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## **Student and Youth Sandinistas in Nicaragua, 1979-2018**

By Viviana Alvarez Rodriguez

*Abstract: In June 1979, Sandinista forces in Nicaragua successfully overthrew a decades-long multi-generational United States-backed military dictatorship. The vanguard, a diverse coalition of secondary and university students, youth, clergy, and peasants, defeated the highly-trained Guardia Nacional (National Guard) and ended the authoritarian Somoza regime. This paper examines how Carlos Fonseca and other Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) leaders resisted the liberal reformist model inherited by student-youth of the late 1960s to demand a more radical political platform. By bringing a relatively isolated student movement into the masses, this paper seeks to understand how a privileged class of university students became active participants in the revolutionary struggle. In addition, an analysis of contemporary student-youth activism in Nicaragua sheds light on how university organizing by the FSLN has shaped student activism outside the confines of the university space itself, particularly in examining the student-led mass mobilizations of 2018.*

### **Introduction**

In 2018, student protesters flooded the streets of Managua, Nicaragua's capital, following the announcement of a proposal by the Daniel Ortega (b.1945) regime to cut social security benefits. The protests made international headlines across multiple media platforms; one publication covering the protests titled their piece "Nicaragua: The Revolution Betrayed."<sup>1</sup> Student-youth protesting

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<sup>1</sup> Jose Zepeda, "Nicaragua: The Revolution Betrayed," *Open Democracy*, September 26, 2021,

issues in the public sphere is not a new phenomenon. For the past forty years, students in Nicaragua have been actively involved in mass mobilization. But this was not always the case. In fact, before the 1979 Revolution, student-youth protests remained relatively limited in scope, as students mobilized to address issues on university campuses like funding and faculty. Outside the area of education, student-youth activists tended to refrain from national politics. However, when they did critique the regime, students raised concerns about ‘undemocratic’ processes.<sup>2</sup> Student-youth involvement in mass mobilization within the public sphere demonstrates how these changes within student activism since the 1979 Revolution remain in Nicaragua today.

By co-opting the existing structure of student-youth activism, the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) successfully expanded student platforms and mobilization beyond the confines of privileged university spaces. Through revolutionary messaging, literacy campaigns, and university organizing, the socialist vision of a rural peasant uprising held by the party’s founder, Carlos Fonseca (1936-1976), was ingrained in the consciousness of a relatively privileged student class. This paper outlines how FSLN tactics indoctrinated student-youth activists and pushed against liberal reformist agendas within the university space. Moreover, I argue that since the 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution, recent student-youth protests in Nicaragua have continued to vocalize broader social issues and working-class demands like social security than pre-revolution student activism.

### ***Education, Economics, and Socio-Political Conditions Under the Somoza Regime***

The Somoza regime rose to power after the 1937 coup d’etat that overthrew President Juan Bautista Sacasa (1874-1946). Anastasio

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<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/nicaragua-the-revolution-betrayed-/>

<sup>2</sup> Claudia Rueda, *Students of Revolution: Youth, Protest, and Coalition Building in Somoza-Era Nicaragua* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 21-24.

Somoza Garcia (1896-1956), who led the coup, gained significant popularity through his leadership in the United States-established *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard), which was created to facilitate the occupation of Nicaragua by the U.S. Marines between 1912 and 1932.<sup>3</sup> The United States operated the *Guardia Nacional* until the election of President Sacasa in 1933. After that, the *Guardia Nacional* retained its relationship with the United States by receiving training and weapons. In 1937, Somoza Garcia overthrew President Sacasa by rallying support from factions in both the Liberal and Conservative parties by marketing himself as a non-partisan politician. Despite his involvement in the *Guardia Nacional's* suppression of Augusto César Sandino's (1895-1934) nationalist peasant rebellion from 1927-1933, Somoza Garcia rose to power by relying heavily on nationalist rhetoric.<sup>4</sup>

In the mid-twentieth century, when Somoza Garcia took power, Nicaragua's economy primarily relied on exporting a few specialized products like coffee and bananas for revenue. At the same time, most in the country, except the business and land-owning elites, remained impoverished.<sup>5</sup> Somoza Garcia initially promised to support the working class of Nicaragua and even championed stricter labor codes to help exploited workers. However, after being elected in 1937, Somoza Garcia failed to pass measures when they challenged his support among the business-owning elite, often pushing the national congress to pass labor codes helping workers instead of taking action himself.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Somoza Garcia implemented policies that enriched those with close connections to the regime, such as wealthy landowners and *somocistas* (ardent Somoza supporters in

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<sup>3</sup> Knut Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza 1936-1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza*, 55.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Bulmer-Thomas, "Nicaragua since 1930," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 320.

<sup>6</sup> Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza*, 58-60; Jeffrey L. Gould, "For an Organized Nicaragua: Somoza and the Labour Movement, 1944-1948," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 19:2 (1987): 357-58.

Nicaragua), while *campesinos* (rural and often indigenous farmers) remained illiterate and living in extreme poverty.

Another source of popular discontent under Somoza Garcia was the lack of democratic practices by the regime. Following his election, Somoza Garcia used his influence within his party, the *Partido Liberal Nacionalista* (PLN), to have parliament amend the constitution. These amendments included giving Somoza Garcia control over municipal governments and the *Guardia Nacional*, and suspending national elections until 1947. Those provisions allowed Somoza Garcia to remain in power well past Nicaragua's four-year democratic term limits.<sup>7</sup> A growing resentment towards this enormous expansion of power made Somoza Garcia's 1947 election plans highly unpopular, resulting in the installation of a puppet candidate named Leonardo Arguello (1875-1947). While Somoza Garcia believed Arguello lacked the self-reliance to govern for himself, Arguello set in motion plans to block Somoza Garcia's intervention in the regime. In response, Somoza Garcia organized a coup and reinstated himself in May 1947.<sup>8</sup>

Due to increased exports following World War II, Nicaragua experienced significant economic growth under the Somoza regime. As the middle class expanded and the country underwent urbanization, enrollment in secondary schools increased significantly.<sup>9</sup> Still, access to education and literacy in pre-revolutionary Nicaragua was reserved for children of the elite and middle classes.<sup>10</sup> The Somoza regime proved ineffectual in meeting the increasing needs of students, and although the number of intermediate schools rose by 130, they failed to match the population growth. Furthermore, these institutions were often located in urban areas, leaving rural Nicaraguans with less access

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<sup>7</sup> Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza*, 103; Rueda, *Students of Revolution*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Rueda, *Students of Revolution*, 53-56.

<sup>9</sup> Rueda, *Students of Revolution*, 95.

<sup>10</sup> Francisco J. Barbosa, "July 23, 1959: Student Protest and State Violence as Myth and Memory in León, Nicaragua," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 85:2 (2005): 192.

to education.<sup>11</sup> The regime's failure to expand education to rural areas meant that peasant youth remained illiterate, lacked opportunities for upward mobility through education, and remained in a continual cycle of poverty and exploitation by wealthy landowners. In the 1950s, literacy rates in Nicaragua were as low as fifty percent in the cities and twenty-five percent in rural areas.<sup>12</sup> Illiteracy among rural peasants remained a problem unaddressed by the Somoza regime until the launch of literacy campaigns by the *Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional* (FSLN) throughout their occupation of Nicaragua's mountainous ranges during the revolution.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Pre-Revolution Opposition and Student Protest***

Student protests and activism were not uncommon in Latin America throughout the 1940s and 1950s. University students protested authoritarian regimes and education conditions in Guatemala, Cuba, and El Salvador. Nicaragua was no different; student protests occurred on university campuses in Managua and Leon, the country's two largest cities. Demonstrations and opposition became so frequent that Anastasio Somoza Garcia, who in 1941 opened a public university in Managua, closed it six years later due to the student resistance to his re-election bid.<sup>14</sup>

Nicaraguans remember the "July 23<sup>rd</sup>" protest in Leon in 1959, which became one of the most impactful precursors to student-youth participation in the revolution. The protest followed the government and the *Guardia Nacional's* restriction to an

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<sup>11</sup> Claudia Rueda, "¡A La Huelga! Secondary Students, School Strikes, and the Power of Educational Activism in 1970s Nicaragua," *The Americas* 77:4 (2020): 602-03.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Sandiford et al, "The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade: How Lasting Were Its Benefits?" *Development in Practice* 4:1 (1994): 35.

<sup>13</sup> Matilde Zimmerman, *Sandinista: Carlos Fonseca And The Nicaraguan Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) 102-05.

<sup>14</sup> Jose Luis Rocha "University Struggles in Nicaragua: How we got to the 1959 student massacre," *Revista Envio* 446, September 2018, <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5536>

annual festival celebrating incoming university students. Because of rising anti-authoritarian sentiments among the student body, the government began to view any mass demonstration or gathering as a threat to its power. Students, growingly frustrated with the dictatorial regime and the *Guardia Nacional's* violence and abuse of power, purposely ignored the restrictions and marched wearing traditional funeral attire and waving the Nicaraguan flag to symbolize the death of the nation's spirit under the Somoza regime. Conflict between the guard and the students broke out, and four students were murdered: Erick Ramírez, Mauricio Martínez, José Rubí, and Sergio Saldaña following the *Guardia Nacional's* decision to shoot at the protesters.<sup>15</sup> The murder of these students resulted in national outrage as concerns grew about the regime's use of violence against youth. The protestors' funerary attire,— formal black clothing—opposition to the Somoza regime, and *Guardia Nacional's* presence further garnered mass support among the people of Nicaragua.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, their mobilization demonstrated that despite the *Guardia Nacional's* efforts to hinder campus gatherings, students felt compelled to challenge limitations imposed by the regime openly.

Organizations like the *Juventud Universitaria Somocista* (JUS) provided on-campus support for Somoza as the regime became more tyrannical. But the JUS lost significant traction as opposition to the Somozas became more common on university campuses after the 1959 student massacre. According to Jose Luis Rocha,

The massacre of July 23, 1959, put the JUS out of circulation. Its members lost all credibility due to their complicity. In the student council's first presidential elections the following year, 778 of the by then 1,200 registered students voted. The Liberal

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<sup>15</sup> Barbosa, "July 23, 1959," 188-92.

<sup>16</sup> Barbosa, "July 23, 1959," 192.

(pro-Somoza) candidate got only 78 votes. The anti-Somoza sentiment was now a majority.<sup>17</sup>

Loss of support for Somoza Garcia following the student massacre demonstrated that many youths valued the importance of solidarity with those who marched against the Somoza regime's abuses and remained critical of the administration.

Despite a growing desire among some students to challenge Somoza Garcia, not all were united in their disdain. While Somoza Garcia rose to power as a self-declared Liberal, many students prior to the revolution became indoctrinated by the writings of Pedro Chamorro (1924-1978), a liberal journalist and opposition writer for *La Prensa*, a popular Nicaraguan newspaper.<sup>18</sup> Chamorro criticized the Somoza regime for its anti-democratic practices and the abuses of the *Guardia Nacional*; many of these criticisms resonated with students who desired change through liberal reform.<sup>19</sup>

Several on-campus organizations made significant student activism possible in the 1950s and 1960s. For one, the *Federacion Mundial de Juventud Democratica* (FMJD) promoted democracy through liberal reform. This meant that they believed that by undergoing some reforms to secure individual rights, the regime would be more democratic. Among its most notable members was Carlos Fonseca, who later formed the FSLN. During a trip to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics sponsored by the organization, Fonseca became inspired by the country's rapid social and industrial developments through socialism; this inspiration later drove the vision of the Sandinista Front in Nicaragua.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Rocha, "University struggles in Nicaragua."

<sup>18</sup> Rueda, *Students of Revolution*, 78-80.

<sup>19</sup> Rueda, *Students of Revolution*, 78-80.

<sup>20</sup> Carlos Fonseca, "Un Nicaragüense en Moscú," (Managua, 1980), Retrieved from <https://sajurin.enriquebolanos.org/docs/Un%20nicarag%C3%BCense%20en%20Moscu.pdf>



Besides organizing in the FMJD, pre-revolution activism among students led Somoza Garcia to allow the formation of a Socialist Party in Nicaragua.<sup>21</sup> Although the organization was named the *Partido Socialista Nicaraguense* (PSN), its platform was liberal and advocated for change through reform. The PSN supported the Somoza regime and offered a space for a mild critique of the government.<sup>22</sup> While the formation of the PSN seemed like an achievement in moving the Somoza regime left, it failed, and like many other concessions offered by the administration, there lacked fundamental reforms to make the government less dictatorial. During Fonseca's participation in the organization, he and Tomas Borge (1930-2012), who helped found the FSLN, challenged this liberal reform approach by publishing articles in *El Universitario*, the student newspaper at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN). Fonseca criticized the Somoza regime for the lack of rural education expansion and a limited tax on exports to benefit wealthy mining and agriculture corporations abroad.<sup>23</sup> As Borge recalled in a tribute to Fonseca, "We published statistics without metaphor; 250,000 children without teachers; only five percent taxation to the mining companies on the gold they export."<sup>24</sup> While these publications raised awareness about income inequality and the need for educational reform within the University, the party's leadership did not consider Fonseca and Borge's demands for mobilization to address these issues.<sup>25</sup> Still, their publication in a university newspaper attempted to create a consciousness about

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<sup>21</sup> Claudia Rueda, "Agents of Effervescence: Student Protest and Nicaragua's Post-war Democratic Mobilizations," *Journal of Social History* 52:2 (2018): 391-93.

<sup>22</sup> Zimmerman, *Sandinista*, 64-65.

<sup>23</sup> Tomas Borge, *Carlos, the dawn is no longer beyond our reach*, translated by Margaret Randall (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1984), 18.

<sup>24</sup> Borge, *Carlos, the dawn is no longer beyond our reach*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Borge, *Carlos, the dawn is no longer beyond our reach*, 18; For more on Fonseca's criticisms of the PSN, see "Nicaragua: Zero Hour" in *Sandinistas Speak: Speeches, writings, and interviews with leaders of Nicaragua's revolution*, ed. by Bruce Marcus (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1982).

economic inequality among the student class, which their predecessors had not addressed.

### ***The Rise of Student Sandinistas***

The *Frente Sandinista De Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) was founded by student activists Silvio Mayorga (1934-1967), Carlos Fonseca, and Tomas Borge in 1961.<sup>26</sup> The FSLN used the image of Augusto Sandino as a basis for their ideological beliefs. Sandino successfully led a peasant uprising against the U.S. Marines' occupation of northern Nicaragua during the late 1920s.<sup>27</sup> Carlos Fonseca, the leader of the FSLN, primarily sought to create a peasant uprising against the U.S.-backed Somoza regime with similar nationalist sentiments as Sandino.<sup>28</sup> Historians have pointed to the influences of the success of Cuba in amplifying the voice of a martyr figure for the cause of revolution, like Fidel Castro's evocation of the writings of Cuban nationalist Jose Martí.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Carlos Fonseca sought to unite Nicaraguans around a prominent figure that could evoke the same sentiments of nationalism and solidarity as Martí had in Cuba.<sup>30</sup>

At the time of the creation of the FSLN, Sandino's legacy had been commemorated by journalist Pedro Chamorro, a student activist in the 1950s himself, though not to the scale that Fonseca was attempting with the creation of the Sandinista Liberation

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<sup>26</sup> Zimmerman, *Sandinista*, 76.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Grossman, "The nation is our mother: Augusto Sandino and the construction of a peasant nationalism in Nicaragua, 1927-1934," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 35:1 (2008): 82-85.

<sup>28</sup> Zimmerman, *Sandinista*, 70-76.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Palmer, "Carlos Fonseca and the Construction of Sandinismo in Nicaragua," *Latin American Research Review* 23:1 (1988): 91-93.

<sup>30</sup> Jose Martí was a Cuban nationalist writer considered one of the major figures of the independence movement from Spain in the 19th century. Martí's work and ideology was frequently cited by revolutionaries in the Cuban revolution of 1959.

Front.<sup>31</sup> Nicaraguans lacked a central figure that could unite them against tyranny as a nation, with many aspects of media and education controlled by the state, Nicaraguans had not heard of or known enough about Sandino and his struggle against the Somoza-led *Guardia Nacional* during the 1930s.<sup>32</sup> In 1936, after the murder of Sandino by the *Guardia Nacional*, Anastasio Somoza Garcia even published a book denouncing the nationalist martyr in order to tarnish his reputation among the masses.<sup>33</sup> Recognizing the need for the construction of a nationalist hero and Somoza Garcia's role in suppressing Sandino's rebellion, the FSLN opted to use the legacy of Sandino to garner popular support for the revolution.

In 1961, Borge and Fonseca planned the upstart of the revolution in Honduras. That year, Fonseca published an article outlining his vision of transformation in Nicaragua. He acknowledged that student-youth activism had significantly challenged the existing political regime. However, he argued for strong participation in leftist youth mobilization.

Let's talk now about the role that the youth of the Nicaraguan people have to play in this historical stage that we are living today (..) For many years, the urban middle class of Nicaragua has not been able to become independent from the old liberal and conservative political parties, and the most that it has come to is to form tiny groups that have often reached the ridiculous point of not even having enough people to compose a reduced national directive. Let's not say that they have lacked

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<sup>31</sup> Palmer, "Carlos Fonseca and the Construction of Sandinismo in Nicaragua," 94.

<sup>32</sup> Anastasio Somoza Garcia, *El Verdadero Sandino: O, El calvario de las Segovias* (Managua: Editorial and Lithography San José, 1976).

<sup>33</sup> Somoza Garcia, *El Verdadero Sandino*.

organizations in the various departments into which the country is divided.<sup>34</sup>

While Fonseca recognized the impact of student-youth activism, he argued that leftist activists never reached a significant base and were still the minority, even in groups like the PSN. Upon Fonseca and Borge's return to Nicaragua, their first task did not involve garnering support among the masses or announcing the creation of the FSLN. Instead, they began forming an entirely different organization called the *Federación de Estudiantes Revolucionarios* (FER).<sup>35</sup>

The FER aimed to get students at the university level involved in the revolutionary struggle. The urgency of creating such an organization among FSLN leadership demonstrated that Borge and Fonseca recognized that having student-youth in the vanguard was crucial to the success of the FSLN. By 1968, the FER succeeded in garnering student support and even recruiting many into the FSLN.<sup>36</sup> Their newfound power at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua in Managua came from the election of Sandinista members to the *Consejo Universitario de la Universidad de Nicaragua* (CUUN), the student council at the University of Nicaragua.<sup>37</sup> Now having power in the student government and an on-campus revolutionary organization of their own, the FSLN recruited various students into their ranks.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike liberal-reformist organizations at the UNAN, Catholics were one group that did actively criticize income inequality in Nicaragua. At the Second Episcopal Conference of Latin America in 1968, also known as the Medellín Conference,

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<sup>34</sup> Carlos Fonseca, "The Fight For the Transformation of Nicaragua," *Centro de Documentación de los Movimientos Armados* (Political Publication, Nicaragua, 1960), [https://cedema.org/digital\\_items/1807](https://cedema.org/digital_items/1807)

<sup>35</sup> Zimmerman, *Sandinista*, 76-77.

<sup>36</sup> Omar Cabezas, *Fire from the Mountain: The Making of a Sandinista* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1986), 5.

<sup>37</sup> Zimmerman, *Sandinista*, 76; Cabezas, *Fire from the Mountain*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Cabezas, *Fire from the Mountain*, 6.

clergy leaders discussed the need for Catholics and the Church to address issues of economic inequality and class struggle, especially throughout Latin America, where Catholicism remained a strong presence. This gave rise to Liberation Theology, a new view of the religion where Catholics had a religious duty to oppose the oppression and mistreatment of marginalized groups like the poor. Catholicism, which had and continues to have an overwhelming influence on Nicaraguan society, was utilized by local priests and religious students as a unifier in formulating a religious opposition movement. As one scholar put it, “One group of revolutionary Christians believed that the needs of the people could best be served through an ideology of human liberation based on a Marxist critique requiring an armed insurrection.”<sup>39</sup> In contrast to liberal and conservative critiques of the regime, many liberation theologians in Nicaragua shared a common Marxist critique of the Somoza regime and desired a fundamental change to the economic system the Somozas used to enrich themselves instead of alleviating the poor.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, Catholic priests and student leaders worked closely with one another to protest the regime in various ways, such as strikes and cathedral occupations. As Fernando Cardenal (1934-2016), a Jesuit priest heavily involved in the revolution, recalled:

The most significant moment was the first occupation of the Cathedral in Managua on September 28, 1970. Three of us priests accompanied about a hundred students from the Catholic Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in a hunger strike at the Cathedral of Managua, demanding that the lives of the university students recently captured be respected, that we might speak

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<sup>39</sup> John-Paul Wilson, “Church, State, and Society during the Nicaraguan Revolution,” *Diálogos Latinoamericanos* 16 (2009): 115- 119.

<sup>40</sup> Wilson, “Church, State, and Society during the Nicaraguan Revolution,” 115-119.

with them, and that, as the law of Nicaragua demanded, at the end of ten days they be freed or appear before a judge with specific charges against them.<sup>41</sup>

The coalition built between students and the clergy was immensely important given the essential role religion plays in Nicaraguan everyday life. By creating an alliance between the FSLN and the Church, both groups could create enough civil unrest to overthrow Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1925-1980), Somoza Garcia's son, in 1979. Students utilized the church's base to gain momentum outside university campuses and into Nicaraguan society. In addition, the clergy's public displays of sympathy and solidarity towards students unfairly imprisoned and mistreated by the regime demonstrated the Somozas' brutal response to criticism of loyal Catholics.

On some occasions, youth in Nicaragua became infatuated with the ideals of the revolution and even purposely enrolled at the UNAN to integrate themselves into the movement.<sup>42</sup> Members recruited at the University did a variety of tasks; many went into the mountain ranges and armed combat with the *Guardia Nacional*. Some students who stayed behind helped the organization by recruiting at the university and finding ways to gain national attention for the revolution like flooding the streets of Managua with propaganda and even robbing banks.<sup>43</sup> Due to the high levels of illiteracy in Nicaragua at the time of the revolution, Sandinista students found creative ways to spread their messaging among the masses, most notably through political comics.<sup>44</sup> These

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<sup>41</sup> Fernando Cardenal, "A Letter to my Friends," *Index on Censorship*, March 1985.

<sup>42</sup> Jose Luis Rocha, "Las Luchas universitarias durante el somocismo," *Revista Envio* 439, October, 2018, <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/5541>

<sup>43</sup> Cabezas, *Fire from the Mountain*, 10-14.

<sup>44</sup> Christiane Berth, "Four Comics in a Revolutionary Context: Educational Campaigns and Collective Memory in Sandinista Nicaragua," in *Comics and Memory in Latin America*, ed. Jorge L. Catalá Carrasco, Paulo Drinot, and James Scorer (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 109.

efforts to make the messaging of FSLN propaganda and revolutionary ideals accessible to those in rural Nicaragua demonstrated that students and Sandinista leadership recognized the importance of moving the revolution out of the university space and into the masses.

In 1968, Fonseca urged students at the University to step out of their comfortable positions as students who supported the revolution's ideals but failed to physically put their lives on the line to participate.<sup>45</sup> As he argued,

While student guerrillas have shed their blood, the revolutionary students have essentially stayed in the classroom with their arms crossed (..) the solidarity of the organized student's movement was limited to offering simple proclamations of condolences... At the origin of student inactivity are the revolutionary students' lack of political discipline and the capitalist penetration of the nation's two universities.<sup>46</sup>

Largely, Fonseca had been critical of students for failing to use their privilege to fight alongside those attempting to overthrow the dictatorial regime, which they understood was essential to building a democratic society. In addition to urging more radical participation from students at the university level, Fonseca had also pushed the FER to engage with students at secondary schools and involve them in the FSLN.<sup>47</sup>

The rhetoric employed by the Sandinista Front leader, Carlos Fonseca, stressed the importance of youth participation in the revolution, treating youth and students as powerful voices in the political development of Nicaragua, resulting in an influx of

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<sup>45</sup> Zimmerman, *Sandinista*, 102.

<sup>46</sup> Rocha, "University struggles in Nicaragua."

<sup>47</sup> Carlos Fonseca, "Mensaje del Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, FSLN, a los estudiantes Revolucionarios," in *Obras* vol. 1 (Managua: 1985), 129.

socially and politically aware young men and women with the overarching desire to determine the political landscape of the country themselves.<sup>48</sup> The FSLN took several measures to attract youth and students into their ranks and succeeded; according to journalist Carlos Vilas, “seventy-one percent of those killed during the insurrection were between 15 and 24 years of age, and students composed the largest sector of participants in the insurrection.”<sup>49</sup> According to Magda Enriquez, a member of the Council of State in Nicaragua—who, in her youth, joined the revolution secretly—several young members of the FSLN deliberately lied about their age to actively resist the Somoza regime.<sup>50</sup> Children as young as twelve served as guerillas during the revolution, demonstrating that some youth in Nicaragua willingly gave up their childhood and adolescence for the revolution.

The success of the FSLN in attracting youth and students into their ranks had several reasons. Some historians attempt to explain this phenomenon by pointing out that the *Guardia Nacional* often targeted youth and students, and the Sandinistas became the Guard’s most ferocious opponents.<sup>51</sup> Attacks on children by the *Guardia Nacional* demonstrated that the Somoza regime was often responsible for stripping their youth. In addition, some sociologists argue that male children in Nicaragua during the revolution felt a moral obligation to abandon their youth much more quickly and enter manhood due to the loss of stable family structure caused by guerilla warfare and mass government persecution by the *Guardia Nacional*.<sup>52</sup> This could have largely

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<sup>48</sup> Zimmerman, *Sandinista*, 102.

<sup>49</sup> Carlos Vilas, *The Sandinista Revolution: National Liberation and Social Transformation in Central America* (New York: Monthly Review, 1986), 108.

<sup>50</sup> Victoria Brittain, “Daughter of the Nicaraguan Revolution,” *The Guardian*, March 20, 1984.

<sup>51</sup> James Quesada, “Suffering Child: An Embodiment of War and Its Aftermath in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 12:1 (1998): 54.

<sup>52</sup> Quesada, “Suffering Child: An Embodiment of War and Its Aftermath in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua,” 54.



contributed to the desire among young men to participate in the war and willingly endanger their lives for the revolution.

While these could have been explanations for youths wanting to join the guerillas, it is important to not dismiss that many students and youth had genuine grievances with the Somoza regime and developed ideologically with the influence of the FSLN. As Luis Ernesto Gomez, a twenty-year-old mechanic interviewed following the victory of the FSLN, explained,

When I wasn't so aware of the struggle, I was romantic, I saw it as a great adventure: "Christ! These FSLN guys are well trained, really cool. I want to be with the FSLN!" But later I realized that it was necessary to think of it as more than an adventure; not just to think about how well trained these *compañeros* were—but about why they fought.<sup>53</sup>

While youth and students were encapsulated by the romanticism surrounding FSLN and resistance to the authoritarian government, many had grown conscious of the political situation in Nicaragua and joined the ranks to fulfill a more prosperous future for the country.

An often neglected aspect of the conversation about youth participation in the revolution is that women made up some of the revolution's most diligent participants, many students, or women who had received formal education.<sup>54</sup> Several educated women joined the guerilla ranks to advance women's rights in Nicaragua, believing that equal rights for women aligned with the revolution's ideals.<sup>55</sup> Carlos Fonseca, the founder of the FSLN, had been

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<sup>53</sup> Envio Digital "And the People Rose Up; Testimonies of the Insurrection in Masaya," *Revista Envío* 96, July, 1989, <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/2722>

<sup>54</sup> Mary Louisa Cappelli, "Women of the revolution: Gendered politics of resistance and agency in the cultural production of Margaret Randall," *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 4:1(2014): 3-4.

<sup>55</sup> Cappelli, "Women of the revolution," 3-4.

adamant about including women in the revolutionary struggle as he viewed them as an essential part of Nicaraguan society and even made the struggle for women's advancement a central part of the FSLN revolutionary program.<sup>56</sup>

Despite including women in the FSLN and Fonseca's beliefs regarding gender equality, many women in the FSLN still occupied gendered roles. Because messaging was important to garnering support for the revolution, young women in the FSLN most often took on the roles of photographers for the revolution. Margarita Montealegre (b. 1956) and Claudia Gordillo (b.1954), who were photographers for the FSLN during the Nicaraguan revolution, used their identity as women guerillas to photograph marginalized communities during the revolution, their most notable subjects being young women, youth, and mothers.<sup>57</sup> Although Sandinista women could join as guerrillas, it is reported that while thirty percent of the FSLN comprised women, only 6.6 percent served in combat.<sup>58</sup> Despite the disparities in participation, many women were dedicated to the revolutionary struggle and would defy societal expectations by being in the vanguard to overthrow the Somoza regime.

### ***The Overthrow of Somoza and Outcomes of the Revolution***

In 1974, FSLN forces split into three factions that advocated for different ways to carry out the revolution.<sup>59</sup> At the time the organization divided, Carlos Fonseca was hiding from the *Guardia Nacional* in Honduras. However, upon seeing divisions within the party, Fonseca ventured back to Nicaragua to mend relationships

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<sup>56</sup> Zimmerman, *Sandinista*, 115.

<sup>57</sup> Illeana L. Selejan, "Women's Work: Photographers of the Sandinista Revolution," *Photography and Culture* 13:3 (2020): 341-2.

<sup>58</sup> Cappelli, "Women of the revolution," 3.

<sup>59</sup> Gerardo Nateras Sanchez, "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): 115-17.

among the factions and reunify Sandinista forces. On November 7, 1976, while making a return to Nicaragua the *Guardia Nacional* discovered FSLN forces and Fonseca was murdered in an ambush.

Although Fonseca's death failed to immediately unify the guerillas, it fueled a massive insurgency among the tendencies. As a result, the Somoza regime declared a state of emergency which authorized the *Guardia Nacional* to raid villages to end civil dissent.<sup>60</sup> During this period, large numbers of Sandinistas were murdered or jailed and tortured by the *Guardia* as political prisoners.<sup>61</sup> In response, students at the university and in secondary schools across the country organized strikes to protest the government's inhumane treatment of political prisoners and on several occasions, they succeeded at securing the release of the imprisoned.<sup>62</sup> During the heightened combat between FSLN guerrillas and the *Guardia* American photographer Susan Meiselas (b. 1948) published one of the most memorable photographs of the revolution. The photograph which became known as *Molotov Man* depicts a young guerrilla in battle with a Molotov cocktail in one hand and a rifle in the other, prominently wearing a rosary around his neck.<sup>63</sup> The image that made international headlines by evoking the role of youth and religion in the revolution.

Some historians debate the importance of Sandinista coalition building and guerrilla forces in the outcome of the revolution. They contend that government oppression during Somoza's state of emergency served as a catalyst for a mass uprising and that the ability of the FSLN to mobilize efficiently and overthrow the regime was largely based on the structure of the

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<sup>60</sup> Jean-Pierre Reed, "Emotions in Context: Revolutionary Accelerators, Hope, Moral Outrage, and Other Emotions in the Making of Nicaragua's Revolution," *Theory and Society* 33:6 (2004): 670.

<sup>61</sup> Claudia Rueda, "¡A La Huelga!" 604.

<sup>62</sup> Rueda, "¡A La Huelga!" 604.

<sup>63</sup> Gilles Bataillon, "Los 'muchachos' in the Sandinista Revolution," *Estudios sociológicos* 31:92 (2013): 306.

state at that point.<sup>64</sup> However, while the state of emergency accelerated the height of the revolution, it was done by strengthening pre-existing coalitions.

In March of 1979, the three tendencies unified and established a National Directorate, giving a democratic voice to each faction.<sup>65</sup> As Katherine Hoyt, a Sandinista who tended to a guerilla safehouse during the revolution, recalls, many Nicaraguans anticipated the end of the overthrow of Somoza during the last confrontations between the FSLN and the *Guardia Nacional*, which were unprecedentedly brutal.<sup>66</sup> Now unified, the FSLN launched massive urban uprisings, more fatal than any other insurgencies that had taken place throughout the revolution. Of the 6,000 individuals who died during the final insurrection, twenty-nine percent had been students, and about seventy-five percent were between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four.<sup>67</sup>

On June 16th the provisional government under Daniel Ortega, who had led the *tercerista* faction during the revolution, marched into Leon, the newly established capital of Nicaragua.<sup>68</sup> The new Sandinista government engaged in various reforms immediately following the revolution. Among them were massive education campaigns led by volunteers.<sup>69</sup> In addition, the government encouraged clergy to travel to Nicaragua's impoverished countryside to teach and provide the poor with food and other necessities.<sup>70</sup> Reforms in education access demonstrated

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<sup>64</sup> Phil Ryan, "Structure, Agency, and the Nicaraguan Revolution," *Theory and Society* 29:2 (2000): 191.

<sup>65</sup> Zimmerman, *Sandinista*, 216.

<sup>66</sup> Katherine Hoyt, "Nicaragua: Memories of the 1979 Final Offensive," *North American Congress on Latin America*, July 19, 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Zimmerman, *Sandinista*, 217.

<sup>68</sup> The *terceristas* became the most prominent leading up to the overthrow of the revolution, this faction of the FSLN formed a coalition with liberals following the government's failed response to the 1972 earthquake in Managua: Zimmerman, *Sandinista*, 220-21.

<sup>69</sup> Christiane Berth, "Four Comics in a Revolutionary Context", 109-10.

<sup>70</sup> Wilson, "Church, State, and Society during the Nicaraguan Revolution," 115-16.

the attentiveness of the new government to appease students who had demanded better education in Nicaragua and had been an integral part of the revolution.

### ***Contemporary Youth and Student Movements In Nicaragua***

Nicaraguans' have preserved the memory of anti-authoritarian student activism. As scholar Eric Cannon writes:

Barrio 14 de Junio is a ten-minute walk from the new cathedral. This working-class neighborhood of about 4,800 residents in southeastern Managua experienced combat during the final insurrection of 1979. It is named for the date during that year when Somoza's national guard massacred five of the barrio's youths, an event commemorated annually with an open-air mass led by members of the Christian base community and progressive priests.<sup>71</sup>

The outcomes of the revolution have deeply shaped contemporary Nicaraguan society. More than forty years after the 1979 insurrection, and one U.S.-funded regime change war later that briefly instituted Violetta Chamorro from 1990-2007—a liberal whom the *terceristas* had collaborated with to gain power after the death of her husband, Pedro Chamorro—Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas remain in power. However, the regime that once mobilized a leftist insurrection against the Somozas is now under scrutiny, with students and youth again as the driving force. In the decade since the Sandinistas' reinstatement, Ortega and the FLSN have faced several criticisms; among them are criticisms of misogyny directed at party leadership and Ortega himself and

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<sup>71</sup> Eric Canin, "Work, a Roof, and Bread: Managua's Christian Base Communities in the Nicaraguan 'Revolution from Below,'" *Latin American Perspectives* 24:2 (1977): 92.

concerns about social safety nets and undemocratic practices.

In the 1960s, Fonseca was vocal about addressing many social issues student-youth activists have adopted today. The FSLN program written by Fonseca in 1969 addressed women's liberation in the post-revolution. In point twelve of the revolutionary program, *Emancipation of Women*, Fonseca wrote that the Sandinista revolution would end discrimination and disparities between men and women and "raise women's political, cultural, and vocational levels."<sup>72</sup> Although young feminists eagerly joined the revolution hoping the leftist regime would champion women's rights in Nicaragua, and many participated as guerillas or did important work in maintaining safe houses for guerillas, young feminists have since become some of Ortega's staunchest critics. In 1998, Ortega's stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narváez Murillo accused the president of sexually abusing her as a child. In response, FSLN leadership refused to publicly hear her claims in front of an ethics committee, fearing losing power during a difficult time for the party as they faced civil conflict with the anti-Marxist U.S.-funded *Contras*.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, while the FSLN program states that a Sandinista government should endorse the liberation and autonomy of women, feminists in the nation argue that the strict abortion ban is counterproductive to women's liberation.<sup>74</sup>

The regime has also been criticized for being anti-democratic. Since the revolution, key members of the FSLN have left the party, stating their inability to affect change in the Ortega regime.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, Ortega, who regained power in 2007,

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<sup>72</sup> Carlos Fonseca, "The Historic Program of the FSLN" in *Sandinistas Speak*, ed. by Bruce Marcus (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1982), 21.

<sup>73</sup> Diane Feeley, "Sandinismo is in the Streets," *Against the Current* 34:3 (2019), <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc201/nicaragua-2019/>; *Contras* were a right-wing rebel group backed by the United States that formed in opposition to the Sandinistas following their success in gaining political control in the 1979 Nicaraguan Revolution.

<sup>74</sup> Karen Kampwith, "Abortion, Antifeminism, and the Return of Daniel Ortega: In Nicaragua, Leftist Politics?" *Latin American Perspectives* 35:6 (2008):122.

<sup>75</sup> Feeley, "Sandinismo is in the Streets."

overruled the courts in the declaration of his 2011 re-election bid as unconstitutional.<sup>76</sup> Students and youth during the Somoza regime listed undemocratic practices as one of their main grievances. Today, the Sandinista government, which many supported with the hope that the organization would implement real democratic processes, is accused of harboring the same undemocratic power schemes as its predecessors by implementing constitutional changes to remain in power past five-year term limits.

The most contentious issue sparking recent activism in Nicaragua and the onset of the 2018 protests have been proposed changes by the government to social security and pensions that reduce payments to those receiving benefits while increasing the tax contributions made by workers and employers.<sup>77</sup> Because of these reforms, students who were already unhappy with the government's actions in various aspects organized in masses.

Since the revolution, students in Nicaragua have massively changed. Educational reforms made by the Sandinista government have greatly expanded access to education among the working class. Scholars argue that Nicaraguan students have developed a dual identity as workers and students since the revolution.<sup>78</sup> This dual identity helps explain why students organize around causes pertaining to the working class without the influence of an organization like the FSLN, who guided students into economically leftist politics during the revolution. Some student participants in the 2018 protests still hold the ideals of the revolution themselves, and others criticize how the Ortega regime has distorted Carlos Fonseca's vision of the revolution for his own

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<sup>76</sup> Forrest D. Colburn and Arturo S. Cruz, "Personalism and Populism in Nicaragua," *Journal of Democracy* 23:2 (2012): 111.

<sup>77</sup> Jose Luis Rocha, *Provocation and Protest: University Students in Nicaragua's Uprisings* (Chicago, IL: La Casa Chicago Press, 2019), 15.

<sup>78</sup> Harry Sheer, "On Being a 'Worker Student': Understanding the Intersected Identities of Children and Adolescents in Nicaragua," *Children's Geographies* 15:1 (2016): 37-38.

personalist desires.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, contemporary students are taking it upon themselves to organize around the working-class demands of the government as opposed to solely a critique of school institutions. Fonseca often critiqued student activists during the 1950s and 1960s for failing to organize around issues of poverty and worker exploitation in Nicaragua and only making demands to aid students, who more often than not came from privileged backgrounds.<sup>80</sup> In a key component of the FSLN program titled *Labor Legislation and Social Security*, Fonseca addressed the need for a revolutionary government to end worker exploitation and implement social safety net programs, specifically a call for expansion of social security.<sup>81</sup> With these ideals in mind, students quickly mobilized to oppose a social security measure that they viewed as a betrayal of the FSLN revolutionary program.

A commonality in the protestors' critiques of the Ortega regime is that student-youth protests encompass the language and ideals of the revolution. The distaste for the undemocratic nature of the Somoza regime has also emerged as a primary complaint against the Sandinista government. And Carlos Fonseca himself saw women's struggle as undoubtedly a part of the revolution, as did other feminists who participated as a way toward women's liberation. Despite the important contributions of women to the revolution, feminist activists in Nicaragua today view those efforts as having done little to advance women's liberation.<sup>82</sup>

The regime eventually dropped the proposed legislation to cut social security in response to the mass protest which erupted after their announcement. The revolution championed social safety nets to aid the exploited working-class masses of Nicaragua, and that aspect of mobilization remains a central part of an expanding platform of student activism since the 1979 Revolution.

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<sup>79</sup> Jose Luis Rocha, *Provocation and Protest*, 69.

<sup>80</sup> Zimmerman, *Sandinista*, 38-39.

<sup>81</sup> Fonseca, "The Historic Program of the FSLN" in *Sandinistas Speak*, 19.

<sup>82</sup> Diane Feeley, "Sandinismo is in the Streets," 4.



## **Conclusion**

Since the reelection of Daniel Ortega in 2007, students and clergy have remained at odds with the regime. The Sandinista party has imprisoned several students and priests for their role in vocally criticizing the government. These persecutions come more than fifty years after the first occupation of the Old Cathedral of Managua in 1970, where students and clergy gathered to protest Anastasio Somoza Debayle's imprisonment of several student activists. The Managua Cathedral, which replaced the Old Cathedral after irreparable damage caused by the 1972 earthquake, has seen heavy policing by the regime since the 2018 protests. On August 13, 2022, the regime prevented the mass gathering of a procession for Our Lady of Fatima, arguing that the community event would be used to facilitate mass protests.<sup>83</sup> Once again, a regime that punishes vocal critics has terrorized a space of collective resistance in Nicaragua.

Like the Somoza regime, Ortega is also involved in controlling education. The University of Central America, a private Jesuit institution, is among the more than five educational institutions fighting for autonomy from the state. The FSLN has used educational institutions to consolidate their power by dismissing faculty critical of the regime's brutal handling of student protests. The Ortega regime now seeks more control over private institutions as well. Before the 1979 Revolution, it was not uncommon for faculty to be dismissed if they were vocal about their opposition to the Somoza regime. Students frequently mobilized to reinstate beloved faculty and fight against the encroachment of education by the government at the UNAN.<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, despite threats of imprisonment and exile,

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<sup>83</sup> Gabriella Selser and Maria Teresa Hernandez, "EXPLAINER: Tension between Nicaragua and the Catholic Church," *Associated Press News*, August 14, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/religion-caribbean-nicaragua-daniel-ortega-a445a59fd605f8089c5e661cb66c2773>

<sup>84</sup> Rueda, *Students of Revolution*, 39.

students remain vocal dissidents of the regime. Carlos Fonseca's most vocal critique of student activists leading up to the 1979 Revolution had been their reluctance to move activism into the public sphere. Today, student activism in Nicaragua no longer solely encompasses educational demands or the university space. With a more diverse student body since pre-revolution Nicaragua, student activism is now directed at mobilizing youth by championing issues like women's liberation, workers' rights, and social safety net concerns.

The reminiscence of the revolution and students' collective understanding of the Ortega regime's failure to fulfill Carlos Fonseca's revolutionary vision has shaped students and youth at the center of contemporary political mobilization in Nicaragua. But unlike their predecessors, students of the contemporary movement no longer need an ardent voice like Fonseca to push their activism into the public sphere. They are a political force on their own.

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