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H-Diplo Review Essay on **Roger Peace. *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign.*** Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-55849-931-7 (cloth, \$80.00); 978-1-55849-932-4 (paper, \$28.95).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **E. Timothy Smith**, Barry University

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With the fall of the regime of Anastasio Somoza Debayle in Nicaragua to the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in 1979 and the election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States in 1980, the United States became increasingly involved in attempts to overthrow the new Nicaraguan government. The Nicaraguans opposed to the Sandinistas, many of whom were members of Somoza's National Guard, were labeled the 'contras' and received funding and supplies from the U.S. government. The concern that this might lead to U.S. military intervention, coming so soon after the end of the Vietnam War, led to the development of an Anti-Contra War Campaign (ACWC) within the United States.

Roger Peace, Adjunct Professor of History at Tallahassee Community College and a peace activist, has written this history of the ACWC, which is both informative and surprising since the wide-range and the depth of the movement has received very little exposure. While he touches on El Salvador and the other conflicts that were concurrent in Central America with the Contra War, he devotes his primary attention to the opposition to the conflict and U.S. support for the Contras in Nicaragua. That is what makes this book so unique. Very little scholarly attention has been paid to the movements which opposed Reagan's policies in Central America. Christian Smith's *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement*<sup>1</sup> examines the emergence of social movements as well as the conflicts in El Salvador and Guatemala. In addition, Smith primarily focuses on three of the major groups involved in the peace movement: Sanctuary, Witness for Peace, and Pledge of Resistance. Peace does recognize that the "ACWC was part of a larger Central America movement" (4) including efforts to stop U.S. assistance to the El Salvador and Guatemala governments

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: the U.S. Central American Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

because of human rights concerns and the Sanctuary Movement, which aided refugees from Central America.

In the introduction, Peace states that his “study provides a comprehensive historical account of the anti-contra War campaign and its Nicaraguan connections” (5). He notes that while much has been written on the Reagan administration’s foreign policy toward Nicaragua, the movement opposed to those actions has received limited treatment. He writes that the effort to cut off assistance to the Contras was reinforced by several factors including the lessons of the Vietnam War, the diplomatic efforts of Latin American leaders to end the conflict, the military strength of the Sandinista government, and congressional outrage at illegal actions by the Reagan administration. These he interweaves throughout his narrative, noting their impact on the ACWC. In the first chapter, Peace provides a brief history of the United States in Nicaragua and the Sandinista Revolution, noting that what set the United States against that revolution was less the cause of alleged arms transfers by the Sandinistas to El Salvadoran guerrillas than the changes that came with the Reagan administration. The reluctant acceptance of the FSLN government by the administration of President Jimmy Carter “gave way to vehement rejection by the Reagan administration” (19). Placing the security issues involved in the context of the Cold War, the new administration viewed the Sandinista regime as an outpost of the Soviet Empire that was determined to export revolution.

Peace argues that critics of the Contra War took the offensive in the debate on the war, seeking to establish their own line of discourse. He sets out seven categories of the major themes advanced by the opponents of the war: violations of U.S. laws, including illegal arms transfers to the contras; the lessons of Vietnam, including the concern that the U.S. would invade Nicaragua; diplomacy over war, especially to counter the Reagan administration’s claim that it was negotiating in good faith; Contra terrorism, attempting to educate American citizens on the Contra attacks on civilians; international law, including Nicaragua’s right to self-determination under international law; “What’s good about Nicaragua,” which supported FSLN reforms; and the ideological views, which challenged the Cold War assumptions of the administration’s Central American policies. By laying out all the themes, the author argues that ACWC was very diverse politically, religiously, and ideologically in its approach to the U.S. policies. That becomes quite clear as Peace discusses the origins and evolution of the movement.

The ACWC drew together “an eclectic mix of groups” (53) that emerged out of progressive groups with connections to Latin America and the post Vietnam War peace movement. The Nicaraguan solidarity campaign emerged in early 1979 and the anti-war campaign emerged in early 1982. Peace notes the impact of liberation theology, a Catholic movement based on the Gospel committed to the process of liberation of the oppressed and exploited in Latin America, that led, in the United States, to a more sympathetic view of Latin American revolutionaries. Another source of the ACWC was the political left in the United States, which was made up of a very diverse collection of groups and individuals in the 1970s and 1980s. In particular he discusses the Coalition for a New Foreign Policy. These leftist groups tended to be sympathetic to the Sandinista revolution. Other sources of the movement were human rights activists, scholars associated with groups such as the Latin American Studies Association, and various peace groups, many of whom were associated with the nuclear freeze

campaign, including, among others, SANE, the American Friends Service Committee, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Beginning with the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign and then the Central American Movement, the author discusses the emergence of the ACWC by 1982, when the Contra War began in earnest. While the broader Central American movement, with its focus on El Salvadoran death squads, diminished Nicaraguan activism, the attention to Central America “ultimately benefited it by increasing public interest in Central American issues” (75). By 27 March 1982, a series of demonstrations around the country initially in opposition to aid to the government of El Salvador added the demand that the U.S. end intervention in Nicaragua.

By 1983 the Contra War became a major topic in Washington. In December 1982 Congress passed the Boland Amendment which prohibited U.S. assistance to groups carrying out military activities in or against Nicaragua. Representative Edward Boland (D-MA) soon denounced the administration for lack of compliance with the amendment and introduced legislation to cut off all aid to the contras. The House of Representatives passed such a cut-off, but the Senate did not and aid continued to flow to the Contras. Throughout the rest of the book, Peace discusses efforts by the ACWC to convince Congress to cut off all assistance, including humanitarian aid, to the Contras. In addition to that legislative effort, he discusses numerous other activities carried out by a wide range of groups, scattered throughout the United States, to educate the American public to the human rights violations and destructive warfare of the Contras, and people-to-people and city-to-city contacts with Nicaragua. Peace discusses the activities of at least thirty groups, local and national, that were involved in the ACWC. Like Smith, he discusses Witness for Peace, which took Americans to the front lines of the Contra War and then returned them to the United States to carry out education campaigns, and the Pledge of Resistance, which emerged between November 1983 and October 1984 after the U.S. invasion of Grenada, led many to wonder how to deter a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua. Their idea was to use civil disobedience in a mobilization to wage peace. Other organizations sent humanitarian supplies to Nicaragua, sent people to help with the coffee harvest, lobbied Congress, and created a United States-Nicaraguan sister cities campaign “centered on dissolving enemy images through personal contact and cultural understanding” (112).

Over the course of *A Call to Conscience*, Peace examines group after group, person after person, demonstrating how extensive and decentralized the ACWC was throughout the United States.

This is the most impressive part of his work. While the anti-Vietnam War movement was divided over its goals, the ACWC, according to Peace, was not. The various “groups were united in seeking an immediate end to U.S. support for the contras, opposing a direct U.S. invasion of Nicaragua and...calling for an end to the U.S. trade embargo” (114). Despite the fact that the groups had different philosophies, organizing styles, constituencies, and tactics, they all agreed on those political goals. The fact that the ACWC was loosely constructed allowed very diverse groups to maintain autonomy and cooperate where they saw fit. Leftist and pacifist groups could maintain their critiques of U.S. foreign policy, liberal groups could focus on politics, and the religious groups could retain an identity based on their faith. Thus activists could keep “their eyes on the prize of ending the Contra War” (117). At times the

coalition's message could, however, be diluted by a variety of issues. For example, the April 1985 demonstrations in Washington and San Francisco, which drew 26,000 to 100,000 (depending on who did the estimate) to Washington had four broad demands: disarmament, an end to U.S. interventionism, an end to South African apartheid, and military spending reductions. Peace argues that this diluted the focus on Contra aid just as Congress was scheduled to vote again on aid to the Contras. This happened again in October 1986, as demonstrations were held in numerous cities to coincide with the release of contra aid approved by Congress.

In the final phase of the ACWC, 1987-1990, the movement was aided by political and international developments. The Iran-Contra scandal validated their allegations of illegal actions taken by the Reagan administration. The 1987 Esquipulas accords, a peace agreement signed by five Central American presidents requiring a cessation of outside support for guerrilla forces in the region, reinforced the theme of diplomacy over war. The 1986 decision by the International Court of Justice, which stated the United States should cease support for the contras and make reparations payments to Nicaragua, and which was rejected by the Reagan administration, placed the movement on the side of international law. By 1989 there was a widespread impression that the Contra War was ending. This presented a new challenge to the ACWC and there was a decline in activism as a result. As the likelihood of a direct U.S. invasion lessened, peace groups began to drift away. The administration of George H.W. Bush took advantage of this to frame the issue as a legitimate effort to support democracy in Nicaragua, shifting U.S. support away from the Contras to the National Opposition Union (UNO) and its presidential candidate in the 1990 elections, Violeta Chamorro. With the UNO's surprising victory in that election, the United States ceased its support for the military operations of the Contras. In the end, Peace notes, the Central American movement "faded into a broader network of progressive groups concerned with Latin America" (241). As the movement weakened, Peace concludes that the opponents of the Contra War had challenged the Reagan administration's nationalistic conception of morality in foreign affairs, and instead had offered some alternative ways of understanding revolutionary turmoil in Latin America. They had developed some unprecedented levels of transnational connections in Nicaragua and their call to conscience raised issues such as democratic responsibility for U.S. foreign policies and a belief in the possibilities of social change. While Peace admits that the ACWC failed to end the war, it did strengthen public and congressional opposition to Contra aid, which limited the Reagan administration's options, including the option of a direct U.S. invasion of Nicaragua. The main weakness of *A Call to Conscience* is its very short concluding section. Once the conflict ended and as the ACWC faded away there is very little discussion of what happened to the various organizations involved in the movement or what kind of impact the end of the struggle had on the various Nicaraguans and Americans who had worked so hard to try to end the conflict.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of post-Cold War challenges to U.S. policies in Central America see Virginia S. Williams, "Grassroots Movements and Witnesses for Peace: Challenging U.S. Policies in Latin America in the Post-cold War Era," *Peace and Change* Vol. 29, No. 3&4 (July 2004), 419-430.

While *A Call to Conscience* does not include a bibliography, the extensive endnotes provide a good sense of depth of the research that Peace did for this book. This includes books, journal articles, newspaper articles, literature of the various groups involved, archival sources, and government publications. Most impressive, however, is the number of interviews that Peace did for his work. Peace interviewed over eighty individuals, U.S. citizens and Nicaraguans, , providing a personal look into the movement and its impact and influence in both nations. While he reaches many of the same conclusions as Smith does in his book on the successes and failures of the movement, Peace's focus on just the movement against the Contra War and his descriptions of work that was done both on the local and national levels throughout the United States makes it a unique and valuable contribution to our understanding of the dynamics of peace movements and to the willingness of some to put their consciences into action.

**E. Timothy Smith**, Ph.D., is Professor of History at Barry University in Miami Shores, Florida where he was the Chair of the Department of History and Political Science from 1996-2007. Among his books and articles are *Beyond the Water's Edge: Liberal Internationalists, Pacifists and Containment, 1945-1953* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999). Currently he is researching and writing on private voluntary organizations and their cooperation with the U.S. government on developmental issues, Food for Peace and the voluntary youth organizations that were the roots of the Peace Corps from 1945-1961.

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