to boil over into open warfare.

Curiously, the most flamboyant and prosperous years of the colonial period in Nicaragua were the first few decades, the time of the conquest and the slave trade. Once the Indian population had been depleted, the colony became an underpopulated backwater. Indeed, there was actually a severe manpower shortage, which forced some gold mines to close and caused landowners increasingly to switch from labor-intensive crop production to cattle raising. The economic foundation of this now underdeveloped colony was adequate to support the lifestyle of the landowning aristocrats in Granada and the merchants of León, but insufficient to provide for general prosperity.

To make matters worse, from the mid-seventeenth century on, the debilitated colony was frequently plagued by pirate attacks. As a result, trade via both the Caribbean and the Pacific was restricted and at times interrupted. By the mid-eighteenth century, the British, who were openly supportive of the pirates, became so bold as to occupy and fortify parts of the Caribbean coast. They maintained some claim over that region for well over a century.

INDEPENDENCE

The end of colonial rule in Central America simply added to the woes of the common Nicaraguan, for it meant the removal of the one external force that had kept the elites of León and Granada from sending their people into open warfare against each other. Mutual resentment between the two cities had flared up in 1811, a decade before the expulsion of the Spanish. When León, after first leading Granada into an insurrection against the crown, reversed its position and supported the royal authorities, it left the Granadinos in miserable isolation to receive the brunt of Spanish revenge. Nicaragua won its independence in stages: first as a part of the Mexican empire of Agustín de Iturbide in 1822, then as a member of the Central American Federation in 1823, and finally as an individual sovereign state in 1838. Throughout this period, the Leonese, who eventually came to call themselves Liberals, and the Granadinos, who championed the Conservative cause, squabbled and fought with each other over the control of their country. After 1838, the chaos and interregional warfare intensified. Presidents came and went as one group or the other imposed temporary control.

With Spain out of the way, other foreign powers began to interfere in Nicaraguan affairs, with the objective of dominating the interoceanic transit potential of the infant country. The British had long maintained a presence on the east coast. In the eighteenth century they had actually set up a form of protectorate over the Miskito Indians in that region. In the 1840s U.S. expansion to the Pacific coast of North America and the discovery of gold in California stimulated intense U.S. interest in Nicaragua as the site for an interoceanic transit route. Therefore, when the British moved to consolidate their control over the Miskito Coast by seizing the mouth of the San Juan River, the United States became alarmed and protested vigorously to the British. In 1850 the two countries attempted to diffuse the

potential for conflict by signing the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, in which both sides forswore any unilateral attempt to colonize Central America or to dominate any transisthmian transit route.

THE WALKER AFFAIR

The treaty, however, failed to bring peace to Nicaragua. By the mid-1850s the two emerging themes of Nicaraguan political life—foreign interference and interregional warfare—converged to produce an important turning point and one of the most bizarre episodes in Central American history: the Walker affair. In spite of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, the clearly conflicting interests of Britain and the United States in the area had kept tension between the two countries at a high level. Both countries frequently took sides in Nicaraguan domestic politics—the British tending to support the Conservatives, and the Americans, the Liberals. Finally, in 1854, the Liberals, who were at the time losing in a struggle to unseat the Conservatives, turned for help to a San Francisco–based soldier of fortune named William Walker.[3]

Though often depicted as a simple villain, Walker was an extremely interesting and complex individual. The son of a pioneer family from Tennessee, he graduated from college and earned a medical degree while still in his teens. He then pursued a law degree, practiced that profession for a short while, turned to journalism, and finally became a soldier of fortune—all before he had reached his mid-thirties. In some senses he was an idealist. As a journalist he championed the cause of abolition, and like many people of that era, he was a firm believer in manifest destiny—the imperialist expansion of Yankee ideals, by force if necessary, beyond the boundaries of the United States.

In accordance with his pact with the Liberals, Walker sailed in June 1855 from California to Nicaragua with a small band of armed Californians. After some initial military setbacks, he and his Liberal allies took Granada in October and set up a coalition government under a Conservative, Patricio Rivas. Almost from the start, the real power in the government was Walker himself, who rapidly began to implement a series of Liberal developmentalist ideas that included the encouragement of foreign investment and the increased exploitation of Nicaraguan resources. In July 1856, Walker formally took over the presidency.

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Initially Walker seemed to have at least the tacit support of the U.S. government. His entrance into the Nicaraguan civil war met with no serious resistance from Washington, which was quick to recognize the puppet government of Patricio Rivas. However, the British and the governments of the other Central American countries were appalled by this bald-faced Yankee attempt to create a U.S. outpost on the Central American isthmus. And many Nicaraguans of both parties became increasingly alarmed at the foreign takeover of their country. This was especially true in 1856 when Walker, the dictator-president, legalized slavery and declared English to be the official language. As a result, it was not long before the onset of a war in which Nicaraguans of both parties and, at one time or another, troops from all of the Central American republics (armed and backed financially by England, certain South American countries, and a variety of public and private interests in the United States) fought against the hated foreigners. In the spring of 1857, the U.S. government intervened to arrange a truce and to allow Walker to surrender and leave Nicaragua. (Walker returned to Central America in yet another filibustering attempt in 1860, but he was captured by the British and turned over to the Hondurans, who quickly tried him and put him before a firing squad.) So important is the war against Walker in Nicaraguan patriotic lore that the independence day that *nicas* celebrate on September 14 is a commemoration of a decisive battle at San Jacinto against Walker and his U.S. troops.

THE CONSERVATIVE PERIOD: 1857–1893

For more than three decades following the defeat of Walker, the country enjoyed relative peace and stability. True, several thousand Indians lost their lives in 1881 in the tragic War of the Comuneros—a rebellion aimed at halting the takeover of their ancestral lands by wealthy coffee growers. But the elites of Nicaragua were temporarily at peace during this period. As a result of their association with the U.S. filibuster, the Liberals had been discredited. The Conservatives, therefore, were able to rule, without interruption and with only sporadic and halfhearted resistance from their traditional adversaries, from 1857 to 1893. A new constitution was adopted in 1857. Thereafter, "elected" Conservative presidents succeeded each other at regular four-year intervals, breaking the old tradition of *continuismo* (an individual's self-perpetuation in power). The country was also blessed in

this period with a relative lull in foreign interference, which came as a result of the completion in 1855 of a transisthmian railroad in Panama that temporarily took the pressure off Nicaragua as a focal point of interoceanic transit. And finally, during these decades, Managua, which had become the capital in 1852, grew and prospered as a result of a coffee boom in that area.

ZELAYA AND ZELEDÓN

Conservative rule, however, was not to last. In 1893 the Liberals, under the leadership of José Santos Zelaya, joined dissident Conservatives in ousting the Conservative government of Roberto Sacasa. Three months later, they overthrew the dissident Conservative whom they had initially placed in power and replaced him with Zelaya himself. For the next sixteen years Zelaya was not only the dictator of Nicaragua but also one of the most important figures in Central American regional politics.

Zelaya was a controversial and unjustly maligned figure. He is commonly described in U.S. textbooks on Central and Latin American history as a corrupt, brutal, cruel, greedy, egocentric, warmongering tyrant. In 1909 President William Howard Taft denounced him as "a blot on the history of Nicaragua." Careful examination of the facts, however, reveals that this depiction has much less to do with the reality of Zelaya's rule than with official U.S. frustration and resentment over the Liberal dictator's stubborn defense of national and Central American interests in the face of burgeoning U.S. interference in the region's affairs following the Spanish-American War.[4]

Zelaya would be described more accurately as a relatively benevolent, modernizing, authoritarian nationalist. Born in Managua in 1853, the son of a Liberal coffee planter, he was educated at the Instituto de Oriente in Granada. At sixteen he was sent to France for further studies, and there he became imbued with the positivist philosophies of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. When he returned to his homeland at nineteen, he immediately entered politics. Subsequently, as the young mayor of Managua, he set up a lending library and stocked it with the works of the French philosophers.

There is no doubt that, as dictator of Nicaragua, Zelaya used whatever means necessary to keep himself in power. Democracy did not exist; freedom of the press was often curtailed. It is also true that Zelaya was cer-

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tainly no great social reformer. But there is little evidence of his alleged cruelty. His constitution of 1893 abolished the death penalty, and he apparently made a practice of granting amnesty, after a decent interval, to captured opposition insurgents.

What is more important, Zelaya initiated many reforms in Nicaragua. In the first place, he worked to secularize Nicaraguan society; his constitution separated church and state and guaranteed freedom of religion and free secular education, and he financed the opening of new schools and the training of Nicaraguans abroad. By the end of his rule, the government was devoting approximately 10 percent of the budget to education.

Like other Latin American positivist leaders of the time, he made a significant effort to modernize the economy. His government surveyed and opened new lands for the expansion of the coffee industry. It also fostered the collection and storage of information by setting up the National Archives and Museum, reorganizing the General Statistics Office, and conducting a national census. In addition, his government invested in the physical infrastructure of communication by purchasing steamships and building roads and telegraph lines. As a result of these modernizing efforts, there was, during the Zelaya period, a rapid increase in the production of such export commodities as coffee, bananas, timber, and gold.

In foreign affairs, Zelaya worked to defend Nicaraguan interests and to promote Central American reunification. More effective in the former than in the latter, he is best known for his success in getting the British to withdraw once and for all from the Miskito Coast. Although they had essentially agreed to withdraw in the 1860 Treaty of Managua, they had not done so. In 1894, Zelaya sent troops to the city of Bluefields, accepted the Miskito king's dubiously valid petition for incorporation, and expelled the protesting British consul from the territory. The British responded with a blockade of Nicaragua's Pacific port, but the United States—anxious to enforce the Monroe Doctrine—pressured them to back down and to accept full Nicaraguan sovereignty over the disputed area.

Zelaya's efforts at promoting Central American reunification, though unsuccessful, were significant. Capitalizing on a region-wide resurgence of Central American nationalism, stimulated in part by his own success in confronting the British on the Miskito Coast, Zelaya convened the Conference of Amapala in 1895, in which Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador agreed to form a confederation called the *República Mayor* (the Greater Republic). A diplomatic representative was dispatched to the United States

and received by President Grover Cleveland, and a constitution for this larger political entity was written in 1898. Unfortunately, before it could go into effect, the incumbent government of El Salvador was overthrown and the new government withdrew from the union. The confederation subsequently collapsed.

Much is made in some accounts of the apparent fact that Zelaya was a disrupter of the peace in Central America. He did, indeed, invade neighboring Honduras on two occasions. However, it is equally true that he preferred to let the *República Mayor* collapse rather than send troops to El Salvador to hold it together by force. In addition, he settled boundary disputes with both of Nicaragua's neighbors through arbitration rather than by force. In the case of the boundary dispute with Honduras, he peacefully accepted a settlement that went against Nicaragua's claims.

Zelaya's downfall in 1909 was largely the result of a mounting conflict with the United States. It is important to remember that in that country at the turn of the century, "imperialism" was not a dirty word. The Spanish-American War had given the United States a colonial empire, and many Americans felt that their country had a legitimate colonial role to play in Central America. Zelaya's assertion as a regional leader and champion of Central American unity was, at least in part, a response to this threat—a response Washington resented. Zelaya also had the audacity to refuse to grant the United States canal-building rights that would have included U.S. sovereignty over certain Nicaraguan territory. As a result, the United States became involved in engineering Panamanian "independence" from Colombia and in 1903 signed the treaty it wanted with the new government it had helped create. A few years later, the Americans became alarmed at rumors that Zelaya was negotiating with the British and the Japanese to build a second—and potentially competitive—canal through Nicaragua.

The upshot of these and other sources of friction between the United States and Zelaya was that Washington eventually let it be known that it would look kindly on a Conservative overthrow of Zelaya. In 1909, when the revolt finally took place in Bluefields, Zelaya's forces made the tactical mistake of executing two confessed U.S. mercenaries. The United States used this incident as an excuse to sever diplomatic relations and to send troops to Bluefields to ensure against the defeat of the Conservatives. Though he held on for a few more months, Zelaya was ultimately forced to accept the inevitable, to resign, and to spend the rest of his life in exile.

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Before his resignation, Zelaya attempted to save the situation for his party by appointing a highly respected Liberal from León, Dr. José Madriz, to succeed him. The U.S. government, however, was determined that the Zelayista Liberals relinquish control. Washington refused to recognize the new government, and early in 1910, when Madriz's troops succeeded in routing the rebel forces in an attempted thrust to the west and drove them back to Bluefields, the commander of U.S. forces in that town forbade government troops from attacking rebel positions. In the face of such foreign interference, it was impossible for the Liberals to win, much less to govern. On August 20, 1910, the Madriz government collapsed and was replaced by a puppet, pro-U.S. regime supported by the Conservatives and some opportunistic Liberal *caudillos* (strongmen).

For the next two years (1910–1912), the economic and political situation deteriorated rapidly. The rebellion had disrupted the planting of crops and disturbed other sectors of the economy, and although the Madriz government had left the national treasury with a favorable balance, the new government squandered this resource almost immediately and began wildly printing paper money. Washington arranged private bank loans to its new client regime, but much of the loan money almost immediately went into the pockets of corrupt politicians. It was necessary to renegotiate loans and to allow the United States to become involved in the supervision of customs collection and the management of payment of the foreign debt.

The abysmal situation into which the country had fallen offended the national pride of many Nicaraguans, among them a young Zelayista Liberal, Benjamín Zeledón. A teacher, newspaperman, and lawyer, Zeledón had served Zelaya's government as a district judge in the newly liberated Caribbean territories, as an officer in the war with Honduras in 1907, as Nicaragua's representative to the Central American Court of Justice, and finally, at the age of thirty, as minister of defense. Under the Madriz government, he had continued as minister of defense and been elevated to the rank of general of the armies. In July 1912, when a group of dissident Conservatives rebelled against puppet president Adolfo Díaz, Zeledón and a group of Liberals joined in the uprising to rid Nicaragua of "the traitors to the Fatherland."

At first it appeared that the insurgents might win. Zeledón and his Liberal followers seized León and several other cities and cut communications to Managua. However, in the words of one U.S. observer of the time, "the

U.S. could hardly permit the overthrow of the Conservative authorities. [If the rebels won] all of the efforts of the State Department to place Nicaragua on her feet politically and financially would have been useless, and the interests of the New York bankers . . . would be seriously imperiled."[5] Therefore, under the old pretext of protecting U.S. lives and property, U.S. Marines were sent into Nicaragua. Though resistance by dissident Conservatives was quickly overcome, Zeledón not only rejected U.S. demands that he, too, surrender but also warned the U.S. commander that he, his superiors, and the "powerful nation" to which he belonged would bear the "tremendous responsibility and eternal infamy that History will attribute to you for having employed your arms against the weak who have been struggling for the reconquest of the sacred rights of [their] Fatherland."[6]

Badly outnumbered by the combined U.S. and Nicaraguan government forces, Zeledón's troops were besieged and defeated, and he was captured by Nicaraguan troops. Though the United States was in a position to save Zeledón's life, Major Smedley D. Butler, in a telegram to his superiors, suggested that "through some inaction on our part someone might hang him."[7] Butler's advice was apparently taken, for, on the following day, the Conservative government announced that Zeledón had died in battle. Before the young patriot's body was buried, it was dragged through the little hamlet of Niquinohomo. There, by historical coincidence, a short, skinny, seventeen-year-old boy was among those who witnessed government troops kicking the lifeless form. This seemingly insignificant teenager—who later commented that the scene had made his "blood boil with rage"—was Augusto César Sandino.

THE U.S. OCCUPATION, THE NATIONAL GUARD, AND SANDINO

For most of the following two decades, Nicaragua was subjected to direct foreign military intervention. U.S. troops were stationed there from 1912 to 1925 and again from 1926 to 1933, an intervention apparently motivated by a variety of concerns. Relatively unimportant, though not negligible, was the desire to protect U.S. investments. The involvement of U.S. bankers in Nicaragua has been mentioned. There was also a sincere, if naive, belief in some circles that U.S. involvement could somehow help bring democracy to the country. The most important motivations, how-

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ever, seem to have been geopolitical. U.S. decision makers felt it imperative to maintain a stable pro-U.S. government in Nicaragua, a country that, in addition to being an ideal site for a second transisthmian waterway, was located in the center of the U.S. sphere of influence in Central America.

During the first occupation, from 1912 to 1925, the United States ran Nicaraguan affairs through a series of Conservative presidents—Adolfo Díaz, Emiliano Chamorro, and Diego Manuel Chamorro. The relationship was symbiotic. The United States needed the Conservatives, and the Conservatives—who had neither the military strength nor the popular backing to maintain themselves in power—needed the United States. The Liberals were well aware that any attempt to regain power by means of an uprising would simply mean another unequal contest with the forces Zeledón faced in 1912, so an uneasy quiet prevailed.

The most notable product of the period was the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty, signed in 1914 and ratified in 1916. By the terms of this document the United States acquired exclusive rights, in perpetuity, to build a canal in Nicaragua, a renewable ninety-nine-year lease to the Great and Little Corn Islands in the Caribbean, and a renewable ninety-nine-year option to establish a naval base in the Gulf of Fonseca. In return, Nicaragua was to receive payment of $3 million. In reality, however, the U.S. officials who ran Nicaraguan financial affairs channeled much of that paltry sum into payments to foreign creditors. The aspects of the treaty dealing with the Corn Islands and the Gulf of Fonseca were hotly contested by El Salvador and Costa Rica, and the Central American Court of Justice decided in their favor. Though the United States had originally played a principal role in the creation of the court, it now chose to ignore its decision and, in so doing, contributed significantly to its collapse a few years later.

By the mid-1920s, U.S. decision makers had convinced themselves that the Conservatives were ready to carry on without the presence of U.S. troops. They were wrong. Within a few months of the first U.S. withdrawal in August 1925, conflicts flared up among the ruling Conservatives, and in 1926 the Liberals seized the initiative and staged a rebellion. The inevitable outcome was that the Conservatives were forced to turn again to Washington for salvation, and U.S. troops returned to Nicaragua.

During the second occupation, Washington showed greater skill and imagination in manipulating Nicaraguan affairs. It arranged a truce between the Liberals and the Conservatives that, among other things, provided

for a U.S.-supervised election in 1928. Though José María Moncada, the candidate of the majority Liberal party, won that contest, the United States was prepared to live with a Liberal president because, in the words of one scholar, the North Americans "controlled his regime from a number of points: the American Embassy; the Marines . . . ; the Guardia Nacional, with its United States Army Officers; the High Commissioner of Customs; the Director of the Railway; and the National Bank."[8] Under the circumstances, it no longer mattered whether the chief executive was a Liberal or a Conservative. Increasingly secure in this fact, the Americans in 1932 oversaw yet another election won by yet another Liberal—this time, Juan B. Sacasa, ironically the same person who had led the Liberal uprising of 1926 that brought about the second occupation.

The importance of this period (1927–1933) lies much less in the individuals who happened to occupy the presidency than in the fact that, during these six years, forces were being shaped that were to have a powerful and paradoxical impact on Nicaragua for at least the next half century. This was the time of the germination of the Somoza dictatorship, which was to rule Nicaragua for over four decades, and of the reinvigoration of a revolutionary nationalist tradition that would ultimately overthrow that dictatorship in favor of a radically new system.

The revolutionary tradition was dramatically resuscitated by Augusto César Sandino, who led a long guerrilla war against U.S. and government forces during the second occupation of his country. Sandino was a fascinating person. Born in 1895 of a common-law union between a moderately well-to-do landowner and an Indian woman, he was accepted by his father and nurtured philosophically in the high principles that were supposed to form the basis of Liberal practice. He worked for his father until he was twenty-five, when he fled Nicaragua after a fight in which he wounded a man who had insulted his mother. He eventually ended up in Tampico, Mexico, working for Standard Oil of Indiana. There he absorbed some of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution—in particular the emphasis on the dignity of the Indian. In 1926 he returned to Nicaragua and found employment in a U.S.-owned gold mine. When the Liberal insurrection broke out that year, he organized a fighting unit and joined the insurgents. In 1927, after the rest of the Liberals had agreed to the U.S.-sponsored peace settlement, he chose to continue the battle against the puppet Conservative government. This decision inevitably brought him into conflict

with U.S. troops and quickly turned his partisan crusade into a war of national liberation.

Though he wrote and spoke eloquently and profusely, Sandino was a man of action rather than a theorist. He did have certain ideas and opinions about the future of Nicaraguan politics and society. For instance, he advocated the formation of a popularly based political party and endorsed the idea of organizing land into peasant cooperatives. But more than anything else, he was a nationalist and an anti-imperialist. Quite simply, he found the U.S. occupation and domination of his country to be offensive and unacceptable. "The sovereignty and liberty of a people," he said, "are not to be discussed, but rather, defended with weapons in hand."[9]

In his struggle against the U.S. occupiers and their military allies, Sandino often used some of the brutal methods endemic to factional warfare in the rugged Segovias region where he was based. He was not above subjecting captured government and U.S. troops and their civilian allies to ritual mutilation before death.[10] In his own words, "Liberty is won not with flowers but with bullets, and for this reason we have been compelled to utilize the *cortes de chaleco, chumbo, y blumer*." (The "blumer" cut, for instance, involved severing the hands and lower legs of the captive and letting him bleed to death.)[11] The purpose was to chasten the enemy and allied civilians. To his credit, though, and unlike his adversaries, Sandino also instituted a strict code against rape as an instrument of intimidation.[12]

At the same time and much more important, Sandino developed an effective set of guerrilla tactics through a process of trial and error. At first he used conventional military tactics, sending large groups of men into combat against an entrenched and well-equipped enemy. As a result, his troops initially took heavy casualties without inflicting serious damage. Learning from this mistake, he quickly developed the more classic guerrilla strategies of harassment and hit-and-run. In addition, he cultivated the support of the peasants in the regions in which he operated. They, in turn, served as an early warning communication network and as ad hoc soldiers during specific guerrilla actions.

For their part, the U.S. occupiers also played a very rough game. Upon his arrival in Nicaragua in 1928, one Marine wrote to his fiancée that "we got instructions to bring him [Sandino] in but not as a prisoner. . . . I wish I'd meet him. I'd bring him in the way they want him."[13] And U.S. forces used tactics that would become familiar during the Vietnam War—the aerial

bombardment of "hostile" towns and hamlets, the creation of what amounted to "free fire zones" in rural areas, and the forced resettlement of peasants to what, later in the century, would be called "protective hamlets."[14]

All this, of course, only solidified civilian support for Sandino. There were fluctuations in guerrilla activity and strength, but when the United States finally withdrew in January 1933, Sandino was still "as great a threat . . . as he had been at any previous point in his career."[15]

Ironically, the threat Sandino posed dissolved almost immediately after the Americans left. Because his major condition for peace had been the departure of the Marines, Sandino signed a preliminary peace agreement, in February 1933, with the Sacasa government. Calling for a cessation of hostilities and a partial disarmament of the guerrillas, the document also guaranteed amnesty for Sandino's men and a degree of autonomy for those Sandinistas who wished to settle in the territory along the Río Coco. In 1934 there were further peace negotiations. In the long run, however, Sandino was deceived, captured, and executed. But his daring stand against the foreign occupiers had been an example and had legitimized a set of tactics that were to be successfully employed by the Sandinista Front of National Liberation in overthrowing a U.S.-client dictatorship almost a half century later.

The other force that came into its own during the second U.S. occupation and had a profound impact on the future of the country was the National Guard of Nicaragua. Washington had long felt that what Nicaragua really needed was an apolitical constabulary that could maintain stability and create a healthy environment for political and economic development. Although a halfhearted attempt to create such a force had been made toward the end of the first occupation, the concept was not effectively implemented until the late 1920s. By then the United States was becoming increasingly tired of directly running Nicaragua's internal affairs. And, of course, there was the desire to "Nicaraguanize," if you will, the war against Sandino. Top priority, therefore, was placed on recruiting, training, arming, and equipping the Guard. In the haste of the moment, safeguards aimed at maintaining the apolitical character of the Guard were set aside. As the Marines were leaving, command of this new "national" army passed from the Americans to a congenial, ambitious, English-speaking Nicaraguan politician, Anastasio Somoza García. Less than four years later, an elitist dictatorial system based on a symbiotic relationship between the now corrupted and thoroughly politicized National Guard and the Somoza family

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NOTES

1. For an excellent, scholarly examination of the early depopulation of Nicaragua, see David Richard Radell, "Native Depopulation and the Slave Trade: 1527–1578," in his *An Historical Geography of Western Nicaragua: The Spheres of Influence of León, Granada, and Managua, 1519–1965* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1969), pp. 66–80.

2. Ibid., pp. 70–80.

3. No known relation of coauthor Walker.

4. For an excellent reexamination of Zelaya, see Charles L. Stansifer, "José Santos Zelaya: A New Look at Nicaragua's Liberal Dictator," *Revista/Review Interamericana*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Fall 1977), pp. 468–485. The interpretation and much of the information in my short treatment of Zelaya is drawn from this fine source.

5. Dana G. Munro, *The Five Republics of Central America* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1967), p. 243.

6. A handwritten letter from Zeledón to Colonel J. H. Pendleton, Masaya, October 3, 1912. Xerox copy courtesy of Zeledón's grandson, Sergio Zeledón.

7. Major Smedley D. Butler as quoted in Richard Millett, *The Guardians of the Dynasty: A History of the U.S.-Created Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua and the Somoza Family* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1977), p. 32.

8. Ralph Lee Woodward Jr., *Central America: A Nation Divided* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 200.

9. Though this is one of the best-known sayings from Sandino, we do not have the original citation.

10. Michael J. Schroeder, "Horse Thieves, to Rebels, to Dogs: Political Gang Violence and the State in the Western Segovias, Nicaragua, in the Time of Sandino, 1926–1934," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2 (May 1996), pp. 427–428.

11. Ibid., p. 428.

12. Ibid.

13. Emil G. Thomas, Letter to Fiancée, April 1, 1928, p. 7, from a collection of the Thomas Letters in the Archives at the Ohio University Alden Library, Athens, Ohio.

14. Michael J. Schroeder, "The Sandino Rebellion Revisited: Civil War, Imperialism, Popular Nationalism, and State Formation Muddied Up Together in the

Segovias of Nicaragua, 1926–34," in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Ricardo D. Salvatore (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 208–268.

15. Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty*, p. 98.