

REVOLUTIONARY REFUGEE POLICY: *Salvadorans and Statecraft in Sandinista Nicaragua (1979–1990)*

ABSTRACT: During the 1980s, more than 20,000 Salvadorans fleeing the violence of the Salvadoran Civil War entered the neighboring country of Nicaragua. Their flight was part of a larger multidirectional migration out of El Salvador in which Salvadorans sought refuge across Central and North America. In response to this unprecedented influx of Salvadoran refugee men, women, and children, the Nicaraguan government—newly under the control of the revolutionary Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)—declared that all refugees would be permitted “the opportunity to survive and produce.” This article argues that the timing of the refugees’ arrival proved mutually beneficial for both the Salvadorans and the FSLN by illustrating how Sandinista officials sought to further agrarian reform projects via refugee integration into agricultural cooperatives. As such, Nicaraguan refugee policy functioned as an integral part of Sandinista statecraft. Through an analysis of refugee-produced sources, government and UNHCR documents, and news reports, this article sheds new light on the entwined histories of Salvadoran refugees and the Sandinista state in the transnational context of the late Cold War period in Central America.

KEYWORDS: Nicaragua, agrarian reform, Salvadoran refugees, Sandinistas

In the October 1983 weekly bulletin *iVolveremos!*, people in the Salvadoran refugee community of Los Leches reported that “they are happy with their sowing. This week it yielded nothing less than 70 *manzanas* of yuca and 15 *manzanas* of corn.”¹ The report also explained how the community of Brasil Grande had “planted a very good type of potato that adapts better to [the Nicaraguan] lands’ conditions of production. It seems that a Salvadoran *compañera* specialist advised them. They will see if it can serve other

I would like to thank Anita Casavantes Bradford, Heidi Tinsman, Susan Coutin, Vicki Ruiz, Steven Topik, Molly Todd, Mellissa Linton-Villafranco, Alex Borucki, Rachel O’Toole, Olivia Hanninen, Clare Gordon Bettencourt, John Schwaller, Eric Zolov, Matthew DeLaMater, and *The Americas*’ anonymous reviewers for their feedback and support as this research developed. I would also like to extend my gratitude to staff members at the Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen (San Salvador) and the Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (Managua) for their assistance. Finally, I would like to thank the University of California at Irvine Humanities Commons and the UCI Center for Global Peace and Conflict Studies for the generous grants that funded this project.

1. Comunidades cristianas de refugiados salvadoreños en Nicaragua, *iVolveremos!*, October 22, 1983, Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica, Managua [hereafter IHNCA], H3247, *Boletín*. A *manzana* is a unit of measurement common in Central America that is roughly equivalent to 1.7 acres or 0.7 hectares.

collectives.”² Such reports were common in *iVolveremos!* (“We Shall Return!”), wordplay that paralleled Radio Venceremos, the clandestine radio network of the leftist Salvadoran revolutionary forces known as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Produced by an organization of refugees living in Nicaragua, *iVolveremos!* circulated information regarding Salvadoran refugees and news from the war in El Salvador.

Excerpts from this refugee-produced publication hint at multiple aspects of the Nicaraguan government’s response to the influx of as many as 20,000 Salvadoran refugees into the nation during the 1980s, as well as how Salvadoran refugees experienced life in Nicaragua.³ The flight of these Salvadoran refugees to Nicaragua was part of the much larger multidirectional migration of approximately 1.5 million Salvadorans who, beginning in 1979, fled civil war and sought refuge across Central America, Mexico, the United States, and Canada.

In the broadest of terms, the excerpts suggest that Salvadoran refugees living in Nicaragua were able to circulate information between refugee camps at a rate that supported a weekly publication. Additionally, the bulletin’s use of the term “*compañero/a*” suggests a link between the refugee communities in Nicaragua and the FMLN in El Salvador.⁴ Furthermore, the excerpts imply a stark contrast between conditions in Nicaragua and neighboring Honduras, where Salvadorans were not afforded open, safe settlements free from state violence.⁵ The Nicaraguan government, on the other hand, encouraged Salvadorans to integrate into society. The discussion of sowing, crop yields, and different varieties of potatoes among multiple refugee camps also illustrates a particular importance placed on agricultural collectives in Nicaragua. Indeed, the government promoted the formation of refugee agricultural cooperatives among Salvadoran refugees. The government officially recognized only 5,000 to 6,000 Salvadorans as legal refugees, but it generally permitted all Salvadorans “the opportunity to survive and produce.”⁶ In fact, the Nicaraguan government’s policy, recognized by the United Nations as “exemplary,” granted

2. Comunidades cristianas de refugiados salvadoreños en Nicaragua, *iVolveremos!*

3. “22 mil refugiados salvadoreños hay en Nicaragua,” *La Prensa*, June 26, 1982, IHNCA, H0569; Hemispheric Migration Project and Intergovernmental Committee on Migration [hereafter HMP/ICM], Study on the Basic Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Central American Refugees in Nicaragua 1981–1983 [hereafter Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics], May 1984, Centro Centroamericano de Población, Universidad de Costa Rica, San José.

4. Jocelyn Viterna, *Women in War: The Micro-Processes of Mobilization in El Salvador* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xv.

5. Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

6. El Salvador & Guatemala Committees for Human Rights, *Out of the Ashes: The Lives and Hopes of Refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala* (London: War on Want Campaigns, Ltd., 1985), 11, in Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen [hereafter MUPI], San Salvador.

all refugees the same civil rights as Nicaraguan citizens regarding health, education, and employment.⁷

The timing of the migration proved mutually beneficial for both the Salvadoran refugees and the Nicaraguan government. It was in 1979, only a year before Salvadoran refugees began arriving, that the leftist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) had overthrown the Somoza family dictatorship, which had been in power since the 1930s.⁸ In the context of the region's ongoing conflicts, the Sandinista government framed the arrival of refugees from a "fraternal nation" as an avenue to further the revolutionary agenda. This article argues that Nicaraguan refugee policies under the revolutionary state promoted a domestic agenda around land and labor—specifically, that the FSLN furthered its agrarian reform projects through the integration of Salvadoran refugees. In 1981–82, the Sandinistas implemented a nationwide agrarian reform policy that advocated the development of agricultural cooperatives through land redistribution.⁹ This article demonstrates that the state actively sought to incorporate Salvadoran refugees into this economic and social restructuring. In this way, Nicaragua's refugee policies toward Salvadorans functioned as revolutionary acts of nation-building and statecraft under the Sandinista platform.¹⁰ The timing of the arrival was critical in

7. "22 mil refugiados salvadoreños hay en Nicaragua."

8. Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993); Tanya Harmer and Eline van Ommen, "Internationalizing Revolution: The Nicaraguan Revolution and the World, 1977–1990," *The Americas* 78:4 (October 2021): 541–551, <https://doi.org/10.1017/tam.2021.109>; Eline van Ommen, "The Nicaraguan Revolution's Challenge to the Monroe Doctrine: Sandinistas and Western Europe, 1979–1990," *The Americas* 78:4 (2021): 639–666, <https://doi.org/10.1017/tam.2021.3>; Mateo Jarquín, "The Nicaraguan Question: Contadora and the Latin American Response to US Intervention against the Sandinistas, 1982–86," *The Americas* 78:4 (October 2021): 581–608, <https://doi.org/10.1017/tam.2021.6>; Aviva Chomsky, *Central America's Forgotten History: Revolution, Violence, and the Roots of Migration* (New York: Beacon Press, 2021); Jeffrey L. Gould, "On the Road to 'El Porvenir': Revolutionary and Counterrevolutionary Violence in El Salvador and Nicaragua," in *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War*, Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 88–120, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822392859-005>; Erik A. Moore, "Rights or Wishes? Conflicting Views over Human Rights and America's Involvement in the Nicaraguan Contra War," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 29:4 (December 2018): 716–737, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2018.1528789>; Michael Zalkin, "The Sandinista Agrarian Reform: 1979–1990," *International Journal of Political Economy* 20:3 (Fall 1990): 46–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08911916.1990.11643801>. For foundational texts in Nicaraguan history, see Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chimandega, Nicaragua, 1912–1979* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); and Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Die in This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880–1965* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

9. Laura J. Enriquez, *Harvesting Change: Labor and Agrarian Reform in Nicaragua, 1979–1990* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Laura J. Enriquez and Marlean I. Llanes, "Back to the Land: The Political Dilemmas of Agrarian Reform in Nicaragua," *Social Problems* 40 (1993): 255; Jon Ander Bilbao, *Migration, War, and Agrarian Reform: Peasant Settlements in Nicaragua* (Washington, DC: Hemispheric Migration Project, Center for Immigration Policy and Refugee Assistance, Georgetown University, 1988).

10. The framework of this article was significantly shaped by the following texts in critical refugee studies: Gil Loescher, "Humanitarianism and Politics in Central America," *Political Science Quarterly* 103:2 (1988): 295–320, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2151185>; María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

influencing their reception, as it coincided with the implementation of social and economic policies that were an essential part of the new Sandinista government's agenda. Moreover, these policies suited Salvadoran refugees, as most desired a similar revolutionary government in their homeland.¹¹

Recent scholarship in the interdisciplinary fields of Central American Studies and Critical Refugee Studies has revealed the importance of incorporating new approaches to historical work on Central America, which has traditionally tended to focus on either individual Central American nations or the study of the region as a collective entity.¹² While historians of Central America have for decades highlighted the importance of land disputes, labor organization, revolutions, state violence, wars, and US intervention in shaping the trajectories of Central American history, the literature has often unintentionally overlooked pivotal transnational dimensions.¹³

11. Todd, *Beyond Displacement*; Viterna, *Women in War*.

12. For key works in Central American Studies, see Cecilia Menjívar, *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Leisy J. Abrego, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love across Borders* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Karina O. Alvarado, Alicia I. Estrada, and Ester E. Hernández, *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017); Maritza E. Cárdenas, *Constituting Central American-Americans: Transnational Identities and the Politics of Dislocation*, Latinidad: Transnational Cultures in the United States Series (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018); Susan Bibler Coutin, *Legalizing Moves: Salvadoran Immigrants' Struggle for U.S. Residency* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Susan Bibler Coutin, *Nations of Emigrants: Shifting Boundaries of Citizenship in El Salvador and the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Susan Bibler Coutin, *Exiled Home: Salvadoran Transnational Youth in the Aftermath of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Bridget Hayden, *Salvadoreños en Costa Rica: vidas desplazadas* (San José: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad de Costa Rica, 2005); Ana Patricia Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009); and Luis Roniger, *Transnational Politics in Central America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011). For key works in the field of Critical Refugee Studies, see Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Todd, *Beyond Displacement*; Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*, Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies Series (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Ma Vang, "Displaced Histories: Refugee Critique and the Politics of Hmong American Remembering" (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1024544841?pq-origsite=primo>, accessed October 22, 2022; Ma Vang, "The Refugee Soldier: A Critique of Recognition and Citizenship in the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 1997," *Positions* 20:3 (2012): 685–712, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-1593501>; Alexander Betts, *Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); Espiritu, *Body Counts*; A. Naomi Paik, *Rightlessness: Testimony and Redress in U.S. Prison Camps since World War II*, Studies in United States Culture Series (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Abrego, *Sacrificing Families*; María Cristina García, *The Refugee Challenge in Post-Cold War America*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/os0/9780190655303.001.0001>.

13. For key works in Central American history, see Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, *Weak Foundations: The Economy of El Salvador in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, *Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador: The Insurrection of 1932, Roque Dalton, and the Politics of Historical Memory* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007); Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, *Modernizing Minds in El Salvador: Education Reform and the Cold War, 1960–1980* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012); Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Lead as Equals*; Jeffrey L. Gould and Aldo Lauria-Santiago, *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920–1932* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Jeffrey L. Gould and Lowell Gudmundson, "Central American Historiography after the Violence," *Latin American Research Review* 32:2 (April 1997): 244; Deborah Levenson-Estrada, *Trade Unionists against Terror: Guatemala City, 1954–1985* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Deborah Levenson-Estrada, *Adiós Niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and*

Within the blooming interdisciplinary field of Central American Studies, the focus on Central America in the United States is largely a result of the increase of US-based Central American scholars writing on the histories, politics, literatures, and epistemologies of their communities. Groundbreaking works on Central American diasporas by scholars such as Cecilia Menjívar, Leisy Abrego, Susan Coutin, Ana Patricia Rodríguez, Maritza Cárdenas, Karina O. Alvarado, Alicia Ivonne Estrada, and Ester E. Hernández have been foundational to the field.¹⁴ This work has been and continues to be extraordinarily important, especially as Central American communities continue to fight against hostile immigration policies in the United States. Less, however, has been written on regional migrations within Central America. Although there is some more recent historical scholarship, it is as of yet relatively limited. Nonetheless, historians María Cristina García and Molly Todd have contributed foundational works for examining the movement of people and ideas across regional borders in Central America.¹⁵

Building on recent historical works that shift the geographic focus to the Global South, this article centers Nicaragua not as a refugee-producing, immigrant-sending nation, but as a host nation to refugees of the Salvadoran Civil War.¹⁶ Within this inherently transnational framework, this article approaches the relational histories of Salvadoran refugees and the Sandinista government using collections from Salvadoran and Nicaraguan archives and digital archives based in other regions. An analysis of refugee-produced

the Politics of Death (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); and Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, updated edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

14. Menjívar, *Framgedmented Ties*; Abrego, *Sacrificing Families*; Bibler Coutin, *Exiled Home*; Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus*; Cárdenas, *Constituting Central American-Americans*; Alvarado, Estrada, and Hernández, *U.S. Central Americans*.

15. García, *Seeking Refuge*; Todd, *Beyond Displacement*; Molly Todd, "The Paradox of Trans-American Solidarity" *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19:4 (2017) 74-112; Molly Todd, *Long Journey to Justice: El Salvador, the United States, and Struggles against Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020). See also Rachael De La Cruz, "Ciudad Romero: The Salvadoran Refugee Family and Panamanian Statecraft under the Torrijos Regime," *Journal of Caribbean History* 53:2 (2019): 245-262; Rachael De La Cruz, "Surveillance, Settlements, and Sanctuary: A Comparative and Relational History of Refugee Policies in Central America, 1979-92" (PhD diss.: University of California Irvine, 2020).

16. For social science studies on migration in Central America produced in the 1980s and 1990s, see Segundo Montes, "La situación de los salvadoreños desplazados y refugiados," *Estudios Centroamericanos* 39:434 (November 1984): 904-920; Arlene Lachman, "Los refugiados en Panamá" (Thesis: Universidad de Panamá, 1986); Shelly R. Daviski, "El Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados (ACNUR) en América Central y Panamá" (Thesis: Universidad de Panamá, 1982); Teresa Moncado, "El refugiado y su régimen legal en Panamá" (Thesis: Universidad de Panamá, 1985); Segundo Montes, *Refugiados y repatriados: El Salvador y Honduras* (San Salvador: Instituto de Derechos Humanos, Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas," 1989); Anna M Alejo, "Central American Refugees in Costa Rica" (Thesis: Florida International University, 1990); Marisol Hernández Torres, "Refugiados salvadoreños en Belice: en busca de un lugar en la historia" (Thesis: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2013); Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, "Central American Migration: A Framework for Analysis," *Latin American Research Review* 26:1 (1991): 75-110; Tanya Basok, *Keeping Heads Above Water: Salvadorean Refugees in Costa Rica* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); and Robin Ormes Quizar, *My Turn to Weep: Salvadoran Refugee Women in Costa Rica* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1998).

bulletins and pamphlets, government documents, reports of the United Nation High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR; ACNUR in Spanish), newspaper articles, and radio broadcasts reveals how Nicaraguan refugee policy toward Salvadorans functioned as an integral part of Sandinista statecraft.

FROM THE SOMOZA DICTATORSHIP TO THE SANDINISTA REVOLUTION (1936–1979)

The treatment of Salvadoran refugees by the Nicaraguan state must be understood in the larger context of the twentieth century from the mid 1930s on, with a particular focus on national and international tensions between the political left and right. From the 1930s through the 1970s, the Somoza dynasty, with the support of Nicaragua's National Guard and the US government, controlled Nicaragua with rampant corruption and violent repression. Under the Somoza regime, the export of agricultural goods, primarily dependent on the US market, constituted the country's economy. Nicaragua was a deeply unequal society, with the wealth of the country concentrated in very few hands—the Somoza family itself owned 23 percent of Nicaragua's land. The large, privately owned farms produced commodities such as coffee, cotton, sugar, and bananas, and raised cattle to be sold to US agrobusinesses. This agro-export economy required migrant labor. Prior to the late 1970s, both Salvadorans and Nicaraguans participated in regional labor migration determined by harvest seasons.¹⁷ The governments of these countries permitted, even encouraged, this system of shared migrant labor. However, the increasing tensions between the region's governments in the late 1970s and early 1980s prevented this traditional migration and worsened recurring labor shortages in Nicaragua.¹⁸ In light of this situation, the Sandinista government would find Salvadoran refugees a very welcome addition to the economy.

One of the most significant reasons for the increased tension in the region was the rise of the leftist Sandinista National Liberation Front in response to the Somoza dictatorship. The FSLN carried the name and tradition of a national hero, Augusto Sandino, who had led the fight against the US Marines' occupation of Nicaragua from 1927 to 1933 and whom the Somoza regime killed in 1934. Through its namesake, the Sandinista Front invoked earlier revolutionary peasant, nationalist, and anti-imperialist movements.¹⁹ Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, the FSLN attempted insurgencies but was largely

17. Hamilton and Stoltz Chinchilla, "Central American Migration," 80, 84.

18. Enriquez, *Harvesting Change*; Instituto Histórico Centroamericano [hereafter IHC], Nicaragua, "La difícil situación de refugiados," *Envío* 6 (November 1981): 16, IHNCA, Analíticas.

19. Alejandro Bendaña, "The Rise and Fall Of The FSLN," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 37:6 (2004): 21–26.

unsuccessful.²⁰ By the mid 1970s, however, repression, corruption, and economic hardship under the Somoza regime had led to mass unrest throughout the country, and by the late 1970s, thousands of Nicaraguans from various sectors of society had joined the Sandinistas' revolutionary cause. Then, after staging several successful armed uprisings in 1978 and 1979, the Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza regime and took control of the government on July 19, 1979. Although more than 50,000 Nicaraguans died in the process, the FSLN had achieved what many other revolutionary groups across Latin America had attempted during the twentieth century.²¹

The revolution faced a notable lack of opposition from the US government. Jimmy Carter was the US president in 1979; in contrast to many other US presidents, Carter promoted a human rights discourse in his foreign policy.²² However, following the 1979 Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, his policies in Central America changed course. After this turning point, the Carter Administration sought to stifle further revolutions in the region by providing funding to the right-wing Salvadoran government to squash a similar revolutionary movement in El Salvador. The level of US involvement in Nicaragua drastically intensified following the 1980 election of US president Ronald Reagan. Thus, the Sandinistas taking control of the government in 1979 did not end the violence between the left and right in Nicaragua. Rather, the so-called Contra War ensued. The Contras were a US-backed, right-wing paramilitary group, and throughout the 1980s, they sought to destabilize and overthrow the Sandinista government. US support of the Contras, much like its support of the Salvadoran government, was a key part of the Reagan administration's anticommunist foreign policies of the late Cold War period. It was also part of a long-standing pattern of US intervention in Central America that pre-dated the Cold War.

Having overthrown the Somoza dictatorship, the Sandinistas in the second half of 1979 began their attempt to radically transform Nicaragua's economy and society. However, international and domestic conflicts between the left and right shaped how the Sandinistas would govern. Although the FSLN generally lacked a clearly defined and unifying ideology in the years following the revolution, party leaders described Nicaragua as a "socialist-oriented" nation.²³ Core elements of the revolutionary government's platform included a literacy crusade, public health campaigns, food development programs, military build-up, and agrarian reform. Economically, the primary goal for the revolutionary government was a

20. Moore, "Rights or Wishes?" 718.

21. Moore, "Rights or Wishes?" 718.

22. John A. Soares Jr., "Strategy, Ideology, and Human Rights," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8:4 (Fall 2006): 62.

23. Bendaña, "The Rise and Fall of the FSLN."

transformation of the agro-export economy to a mixed economy that would include diverse trading partners and an expanding economic infrastructure, and generally attempt to redistribute the nation's resources through agrarian reform. Regardless of these lofty and noble social and economic plans, over the following decade the FSLN diverted much of the national budget to fighting the Contra War.²⁴

WELCOMING REFUGEES OF A 'FRATERNAL NATION'

Similar violent struggles between the Left and Right were occurring simultaneously in El Salvador. From 1979 to 1992, the US-backed Salvadoran military waged war against a leftist coalition of rebel guerillas known as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The Salvadoran government's persecution of civilians led to countless human rights violations, including massacres, torture, and sexual violence corroborated by widespread accounts.²⁵ During the violent 12-year conflict, over 20 percent of the population of El Salvador fled their homes.

Between 1980 and 1984, political violence and persecution drove approximately 20,000 Salvadorans, generally those who belonged to various targeted groups in El Salvador, to flee to Nicaragua. These were people who worked for the Catholic Church, family members of people who had been indiscriminately killed in military sweeps, family members of FMLN guerrillas, and people who had participated in any type of mass organization.²⁶ These backgrounds indicate that those Salvadorans who fled to Nicaragua were likely sympathetic to leftist politics, if not active participants. Approximately half the refugees were from rural areas and half from urban areas. The majority arrived in nuclear, extended, and female-headed family units, consisting of mixtures of men, women, and children.

Most of these refugees had to implement creative strategies to reach Nicaragua and relied on some level of financial means. As the Salvadoran government began restricting travel to the nearby socialist country, entering Nicaragua was often a complicated process for displaced Salvadorans. Since the two countries do not share a border, the only ways to enter Nicaragua from El Salvador without first passing through other countries was by either boat or plane. Between 1980 and the early months of 1981, many Salvadorans had entered

24. Bendaña, "The Rise and Fall of the FSLN"; Enríquez, *Harvesting Change*, 53.

25. Truth Commission: El Salvador, United States Institute of Peace, <http://www.usip.org/publications/truth-commission-el-salvador>, accessed October 22, 2022.

26. IHC, "La difícil situación de refugiados".

Nicaragua via the Nicaragua-El Salvador ferry, but due to tense political relations between the two countries, the ferry ceased operation in March of 1981. Before the Salvadoran government further restricted air travel between the countries, more Salvadorans arrived in Nicaragua by plane.²⁷ As violent conflict grew in both countries, however, the Salvadoran government suspended flights, citing the increase in arms trafficking between the Sandinistas and the FMLN.²⁸ In particular, the government restricted the departure of men for Nicaragua, claiming they were going to train with Sandinista forces; this led to disproportionately more women and children in Nicaraguan refugee settlements.²⁹ Subsequently, many who arrived in Nicaragua strategically chose to pass first through other Central American countries. Some entered Panama and Costa Rica on eight-day visas for visits to friends and family before continuing their journey. Others crossed through Honduras on their way to Nicaragua.³⁰ Approximately 20,000 Salvadorans used these strategies and others to enter Nicaragua prior to a significant slowdown in migration in 1984.³¹

In response to the influx, the Nicaraguan government found it imperative to allow Salvadorans fleeing war and repression to live without fear of persecution in Nicaragua. From a geopolitical perspective, the Sandinistas' reception of Salvadoran refugees was intertwined with the Contra War and US intervention in Central America in general. The arrival of the refugees—who were fleeing the right-wing state violence in El Salvador—offered the Sandinista government a chance to condemn the right-wing Salvadoran government and its financier, the US government, on the international stage by officially recognizing Salvadorans as refugees fleeing persecution. Thus, in February 1980 the government of Nicaragua announced that it would adhere to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.³² This decision also distanced the revolutionary state from the former Somoza regime, under which Nicaragua had not been a signatory.

In June 1980, Nicaragua's secretary of foreign affairs, Doris Tijerino Haslam, read an appeal on behalf of the FSLN National Directorate calling "to all Latin American people to welcome the large number of Salvadoran refugees who are fleeing and seeking refuge from the ferocious repression undertaken against the

27. IHC, "La difícil situación de refugiados."

28. IHC, "La difícil situación de refugiados"; "Armas de Nicaragua para el FMLN descubre Honduras," *El Diario de Hoy*, January 8, 1989, in MUPI, San Salvador, A2 04 4.1 F4.192.3.

29. "Salvadoran Refugees Arriving at Pacific Port," *Panama City ACAN*, June 14, 1980, Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Reports [hereafter FBIS Daily Reports].

30. IHC, "La difícil situación de refugiados."

31. HMP/ICM, Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics, 10.

32. Law Establishing the National Office for Refugees, Decree No. 1096, reprinted in HMP/ICM, Annex V.

people of that fraternal nation.”³³ This public plea, which was reported through Radio Sandino, called on other Latin American countries to take in their “heroic” Salvadoran brothers and sisters from the “fraternal nation” suffering at the hands of “ferocious repression.”

[The FSLN urged] the fraternal governments and peoples of Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, the Andean Pact countries, any other Latin American country, and the world—as they helped our people who are being massacred by the Somocista dictatorship—to open their doors to the hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans who are seeking refuge along the Honduran border. This is a tragic situation: in Chalatenango alone there are 3,000 Salvadoran citizens huddled together, fleeing from extermination.³⁴

Framing Salvadoran refugees as both “heroic” and victims of attempted “extermination” by the Salvadoran regime, this official FSLN statement simultaneously criticized the atrocities in El Salvador, highlighted Nicaragua’s role in welcoming refugees, and called on other Latin American governments to do the same.

Between 1980 and 1982, the Nicaraguan government and the UNHCR, the United Nations’ refugee agency, which had been active in Central America since the late 1970s, created and funded reception centers as part of an emergency program intended to process the extraordinary number of incoming refugees.³⁵ Once in Nicaragua, most Salvadoran refugees passed through a transit camp—the first step in the government’s resettlement process. Refugees commonly stayed at the transit camps for approximately two months as the government attempted to resettle them rapidly into agricultural cooperatives.³⁶

The establishment of the National Office for Refugees in 1982 was a visible manifestation of the Sandinista government’s commitment to ensuring displaced Salvadorans would live safely, with their basic needs met. In February 1981, the Nicaraguan government had announced a “census of Salvadoran refugees to be taken.”³⁷ The Ministry of the Interior requested that all undocumented refugees “come forward and . . . normalize their situation,” claiming it would “make their stay in Nicaragua easier.”³⁸ The announcement

33. “FSLN Appeal for Help,” Radio Sandino, Managua, June 7, 1980, FBIS Daily Reports.

34. Radio Sandino, “FSLN Appeal for Help.”

35. “22 mil refugiados salvadoreños hay en Nicaragua”; “Salvadoran Refugee Camp,” Radio Sandino, June 7, 1980, FBIS Daily Reports.

36. El Salvador & Guatemala Committees for Human Rights, *Out of the Ashes*, 18; “22 mil refugiados salvadoreños hay en Nicaragua.”

37. “Census of Salvadoran Refugees to be Taken,” Radio Sandino, February 7, 1981; “Salvadoran Refugee Camp,” Radio Sandino, June 7, 1980, FBIS Daily Reports..

38. Radio Sandino, “Census of Salvadoran Refugees to be Taken.”

asked Salvadorans to go to regional immigration offices in Rivas, Ocotol, Chontales, Matagalpa, and Managua to obtain identification cards that would officially allow them to move freely throughout the country.³⁹ In September 1982, another government decree established the National Office for Refugees, which institutionalized processing and assistance for refugees. The office was set up under the authority of the Nicaraguan Social Security and Welfare Institute and was tasked with the following purposes: determine the status of refugees; keep permanent and updated registration of refugees; coordinate with other state bodies to develop programs to integrate Salvadorans into the economic process without detriment to employment of Nicaraguans; cooperate with other state agencies to administer necessary health, housing, education and other services; and supervise the implementation of UNHCR and other international aid projects.⁴⁰

The National Office for Refugees recognized approximately 6,000 of the 20,000 Salvadorans as “legalized refugees,” which meant they could receive assistance from the Nicaraguan state and from the UNHCR. The 14,000 additional unrecognized refugees integrated into Nicaraguan society, living throughout the country, without applying for state or UNHCR aid. However, both the government and the UNHCR were aware of the presence of the unrecognized refugee population.⁴¹ While the state did not provide these “undocumented” refugees assistance, they also did not harass or target them for deportation.

INTERTWINING AGRARIAN REFORM AND REFUGEE POLICY

Because the arrival of thousands of Salvadoran refugees coincided with the Sandinista implementation of economic and social restructuring, the revolutionary government responded by weaving together its refugee policies with its agrarian reform policies. In 1981–82, the Sandinistas were in the process of enacting a nationwide agrarian reform policy, intended to alleviate poverty and raise the standard of living for rural poor via the formation of agricultural cooperatives through land redistribution.⁴² The 1981 Agrarian Reform Law legalized the expropriation of unused, underutilized, and rented land on farms greater than 350 hectares in the Pacific and central interior regions and on farms greater than 700 hectares in the rest of the country.⁴³ In

39. Radio Sandino, “Census of Salvadoran Refugees to be Taken.”

40. Law Establishing the National Office for Refugees: Decree No. 1096, reprinted in HMP/ICM, Annex V.

41. HMP/ICM, Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics, 20.

42. Enríquez, *Harvesting Change*, 54.

43. Carmen Diana Deere, “Cooperative Development and Women’s Participation in the Nicaraguan Agrarian Reform,” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* 65:5 (1983): 1044.

the early stages, the majority of the redistributed land was expropriated from Anastasio Somoza Debayle and his close associates.⁴⁴

The revolutionary state desired to create a mixed economy by diversifying trade partners and producing for a more localized market, thus decreasing dependency on the United States. To achieve this, the government opted not to redistribute this land to individual *campesino* families, as it saw such a move as a “step backward” in terms of economic production. Rather, land reform would foster agricultural collectivism.⁴⁵ Beneficiaries of the agrarian reform consisted of landless workers, tenant farmers, smallholders with insufficient land, cooperatives, and state farms.⁴⁶ While significant large-scale production of cotton, coffee, sugarcane, beef continued to sustain the Nicaraguan economy in the years immediately following the revolution, agricultural collectives began cultivating staples such as basic grains, corn, beans, potatoes, and yuca.

The burgeoning refugee settlements did the work of statecraft. The refugee assistance agencies, along with the Social Security and Welfare Institute, aligned their policies with the larger Sandinista goal of agrarian reform by creating (semi)permanent Salvadoran refugee settlements that functioned as agricultural cooperatives, using land redistributed by the state. In fact, much of the land granted to Salvadoran refugees was on farms expropriated from Somoza and his close supporters.⁴⁷ By 1985, the Nicaraguan Ministry of Land Reform had provided 15,000 acres of “good agricultural land” to refugee cooperative camps, using expropriated properties.⁴⁸

While the original beneficiaries of agrarian reform were imagined as Nicaraguan nationals, the arrival of thousands of refugees in the early 1980s altered the plan to extend to Salvadoran beneficiaries. The government settled between 4,000 and 5,000 Salvadorans in these refugee settlements, located throughout the country. The leader of the UNHCR mission in Nicaragua between 1981 and 1983 stated in July 1982 that “the programs for the incoming refugees [give] them economic independence, incorporating them primarily into production activities in agriculture and artisanal work . . . [O]f the 5,000 refugees that are in the country, 3,000 have reached a high level of financial independence.”⁴⁹ While this statement referred only to the legal refugees, and not all refugees, it

44. Enríquez and Llanes, “Back to the Land,” 255.

45. Enríquez and Llanes, “Back to the Land,” 255.

46. Deere, “Cooperative Development and Women’s Participation,” 1044.

47. El Salvador & Guatemala Committees for Human Rights, *Out of the Ashes*, 18; Enríquez and Llanes, “Back to the Land,” 255.

48. El Salvador & Guatemala Committees for Human Rights, *Out of the Ashes*, 11, 18.

49. “22 mil refugiados salvadoreños hay en Nicaragua.”

nevertheless proclaimed a relative success in relation to refugee agricultural cooperatives.

The state's emphasis on integration into agricultural cooperatives also conveniently converted refugees into workers in the context of the complex dilemma of labor shortages, which had worsened with the region's violent conflicts. Although seasonal labor shortages were not new in Nicaragua, the migration of workers from El Salvador and Honduras and the internal migration of campesinos had largely met the demand for labor in the agro-export sector prior to 1979.⁵⁰ As the Salvadoran government halted its support for transnational labor migration between neighbors following the 1979 Sandinista Revolution, the traditional labor migration largely ceased.

This shift in international relations worsened existing shortages in the agro-export sector following the FSLN's efforts to create a mixed economy.⁵¹ Although land redistribution and agricultural collectivization among the Nicaraguan people were intended to alleviate poverty and landlessness, a result of agrarian reform was that many campesinos no longer felt the necessity of working the agro-export harvests. Thus, the "agrarian reform-agroexport dilemma" in which the agro-export sector still relied on exploitative labor practices increased labor shortages during the early post-Somoza years.⁵² Attempting to address these shortages, the FSLN made a "patriotic call" on the people to join the harvest as traditional laborers or volunteer workers. Thousands, for example, "rall[ie]d to help in cotton harvest" in January 1981.⁵³

In addition to their extraordinary efforts to integrate Salvadorans into agrarian reform through large land grants, the Sandinistas also viewed the arrival of Salvadoran refugees as a partial solution to the labor shortage in the agro-export sector as refugees joined the cause. In February 1981, Radio

50. Carmen Diana Deere, "Nicaraguan Agricultural Policy: 1979-81," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 5:2 (1981): 195-200, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23596609>; Stoltz Hamilton and Chinchilla, "Central American Migration"; Enríquez, *Harvesting Change*; Ministry of Agricultural Development and Agrarian Reform (MIDINRA) and Center for Research and Studies on the Agrarian Reform (CIERA), "Agrarian Reform in Nicaragua: The First Three Years," *International Journal of Sociology* 13:2 (1983): 1-91, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20629888>, 4.

51. Deere, "Nicaraguan Agricultural Policy: 1979-81," 195-200; Stoltz Hamilton and Chinchilla, "Central American Migration" 80, 84; Enríquez, *Harvesting Change*, 105.

52. Deere, "Nicaraguan Agricultural Policy"; Carmen Diana Deere and Peter Marchetti, "The Peasantry and the Development of Sandinista Agrarian Policy, 1979-1984," *Latin American Research Review* 20:3 (1985): 97-98; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2503470>; Enríquez, *Harvesting Change*, 2, 22, 105; "Official Discusses Role of 'Political Delegates,'" *La Prensa*, November 30, 1979, FBIS Daily Reports, <https://www.readex.com/products/foreign-broadcast-information-service-fbis-daily-reports-1941-1996>, 2; "Labor Shortage Threatens Coffee Harvests in Nueva Segovia," *El Pueblo*, November, 23 1979, FBIS Daily Reports; "Labor Shortage," *La Prensa*, February 28, 1981, FBIS Daily Reports; "Thousands Rally to Help in Cotton Harvest," *Managua Domestic Service*, January 27, 1981, FBIS Daily Reports.

53. "Thousands Rally to Help in Cotton Harvest."

Sandino reported that “brothers, fleeing the Christian Democratic repression in El Salvador, have joined the cotton and coffee pickers in . . . the Departments of Managua, Leon, Chinandega, and Nueva Guinea.”⁵⁴ The report also implied that the Salvadoran refugees were able to do so because the refugees had received official documents allowing them “to move freely throughout the country.”⁵⁵ Here, the Nicaraguan state acknowledged the contributions of Salvadoran refugees to addressing the labor shortages, while nodding to its own welcoming refugee policies. In this context, refugees aided the agrarian reform project by supporting the mixed economy through their additional labor in the agro-export sector.

While Salvadoran labor supported the FSLN economic agenda in complex ways, the Nicaraguan refugee policies also aligned with UNHCR goals. Although the UNHCR in general was influenced by the United States, Sandinista land reform plans that incorporated Salvadoran refugees worked exceptionally well with the UNHCR’s “durable solutions” policy for the long-term safety and dignity of refugees. Both institutions believed that agricultural cooperatives reduced refugee dependence on UNHCR and governmental aid. By 1984, with government and international aid, Salvadoran refugees had created 11 cooperatives throughout Nicaragua, with two in the handicrafts sector and nine in agricultural sector.⁵⁶

Although the UNHCR organization did not highlight this, the UNHCR supported the goals of the revolutionary state regarding refugees through the funding of cooperative projects throughout the 1980s. The UN refugee agency supplied 77 percent of assistance, while the government and other organizations contributed the other 23 percent. The UNHCR assistance, however, was administered to refugees through the National Office for Refugees.⁵⁷ Between 1979 and 1982 the UNHCR spent approximately \$8.5 million in Nicaragua.⁵⁸ While it was not immediately clear to refugees where the aid came from, it was evident that legal refugees received assistance that was intended to help them reestablish and maintain sustainable livelihoods.⁵⁹ Throughout the 1980s, the Nicaraguan government and UNHCR remained aligned in their plans for refugee social and economic integration.

54. “Salvadoran Refugees Picking Cotton, Coffee,” Radio Sandino, February 11, 1981.

55. “Salvadoran Refugees Picking Cotton, Coffee.”

56. HMP/ICM, Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics, 27.

57. HMP/ICM, Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics, 18.

58. “22 mil refugiados salvadoreños hay en Nicaragua.”

59. HMP/ICM, Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics, 28.

Undeniably, Salvadoran refugees benefited from various forms of state and UNHCR assistance. Refugees received assistance in the form of food, housing, clothing, medicine, medical and hospital care, and cash.⁶⁰ Both legal refugees and all migrants in general could benefit from Nicaraguan social welfare. This meant that Salvadoran refugees had access to the same government educational, recreational, and medical programs as citizens did. Medical services like mass vaccinations, prenatal and postnatal care, preventive health care, and hospitalization were “absolutely free” for citizens and migrants alike.⁶¹ To support an adequate nutritional program, all refugee camps in Nicaragua had classes in communal cooking run by dieticians.⁶² However, while the state promised robust health care services, it did not always actually provide them. In a June 1984 meeting with President Daniel Ortega, both Nicaraguan campesinos and Salvadoran refugees from the Ivan López cooperative shared their concerns about access to health care.

In addition to the free yet imperfect health care services, the revolutionary state invested heavily in providing refugees with access to formal education—a logical investment considering that the literacy crusade constituted a major piece of its own revolutionary platform.⁶³ As the government encouraged multiple forms of integration into Nicaraguan society, Salvadoran parents living both inside and outside of refugee camps could send their children to local schools.⁶⁴ In 1984, approximately 89 percent of school-age Salvadoran refugee boys and girls attended school. The government also provided legal refugees access to adult education programs and higher education. Extensive programming focused also on increasing literacy rates among refugees, which were as low as 46 percent upon their arrival.⁶⁵

While the implementation was certainly imperfect, by delivering medical, recreational, and educational services to Salvadoran refugees in ways visible to international observers, the Sandinista state fashioned itself as a humanitarian nation that provided social services to all, while simultaneously critiquing US and Salvadoran authorities.⁶⁶ Because the government actively encouraged the integration of Salvadorans into the Nicaraguan society and economy, Salvadorans living inside or outside of camps had fluid, open relationships with the rest of Nicaraguan society. Indeed, one of the purposes of the National

60. HMP/ICM, Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics, 18.

61. HMP/ICM, Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics, 29.

62. IHC, “La difícil situación de refugiados.”

63. Bendaña, “The Rise and Fall of the FSLN.”

64. El Salvador & Guatemala Committees for Human Rights, *Out of the Ashes*, 11.

65. HMP/ICM, Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics, 21–22.

66. El Salvador & Guatemala Committees for Human Rights, *Out of the Ashes*, 11; HMP/ICM, Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics, 9.

Office of Refugees was to coordinate with other government agencies to develop specific programs to encourage the integration of Salvadoran refugees into the economic process of the country without detriment to the employment of Nicaraguans.⁶⁷ From an economic viewpoint, the refugee cooperatives did not appear to have a negative impact on Nicaraguan nationals' employment, according to the government and international observers. Socially, many Nicaraguan nationals also lived in refugee collectives. These Nicaraguan nationals were often children and spouses of Salvadorans.⁶⁸

Among the Sandinista goals for agrarian reform was the integration of rural women into agricultural cooperatives. The state's desire to incorporate rural women into agrarian reform certainly fostered a smoother integration of Salvadoran refugees into the agricultural collectivization, as women constituted a large portion of the refugee population. The Sandinista plan differed from previous land reforms in other Latin American countries, because it was the first to officially consider all women as potential beneficiaries.⁶⁹ In the cases of Chile and Peru, agrarian beneficiaries were generally heads of household with dependent children. This stipulation meant that mainly men received land. Even among the eligible women, few received land because women were not seen as agriculturalists. In Sandinista Nicaragua, however, all rural women were acknowledged as potential beneficiaries, and women became eligible to participate in the agrarian reform projects without men. Furthermore, Article 132 of the Agricultural Cooperative Law of 1982 stipulated that cooperatives must incorporate women under the same conditions and with the same rights as men.⁷⁰

Women took on many integral roles in refugee agricultural collectives. The revolutionary state's explicit goal of integrating women into agricultural cooperatives aligned well with the demographics Salvadoran refugee families, approximately half of which were headed by women.⁷¹ As such, the practice of incorporating women as beneficiaries of land reform functioned in tandem with the government's larger goal of integrating Salvadorans into Nicaragua's economy and society. Salvadoran women took on many roles in the agricultural cooperatives. In addition to cooking and providing childcare, they women worked in both handicrafts and agriculture. As mentioned in one previously discussed excerpt from *!Volveremos!*, it was a Salvadoran woman who advised

67. HMP/ICM, Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics, Annex V; "22 mil refugiados salvadoreños hay en Nicaragua."

68. HMP/ICM, Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics, 9.

69. Deere, "Cooperative Development and Women's Participation, 1044."

70. Deere, "Cooperative Development and Women's Participation, 1044."

71. HMP/ICM, Socio-Demographic and Economic Characteristics, 12.

the Brasil Grande collective regarding the introduction of a new type of potato that may have benefited all of the collectives.⁷²

The policies of the revolutionary government benefited refugees in material ways. This was exemplified by the San Ramón camp in Estelí, in the northern mountains of Nicaragua. Indeed, the San Ramón refugee collective exhibited many characteristics common among agricultural cooperative refugee camps created by the Nicaraguan government. By 1984, the camp housed 85 Salvadoran refugees, mostly from Morazán, the northeastern department in which the Salvadoran government perpetrated the infamous 1981 El Mozote massacre of 900 civilians. The six men, 31 women, and 48 children living in San Ramón were among the poorest refugees who had arrived in Nicaragua. Most had fled El Salvador without any money or possessions. Some families reported having male members who were killed or joined the FMLN. Outside of the camp, approximately 250 more Salvadoran refugees were living in the surrounding neighborhoods of Estelí. International observers reported that the conditions of the camp itself were “fairly good by any Central American standard.”⁷³

In addition to cultivating beans, the Salvadorans established carpentry and clothing cooperatives in the larger town of Estelí, where many of the camp residents worked. With materials supplied by the Nicaraguan government to these workshops, they made hammocks to sell, in addition to those used in the camp. Reportedly, the cooperative alleviated “the problems of lack of money, idle time and boredom” in San Ramón. The Ministry of Social Welfare and the UNHCR provided the camp’s food, which was described by camp visitors as “both substantial and appetizing.”⁷⁴ The women of the camp prepared the meals, which consisted of eggs, milk, beans, tortillas, vegetables, and some meat. Medical care at San Ramón was similar to that at other Nicaraguan camps. A doctor made weekly visits. Early on, residents at San Ramón were concerned about low temperatures at night due to its location in Nicaragua’s northern mountains. Because they were unaccustomed to such low temperatures in El Salvador, people were getting sick. However, some church and solidarity groups from the United States and Cuba donated warmer clothing, resolving the issue.⁷⁵ Following this initial difficulty, international visitors described the physical state of the refugees at San Ramón as overall

72. Comunidades cristianas de refugiados salvadoreños en Nicaragua, *¡Volveremos!*, October 22, 1983, IHNCA, H3247; *Boletín*.

73. IHC, “La difícil situación de refugiados.”

74. IHC, “La difícil situación de refugiados.”

75. IHC, “La difícil situación de refugiados.” Although I am unable to expand here on the role of Cuban, US, and other international solidarity groups in Nicaragua and the assistance they offered to Salvadoran refugees, the topic would be fruitful for future inquiry.

“quite healthy.” Between 1980 and 1985, the refugees and international visitors to San Ramón alike reported satisfactory health, education, and economic programs implemented by Nicaraguan government and the UNHCR.

“THEY WERE OUR FRIENDS”: SALVADORAN REFUGEE SUPPORT OF THE FSLN

Because the Sandinistas’ treatment of Salvadoran refugees was generous and beneficial, and because their politics aligned, Salvadoran refugees generally supported the Sandinistas. This perspective can be seen in refugee testimonies and publications, as well as photos. The weekly bulletin *iVolveremos!* frequently demonstrated its support of the Sandinistas. One of the most telling examples is a cartoon titled “El teatro sangriento del Tío Sam,” published on the first page of the October 22, 1983, edition (see [Figure 1](#)).⁷⁶ The cartoon, whose title translates as “Uncle Sam’s Bloody Theater,” depicts Uncle Sam, the iconic personification of the US government, as a puppet master pulling the strings of the Contras and Nicaraguan peasants. Uncle Sam looms over a stage with perverse pleasure, as his grotesquely long fingers yank the strings, forcing the Contra puppet to murder the unarmed peasant puppet.

The cartoon condemns the US involvement in the Contra War, arguing that in carrying out the bidding of the United States, the Contras were killing innocent Nicaraguans. This condemnation is unsurprising, as the refugees had fled similar situations in El Salvador. Moreover, the placement of this image on the front page of the refugee-produced bulletin also suggests an implicit alignment with the Sandinistas—the revolutionary government that the US government and Contras sought to destabilize and overthrow. Indeed, similar sentiments were commonly included in *iVolveremos!*

Further evidence of pro-Sandinista attitudes can be seen in the testimony of Gloria Núñez, a refugee woman who had lived in the San Roque collective in Nicaragua before she decided to repatriate to El Salvador in 1991. Back in El Salvador, Núñez articulated this pro-Sandinista perspective clearly: “In Nicaragua we had the support of the army of the Sandinista Front. We had confidence in them. Here [in El Salvador] the army was different, they’re very repressive. This was shocking. It was a major difference. There, they were our friends, here they are our enemies.”⁷⁷

76. Comunidades cristianas de refugiados salvadoreños en Nicaragua, *iVolveremos!*, October 22, 1983, IHNCA, H3247; *Boletín*.

77. Nueva Vida de R. L., “La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991),” 1991, in MUPI, CE4 ARN REP EJ 1. Using testimonies and photographs, repatriated Salvadorans also documented their political support of the FSLN. In 1991, the Salvadoran printing cooperative Nueva Vida de R. L. published a booklet titled “La repatriación de Nueva

FIGURE 1

Illustration: “El teatro sangriento de Tío Sam” (Uncle Sam’s Bloody Theater)



Source: ¡Volveremos!, October 22, 1983.

With the sharpest of juxtapositions, Núñez deemed the Sandinista Front “friends” and the Salvadoran army “enemies.” Because the Sandinistas offered them safety and land, and because the Sandinistas were ideologically in line

Esperanza (1990–1991).” The author was a Spaniard named Ángel Arnaiz Quintana who had come to Nicaragua and supported the Sandinista revolution. Beginning in the late 1980s, he began working with a Salvadoran refugee collective in Managua. Eventually Arnaiz Quintana accompanied the community on their repatriation to El Salvador, where they founded the town of Nueva Esperanza. Consisting primarily of captioned photographs and the lengthy testimony of one refugee woman, the booklet recorded the story of the repatriation and the founding of Nueva Esperanza. The photographs and the testimony commemorate the Salvadoran refugees’ amicable relationship with the Sandinistas as one of mutual support.

with El Salvador's FMLN, most refugees supported the Nicaraguan government in the 1980s.⁷⁸

Printed alongside Núñez's testimony were captioned photographs conveying similar sentiments that highlighted the revolutionary role of women, agricultural labor, family, unity, and collectivity. The photograph in [Figure 2](#) depicts a refugee family belonging to Iván López cooperative. The young mother, Soledad, has just returned from her work in the cooperative, and is about to celebrate the July 19 anniversary of the Sandinista triumph with her two young children.⁷⁹ She is carrying one bundle on her head and one at her side. While her son looks backward to something behind him, her daughter, wearing a white dress, smiles at the camera. The children appear to be walking with a casual, even carefree posture.

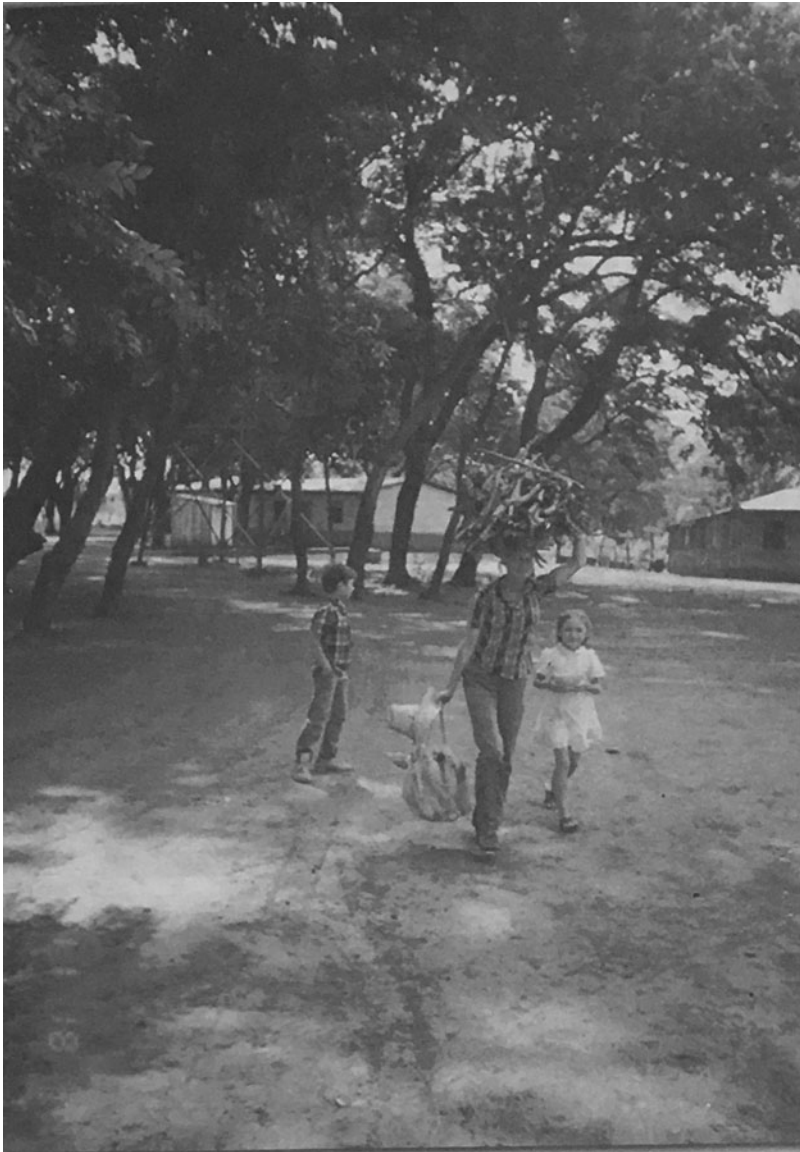
[Figure 3](#) is another photograph that appeared in "La repatriación." An elderly woman and two younger women stand in a door frame. On the exterior wall of the building, a poster reads, in large block letters, "19 de Julio: Todos en la Plaza [July 19th: Everyone in the Plaza]." The photo caption translates as "The Women Were at Work with Machetes, Celebrating the Revolution." The presence of this poster suggests efforts to gather the community in celebration of Liberation Day.

These two photographs and their captions functioned in tandem to construct a narrative in which Salvadoran women and children celebrated the Sandinista revolution in two ways. First, the photograph serves as documentation of Salvadoran refugee support of the Sandinistas in the celebration of their July 19 victory. Second, the publication of the photographs and captions allows the community to remember and represent their previous support of the Sandinistas now that they have returned to El Salvador. The caption for [Figure 2](#) shows Soledad engaged in childcare, immediately after finishing a day of laboring in the cooperative (either artisanal or agricultural). The [Figure 3](#) caption suggests that the women had just finished work with a machete, even though one does not appear in the photo. The specific type of work is not explained, leaving it open to interpret the use of the machete for either cooking or agricultural labor. Together these photographs captions highlight the diverse labor of women in the communities as workers and mothers.

78. Nueva Vida de R. L., "La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991)," 31, 40. This sentiment can be seen throughout the weekly publications of *iVolveremos!* as well.

79. Nueva Vida de R. L., "La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991)," 31, 5.

FIGURE 2
Salvadoran Refugee Family Celebrates the July 19th Anniversary of the Sandinista
Victory (1988)



Source: Nueva Vida de R. L., “La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991),” 5.

FIGURE 3

“Everyone in the Plaza!” Celebrating Liberation Day, the Sandinista Victory (1988)



Source: Nueva Vida de R. L., “La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991),” 5.

THE RISE OF THE NATIONAL OPPOSITION UNION AND THE FIGHT FOR REPATRIATION (1990–91)

The Sandinistas maintained goodwill, strategically or otherwise, toward the Salvadoran refugees throughout the decade. President Daniel Ortega himself made clear his stance on Salvadoran refugees. As late as April 1989, when UNHCR representative Jean-Pierre Hocke informed President Ortega of a request for 200 Salvadorans to be accepted as refugees in Nicaragua, Ortega reportedly answered, “Our doors are open.”⁸⁰ However, in 1990 the political climate of Nicaragua changed. In that year, Sandinista incumbent Daniel Ortega lost the election to the National Opposition Union candidate, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. Although the Sandinista government had endured a decade of the US-sponsored Contra effort to destabilize it, this election ended revolutionary control of the national government.⁸¹

Nicaraguan refugee policy under Chamorro’s conservative government set off a drastic change in Salvadoran lives.⁸² The end of the revolutionary state and the opposition’s rise to power created troubling conditions for Salvadorans. The new administration stripped refugees of their social security benefits and began accusing displaced Salvadorans of being guerrillas. The Nicaraguan state no longer viewed Salvadoran refugees as useful, nor did it give recognition to their status as survivors of Salvadoran and US government violence. Thus, Nicaragua, which in the 1980s was a country with one of the most generous refugee policies in Central America, started to show parallels to the hostility Salvadoran refugees had faced in Honduras.⁸³

The combination of the loss of rights, persecution by the government, and threats to cooperative land, in addition to news of the mass repatriations of their compatriots who had fled to other Central American countries, led many Salvadoran refugees to mobilize for their right to return home. In her testimony, Gloria Núñez cited confrontations with the new government as a key motivation for returning:

Other reasons [to return] were that Nicaragua had had a change in government and they were looking suspiciously at us, they accused us of being part of the

80. “Ortega on Refugees, Repatriation Plan,” Radio Sandino, April 18, 1989, FBIS Daily Reports.

81. Arturo Santa-Cruz, “Redefining Sovereignty, Consolidating a Network: Monitoring the 1990 Nicaraguan Elections,” *Revista de Ciencia Política (Santiago)* 24:1 (2004): 189–208; Leslie Anderson, *Learning Democracy: Citizen Engagement and Electoral Choice in Nicaragua, 1990–2001* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Jennifer L. McCoy, “Nicaragua in Transition,” *Current History* 90:554 (1991): 117–132, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45316501>.

82. Nueva Vida de R. L., “La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991),” 36; UNHCR, “Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala: Exit and Return,” <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a81110.html>, accessed October 22, 2022.

83. Todd, *Beyond Displacement*; De La Cruz, “Surveillance, Settlements, and Sanctuary.”

FMLN. In the newspapers of doña Violeta, in *La Prensa*, in the month of May they [listed] more than 300 Salvadorans they accused of being guerrillas. And there was an ideological campaign against us searches of various kinds. Everything coincided. We were not feeling good about being there and the situation was very different than in the years before. We began to have problems with the land in the cooperatives. Already, the UNO [National Opposition Union] was looking poorly on us; they said that we had to leave these lands because we were taking it from them [Nicaraguans] and that there were bosses that were coming to reclaim the lands that they had given us for the cooperatives.”⁸⁴

From this testimony it becomes clear that the end of the revolutionary state and the opposition’s rise to power created troubling conditions for Salvadorans. The Nicaraguan state no longer viewed the presence of Salvadoran refugees as beneficial, neither for their status as survivors of Salvadoran and US government violence nor as agricultural workers.

Salvadorans in Nicaragua also learned through their transnational refugee networks that their brothers and sisters in Honduras and Panama had returned or were preparing to return in 1990.⁸⁵ However, they also knew the challenges of resettlement and the violent reception that had met returnees in the previous mass repatriations from Honduras between 1987 and 1989. Still in the midst of civil war, the government of El Salvador had not wanted the refugees back. Claiming the repatriated refugees were FMLN guerrillas, the Salvadoran state once again targeted these communities.⁸⁶ A group dedicated to the repatriation began organizing weekly meetings at different cooperative communities throughout Nicaragua. From the beginning, they had framed repatriation as a collective decision. In her testimony, Gloria Núñez explained how they were already accustomed to living as a community. They felt stronger as a community and believed rebuilding a life in El Salvador would be easier and safer together than individually. Thus, they assembled the Return Committee of Salvadoran Refugees (Comite de Retorno de Refugiados Salvadoreños), with representatives from different communities.⁸⁷

The committee faced many obstacles as the Salvadoran government tried to prevent the return of refugees from Nicaragua. For example, the Salvadoran

84. Nueva Vida de R. L., “La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991),” 34.

85. Nueva Vida de R. L., “La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991),” 34; De La Cruz, “Surveillance, Settlements, and Sanctuary.”

86. Nueva Vida de R. L., “La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991),” 36.

87. Nueva Vida de R. L., “La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991),” 36; “Refugiados salvadoreños protestan en Managua y Panamá,” *Diario Latino*, January 22, 1991, in MUPI, A2/04/4.1 F11.300. For a more detailed history of the Salvadoran repopulation movement see Todd, *Beyond Displacement*.

FIGURE 4
Occupation of the Embassy of El Salvador in Managua (1990)



Source: Nueva Vida de R. L., “La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991),” 9.

government declared it would grant entrance to those who wanted to return only if they were able to acquire a temporary safe house in a government-approved location. The refugee community had secured a location in El Jícaro, 20 kilometers from San Salvador, but the government refused to approve this location.⁸⁸ Because the government was determined to make it impossible for refugees to repatriate, the committee knew they needed to pressure the UNHCR to support their repatriation.

Thus, on January 21, 1991, the committee and representatives from approximately 80 families peacefully occupied the UNHCR facilities in Managua to demand that the organization intercede on their behalf and force the Salvadoran government to allow them to repatriate soon.⁸⁹ The committee also staged other actions in Managua. Figures 4 and 5 depict the 15-day occupation of the Salvadoran embassy in Managua, where refugees demanded travel documents and specific dates for their return. With a group of refugee

88. “Refugiados salvadoreños protestan en Managua y Panamá.”

89. “Refugiados salvadoreños protestan en Managua y Panamá.”

FIGURE 5

Salvadoran Protests at the United Nations and ACNUR Offices in Managua (1990)



Source: Nueva Vida de R. L., “La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991),” 8.

women in the foreground, [Figure 4](#) captures a sign that reads, “We demand the immediate repatriation of Salvadoran refugees from UNHCR and the Salvadoran government.”⁹⁰

[Figures 5](#) and [6](#) capture other protests led by Salvadoran refugees at the UNHCR office in Managua in order to secure their long-awaited return. With two of the three photographs capturing women refugees protesting, these images also make clear the prominent role of women in the refugee communities.

The refugees were successful in pressuring the UNHCR to support their goal of repatriation. However, even in the face of UNHCR support, the Salvadoran government continued its claims that repatriates returning from Nicaragua would be a dangerous security threat due to their potential support of the FMLN.⁹¹ Nevertheless, with the assistance of the UNHCR, the Salvadorans continued to push for their right to a safe repatriation. In 1991, Gloria Núñez

90. Nueva Vida de R. L., “La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991),” 8.

91. Nueva Vida de R. L., “La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991),” 36, 40.

FIGURE 6

Salvadoran protestor speaks to crowd at the United Nations and ACNUR Offices in Managua (1990)



Source: Nueva Vida de R. L., "La repatriación de Nueva Esperanza (1990–1991)," 8.

and her 400 compañeros boarded a plane at the Augusto C. Sandino airport in Managua to fly back to El Salvador. Following their arrival, the repatriates founded a town, aptly named Nueva Esperanza (New Hope) in [Usulután](#). Indeed, by the end of 1991, the majority of refugee communities once living in Nicaragua had repatriated to El Salvador

CONCLUSION

For ten years, Sandinista policy had benefited Salvadoran refugees in literally lifesaving ways. Nevertheless, it would be simplistic to conclude that the Nicaraguan government acted on mere altruism. Rather, as this article suggested, the revolutionary state strategically attempted to employ refugees to carry out specific domestic goals. This research has demonstrated how the Sandinistas integrated refugee policy with agrarian reform projects that helped them to carry out the domestic goal of agricultural collectivization. Thus, throughout the 1980s, as a means of legitimizing itself, the Sandinista state implemented mutually beneficial revolutionary refugee policies.

Because of their own ideological alignments, revolutionary hopes, and material realities, Salvadoran refugees living in Nicaragua supported those policies.

They worked in tandem with the revolutionary government to create successful agricultural collectives, which benefited them profoundly. The collectivities that refugees forged in exile became vital to their lives, so much so that in the early 1990s they engaged together in a hard-fought process of highly organized mass repatriations to El Salvador in order to bring their new communities back home.

Study of the transnational and relational dynamics of Nicaraguan agrarian reform and Salvadoran refugees suggest that there is much work ahead for historians of twentieth-century Central America. Decentering the United States as the assumed host nation of Central American migrants and refugees allows novel historical perspectives to emerge. Shifting the focus to regional migrations can provide different angles to approach histories of civil war, statecraft, nation-building, and revolutionary praxis, for example. Such perspectives will be extremely useful for historians producing new and much needed scholarship on the turbulent histories of Central America during the 1980s.

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