

THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION IN PERSPECTIVE

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NICARAGUA DIVIDED: LA PRENSA AND THE CHAMORRO LEGACY. By Patricia Taylor Edmisten. (Pensacola: University of West Florida Press, 1990. Pp. 142. \$19.95.)

TO LEAD AS EQUALS: RURAL PROTEST AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN CHINANDEGA, NICARAGUA, 1912-1979. By Jeffrey Gould (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990. Pp. 377. \$47.50 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

THANKS TO GOD AND THE REVOLUTION: THE ORAL HISTORY OF A NICARAGUAN FAMILY. By Dianne Walta Hart. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990. Pp. 306. \$25.00.)

LIFE STORIES OF THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION. By Denis Lynn Daly Heyck. (New York: Routledge, 1990. Pp. 355. \$45.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)

WASHINGTON'S WAR ON NICARAGUA. By Holly Sklar. (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1988. Pp. 472. \$15.00.)

The Sandinistas' 1990 electoral defeat came as a devastating blow to the party faithful. At the time, it seemed as if the years of sacrifice had been for naught. From a different perspective, however, the elections may have provided the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional with a unique opportunity. For the first time in its thirty-year history, the FSLN can enjoy the political luxury of engaging in a serious discussion, of reassessing its past while mapping out its future. For a revolutionary movement that had somehow lost touch with its rank and file, the electoral loss may prove to be the FSLN's salvation, a chance to reassert its commitment to Nicaragua's poor majority.

The election results represent an opportunity as well for scholars who work on Nicaragua. Now that the Reagan-Bush administration's obsession with the Sandinistas appears to be subsiding, it may be possible to engage in a more dispassionate debate about the Sandinista revolution. The books reviewed here make important contributions in a variety of ways to a reassessment of the revolutionary period and to general understanding of the Sandinistas' electoral defeat.¹

1. Other recent studies of the revolutionary period include Laura Enríquez, *Harvesting Change: Labor and Agrarian Reform in Nicaragua, 1979-1990* (Chapel Hill: University of North

A central theme running through three of the books is that every Nicaraguan family, regardless of class origin or political stripe, has been affected in some way by the revolutionary changes initiated by the Sandinistas. Patricia Edmisten's *Nicaragua Divided: La Prensa and the Chamorro Legacy* focuses on one of Nicaragua's most politically influential families. Drawing on interviews with family members and excerpts from Pedro Joaquín Chamorro's political writings, Edmisten traces the Chamorros' political fortunes from patriarch Pedro Joaquín's initial run-ins with Somoza Sr. through the eve of the recent elections.

As with that other great Nicaraguan political martyr, Augusto Sandino, much controversy has surrounded the political legacy left by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro. Nicaraguans at large disagree over it, and so do Pedro Joaquín's wife and four children. Edmisten attempts to put the debate in perspective by analyzing Pedro Joaquín's writings and conversations with various family members. What is lacking, however, is a more in-depth analysis of Chamorro's political and social thought and his political behavior. For example, Edmisten never clarifies whether Chamorro would have supported a major redistribution of land and wealth. If not, he certainly would have been at odds with the Sandinistas. Some evidence suggests that Chamorro's political position was moving closer to that of the Sandinistas not long before his death. Throughout 1977, he and other opposition leaders like Reinaldo Tefel discussed the possibility of founding a social democratic party. In actuality, most of Chamorro's closest political associates, including Tefel and Rafael Córdova Rivas, ended up working with the Sandinistas. Unfortunately, none of these issues are discussed in Edmisten's account.

Chamorro's political behavior leaves an even more ambiguous legacy. Edmisten refers in several instances to his authoritarian personality without discussing its possible ramifications. Would Chamorro have been willing to accept direction from the "muchachos" in the FSLN? Or would he have broken with the Sandinistas (as did Alfonso Robelo) on realizing that he would not be able to dictate to the FSLN as he was accustomed to doing in his relations with other opposition leaders? Given Edmisten's failure to probe beneath the rhetoric, it is not surprising that she remains uncertain about Chamorro's particular legacy. She asserts that while, on the one hand, Pedro Joaquín "would have considered the 1986 closing of *La Prensa* an act of betrayal of the ideals of the revolution," on the other hand, he "would not have wanted Nicaragua's future to be directed by the

Carolina Press, 1991); Michael Dodson and Laura Nuzzi O'Shaughnessy, *Nicaragua's Other Revolution: Religious Faith and Political Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); and Dennis Gilbert, *Sandinistas: The Party and the Revolution* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1988). See also Kenneth Mijeski's recent review essay, "From Solidarity to Class Struggle: Ten Years of Post-Somozan Nicaragua," *LARR* 26, no. 2 (1991):247-60.

United States." In the end, Edmisten seems to give credence to Violeta Chamorro's more conservative interpretation of her husband's legacy, which would place him squarely in the anti-Sandinista camp. If this view is accurate, then it is appropriate to ask whether Pedro Joaquín would have endorsed his wife's embracing the Contras as "mis muchachos." Indeed, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro's most striking legacy was his refusal to enter into pacts with Somocistas.

Although *Nicaragua Divided* does not claim to be "an exhaustive biography of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro nor a comprehensive history of Nicaragua," Edmisten's superficial and sometimes flawed historical interpretation is at times frustrating. Her reference to Sandino as being "known for both his anti-Communist stance and his anti-imperialist position" is surprising, given recent scholarship on Sandino's political thought.² Furthermore, Edmisten's discussion of UDEL (the Unión Democrática de Liberación), the opposition front headed by Pedro Joaquín, is extremely meager. UDEL did not bring together "all of the opposition" under its umbrella (p. 61). Also, Edmisten fails to mention that UDEL and its successor, the FAO (Frente Amplio Opositor), were willing to accept a role for the Guardia Nacional in a transitional government, despite the author's assertion that "there could be no place for the guard in the new Nicaragua" (p. 70). Finally, the inclusion of personal reflections such as, "I am for the Nicaraguan people and for the legacy left by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro" (p. 122) or "I felt ashamed of our pugnacious policies and felt great solidarity with their poor" (p. 114) contributes little if anything to the book.

Despite its shortcomings, Edmisten's *Nicaragua Divided* provides some valuable insights into one of the country's most influential families. Her interviews with Violeta are especially revealing in the context of the recent election results. Without a doubt, Violeta's ability to keep her own family together in the face of adversity must have appealed to many Nicaraguan voters, who hoped that she would be able to do the same for the larger Nicaraguan family.

In *Thanks to God and the Revolution*, Dianne Walta Hart narrates the course of the Nicaraguan revolution from the viewpoint of a poor family in the town of Estelí. Through the eyes of family members, readers see how the revolution evolved from the struggle against Somoza to triumph and euphoria, to recovery and rebuilding, and then to counterrevolution and economic decline. In a sense, the tragedy of the revolution is revealed

2. Donald Hodges's in-depth study of Sandino's political thought argues that Sandino's political ideology can be characterized as "anarcho-communism," which synthesizes elements from a number of sources, including anarcho-syndicalism, socialism, communism, and spiritism. See Donald Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

in the tragedy of this family from Estelí, whose fortunes seem to parallel the waning fortunes of the revolution.

Initially, the revolution opened up new opportunities for family members, but by 1988, the war and the economic crisis had sapped their energies and resources. As their dreams of a better life slowly faded, one of the daughters left for the United States and the others began to consider the same path. The economic crisis combined with the Contra war have had a devastating impact on this family. As each member struggled to support his or her own family, each one became less and less able to contribute to the mother's welfare. This trend has bred tension and alienation. The war has affected the family in other ways as well. Son Omar, who fought during the insurrection, suffers from war psychosis, which is exacerbated by the constant fear of Contra attacks against Estelí. Daughter Marta's frequent trips to the war zones as part of her work with the AMNLAE (Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza) has caused ongoing anxiety for her mother and her young son.

Hart's moving oral history of a poor Nicaraguan family provides important insight into the Sandinistas' electoral defeat. The fact that by 1988 Omar and Marta (both militants in the Frente) were seriously considering following their sister to the United States illustrates the extent to which the war and the economic crisis have shattered their hopes and dreams. For those less committed to the revolution, the daily struggle for survival as the war escalated and the economy tumbled further toward collapse must have proved too heavy a price to pay. Not surprisingly, as the narratives progress, the reader finds increasing criticisms of abuses by government officials and references to growing disillusionment in the populace. While family members qualify this view by saying that the government is not to blame, their commitment has become increasingly tenuous.

What is most fascinating about *Thanks to God and the Revolution* is that despite growing adversity, this family has exhibited incredible resiliency and faith. Somehow, a strong sense of family solidarity prevails through it all. Those who have spent time in Nicaragua will immediately recognize this extraordinary characteristic of so many seemingly "ordinary" Nicaraguan families.

Denis Lynn Daly Heyck's *Life Stories of the Nicaraguan Revolution* brings together twenty-four oral histories that represent a broad cross-section of Nicaraguan society. The life stories are organized under "political lives," "religious lives," and ordinary "survivors' lives." Heyck's translations, like Hart's, are superb and accurately capture the idiosyncrasies of each individual interviewed.

The oral histories that Heyck collected provide additional insight into the 1990 elections. First, readers can clearly grasp the importance of religious faith and its relationship to politics. Several of those interviewed

point to the religious motivation behind their decision to participate in the insurrection and to continue working within the revolutionary process. For these Nicaraguans, the revolution's essentially "Christian" ideals warrant ongoing support. For others, like Monsignor Osvaldo Mondragón, the FSLN's "persecution" of the traditional Catholic Church is proof of its march toward totalitarianism and thus undergirds his opposition to the Sandinistas. Second, the fundamental concerns of ordinary "survivors" are the economic crisis and military service, which contribute to their growing disillusionment with the government. Other complaints, echoing those of Hart's family, focus on bureaucratic inefficiency and incompetence, restrictions on economic activity, and an excessively homogeneous educational curriculum.

Another important insight implicit in some of the conversations is the distance existing between the FSLN leadership and the masses. For example, Reinaldo Tefel, head of the Instituto Nicaragüense de Seguridad Social y Bienestar, remarks that despite the country's economic woes, Nicaraguans "are not a depressed people" (p. 35). He argues that Nicaraguans' ability to complain out loud prevents them from becoming demoralized. Similarly, Comandante Manuel Calderón of the Ministerio de Interior, claims that the example of sacrifice of the *compañeros* "nourishes the revolution" by making people understand the country's problems (p. 116). Finally, Vidaluz Meneses, former Associate Minister of Culture, asserts that the fact that the Nicaraguan people have not risen up against the government demonstrates their awareness of the causes of their suffering.

As Oscar René Vargas has argued elsewhere, one of the main causes behind the Sandinistas' electoral defeat was their erroneous analysis of *la realidad social*.³ Several Sandinistas with whom I spoke during the months following the elections referred to the FSLN's having lost touch with the masses because it failed to listen seriously to their complaints and refused to allow a genuine debate within the party. Many Sandinista leaders, who may have been in a better position to weather economic adversity, convinced themselves that the Nicaraguan people were capable of continuing sacrifices. Obviously, the election results proved otherwise.

One last theme shared by Heyck's and Hart's studies is the way in which the revolution has affected the role of women in Nicaraguan society. Although many women have become more aware of their rights and now exhibit a greater sense of dignity and self-worth, the degrees of progress have varied. Generally, middle- and upper-class women have experienced the most measurable gains. Also, many women continue to accommodate to *machista* behavior, accepting their husband's infidelities

3. Oscar René Vargas, *Adonde va Nicaragua: perspectivas de una revolución latinoamericana* (Managua: Ediciones Nicarao, 1991), 70–84.

while scorning women who are unfaithful. Yet the hardships produced by the war and economic crisis have forced a growing number of couples to work together as partners in the domestic sphere.⁴

Despite the contradictory developments in the women's movement, these life stories highlight the growing self-confidence of all Nicaraguans. As Tefel remarks, one of the most important legacies of the revolution is that "the people have found their voice" (p. 348). Or as a campesina from Wiwili said, "the revolution untied our tongues."⁵ Many of these same Nicaraguans who "found their voice" would eventually turn against the political movement that had so much to do with their acquiring a voice. Nevertheless, although Nicaraguans' newfound ability to think and speak for themselves may have prevented the revolution from becoming totalitarian, this self-confidence can also set limits on efforts by the current leaders to turn the clock back.

Holly Sklar's *Washington's War on Nicaragua* supplies a necessary backdrop to the testimonials of a people whose lives have been shattered by war and economic crisis. If a central argument or lesson is to be found in this journalistic account of the Reagan administration's policy toward Nicaragua, it is that "the fundamental policy problem we face is not flawed oversight but faulty vision" (p. 394). Sklar correctly lays much of the blame for Washington's failed policies on the U.S. Congress, specifically on Democratic congressional representatives. As Cynthia Arnson has argued elsewhere, it was not that Congress lacked the tools of oversight. Rather, Congress was simply unwilling to exercise its oversight authority fully.⁶ More important, congressional opponents of the administration did little more than react to policy, never asking the kind of hard questions that might have engendered alternative policies.

Another lesson from *Washington's War on Nicaragua* is the danger of entrusting policy-making to zealots. During the first six years of the Reagan administration, policy toward Central America came to be dominated by the ideological right. Ronald Reagan's core group of policymakers, convinced of the righteousness of administration positions, refused to accept contrary evidence or counterargument.⁷ Rather than adjust policy to accommodate reality, the ideological right chose instead to adjust reality to accommodate policy. Drawing from documents made public during the

4. For more on the women's movement in Nicaragua, see Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State and Revolution in Nicaragua," *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 2 (1985).

5. Quoted in René Mendoza, "We Erred to Win," *Envío*, no. 111 (Oct. 1990):24.

6. Sklar's and Arnson's books complement each other and ideally should be read together. See Cynthia Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the Reagan Administration, and Central America* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

7. For a discussion of the ideological right's role in Reagan administration policy toward Central America, see Laurence Whitehead, "Explaining Washington's Central American Policies," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 15, pt. 2 (Nov. 1983):321-63.

Iran-Contra investigation, Sklar's account makes disturbingly clear how far the administration was willing to go in its obsession with toppling the Sandinistas. Beyond engaging in illegal activities, the administration willingly enlisted the services of the most unsavory types, including drug smugglers, mercenaries, and terrorists. One larger question that Sklar leaves unanswered is, how did such a group of zealots come to take the initiative in administration policies toward Nicaragua?

Although *Washington's War on Nicaragua* was written in 1988, before the Sandinistas' electoral loss, Sklar anticipates the 1990 election result in drawing parallels with the Jamaican case, in which U.S. economic and political pressures contributed to Michael Manley's electoral defeat. She also indicates a possible shift in administration strategies toward preparing the groundwork for an opposition electoral victory. Sklar nevertheless ends the book with an overly optimistic assessment of Nicaraguans' ability to resist U.S. aggressions, one that resembles the statements by Sandinista leaders cited in Heyck's book.

Sklar also seems to overestimate the staying power of the Reagan administration's policy. In discussing the Central American peace plan, she fails to emphasize the real significance of the accords, which symbolized the beginning of the end for the administration's policies. Although in the wake of the accords the administration was able to squeeze funds out of a still pliant Congress to maintain the Contras intact and to pressure its clients in the region to slow the peace process, Reagan's policy had begun to unravel at the seams. After 1987 even the Contras could not be counted on to follow blindly the dictates of Washington. By the summer of 1988, the Contra leadership had become sharply divided and lost what little momentum it had built up. At the same time, the administration began to turn its attention toward bolstering the internal opposition and sent Secretary of State George Shultz to the region, an act that symbolized the eclipse of the ideological right's stranglehold on Central American policy.

Given the intensity of the administration's obsession with Nicaragua and its commitment to the Contra cause, it was probably difficult for Sklar to accept the idea that Washington would consider backing away from the Contras and total military victory. Moreover, at the time Sklar was writing only faint glimpses were visible of the alternative strategy eventually adopted by the Bush administration.

By far the most ambitious of the works reviewed here is Jeffrey Gould's *To Lead as Equals*. This study of peasant and worker movements in the department of Chinandega makes a major contribution to understanding contemporary Nicaraguan history. Because of the paucity of primary sources, Gould relied heavily on oral testimonies, Somoza's presidential papers, sugar estate records, and newspaper reports. The resulting study is divided into three parts. Part I traces the evolution of workers' political

consciousness at the Ingenio San Antonio, Nicaragua's largest sugar mill, and in the city of Chinandega. In both places, Somoza tried to co-opt the local labor movements by adopting the language of *obrerismo*. The results differed, however. Whereas the Somocista union thrived at the Ingenio San Antonio, the labor movement in Chinandega ceased to exist between 1948 and 1958.

The second part of *To Lead as Equals* shifts the focus to the countryside, where a minor land dispute in San Juan del Obraje "turned into a mass movement that challenged both the agrarian elite and the regime" (p. 15). In addition to discussing the structural economic changes that conditioned the upsurge in peasant mobilization, Gould shows how the campesinos, as a result of their growing political consciousness, transformed Somocista populism by eventually turning it against their elite antagonists.

Part III focuses on the 1960s and 1970s, when popular movements in Chinandega had recognized the limits of Somocista reformism. They then "pushed Somocista popular discourse to its limits, sapped it of its value, and left the regime with nothing to defend itself but the National Guard" (p. 293). Arguing that "there was nothing inevitable about the campesinos' eventual support for the Sandinista revolution," Gould demonstrates how radical Catholicism served to bridge the political-cultural barrier between them and the Sandinistas, leading the campesinos to "appropriate the revolutionary language of the Sandinistas and to accept the subordination of their own class struggle to the national revolutionary movement" (p. 270).⁸ Gould's conclusions challenge predominant interpretations of the Sandinista revolution. First, his study sheds new light on the peculiar nature of the Somoza regime, especially its populist style, which "combined anti-oligarchic discourse with appeals to the working masses" (p. 293). Gould argues convincingly that Somocista populism was essential to the regime's attempts to establish hegemonic control and was perpetuated by the political-cultural barrier between middle-class anti-Somocista groups and popular movements. Second, he dismisses the notion that workers and peasants supported the FSLN because of some "innate hostility to the regime," arguing instead that the process by which they came to support the Sandinistas was complex and regionally varied (p. 294). Finally, Gould emphasizes the important campesino component of the revolution in key agro-export regions. A well-developed agrarian movement in Chinandega "created the conditions for a campesino-FSLN

8. Gould's conclusions corroborate the findings of other scholars who have emphasized the importance of religious faith in the growing political radicalization of poor Nicaraguans. See Philip Williams, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Nicaragua and Costa Rica* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989); and Dodson and O'Shaughnessy, *Nicaragua's Other Revolution*.

alliance, thus providing a large political and military base for the revolutionaries" (p. 294).

On a theoretical level, Gould contributes to the debate over whether peasant rebellions are community- or class-based. Borrowing from Carol Smith, he argues that community and class are not analytically separate concepts.⁹ Communities in rural Chinandega formed a class in a "relational sense," sharing a feeling of antagonism toward agrarian elites. Consequently, community and class forms of struggle became intermingled (p. 297). Gould also builds on the work of Lowell Gudmundson and William Roseberry, whose studies of agrarian capitalism in Costa Rica and Venezuela challenge the predominant interpretations of agrarian revolt as "the necessary consequence of capitalism's destructive impact on precapitalist communities" (p. 134).¹⁰ In Chinandega, where the communities studied came into being in the late 1940s, agrarian "capitalism created rather than destroyed" these communities (p. 134).

Gould's *To Lead as Equals* also foreshadows the tensions that subsequently arose within the FSLN's multiclass alliance. Developing autonomously from guerrilla bands, campesino movements in Chinandega eventually subordinated their class-specific demands to the revolutionary movement's national struggle. Following the FSLN's successful assault on state power, their demands became diluted within the Frente's broader political agenda. Early tensions between the ATC (Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos) and the government over the pace of the agrarian reform reflected this inherent contradiction. Moreover, as the external noose tightened around Nicaragua, popular organizations were generally expected to subordinate their demands to the government's defense requirements. Austerity measures beginning in February 1985 further limited the programs that had enabled popular sectors to increase their participation and relative influence over political and economic decision making (programs involving health, education, and agrarian reform). In short, the context of war and economic crisis sharply circumscribed the autonomy of popular organizations vis-à-vis the FSLN.

The problematic relationship between the FSLN and popular organizations during the revolutionary period and beyond merits further study.¹¹ Although rapid growth in popular organizations provided traditionally

9. See Carol Smith, "Culture and Community: The Language of Class in Guatemala," in *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook*, edited by Mike Davis (London: Verso, 1987).

10. See Lowell Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986); and William Roseberry, *Coffee and Capitalism in the Venezuelan Andes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

11. In the wake of their electoral setback, Sandinista leaders are much more willing to discuss openly the party's relationship with popular organizations. For studies conducted prior to the 1990 elections, see Gary Ruchwarger, *People in Power: Forging a Grassroots Democracy in Nicaragua* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1987); and Ilja Luciak, "Popular Democracy in the New Nicaragua," *Comparative Politics* 19, no. 4 (Oct. 1987):35–55.

marginalized groups with important new opportunities for participation, the meaningfulness of such participation was greatly affected by these organizations' degree of autonomy. Organizations that witnessed a decline in their relative autonomy also suffered from erosion of support among the rank and file. This outcome undoubtedly contributed to the Sandinistas' electoral setback.

Since the elections, the Sandinistas' capacity to restrain the demands of popular organizations has diminished significantly.¹² Although popular organizations recognize the benefit of some kind of association with the FSLN, indications are that such groups will become increasingly autonomous in the future. In the context of a deepening economic crisis, popular organizations can no longer depend heavily on a party whose future is uncertain. Ultimately, however, their growing assertiveness guarantees that ten years of revolution will not be easily reversed.

12. This situation was no doubt compounded by the party's internal crisis immediately following the elections.