

2019

H-Diplo

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Article Review

No. 819

4 January 2019

Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse
Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Gerardo Sánchez Nateras. "The Sandinista Revolution and the Limits of the Cold War in Latin America: The Dilemma of Non-intervention During the Nicaraguan Crisis, 1977-78." *Cold War History* 18:2 (2018): 111-129. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2017.1369046>.

URL: <http://tiny.cc/AR819>

Review by **Eline van Ommen**, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

In July 1979, after a long military struggle and successful diplomatic campaign, Nicaraguan guerrillas from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) finally succeeded in toppling the dictatorial regime of Anastasio Somoza. For the first time in two decades, armed Cuban-inspired guerrillas had triumphed in Latin America. Sandinista leaders, however, maintained that their revolutionary project would be very different from Fidel Castro's Cuba. Instead of moving towards a totalitarian socialist regime, the FSLN promised to establish a revolutionary government based on the three principles of political pluralism, a mixed economy, and non-alignment. The Sandinistas' utopian political project inspired peoples and governments from around the globe and, in the years leading up to the fall of Somoza, the young revolutionaries enjoyed widespread domestic and international support, amongst others from Latin American governments, Western European social democrats, solidarity activists, human rights organisations, and labour unions.

Gerardo Sánchez Nateras's article discusses the involvement of the governments of Costa Rica, Venezuela, Panama, the United States, and Cuba in the Nicaraguan regional crisis. Amongst others, he seeks to explain the unusual partnership between the Sandinista guerrillas and various Latin American liberal and authoritarian governments during the tumultuous period leading up to the FSLN's revolutionary victory. The broad alliance between socialist Sandinista revolutionaries and Latin American statesmen, the author argues, was an unstable "marriage of convenience" as the different actors did not fully trust each other and often had "secret" and "contradictory objectives" (113, 128). Furthermore, the article suggests, the Latin American alliance against Somoza would not have been possible if it was not for the policies of the American President Jimmy Carter, who aimed to "eliminate the strict pattern of Cold War politics" and was therefore resistant to intervene in the "internal affairs of the Latin American nations." The 'limited capacity' of the U.S. government to shape political events in Latin America under the Carter administration, Sánchez Nateras argues, "opened the door for new political configurations and alliances" amongst Latin American leaders (113). Thus, he concludes, although the United States government remained "the great force" behind the Nicaraguan crisis in 1977-1979, Latin American actors "managed to negotiate, influence, and manipulate the situation to create an independent political solution" (128).

In addition to dealing with inter-American affairs, the article includes an interesting discussion of the FSLN's shifting campaign strategies. In 1976, one of the three Sandinista factions, the so-called *terceristas*, changed tactics. After deciding that the FSLN needed the support of mainstream opposition parties and respectable individuals, both domestically and internationally, these *tercerista* revolutionaries publicly moved away from Marxist rhetoric, hiding their true intentions "behind layers of political moderation and openness" (114). This strategy was highly successful, and many prominent Nicaraguans joined the FSLN in the late 1970s, such as lawyers, priests, professors, writers, journalists, and bankers. The author maintains, however, that the *tercerista* turn towards political moderation was no more than a façade, and that the FSLN secretly remained committed to Marxist-Leninism. To make this point, he quotes an intriguing Nicaraguan primary source: a clandestine letter sent by Sandinista commander Humberto Ortega, which can be found in the *Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica* (IHNCA) in Managua. In this document, Humberto Ortega explains to the Sandinista militants that the *tercerista* strategy had been highly effective in mobilising the Nicaraguan people for the Sandinista cause. What is more, Ortega added, this had been possible without losing "at any moment our revolutionary Marxist-Leninist content" (114). While this is certainly a compelling source, the article would have benefited here from a broader engagement with the—albeit relatively small—body of literature that deals with ideological foundations of the FSLN and the Nicaraguan Revolution to demonstrate to what extent Ortega's letter was representative of the political convictions and motivations of the FSLN's broader base.¹

Perhaps because Sánchez Nateras attempts to cover the role, ambitions, and impact of such a large variety of actors, not all aspects of the article are fully developed. In particular, I would have liked to read more about the motivations of the presidents of Venezuela and Panama, respectively Carlos Andres Perez and Omar Torrijos, for becoming actively involved in Nicaraguan affairs and engage in a marriage of convenience with the FSLN in the late 1970s. Were these Latin American leaders simply convinced by the arguments of the Sandinista guerrillas, or did other strategic, ideological, or economic considerations play a more important role? While the author does suggest that "Washington's distance from Somoza" emboldened the Nicaraguan dictator's enemies, the link between U.S. foreign policy and the Venezuelan and Panamanian involvement in Nicaragua—and not any other country in the region—is not as explicit as it might have been. The Venezuelan social democrat Perez, for example, might have had a long "history of enmity" with anti-Communist regimes in Latin America, but surely Somoza was not the only right-wing dictator he could target (115). With regards to Omar Torrijos, readers might be left wondering why the Panamanian military leader, who himself had obtained power in a coup in 1969, was so eager to support the Sandinistas' campaign to overthrow the Somoza regime.

By including a more in-depth analysis of Panamanian and Venezuelan relations with the FSLN, the article's interpretation of some of the decisions of these Latin American leaders might have made more sense. According to the author, for instance, Perez sought "to avoid a revolution" in Nicaragua as he feared radicalisation and a communist takeover. At the same time, the Venezuelan government continued to provide the Sandinistas with a monthly stipend of \$100,000 (115). This seems strange; why would the Venezuelan president provide the FSLN with money, which the revolutionaries could use for their military campaign

¹ See, for instance, Dirk Kruijt, *Guerrillas: War and Peace in Central America* (London: Zed Books, 2008); Matilde Zimmerman, *Sandinista: Carlos Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Revolution* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Gary Prevost, "Cuba and Nicaragua: A Special Relationship?" *Latin American Perspectives* 17:3 (1990): 120-137.

against Somoza, if he did not want them to succeed? Perhaps a discussion of which of the three Sandinista factions actually benefited most from the Venezuelan aid would have been useful here. Presumably, Perez tried to ensure the money ended up with the more moderate Sandinista faction, the *terceristas*. Also, considering that the article predominantly draws on U.S. sources to argue that the “alliance between the Sandinistas and their patrons began to fall apart” in 1978, I wonder if the Venezuelan and Panamanian leaders might not have exaggerated their fear of an “extreme left regime” taking over in Nicaragua in the presence of U.S. officials (117). By playing on what they assumed were U.S. Cold War concerns, these Latin American officials could simply have tried to push the Carter administration towards breaking its diplomatic and financial ties with the Somoza regime.

Finally, it would be good to see future historians explore the author’s conclusions that the Carter administration rejected “American unilateralism” and pushed for a “moral” foreign policy, while Latin American actors, such as Torrijos and Perez, tried “to re-establish the previous bipolar and imperialist arrangement, actively calling for US intervention to promote stability in the region” (128). Some conceptual framing would have been useful here to define contested concepts such as intervention, unilateralism, multilateralism, and imperialism. When Torrijos and Perez asked the U.S. administration to “intervene” in the Nicaraguan crisis, for example, did they call for a military intervention, diplomatic pressure, mediation, or the termination of U.S. assistance to the Somoza regime? This matters quite a lot, in particular if one wants to make the case that these Latin American actors were pushing for more, rather than less, U.S. imperialism in the region. Is it really fair to say that calling for a cut-off in economic assistance is the same thing as pushing for U.S. imperialism? The author’s claim that the Carter administration successfully moved away from a unilateralist foreign policy also seems questionable. Indeed, despite protests from multiple Latin American governments, the U.S. continued to provide Somoza with economic aid and, at some point, he even alerted American “fighter jets to intercept any attack” against the Somoza dictatorship (124).

To conclude, the involvement of Latin American governments in the international campaign to isolate and undermine the Somoza dictatorship is a crucial aspect of the history of the Nicaraguan revolution that, the author rightly states, has not yet been covered in much depth. Some scholars, however, would challenge the article’s claim that the history of U.S. involvement in the Nicaraguan crisis has already been “extensively studied” by historians (111). While Sánchez Nateras does cite works that deal with U.S. foreign policy towards Nicaragua, these were all published in the 1980s and 1990s and, as a consequence, do not draw on recently declassified archival material.² Nevertheless, this article, drawing on memoirs and archival material from the United States, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua, makes a very welcome contribution to the historiography of this transformative period in twentieth-century Latin American history. It is part of the burgeoning and exciting new field of international and transnational history of Central America in the 1970s and 1980s. And it demonstrates convincingly that in order to understand why the Sandinistas’ military struggle against the Somoza regime gained momentum and international recognition in the late 1970s, after years of failure and isolation eventually, we need to take into account the involvement of a wide range of regional actors. Indeed, I hope this multi-archival, multilateral, inter-American approach will invite future

² Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling: A Case Study of Washington at Work* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1989); Robert Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Lawrence Pezzullo, *At the Fall of Somoza* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993); William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Back Yard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

historians to join a growing academic debate into the domestic, transnational, and international origins of the 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution.

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