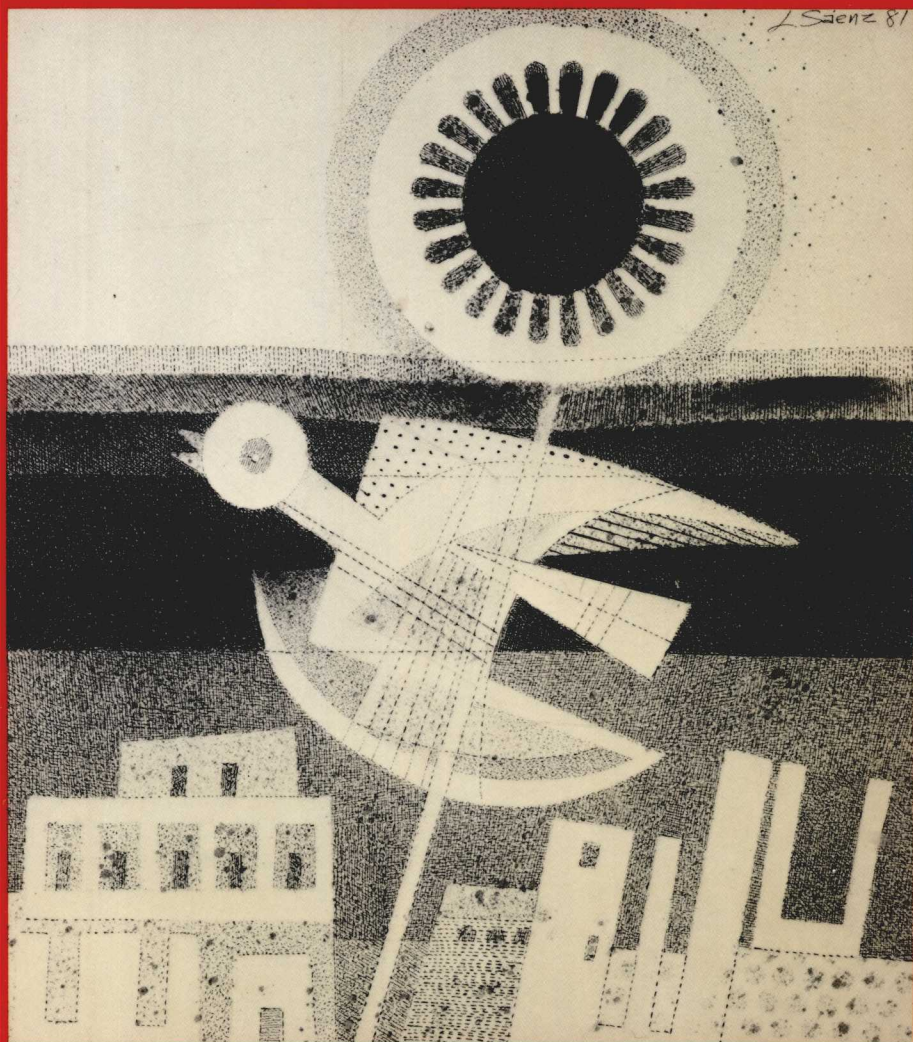


NICARAGUA

The Land of Sandino

SECOND EDITION, REVISED AND UPDATED

Thomas W. Walker



Westview Profiles / Nations of Contemporary Latin America

NICARAGUA

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Westview Profiles/Nations of Contemporary Latin America

The picture on the paperback cover, entitled *Amanecer en Nicaragua* (Awakening in Nicaragua), was drawn especially for this book by Leoncio Sáenz of Managua. An artist of considerable acclaim in Central America, Sáenz is a frequent artistic contributor to *Nicaráuac*, a monthly publication of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Culture.

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Published in 1986 in the United States of America by Westview Press, Inc.; Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher; 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Walker, Thomas W.

Nicaragua, the land of Sandino.

(Westview profiles. Nations of contemporary Latin America)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Nicaragua—History. I. Title. II. Series.

F1526.W175 1986 972'.85 85-22566

ISBN 0-8133-0072-X

ISBN 0-8133-0073-8 (pbk.)

Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Foreword

For many countries of Latin America, as well as for much of the rest of the so-called Third World, dependency is a basic fact of life. Related to, yet differentiated from, the elemental Marxist concept of imperialism, dependency theory in recent years has evolved into a framework for analyzing the political dilemmas and developmental processes of such countries. It has proved most useful when applied to frustrated or even abortive experiences with modernization, especially those cases in which the most intractable problems are rooted in a peripheral relationship to the international economic system and subordination to one of the world's superpowers in the political realm. As this has been the fundamental situation of Nicaragua until very recently, a modified dependency perspective is highly appropriate for Professor Walker's insightful study of this troubled Central American nation.

Nicaragua, with its long history of dictatorships and foreign intervention, followed by a dramatic revolution at the end of the 1970s, was certainly a most timely choice for the first volume in the *Nations of Contemporary Latin America* series. Here the United States, once it replaced Great Britain as the Western Hemisphere paramount (around the turn of the century), exercised an all but suffocating influence—one which produced both the Somoza dynasty and the Sandinist revolutionaries. Significantly, the confrontation between the original protagonists in this prolonged drama, Augusto César Sandino and Anastasio Somoza García, occurred during the early years of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy when the United States was beginning to pull back from its most heavy-handed direct domination of Latin America. It would take nearly a half century for the political heirs of the martyred Sandino to topple the *Somocista* system erected during the 1930s, and great questions concerning the essential nature of the postrevolutionary regime remain to be resolved in the 1980s.

This book, like its sister studies in the series that will employ other analytical approaches to countries whose essential problems are of a significantly different nature, does not attempt to predict the future course of events. Its author does, however, meet the challenge of presenting a coherent interpretation of Nicaraguan reality, which will make controversial events intelligible to those seeking answers along the way to the questions of why developments are following a certain course. This is a critical contribution at a point in time when the Reagan administration in Washington appears strongly inclined to reassert the traditional U.S. voice and presence in the post-Somoza processes. Developments in and concerning Nicaragua during the late 1980s are giving rise to heated debate. This perceptive profile should provide needed focus and understanding to this debate and assure that at least some of the participants are well informed on the serious issues involved.

Ronald Schneider

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to a number of individuals, groups, and institutions who helped produce this book. First, thanks are due the Nicaraguan people and government for their kind hospitality and extensive cooperation. I am also indebted to the Department of Political Science, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at Ohio University for the financial support that enabled me to make numerous trips to Nicaragua following the liberation. For kindly agreeing to read and comment on various segments of the manuscript, thanks are due Alejandro Bendaña, Ricardo Chavarría, Joseph Collins, Kenneth P. Erickson, Peter Kemmerle, Susan E. Ramírez-Horton, Charles Roberts, Charles Stansifer, Eric Wagner, Anne U. Walker, and Sergio Zeledón. I am also grateful to the editors of *Caribbean Review*, *Current History*, Houghton Mifflin and Company, and Scholarly Resources, Inc., for their kind permission to use occasional phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that appeared in earlier works of mine for which they hold the copyrights. The work of several efficient and dedicated typists is also gratefully acknowledged. Finally, my deep appreciation goes to my wife, Anne, and my children, Joe, Carlos, Jimmy, and Emilie, for understanding and support beyond the call of duty.

T.W.W.

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1

Introduction

Located at the geographic center of Central America, with Honduras to the north and Costa Rica to the south, Nicaragua is the largest country in the region. Even so, its 57,143 square miles (148,000 square kilometers) of surface make it only slightly larger than the state of Iowa. Its population of about 3 million is slightly larger than Iowa's 2.8 million. Nevertheless, Nicaragua is an extremely interesting and unique country with an importance that far exceeds its size. Although there have been many revolts and coups d'état in Latin America, Nicaragua is one of only a handful of Latin American countries to have experienced a real social revolution, by which I mean a rapid process of change in social and economic as well as political structures.

The physical characteristics of Nicaragua have long drawn the attention and captured the imagination of outsiders. The country has abundant and rich agricultural lands, considerable potential for geothermal and hydroelectric energy, important timber and mineral resources, and conveniently located waterways that make Nicaragua an ideal site for an interoceanic canal.

Though located entirely within the tropics, this small country varies from one region to another in temperature and other climatic characteristics. Altitude, mountainous land barriers, and the differing meteorological influences of the Caribbean and Pacific Ocean are the determining factors. As throughout the tropics, altitude rather than season determines temperature. On the lowlands of the Pacific and Caribbean coasts temperatures usually are quite high. In the central mountain ranges—or Cordilleras—that transverse the country from northwest to southeast, the climate is temperate. The mountains also influence Nicaraguan weather by acting as a natural barrier between the predominantly humid environment of the Caribbean and the seasonally dry patterns of the Pacific.

As a result of these factors, Nicaragua can be divided conceptually into three distinct regions: the Caribbean lowlands, the central highlands, and the western lowlands. Occupying nearly half of the country, the Caribbean lowlands are composed of hot, humid, tropical rain forests, swamps, and savannahs. As the most appropriate type of agricultural activity in such an environment involves the primitive technique of slash-and-burn, this vast region has never been able to support a large human population—at present less than 8 percent of the national total lives there.

Due to the more moderate and seasonal nature of rainfall in the central highlands and western lowlands, these regions are more inviting for commercial agriculture and human habitation. The temperate climate and rich soils of the highlands make an ideal environment for coffee cultivation. Indeed, some of the best coffee in the world comes from the highland department of Matagalpa. The western lowlands are appropriate for such crops as cotton, rice, and sugar. A chain of volcanos running through the western lowlands from northwest to southeast enriches the soil of the region through frequent dustings of volcanic ash. The principal cities and most of the population of Nicaragua are in the western lowlands.

Another important physical factor is the position of certain large lakes and rivers. Even in the colonial period, explorers and settlers knew that interoceanic travel across Nicaragua was possible via water routes, taking advantage of the San Juan River, Lake Nicaragua, and Lake Managua. The amount of overland travel required to complete the journey was small. As a result Nicaraguan waterways were regularly used as commercial routes for transisthmian travel during the nearly three centuries of colonial rule. And, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the country's obvious potential as a canal site made Nicaragua the object of frequent foreign intrigue and intervention.

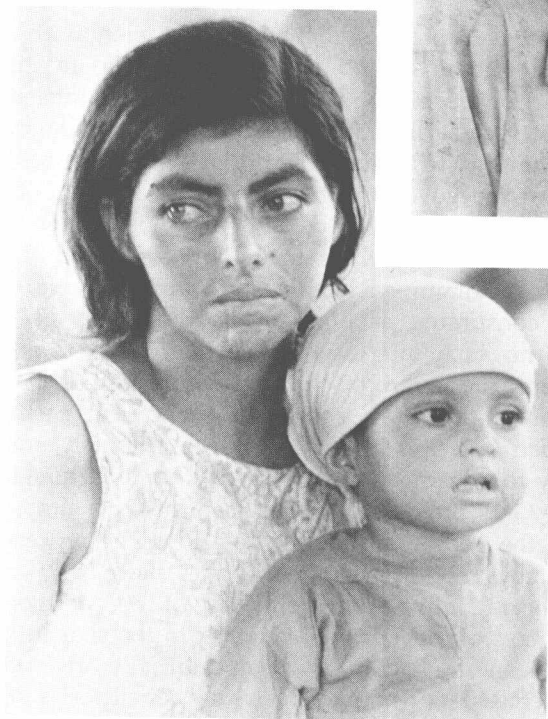
Nicaragua is blessed not only in natural resources and environment but also in certain demographic, social, and cultural characteristics. First, unlike some Latin American countries, it is not overpopulated. Indeed, although it has an abundance of arable land, Nicaragua's population is relatively small. Second, the people are relatively homogeneous and culturally integrated. There are no major racial, ethnic, linguistic, or religious divisions. Practically all Nicaraguans are Catholic, speak Spanish, and share a common cultural heritage. The majority are mestizo, a mixture of Spanish and Indian. And, though there are some "pure" whites, Indians, and blacks, little racial prejudice exists. Finally, Nicaraguans are a congenial, outgoing people with every reason to be proud of things *nica*, such as their

distinctive cookery, music, dialect, literary heritage, and sense of humor.

Ironically, in spite of its human and natural potential, Nicaragua is a poor country and the majority of the people have endured great oppression throughout history. Even in the late 1970s the annual gross national product (GNP) per capita was only a little over \$800 (U.S.). And this statistic obscures the fact that income in Nicaragua was so unevenly distributed that 50 percent of the people probably had an annual disposable income of only \$200. This, in turn, means that the average citizen lived in inadequate housing, ate poorly, and, prior to the 1979 revolution, had little access to education, health care, or other public services. In 1979 the estimated life expectancy at birth for the average Nicaraguan was fifty-three years—ten years less than the average for Central America and eighteen years less than the average for the Latin American nation with the greatest longevity, Cuba.¹

The roots of Nicaragua's problem lie in a phenomenon that many social scientists refer to as *dependency*. Most countries in the world are dependent to one degree or another on other countries. Interdependence does not necessarily imply dependency. Dependency refers to a specific situation in which the economy of a weak country is externally oriented and the government is controlled by national and/or international elites or classes that benefit from this economic relationship. Whereas the dominant elites in an industrial country usually have an interest in maintaining a healthy society and, therefore, a citizenry capable of consuming at high levels, the rulers of a dependent society have no such interest because their markets are largely external. For them, the common citizen is important not as a potential consumer but rather as a source of cheap and easily exploitable labor. In such societies the means of production and income tend increasingly to be concentrated in a few hands. Though impressive growth in the GNP often occurs, significant benefits almost never "trickle down" to the people, no matter how long the process goes on and no matter how much development takes place.²

Prerevolutionary Nicaragua was an extreme case of this common phenomenon. Since the days of the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century, the Nicaraguan economy had always been externally oriented and the people who exercised power had been the beneficiaries of this relationship. First, hundreds of thousands of Indians were exported as slaves. Later, when that "resource" was used up, the elites exported timber, beef, and hides. During the late nineteenth century, coffee became an important product on the world market. In the twentieth century, especially after the Second World War, the country developed





Some Nicaraguans. *Upper left*, ranchhand; *lower left*, mother and child (photos courtesy of Harvey Williams). *Upper right*, boys with slingshot; *lower right*, market woman (photos courtesy of Alberto Mendez of the Center for Agrarian Education and Promotion, Managua).



a diversified repertoire of exports ranging from cotton, coffee, and sugar to beef and gold. Throughout Nicaraguan history, a small elite controlled most of the means of production and garnered most of the benefits. The country's rulers—whether openly dictatorial or ostensibly democratic—always governed in behalf of the privileged few.

Paralleling this history of domestic exploitation—and frequently an essential ingredient of it—was a history of foreign intervention and control. During the colonial period, the Spanish faced sporadic challenges from the British government and English pirates for control of Nicaraguan territory. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the country was actually ruled by a U.S. citizen for a brief period. In the twentieth century, the U.S. government imposed its dominion over Nicaragua first by direct armed intervention (from 1912 to 1925 and from 1926 to 1933) and later through the client dictatorships of the Somoza family (from 1936 to 1979).

Yet if dependency, exploitation, and mass deprivation constitute recurrent themes in Nicaraguan history, so, too, do the ideas of nationalism and popular resistance. Nicaraguan history and folklore are replete with nationalist heroes and martyrs: the Indian *cacique* ("chief"), Diriangén, who fought against the Spanish at the outset of the colonial period; Andrés Castro, who took a stand against the forces of the North American filibuster-president, William Walker, in the mid-nineteenth century; the liberal dictator José Santos Zelaya, who defied British and U.S. imperial designs at the turn of the century; Benjamín Zeledón and Augusto César Sandino, who fought the U.S. occupiers in the early twentieth century; and Carlos Fonseca Amador, a cofounder of the Sandinist Front of National Liberation (FSLN), who died in the guerrilla struggle against the Somoza dictatorship in 1976.

By their actions, these men preserved and reinforced in the Nicaraguan people a stubborn strain of irrepressibility and national pride. Finally, catalyzed into action early in 1978 by the brutal assassination of a prominent and beloved opposition newspaper editor, Nicaraguans of all classes rose up against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle and the system he represented. Eighteen months later, at a cost of approximately fifty thousand dead, the Nicaraguan revolution had triumphed. A brutal and selfish dictator had been overthrown, and a revolutionary government representing the aspirations of countless generations of Nicaraguans had finally come to power.

The Nicaraguan people were aware of the historic significance of their victory. In spite of the tremendous cost of the war, the mood

in the country in July 1979 was one of near universal ecstasy. On July 20, the largest crowd ever assembled in Central America greeted the new government in the central plaza. As one young woman said a few days later, after detailing the loss of various family members, "That [the death and destruction] doesn't matter. The revolution triumphed! I feel as if I had just been born! Like a little baby with a whole life ahead of me!"

In a sense the people of Nicaragua *had* just been born. Almost immediately the new government took steps to reverse the centuries-old patterns of elite control and dominance. A substantial segment of the economy was nationalized, exports were put under strict government control, a massive literacy campaign was launched, and new ideas in health, housing, and public education were generated and put into practice. Though Nicaragua would continue to be dependent on exports, the old cycle of *dependency*, with all its human costs, would, it was hoped, be broken.

This book deals with the history of the Nicaraguan people and their social, economic, and political reality, past and present. It also examines the programs and policies—domestic and foreign—of the revolutionary government. The themes of elite exploitation, foreign manipulation, national resistance, and revolutionary redirection receive special attention. I hope this approach will help the reader not only to appreciate why the Nicaraguan revolution took place but also to understand the motivations behind the various programs that the revolutionary government began to carry out.

NOTES

1. 1979 *World Population Data Sheet* (Washington, D.C.: The Population Reference Bureau, 1979).

2. For a good discussion of *dependency*, see Ronald H. Chilcote and Joel C. Edelstein, "Alternative Perspectives of Development and Underdevelopment in Latin America," in their edited work, *Latin America: The Struggle with Dependency and Beyond* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), pp. 1–87.