

## An Abstract Of The Thesis Of

Kim Glover for the Master of Arts in World History presented on April 30, 2003

Title: The Revolutionary Women of Nicaragua

Abstract approved: 

This thesis contends that women were active participants in the revolutionary events taking place in Nicaragua between the 1960s through the 1990s. I state in this thesis that women made huge contributions and sacrifices on both sides of the Nicaraguan civil war in order to take a part in determining the government of their country and to develop a better future for themselves and others.

The first chapter of this thesis will explain the events leading up to the Sandinista Revolution and the participation of women in the revolt. In chapter 2, in addition to a general overview of women's involvement in the Nicaraguan revolution the thesis will also briefly compare it to the women's involvement in the Cuban revolution years earlier. In the next chapter I will also give personal accounts of several women that fought in the Sandinista revolution and of those that fought in the Contra counter-revolution. I have tried to include profiles of women from different social classes and of those who fought in either support or combat situations.

Chapter 4 of the thesis explains the Catholic Church's involvement in recruitment and organization of Sandinista and Contra revolutionaries with an emphasis on the Church's impact on women's involvement in the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional). Chapter 5 will list and describe the different women's organizations that formed during the Sandinista revolution and after as well as their effects on women's lives in Nicaragua. The chapter 6 of the paper will cover the contributions of Violeta

Chamorro in both revolutions and her presidency in Nicaragua, to first woman president of Nicaragua, and the central figure in the peace negotiations ending the fighting within her country.

**The Revolutionary Women of Nicaragua**

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**A Thesis**

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**Master of Arts**

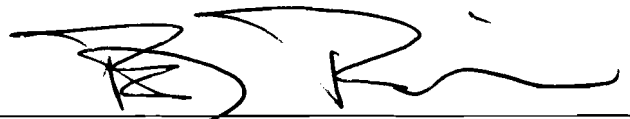
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**by**

**Kim Angelina Glover  
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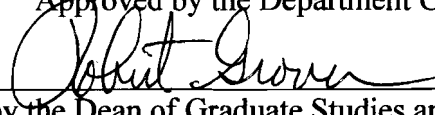
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Approved by the Department Chair



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Approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

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## **Introduction**

If one looks at the period of time between the 1960s (when the Sandinista Revolution began) and the present, dramatic changes have occurred in Nicaragua and the lives of the Nicaraguan people. At the end of a long and hard fought revolution in 1979, a dictatorship that lasted over forty years ended, and a socialist government began. As soon as the Sandinista government started to rule, a counter-revolution began and lasted over a decade. In 1990 the first woman president of Nicaragua, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro was elected, ending the Socialist government run by the Frente Sandinista Liberación Nacional (FSLN-the Sandinista army) putting an end to a civil war that had completely ravaged the country.

The thesis of this paper is that Nicaraguan women actively participated in all aspects of the revolutionary upheaval to change their country's political destiny. I contend that women from all classes joined the revolution so that they could work towards a government that represented their interests and bettered the lives of the poor and oppressed in their country. I will also demonstrate through the women's organizations that sprung up during the 1990s that women were determined to improve the opportunities and lives of all women. What is new about my approach is that I will not only look at the women who participated in the Sandinista Revolution but I will also explore the participation of women on the opposing side, who fought for the Contras. I will finish with a look at what the first woman president of Nicaragua meant to the women's movement.

As women fought in Cuba against the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship years before, Nicaraguan women fought to overthrow the oppressive Somoza dictatorship. The FSLN more actively recruited women from all different ages, backgrounds, and social classes than Fidel Castro's Cuban army.<sup>1</sup> The Sandinista leaders understood women could strengthen their movement. Middle school children like Doris Tijerino ran guns for the FSLN when she was a preteen and was one of the first women to join the Sandinistas. Young women like Dora María Téllez went underground when she was still taking classes at the university because her revolutionary activities had put her in life in danger. Mothers, like that of Monica Baltodano, provided safe houses for Sandinista rebels endangering themselves and their families' lives to save the lives of others. Monica Baltodano was a commander in the Sandinista army who helped organize the final offensive on Managua.<sup>2</sup> Women from middle class families, like Daisy Zamorra, supported the FSLN by organizing others and spying on the enemy, and Nora Astorga, a lawyer, seduced one of Somoza's top generals leading to an ambush and his murder.<sup>3</sup>

Towards the end of the revolution, women comprised thirty percent of the Sandinista army. Women's presence in combat would significantly change their traditional relationship with the opposite sex. Men fighting alongside women in the Sandinista army would praise the bravery, strength, and commitment of their female counterparts. In interviews, the Sandinista women explained that their motivation for all

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<sup>1</sup> Linda L. Reif. "Women in Latin American Guerrilla Movements: A Comparative Perspective." *Comparative Politics*, Volume 18, Issue 2 (Jan., 1986), 155.

<sup>2</sup> Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes And Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001) 32

<sup>3</sup> Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, et al., *Dreams of the Heart*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 134, 135



the sacrifices they made and risks they took came from the tremendous poverty of their country and the hopes for the future of their families and others.<sup>4</sup>

Women would benefit from the revolution. Anna M. Fernandez Poncela describes some of the important gains by women under the Sandinista administration:

It is evident that change favorable to women was promoted and developed in the eleven years of Sandinista government. This is especially apparent when compared to other periods in the history of the country, and to the contemporary situation in other Central American nations. Progress was made in terms of organization, legislation, employment, and education, and discrimination was confronted.<sup>5</sup>

After the Sandinista Revolution succeeded in ousting the Somoza dictatorship, a counter-revolution was born. The Contras were formed by various groups; ex-Somoza guards, ex-Sandinistas, Nicaraguan exiles, and Miskito Indians. Women fought in this counter-revolution as well.

There is not as much documentation regarding the women who participated in the counter-revolution. One reason is probably due to the conservative<sup>6</sup> nature of the Contras on the whole. Compared to the thirty percent of female participation in the Sandinista army the Contras only had seven percent at the most.<sup>7</sup> However, what documentation there is indicates that the women who fought against the Sandinistas fought with the same passion as those who fought on behalf of the Sandinistas. Just as the Sandinista men

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Randall, Sandino's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994)

<sup>5</sup> Anna M. Fernandez Poncela, "Nicaraguan Women: Legal, Political, and Social Spaces." Ed. Elizabeth Dore. Gender Politics in Latin America: Debates in Theory and Practice (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997) 44

<sup>6</sup> I am using the word conservative in the context of being traditional or conventional.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy C. Brown, The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2001) 109-110.

would praise the fighting attributes of the Sandinista women, so would the Contra men praise the courage and fierceness of the women who fought on their side.<sup>8</sup>

There seem to be many similarities between the women who fought on both sides of the war. For one, they came from all different social classes and all ages. Secondly, they fought in combat or participated in support roles during the revolution. Women Contras like Jamilet, the daughter of a landowner who loved the excitement of combat, or La Negra, poor and rough, who ran guns and military camps, or Laura Ortiz, educated and sophisticated, who worked behind the scenes, did everything from inventorying weapons to interpreting for former Somoza guardias in Washington, D.C.<sup>9</sup>

These women also demonstrated commitment and bravery during battle. Author Timothy C. Brown, who from 1987 to 1990 was a senior liaison to the Contras for the U.S. State Department had this to say about the bravery of the Contra women:

In sum, while the Resistance made no special effort to enlist female combatants and activists, they were welcomed as participants at all levels below that of commandante. The price they paid is visible in the casualty reports. But it was as correos [intelligence runners or guides] and clandestine committee members that they played their most decisive role. It seems no exaggeration to suggest that without the active involvement of women, the highlands war would have gone very differently.<sup>10</sup>

And finally, women on both sides gave up much to participate and many times risked their lives for their revolution. Brown explains that eighty percent of the Contras were made up of highland peasants and the rest were tribal Indians or black creoles trying to preserve a way of life they felt the Sandinistas threatened.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, 110.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Dickey, 62.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, 113, 272.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, 3

One of the main differences between the Sandinistas and the Contras is mentioned in Brown's statement. The Sandinistas promoted women to commander position (Doris Tijerino, Dora María Téllez, and Monica Baltodano were all promoted to the rank of commander in the Sandinista army) while the Contras did not. La Negra is one example of Brown's assertion; she was not officially recognized as a commander of a task force even though she led men in battle. Brown states that even though women Contras were recognized for their bravery, they still were stopped by a glass ceiling.<sup>12</sup>

Institutions such as the Catholic Church, student organizations, and Women's groups, such as AMPRONAC (Association of Nicaraguan Women Confronting the Nation's Problems), supported and encouraged women to take part in revolution. The younger women, even girls from middle school on up usually were drawn to or recruited by student organizations or church led student organizations.<sup>13</sup>

Many in the Church were strongly influenced by Vatican II's message of liberation theology that called for the Church to reach out and help liberate the poor from their oppressors. Bishops from Latin America gathered at the Medellín conference to figure out what liberation theology meant to Latin America and how to implement it their churches.<sup>14</sup> In 1970, Archbishop Obando y Bravo would demonstrate this ideology:

...at about this time Managua's newly named Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo took a first step toward distancing himself from the regime by selling Somoza's gift of a new Mercedes-Benz and giving the money to the poor.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, 110.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Randall, *Sandinista's Daughters Revisited: Feminism In Nicaragua*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 16.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Dodson and Laura Nuzzi O'Shaughnessy, *Nicaragua's Other Revolution: Religious Faith and Political Struggle*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 88, 91,

<sup>15</sup> Dodson and O'Shaughnessy, 120

The Archbishop was one of the first to help the Sandinistas in their revolution to overthrow Somoza; however, he fell out with revolutionary government once they were in power. He eventually supported the Contras in their revolution to oust the Sandinistas.<sup>16</sup> Other clergy of the Catholic Church encouraged their parishioners to take up guns during the Sandinista Revolution. Priests like Gaspar García Laviana from Spain took up guns and led military campaigns.<sup>17</sup>

AMPRONAC was started and organized by the FSLN and was meant to bring women together to support the revolution. It changed its name to the AMNLAE (Association of Nicaraguan Women Luisa Amanda Espinosa) to honor the first Sandinista woman to die in battle. Several organizations were created from AMNLAE that aimed at improving women's lives in both their public and private lives.

One of the most astonishing stories of women's roles in Nicaragua's political changes during these years is the story of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, who was the first woman to be elected president in the history of Nicaragua and of Central America. Violeta Barrios de Chamorro was elected by the people of Nicaragua in hopes of bringing peace to their country. In her autobiography, *Dreams of the Heart*, Chamorro explains that her motivation for running for president was because of the dreams of her late husband, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, for their country as well as it being her moral duty. As her husband courageously opposed the injustices of the Somoza family before his murder, Chamorro openly criticized the injustices of her former Sandinista comrades in

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffery S.J Klaiber, The Church, Dictatorships, And Democracy In Latin America. (New York: Orbis Books 1998) 198-199,202-203

<sup>17</sup> David Gullette, Gaspar! A Spanish Poet/Priest in the Nicaraguan Revolution (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1994) 61

her newspaper, *La Prensa*. Her presidency, however, was widely criticized for its stand against feminism, the steady deterioration of the Nicaraguan economy, and her hesitation to rid the government of Sandinista leaders.

Although Chamorro did not support or encourage feminist movements they survived and even flourished. It seems that women had come too far during the past three decades to let all their headway in women's rights slip away. The following quote by Nora Astorga during an interview with Margaret Randall sums up this attitude of perseverance:

Nicaraguan women have taken part in the revolutionary struggle and that experience has had a profound effect on us. Women won't be apathetic again. We won't ever again let ourselves be isolated from society. Some might withdraw momentarily for some reason, but I'm positive that sooner or later they'll be back in the swing of things. And with renewed strength. We see this in our women's association-those women are tremendous fighters. Women were of crucial importance in the insurrectional struggle and we know that we-who are 51 per cent of the population-are vital to our country's development today.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret Randall, *Sandinista's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*, new and rev. ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995) 128

## CHAPTER 1

### History of the Revolution

To understand why there was a revolution in Nicaragua one must understand the history of the Somoza regime and how deeply it oppressed the Nicaraguan people. Mark Everingham explains in his book, *Revolution and the Multiclass Coalition in Nicaragua*, that the Somoza government began in the 1930s, following other ruthless dictatorships and established its power with the help and the support of the United States. The Somoza dictatorship began with General Anastasio Somoza Garcia, then it was continued by his son Luis Somoza Debayle, and ended with his other son, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, otherwise known as “Tacho”.<sup>1</sup>

Anastasio Somoza Garcia’s reputation for cruel and deadly oppression can be seen with the assassination of Augusto Sandino (leader of a nationalist, anti-imperialist guerrilla movement made up of peasants) by Somoza’s National Guard in 1934. Augusto Sandino became a popular hero and martyr in the hearts of the Nicaraguan people, for he is credited with battling “Yankee imperialism” during the 1920s and 1930s by successfully fighting the occupancy of the United States Marines in Nicaragua. Chamorro explains that Sandino had been invited to Managua to sign peace accords with President Sacasa. Somoza complained to the American Ambassador, Arthur Bliss Lane, that the peace agreement between Sacasa and Sandino was a threat and insult to the National Guard and in turn high officials in the National Guard were threatening to do away with

Sandino. He promised the ambassador that he would consult him before doing anything about Sandino (according to Chamorro, at one time Somoza and Sandino fought as military officers for the Liberal party in the civil war against the Conservatives).

After leaving a banquet to celebrate the peace accords at the presidential palace Sandino and his men were ambushed and executed by Somoza's men.<sup>2</sup> Everingham writes that after having Sandino killed he had his Uncle, President Juan Batista Sacasa, forcibly removed from office two years later Somoza assumed the presidency after a fraudulent election in 1937. This was how Somoza consolidated his power.<sup>3</sup>

During Somoza's presidency, he enriched himself and his followers while the majority of Nicaragua paid a high price for it. John A. Booth explains that Somoza and his National Guard took over almost all of the public services and utilities, and corruption was rampant. Families were forced off their lands and forced into migrant work where company stores exploited them by keeping them in debt using credit and charging exorbitant prices. Somoza was murdered in 1956 by Rigoberto López Pérez, a student leader in hopes of ending the tyranny in his country.<sup>4</sup> In 1956, *New York Times* reported that López, a native of Nicaragua, shot Somoza at a dance four times at close range before being shot and killed himself.<sup>5</sup>

Upon his death, Anastasio Somoza García was succeeded in power by his son, Luis Somoza Debayle. His other son, Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza Debayle would head

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Everingham, *Revolution and the Multiclass Coalition in Nicaragua*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 1996) 44, 53, 62

<sup>2</sup> Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, et al., *Dreams of the Heart*, (New York: Simon & Schuster 1996) 20,22

<sup>3</sup> Everingham, 45.

<sup>4</sup> John A. Booth, *The End and the beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution*. (Boulder, Westview Press 1982) 51-52, 64, 70

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, S 23, 1:8

up the National Guard. Luis inherited his father's charm and Tacho his brutality.<sup>6</sup> After Luis's heart attack in 1967, his brother would take over the dictatorship and continue the Somoza dynasty. During their years of dictatorship the Somozas made Nicaragua infamous throughout the world for human rights violations and corruption. Just one example of their corruption was the distribution of the country's wealth and the living conditions of the majority of Nicaraguans during the 1970's. In a study by Anderson and Wesson, they state that most of the poor lived on the brink of starvation and half the children died by the age of five from gastrointestinal diseases in a country rich in resources.<sup>7</sup> John A. Booth also described the grim reality that faced most in Nicaragua in the 1970s:

Nearly half the country's housing (80 percent in rural areas) lacked indoor plumbing. The average Nicaraguan could expect to live only 53 years, the lowest life expectancy in Central America. Infant and child mortality rates were the second highest in Central America. The lack of potable water outside the cities caused epidemic intestinal disease that led to almost one-fifth of all deaths. Nicaragua had the highest murder rate in Central America, a high accident rate, and Central America's highest alcoholism rate.<sup>8</sup>

An earthquake on Christmas Eve, 1972, devastated Managua and would lead to the world's recognition of the corruption under "Tacho" Somoza's dictatorship. It has been widely suspected that Somoza and his people kept much of the international aid that poured into Nicaragua to help the victims of the earthquake. The complaints and accusations from many Nicaraguans were that the majority of the aid never reached the people who so desperately needed it. Everingham writes that the Somoza's shameless

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<sup>6</sup> Booth, 73

<sup>7</sup> Thomas P. Anderson and Robert Wesson, ed., Politics In Central America: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. (Stanford: Prageger and Copublished with Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University 1982) 149, 150

<sup>8</sup> Booth, 85.



greed during such a desperate time in Nicaragua caused many of the upper-class to separate themselves from his government. In fact much of Managua was not even rebuilt during the Somoza rule; rather the Sandinistas were the first to really start building back what was left in ruins from the earthquake.<sup>9</sup>

“Tacho,” like his father, used his power as president and head military officer to enrich himself and his associates at the price of the majority of Nicaragua’s citizens while brutally suppressing democracy. One of his acts of brutal repression would lead to the murder in 1978 of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the Editor of *La Prensa*, the life long critic and enemy of the Somoza government, and beloved by the popular masses as a champion of the rights of the Nicaraguan people. Everingham explains the events leading up to Chamorro’s assassination:

Most available evidence supports the scenario that Somoza was furious with Chamorro for publicizing the illegal export of blood by the “Plasmaferesis” company, owned by the dictator and his associates. Roberto Argüello, the Chamorro family’s lawyer, obtained an injunction against Plasmaferesis in late 1977. During subsequent hearings, Chamorro informed the United States Congress and the General Accounting Office about the activities of the “blood bank” (Chamorro 1990, 318). Thinking that they would be doing Somoza a favor, his son, Anastasio Somoza Portocarrereo, and Silvio Peña Rivas ambushed Chamorro without actually receiving orders to do so (Booth 1985, 159-160).<sup>10</sup>

The earthquake and international aid scandal coupled with Chamorro’s murder would unify the Nicaraguan people against the Somoza government and cause its eventual collapse. Many sources on the Nicaraguan revolution claim Chamorro’s murder was the last straw in the Nicaraguan people’s tolerance of Somoza’s oppression. In 1979 the Somoza dynasty was finally successfully overthrown after over forty years of domi-

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<sup>9</sup> Everingham, 110-112

<sup>10</sup> Everingham, 53, 139, 145

nation, and many failed attempts to oust the dictators. The victors were a group of leftists calling themselves the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) named after their hero Augusto Sandino. Everingham writes about the origins of the FSLN:

... Tomás Borge, Carlos Fonseca, and Silvio Mayorga entered law school at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN) where they organized a radical student movement against the regime. The three men held brief membership in the Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN), but soon rejected the passive, orthodox Marxist strategy of the Socialists. They agitated for more militant action. Fonseca was especially instrumental in resurrecting the revolutionary thought of Sandino and recasting his nationalist, anti-imperialist philosophy to spur mass political rejection of Somocismo.<sup>11</sup>

The extremist militant attitude would characterize the Sandinista Revolution and government and would eventually turn their sympathizers and collaborators (the Church and the upper classes) against them and lead to their downfall.

The Sandinistas called for the armed overthrow of the Somoza government and its replacement by a socialist government that would implement reforms in many areas including education, health, and land reforms. In the beginning of their revolution, the Sandinistas found it difficult to unite the people to rise up and take arms against the Somoza dictatorship even though it called for all the reforms the Nicaraguan majority so desperately needed. The Sandinistas began working to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship in the 1960s using guerrilla warfare and continued with only moderate successes until closer to the end of the 1970s when they scored some major victories. In 1979 they took over Managua, and Somoza and much of his National Guard fled the country.

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<sup>11</sup> Everingham, 53

Everingham explains that all social classes, from the peasant (small farmer or migrant worker) to the elite class (usually the wealthy and business owning class) supported the revolution. The Catholic Church also supported the revolution and some bishops even encouraged their congregation to help in the armed struggle; others actually took up guns themselves.

Women's involvement in the Sandinista Revolution began during the early years of the rebellion. Women fought during Augusto Sandino's time against the occupation of their country by the United States Marines. Women fought during the Sandinista Revolution for a better government and a better life for all Nicaraguans. Some of those women warriors lived to see the next revolution against the man who killed their comrade Sandino. One of these women was María Lidia, who fought alongside Augusto Sandino and in her 60s participated with the Sandinistas against the Somozas.

I worked with Sandino, as a messenger. There were no bosses, no generals. We were Nicaraguan soldiers against the machos. We fought for a free Nicaragua...I haven't stopped participating, not for a minute. I haven't cut myself off. These bonds will last to the end. I move on, I put the years aside and continue fighting for my beloved Nicaragua. I got the news at night. I wanted to dance. July 19-the bells tolled for joy when the kids won the war. It seemed like a dream, a dream come true. But not anymore - there's so much to be done.<sup>12</sup>

The Sandinistas encouraged and even recruited the help of women during the revolution, and many women were glad to take part and prove themselves as equals. Women like Doris Tijerino, Dora María Téllez, Monica Baltodano, and a few others were even promoted to Commander within the Sandinista army. Booth writes of Dora María

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<sup>12</sup> Randall, Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle, xi.

Télez, “Dora María Télez commanded the entire Rigoberto López Pérez western front, one of the most important of the war.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Booth, 151

## Chapter 2

### Women and Revolution

All the women who fought, whether they fought for the Sandinistas or for the Contras, sacrificed some part of their lives, and many risked their very lives. Women stepped out of their traditional roles of wives, mothers, and wage earners to be revolutionaries who smuggled weapons and killed the enemy in combat. Families were torn apart many times when daughters, wives, and mothers decided to go to war. For a very conservative and traditional Latin America society, their actions were radical. However, they were not the first women in Latin America to participate in a revolution. Women throughout Latin America's history have united to fight for a better life for themselves, for their families, and for their country. Indeed, the actions of the Sandinista women bear a strong resemblance to those of Cuban women who fought in the revolution led by Fidel Castro to oust Fulgencio Batista in the 1950s.

Like the Cuban women twenty years before them, the majority of Nicaraguan women and their families faced abject poverty, malnutrition, a corrupt dictatorship, and little hope of improving their condition. Judy Maloof describes the living conditions for the majority of Cubans in pre-Revolutionary Cuba, "A large sector of the population-men and women alike-suffered hunger and malnutrition, extreme poverty, poor housing, high infant mortality, widespread unemployment and under-employment, illiteracy and disease."<sup>1</sup> The only two professions available to most poor and working women of Cuba

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<sup>1</sup> Judy Maloof, Voices Of Resistance: Testimonies of Cuban and Chilean Women. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999) 24

were as domestic servants or prostitutes, not unlike the employment options for the women of those classes in pre-Revolutionary Nicaragua. Women in Nicaragua during the late 1970s, before the Sandinista victory over Somoza's regime, constituted 51 percent of the population and two thirds of them lived below the poverty level.<sup>2</sup> From this data it is easy to understand why women in Nicaragua participated in the Sandinista Revolution in great numbers.

Just as the Cuban women revolutionaries believed that a new Cuba would improve their lives as women in a male-dominated society, so did the women who fought on behalf of the Sandinistas. The Sandinista women believed that if their revolution succeeded it would dramatically improve their lives and create opportunities for all women in the social, economic, and political spheres. The following quotation demonstrates the FSLN's own perspective of how their idealism towards women attracted women to join their cause.

The popular Sandinista Revolution opened unquantified spaces to Nicaraguan women to redress specific wrongs as well as to advance the struggle for complete equality. This was as much the result of the radically democratic nature of the revolution as it was the consequence of women's quantitative and qualitative participation in the revolutionary Sandinista struggle.<sup>3</sup>

However, as their Cuban counterparts discovered after the Cuban revolution succeeded, their aspirations and the promises made to them would be a low priority for their new government. Anna M. Fernandez Poncela explains that the ideology touted by the FSLN

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<sup>2</sup> Randall, *Sandinista's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua*, 12

<sup>3</sup> Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), Programa Histórico Nicaragua: FSLN 1969. quoted in Anna M. Fernandez Poncela, "Nicaraguan Women: Legal, Political, and Social Spaces." *Gender Politics in Latin America: Debates in Theory and Practice* Ed/ Elizabeth Dore. (New York: Monthly Review Press. 1997) 49

in regards to women's rights did not occur to the extent that the FSLN promised or published in their propaganda.

Despite gains, women's social participation in the state structure and the popular organizations did not correspond to the expectations generated by the revolution, and did not reach the levels publicized by the Sandinista government. Massive female participation in the decade of the 1980s is a myth. In reality a chasm existed between women's daily experience and the progressive theoretical posturing of the party. This was reflected in a comment made by a teacher interviewed in a 1990 workshop: "I believe that there is a contradiction between what the Front wants us to be and what we want to be. It wants to perpetuate our dependence on men's political will; always to be governed by him, to do only what he says. Be good or bad, for us it's the same thing."<sup>4</sup>

Poncela goes on to explain the difficulties faced by women trying to break through into the public sphere and into politics due mainly to centuries of chauvinistic attitudes. Maloof points out as well that the percentage of Cuban women involved in politics was minimal after the revolution and up through the 1990s. She also states that most women do not exert any direct political influence in modern day Cuba and their concerns about women's issues are not adequately represented.<sup>5</sup> Even Randall and other feminist supporters of the Cuban and Sandinista Revolutions would admit that both governments failed to keep many of the promises made to women during the revolutions.<sup>6</sup> Women would face discrimination from the same men who they fought with during the revolutions. These same critics would agree with the Castro and Sandinista regimes however, that one of the main reasons for their failure to keep their

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<sup>4</sup> Anna M. Fernandez Poncela, "Nicaraguan Women: Legal, Political, and Social Spaces." Ed/ Elizabeth Dore. Gender Politics in Latin America: Debates in Theory and Practice (New York: Monthly Review Press. 1997) 45

<sup>5</sup> Maloof, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Randall, Sandinista's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua, 5

promise to dramatically improve life and opportunities for women had to do with their preoccupation with fighting the counter-revolutions supported by the United States. Even though neither the Cuban nor the Sandinista Revolutions accomplished everything they promised in regards to women's rights, women's lives were improved after the revolutions through easier access to health care, literacy campaigns, etc.

During both revolutions women had to fight on several fronts; they had to fight husbands and families to have the right to fight, they had to fight against chauvinism within their own party, and they had to fight their revolutionary enemy. Women continued to fight against all fronts to achieve their revolutionary dreams. After the revolution women would demand more rights and fight the people they fought with during the revolution to get those rights. Margaret Randall, a feminist writer who lived in Cuba after the Cuban revolution and in Nicaragua after the Sandinista Revolution, has written several books that describe Nicaraguan women's attraction to the Sandinista struggle, how they participated during the revolution and how their lives were changed because of it.

At first these young women-often sisters or girlfriends of the men-didn't question male authority. Their task was immense: they were among a handful of radicals with nothing but faith and fury on their side. And they intended to topple a dictatorship that not only owned close to 90 percent of the country's land, industry, and production, but also was also supported and protected by the richest country on earth, the much-too-close United States of America.

No wonder there was little inclination on the part of the women, or patience on the part of the men, to challenge women's role in the struggle. Women faced a severe break with family, social, and religious norms simply by engaging in revolutionary activism. But sexism, deeply embedded in the social fabric, was also responsible for the status quo, and as women's determination and courage led to a more central involvement, stereotypes were being questioned. During those early years it was the exceptional woman who withstood the rigors



of guerrilla warfare or who became an instrument of precision in an urban bank expropriation. Still, men-and other women-noticed.<sup>7</sup>

The women who Margaret Randall interviewed came from different class backgrounds, which in part shaped the reasons they joined the revolution and how they supported it. When Randall speaks of severe breaks with family, one of the people she is speaking of is Sofia Montenegro whose father and brothers had been in Somoza's National Guard. According to Sofia Montenegro, her father felt remorse for his participation in the Guard and tried to talk her elder brother into leaving the Guard as his deathbed wish, but her brother refused. Her brother killed her fellow Sandinistas, and the Sandinistas killed her brother.<sup>8</sup> Not only did she turn to the opposition of her family's political alliance but also she had to fight and prove herself to the Sandinistas because of her family's alliance with the Somoza government. The main reason it seems that Montenegro fought against the lifestyle and beliefs she was raised with was because of her passion for the Marxist ideology that was popular in her country and amongst her peers during that time. This fascination with Marxism and the awareness of the suffering and rights of the poor awakened in the youth of the upper and middle class Nicaraguans, and it would be the reason for many to rebel against family, friends, and country.

Comparing Nicaraguan women's participation by social class Randall's work points to some definite trends. The majority of the women of the bourgeois class who fought the Sandinistas participated mainly in support roles during the revolutions, which included functions of espionage, political work, hiding and caring for revolutionaries, and transporting weapons. Working class (wage earners, usually manual labor) women

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<sup>7</sup> Randall, Sandinista's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua, 5.

however, participated in both support roles and combat functions while peasant women fought mainly on the side of the Sandinistas in combat functions. One of the female commanders during the Sandinista Revolution, Dora María Téllez, contends that peasant women got involved in combat very early in the revolution. It was not until the 1970s that women in the cities got involved in the combat role because of the social stigma it carried within a “machista” society.<sup>9</sup> Linda L. Reif explains that it is harder for peasant and working class women to join a guerilla movement because besides taking care of home and a family they are working to make a living, whereas middle class women do not have the same financial considerations (supporting a family) to stop them.<sup>10</sup>

Accounts of the Sandinista guerrilla camps describe the situation between women and men as being one of mutual respect and friendship. The reason most writers give for this gender relationship in a traditionally sexist society is the physical hardship and emotional strain women and men were under in the mountains. Because of the hardship, they depended on each other to survive and succeed. In interviews with both Sandinistas and Contras, the men speak of their female counterparts with praise and respect. Padre Manuel has this to say about women’s presence in the Sandinista camps:

One could say without fear of error that there was not a single desertion among the women. Some of them left camp for reasons of illness, but always unwillingly. In contrast, there were many untrustworthy men. There were boys who simply couldn’t deal with the hardship of life in the mountains and were forced to return home.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Randall, *Sandinista’s Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua*, 286-296

<sup>9</sup> Randall, *Sandinista’s Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*, xii.

<sup>10</sup> Linda L. Reif. “Women in Latin American Guerrilla Movements: A Comparative Perspective.” *Comparative Politics*, Volume 18, Issue 2 (Jan., 1986), 1151-152

<sup>11</sup> Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2001) 101-102

Women who fought for the Contras were highly regarded for their strength and tenacity as well. The following is a description of women's presence in the Contra camps by a male Contra.

Of course, we had a lot of women with us. They were armed like men, carried FAL guns and the same backpacks. In fact, I believe the women were much stronger than we were. Men often go crazy after a day-long march in the bright sun, and become feverish. No one has any desire to do anything. You just want to sit down. Often the women then take the men's backpacks and carry them on their heads-in addition to all their own stuff, of course. You only have to carry your gun, the women carry all the other things. After five kilometers you will be recovered to the extent that you are able to carry your own stuff again. As I told you, many things worked out well only because we had so many women with us.<sup>12</sup>

An American reporter who lived with the Contras describes the roles of women in his camp:

About a dozen women and girls at Pino Uno wore uniforms and carried AK-47s; Aurora and Jamilet, Jacqueline and Irma among them. They are mostly in their teens and they marched alongside Suicida's commanders and slept with them in their makeshift beds.<sup>13</sup>

Dickey also describes abusive treatment that women would endure sometimes from some of the men in the camp and the bloody and some times fatal fights over women. Some of the reasons for this poor treatment of women in the Contra camps could have been the lack of education of some of its military leaders and the lack of discipline in the camps in regards to men and women's relationships. Another reason is that since some of the earliest Contras were highland peasants, tribal Indians, and black Creoles who lacked a

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<sup>12</sup> Dieter Eich and Carlos Rincón, The Contras: Interviews with Anti-Sandinistas (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications 1984) 99

<sup>13</sup> Dickey, 216.

higher education and whose traditional beliefs might not have valued women's rights.

Women who fought for the Contras however, not only participated in combat roles, but also according to Brown, participated in clandestine activities.

Serving as a correo or member of a clandestine comarca committee was even more hazardous, and women played a crucial role at this level. Correo lists found in the archives suggest that close to 20 percent of jefes de correos, or chefs of correo networks, were female, almost triple the percentage of female Comandos in the combat units. This figure greatly understates the percentage of women in the networks themselves. According to two female jefes de correos, Marina and La Chaparra, women were often preferred as correos over men because they tended to attract less attention, could move about more freely, and were not subject to conscription. In their own two networks, more than 50 percent of those serving were women. Of the few names I found of clandestine committee heads, 15 percent were female. Given the relative absence of young men in the comarcas during the war, and with women relatively less suspect than man, a reasonable assumption is that half or more of the movement's clandestine committee members were women.<sup>14</sup>

Brown's description of women participating in clandestine roles for the Contras demonstrates that women contributed to the counter-revolution in several ways and that they performed some positions better than their male counterparts. His data also shows that even though women were not promoted to commander positions within the armies they were promoted to head positions as messengers and spies.

### **Conclusion**

Nicaragua in the 1960s' and 70s' was a traditionally male-dominated Latin American society. However, the Sandinista guerrilla group understood that women's involvement in the war could only help their cause and women understood that by joining the Sandinistas some doors could be opened to them. Women who fought, whether they

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<sup>14</sup> Brown, 112

were Sandinistas or Contras, proved themselves to be equally skilled in fighting and equally committed to their ideologies.

The comparison of women who fought in Nicaragua to those who fought in Cuba years before demonstrates the historical pattern of women's resolve in Latin America to fight for what they believe in. Both the Cuban Revolution and the Nicaraguan Revolution are also comparable in their revolutionary government's lack of follow through in fulfilling their revolutionary promises to women. The promises made to these women for much improved lives and new opportunities would not be completely fulfilled partially due to the United States' aggression towards their new socialist/communist governments.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Women's Personal Stories**

This chapter is made of the stories of women who fought in either the Sandinista or Contra revolution. These stories reveal the commitment by women on both sides of the war. Doris Tijerino was one of the first women to get involved with the Sandinista Revolution so it seems only appropriate to begin with her story. Tijerino got involved in the struggle when she was only twelve or thirteen running guns in 1965. In Tijerino's case her mother was the main person to encourage her involvement, and her mother covered for her daughter's activities. As Doris Tijerino got older she became involved in combat and eventually was promoted to the full rank of commander. Tijerino was just one of the women who was tortured at the hands of Somoza's National Guard after being captured and taken prisoner twice. She has many scars and has had a couple of surgeries as a result of the torture that she was subjected to. She would also lose one of her lovers who was killed during the war after being tortured to death. Several of the women interviewed by Margaret Randall mention Tijerino's early participation in the war and how they had protested within their own groups for her release from prison. The FSLN sent Tijerino outside of Nicaragua in 1975 to work on international solidarity, and she did not come back until after the Sandinistas won the war. For the Sandinistas, she is one of the heroes of the revolution. After the revolution, Doris Tijerino held a few different government positions, with the most impressive being her role as Head of the Sandinista Police. Although Tijerino has proven that she could excel in the traditional male roles and has won the admiration of her male and female peers, she does not consider herself a feminist. Randall explains Tijerino's perspective of her role as a woman in the revolution:

“I’m not a woman revolutionary,” Doris once told me, “but a revolutionary who happens to be a woman.” She will probably continue to argue that view of gender all her life. She does not consider herself a feminist in any radical definition of the term, yet she has defended women consistently and headed AMNLAE from 1989 to 1990.<sup>1</sup>

Dora María Téllez is another one of the women members of the Sandinista army who was with the revolution long before most. She was also another one of the few women to be promoted to a guerrilla commander position for the Sandinista army. Her personal story comes from the interviews Margaret Randall conducted immediately after the revolution had defeated Somoza and again in the 1990s after the Sandinista electoral defeat by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. During the interviews with Randall, Dora María Téllez explained her involvement in the revolution and her own ideologies. Born and raised in a family in the petit bourgeois class, she came into her social consciousness early. According to Téllez, she began her role in the revolution while in school with school strikes for several different issues. One strike of extreme importance was the one waged to keep the FSLN leadership from being killed after most of them were taken prisoner in 1970.<sup>2</sup> The strikes kept pressure on the Somoza leadership by making the government’s actions public knowledge.

When Téllez entered the university she studied medicine and planned to be a doctor but her involvement with the FSLN would keep that dream from ever being realized. After 1972, Téllez became more involved with the FSLN through student movements in support work. She describes her work during this time:

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<sup>1</sup> Randall, Sandinino’s Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua, 209, 210, 211

<sup>2</sup> Randall, Sandinino’s Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle, 41, 43

I finished high school and entered university. I wanted to study medicine so I had to go to the university in Leon. That's when everything changed for me. I was recruited by the FSLN. I was sixteen or seventeen. At University I worked in the student movement and took part in some semi-clandestine activities, mostly support work for the people in the mountains-buying clothes, food, supplies, securing medicines, weapons, providing safehouses.<sup>3</sup>

After she developed too high of a profile with the National Guard, she went underground and not see her family again for years. Her mother mentions that there were several times that she was told or that the local newspaper would announce her daughter's death. They were all false reports, and Dora María Téllez would rise up through the ranks to lead others, including men. She was one of the commanders who occupied the National Palace when Somoza's legislature was in session in August 1978, which gained her a lot of notoriety.<sup>4</sup> David Gullette describes her important role in the occupation of the National Palace during the negotiation process to release hostages for Sandinista prisoners in Somoza's prisons:

Over the next two days, Dora María Téllez, using Catholic bishops as mediators, wrung a series of stunning concessions from Somoza, including an end to sniping and counterattacks on the palace, a ransom of half a million dollars, publication of an FSLN manifesto, freeing political prisoners from jails around the country, as well as free passage out of Nicaragua for the assault team, the 60 or so newly released prisoners, and a handful of hostages.<sup>5</sup>

Dora María Téllez is one of the mostly widely recognized women Sandinista fighters among those who have written about both sides of the war. Her many military accomplishments during the war have earned her respect from a vast audience. After the war, she became the Health Minister for the Sandinista government and her hard work

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<sup>3</sup> Randall, *Sandinista's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*, 44

<sup>4</sup> Randall's *Sandinista's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua*, 230.



allowed her to keep her position even after the Sandinistas lost the elections. From her interviews Téllez appears to be a quiet and modest woman with a remarkable will and intellect. As an individual, Dora María Téllez played a crucial role in shaping her country.

Nora Astorga Jenkins is another famous Sandinista. In 1978 Nora, a well-known lawyer in Nicaragua, assisted in the assassination of Reynaldo Pérez Vega, a top general in Somoza's National Guard. Nora sent a letter to *La Prensa*, the Chamorro family's newspaper describing her involvement in Vega's death. Here is Chamorro's account of the event:

Then one morning at our offices in *La Prensa* we received a letter from Nora Astorga Jenkins proudly declaring herself a Sandinista militant and claiming full responsibility for, as she put it "executing Somoza's henchman." Under orders from her superiors in the front, she seduced Pérez Vega, leading him into her home and into an ambush, where he was repeatedly stabbed in the neck with an ice pick.<sup>6</sup>

*La Prensa* decided to print the letter from Nora along with a photo of the lawyer in military fatigues and carrying a machine gun. According to Chamorro, many people compared her to the biblical heroine Judith who killed to liberate her people. Chamorro also explains that the event brought greater acceptance of terrorist acts during the revolution. In an interview with Margaret Randall after the Sandinista victory in 1979, Astorga described her perception of the man she helped to assassinate:

The guy was a classic cop known for being able to have any woman, how, where and whenever he pleased. He'd use persuasion to get what he wanted. And if that

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<sup>5</sup> David Gullette, ¡Gaspar! *A Spanish Poet/Priest in the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1994) 101-102

<sup>6</sup> Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, et al., *Dreams of the Heart*, (New York: Simon & Schuster 1996) 134, 135

didn't work he'd use force. And in his role as general he was the worst sort of animal you could imagine. He was a torturer-the worst kind. Any adjective I could use to describe him would be pale in comparison to the reality of his crimes.<sup>7</sup>

From this personal account of Astorga's feelings about the type of person the general was it is clear that she felt she was doing the people of Nicaragua a great service by participating in his murder. Her only regret seems to be that she had to leave her young daughters to go into hiding. However, like other women Randall interviewed who had to leave their children behind with family to fight or go underground, she justifies leaving them to make a better future for them.<sup>8</sup> After the revolution, Helen Collinson reports Nora was the Ambassador to the United Nations for Nicaragua and then became a Catholic activist after attending a convent school until her death in 1987.<sup>9</sup>

Of the few women fighters written about who fought for the Contras, La Negra is one of the liveliest. La Negra is one of the few women who the reporter, Christopher Dickey writes about in-depth. There are not many details about where La Negra came from except that she came from a very poor barrio in Nicaragua and that she had spent time in a Sandinista prison. According to La Negra, she was tortured while in the Sandinista prison before she escaped and found her way back to her lover Suicida. Dickey explains that La Negra did not feel sorry for herself because of her circumstances. Indeed, they made her tougher.

But La Negra had no sense of herself as a victim. She thought she was smarter than most of the men she knew, and was probably right, and she was

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<sup>7</sup> Randall, *Sandinista's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*, 121

<sup>8</sup> Randall, *Sandinista's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*, 122

<sup>9</sup> Helen Collinson, *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books LTD., 1990) 85

nearly a physical match for many of them. Her shoulders were broad, her grip was firm. She liked tests. When the Sandinistas decided to pick her up in late 1979 they found someone who was difficult to handle.<sup>10</sup>

Dickey describes her as a rough and hard woman who only showed her soft side to her men (those Contra fighters whom she commanded) and lover and companion Suicida, a radical commander for the Contras. La Negra ran weapons, lived in Contra camps full of men, and served as a confidant to Suicida. She often made tactical decisions during the fighting with the Sandinistas. In 1983, La Negra was ambushed, and killed running guns in her jeep with a fellow Contra. The Contras accused the Sandinistas of the ambush and the Sandinistas accused the Contras of killing her. Those closest to La Negra came to the conclusion that the Contra's high command had her killed because she had challenged their authority.<sup>11</sup>

Another Contra female freedom fighter was Laura Ortiz. Dickey does not give any details about Ortiz's background before her work in the counter-revolution, but he expresses admiration for Ortiz's role with the Contras. Ortiz knew La Negra and both Ortiz and her husband helped to keep La Negra and Suicida's men supplied with weapons. Dickey describes Ortiz and her work, "With Ortiz in Washington was his woman, Laura. She was sexy, aggressive and self-confident. She spoke English well, interpreted for the *guardias* who didn't and watched over them like a mother."<sup>10</sup> Dickey does not mention Ortiz ever taking up arms herself in combat; apparently she worked in a support role during the counter-revolution. Like La Negra, Laura Ortiz devoted herself to

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Dickey, With the Contras: A Reporter in the Wilds of Nicaragua. (New York: Simon & Shuster, Inc., 1985) 93

<sup>11</sup> Dickey, 93, 222

<sup>12</sup> Dickey, 62

her man and the Contra cause. They were women who would do whatever was needed to help their men. While women who fought for the Sandinistas also believed in supporting their spouses or lovers, the majority also worked towards proving their equality while creating opportunities for other women.

Marotoza Zeledón, or “Daysi,” is another woman noted for her contribution to the Contra effort, and her courageous actions helped save lives of soldiers. Apparently she was trained as a paramedic and was a combatant of the Salvador Pérez Regional Command. She is remembered for being in combat and lying beside her medical kit joining in the fighting until her medical services were needed. On April 6, 1985 she was shot and killed in a firefight in Jinotega. She was so well respected and appreciated that her fellow fighters renamed their unit after her.<sup>13</sup>

There were other women who played an important part in the counter-revolution who were not involved in combat. Women like Clemen Araica did dangerous and clandestine work as recruiters for the FDN, or the Contras.<sup>14</sup> Helen Collinson describes Araica’s crucial role in forming and organizing the Contras:

After the victory [the Sandinista victory] she was involved in organizing the Legion of the 15<sup>th</sup> September (one of the first Contra groups to amass in Honduras) and established a group in the Industrial Quimica de Nicaragua Distillery. She later moved to Honduras where she had direct contact with the general staff of the FDN (main Contra group).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Timothy C. Brown, The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2001) 109,110

<sup>14</sup> Dieter Eich and Carlos Rincón, The Contras: Interviews with Anti-Sandinistas (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications 1984) 134

<sup>15</sup> Collinson, 164

There were also women who protected people such as Marta Patricia Baltodano. Sam Dillon, author of Commandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels, describes Marta Baltodano's career of helping and defending others. Marta was born to middle class parents, and while attending a Jesuit run university as a law student, she did volunteer work for a human rights watchdog group that filed habeas corpus petitions to find Somoza critics who had been "disappeared." After the Sandinistas took over and harassed her and her boss, Baltodano, only twenty-eight years old and a mother, moved to the United States and went to work for the State Department to head its Contra human-rights reform. After uncovering many human rights abuses within the Contra army and making them known to her superiors, she decided to resign her position after becoming a victim herself of personal attacks and violent resistance by those whom she was investigating and those she worked for. She worked very hard at investigating abuses and standing up for those who were victimized by the Contras and the FDN, but after realizing that she was in a no-win situation, she decided to move back to Nicaragua to monitor and record those abused by the Sandinista government. Dillon quotes Baltodano when she took the State Department's offer to head up the contra human-rights reform, "This is one of those adventures in which you risk losing everything, but in which you can, perhaps, make an impact."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Sam M. Dillon, Commandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels. (New York: Henry Holt and Company 1991) 198,296, 297, 315

## **Conclusion**

The personal stories mentioned in this section represent a few of the many Nicaraguan women whose actions and courage during the revolutionary period were extraordinary and worthy of praise. On both sides of the war, women volunteered and carried out dangerous activities with little regard for their own lives. The different cases presented in this chapter represent women from different backgrounds and with different ideologies, yet all demonstrated total commitment to what they were doing during the war. Doris Tijerino and Dora María Téllez were some of the first women to join the Sandinista Revolution, and two of three women that were promoted to commander positions with the Sandinista army. Both women joined the revolution when they were only teenagers and both had the support of their mothers in this dangerous endeavor. Nora Astorga is an example of the well educated and professional women who gave it all up to fight with the Sandinistas. Astorga also demonstrates that women were willing to use their sexuality as a weapon in the war.

La Negra's story confirms that women did lead men in combat for the Contras even if they were not officially given the title of commander. Marta Patricia Baltodano's involvement in both wars is a good example of women's concern and fight for the victims of both wars. And finally, women's participation and achievements prove that women are worthy soldiers in time of war.

## Chapter 4

### The Church

The Sandinista Revolution was helped in great part by the Catholic Church in Nicaragua. Considering that the majority of Nicaraguans are believers in the Catholic faith, the Church's support of the revolution was invaluable to the Sandinistas. In his book, *Promises Not Kept*, John Isbister describes the Sandinista Revolution as a Christian revolution, "It was a Christian revolution, based on the religious faith of the people and the liberation theology of many of the clergy."<sup>1</sup>

A religious institution participating at such a high level in favor of a socialist party that has been historically against religious institutions is exceptional. The liberation theology inspired by Vatican II in 1962, and customized for Latin America at the Medellín conference in 1968, called for social reforms and for the clergy to take more of an active role in helping their patrons, and both were very influential for the Church in Nicaragua. Some leaders in the Catholic Church at first, who had traditionally aligned themselves with the Somoza government, were slow to respond to the changes outlined at the Medellín conference. Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo in 1970 set an example for other Church leaders however, when he sold the gift of a Mercedes-Benz by Somoza and gave the money to the poor. The Church not only supported the revolution by speaking out against the Somoza government, it also encouraged and organized men and women to take a stand against their oppression. Dodson and O'Shaughnessy describe scenes at the

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<sup>1</sup> John Isbister, *Promises Not Kept: The Betrayal of Social Change in the Third World*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1998) 138

triumph of the revolution demonstrating the Church's support of the Sandinista defeat of the Somoza government:

In the first days after the Sandinista forces entered Managua on July 19, 1979, one of the major public events to celebrate the popular triumph over the hated Somoza regime was a mass presided over by Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo, which was attended by thousands of joyous Christians welcoming the revolution. Dozens of other masses were simultaneously celebrated in parishes throughout the country. These religious celebrations only hinted at the vital role played by Nicaraguan churches, and by thousands of individual Christians, in the popular insurrection.<sup>2</sup>

The Church's support of women's participation in the revolution was very powerful in a traditionally male-dominated society. Women, who were typically responsible for their family's spirituality, felt validated by the Church in their revolutionary actions. Help from the progressive part of the Church was especially valuable for peasant women and women of lower income families where the men in their families lacked a formal education and it is highly likely that they tended to be more threatened by their women leaving home. The Christian Base Communities mentioned later in this chapter are a good example of how women were able to get involved in the struggle through the help of the Church.

The women of bourgeois society who fought on behalf of the Sandinistas did so out of compassion and a sense of moral duty to the poorer classes as did the women of the lower classes. This sense of moral obligation and compassion was generally taught and fostered by the Catholic Church in its sermons and schools. In Margaret Randall writes about how the Catholic Church influenced several women during a period of time when the Church was trying to be more socially conscious.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Dodson and Laura Nuzzi O'Shaughnessy, Nicaragua's Other Revolution: Religious Faith and Political Struggle. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 88-95, 116,120



Michele Najlis, Vidaluz Meneses, Gioconda Belli, and Amanda Granera remember how the nuns organized charitable activities through which students distributed food to the poor or built latrines in destitute neighborhoods. But they also began to ask why such miserable conditions existed and what their responsibility really was. Concern for social justice began to replace the sense of satisfaction earlier generations had derived from giving alms. The country's political contradictions were also becoming more obvious. And, with the appearance of the FSLN's student and women's fronts, alternative options became available. Each of these interviewees, in her own way and at her own pace, broke away from the humiliation of giving charity and sought an activism that attacked the structures which produce and perpetuate injustice.<sup>3</sup>

In the book, Sweet Ramparts: Women in Revolutionary Nicaragua, Jane Deighton et al. point out that local churches were the basis for the organization of youth, students, workers and peasants into Christian Base Communities (CEBs):

People began to organize themselves in the CEBs, which often served as stepping stones to other groups and organisations. A CEB was the first organization many people encountered, being the only legitimate group in government eyes – though as their popularity grew they too were suppressed. Many members of the FSLN were recruited through them, mainly from the Christian youth organizations. In rural areas where no independent grassroots organizations existed the CEBs encouraged the right of the poor to defend their interests: the first rural unions evolved out of the Christian groups.<sup>4</sup>

Deighton also goes on to explain women's involvement in the CEBs.

For women, who made up the bulk of the church-goers, the CEBs were extremely important. Church activities had been traditionally the one area of public life that they could take part in, and participation in the CEBs was an easily accepted development. Through their fundamental involvement in health, education and other social issues, women's work within the CEBs soon evolved, during the insurrection, to include setting up clandestine medical centres, 'safe houses' for guerrillas, hiding places for arms and so on. Under the guise of 'church work' many women were able to act as messengers and the like for the FSLN, without ever coming under suspicion from the National Guard.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Randall, Sandinó's Daughters Revisited: Feminism In Nicaragua, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Deighton et al., Sweet Ramparts: Women In Revolutionary Nicaragua. (London: Lithoprint Ltd. 1983) 140

<sup>5</sup> Deighton et al., 140

Several of the women interviewed by Margaret Randall mentioned nuns or priests who were inspirations to them in their struggle to help the poor. The book, Women and Revolution in Nicaragua, explains how the church connected with the working-class and peasant women in Central America.

For thousands of working-class and peasant women in Central America, the radical church of the poor has been their first contact with politics. It has played a crucial role in revealing the reality of their oppression, particularly in situations where few opportunities have existed for women to develop their ideas in any other forum. Invariably grassroots church groups like the CEBs have acted as a springboard from which women haven ventured into more organized politics.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most well-known priests who participated in the Sandinista Revolution was Ernesto Cardenal. One of the most famous pictures of Cardenal is the one where he is on his knees bowed before Pope John Paul who is reprimanding him for his part in the revolution in front of a huge crowd of Nicaraguans. David Gullette explains Cardenal's justification for his participation in the revolution as realizing that there would never be an end to Somoza's injustice without violent means. He encouraged others to join the FSLN and bear arms but never bore arms himself. Gullette also lists all the different ways Cardenal helped the people in his community, Solentiname, while at the same time raising their social consciousness. He began literacy campaigns, debates on the Gospels and their meanings, painting and poetry workshops.<sup>7</sup> One example of Cardenal's work with women during the revolution was when, "In March 1977, the FLSN, through Father Ernesto Cardenal, brought together a group of Sandinista and non-Sandinista women to discuss the formation of a women's organization to denounce the Somoza regime." After

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<sup>6</sup> Helen Collinson, Women and Revolution in Nicaragua (London and New Jersey: Zed Books LTD., 1990) 84

the Sandinista Revolution was won Ernesto Cardenal was named Minister of Culture. In his new role he continued and expanded the work he did in Solentiname for all of Nicaragua.<sup>7</sup>

Another priest who became a hero of the Sandinista Revolution was Gaspar Garcia Laviana. Gaspar was born and raised in Spain yet adopted Nicaragua as his country and Nicaragua's poor and downtrodden adopted him. When he was killed during the revolution, three different Nicaraguan communities fought over burying his body in their locale.<sup>8</sup> The following is David Gullette's summary of Gaspar's character and involvement with the people of Nicaragua and their revolution.

Gaspar above all was a priest, one who loved his people with an uncompromising intensity; one whose attempts as a parish priest to better through peaceful means the lives of the Nicaraguan poor had been baffled at every step; one who felt that embracing armed struggle against a tyrant was not only justified, but in his case, unavoidable; one whose publicly stated rationale for taking up arms gave the Sandinistas fighting against Somoza a broad ethical, even spiritual, legitimacy they had previously lacked in Christian Nicaragua.<sup>9</sup>

Like Cardenal, Gaspar used the Gospels to base his argument for the Church and Christians' involvement with the struggle. However, unlike Cardenal, Gaspar joined his fellow revolutionaries in bearing arms against the enemy.

Of all the Catholic Church leaders Archbishop Obando y Bravo was probably the most controversial. The Archbishop played an important part in the Sandinista Revolution, publicly denouncing the corruption of the Somoza regime and acting as a

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<sup>7</sup> David Gullette, *Gaspar! A Spanish Poet/Priest in the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1994) 61

<sup>8</sup> *Barricada*, 18 September 1980 quoted in Lorraine Bayard de Volo, ed., *Mother's of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua* (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001) 24.

<sup>9</sup> Gullette, 126, vii

mediator between the Sandinistas and Somoza. Subsequently he would later turn against the Sandinistas when he perceived them as being as oppressive as the Somozas. He would later fight them bitterly on the side of the Contras with the support of the Pope. Once again he would act as a mediator in the 1980 but this time it would be between the Sandinistas and the Contras to help achieve peace.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the church's participation in the Sandinista Revolution the Contras mistrusted many of those representing the Church. Christopher Dickey shares the testimony of an American Nun named Lisa. The following statement is just one example of the persecution the clergy faced from the Contras. Lisa's story is set in the valley of Jalapa, when it was under siege by a group of Contras led by Suicida:

If the town were to fall, Lisa was sure that she and the rest of the nuns and priests would be singled out for killing. The contras hated them with a special intensity, it seemed. The contras saw them as "internationalists." In their radio broadcasts, people told her, they named everyone in Lisa's religious household, the Spanish priests, the Mexican sisters and herself, as agents of communism. The contras had accused every Maryknoll missionary in the country of teaching communism. But if you were identified with a Cuban doctor or Spanish priests or the American Capuchins in Jícaro, what could you do about it? .....Pedro Carazo, the delegate of the word who had welcomed Lisa and Marimer to San Pablo and then watched over them in the grim days of the bombardment during Holy Week, was dragged from his isolated house one night in November. His corpse showed up on the outskirts of town a day later, on the path to Jalapa, his throat cut and his body half eaten by dogs.<sup>110</sup>

## **Conclusion**

There is a consensus amongst writers of the Sandinista Revolution that the Catholic Church had a profound effect on the success of the revolution. When comparing

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffery S.J Klaiber (The Church, Dictatorships, And Democracy In Latin America. New York: Orbis Books 1998) 198-199,202-203

the Sandinista Revolution with the Cuban revolution, the large Christian influence on the Sandinista Revolution was a major difference between the two. The considerable involvement of the Church was greatly due to the influence of the liberation theology introduced by Vatican II. The Church's involvement in the revolution significantly resulted in the large percentage of women who contributed to the revolution.

The Church's involvement in the revolution helped women of different social classes and ages to join the revolution. The lower class women were able to participate in the revolution thanks to the progressive part of the Church that created and sponsored the Christian Base Communities. The Catholic Church inspired and assisted women in the participation of armed struggle against the dictatorship.

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Dickey, With the Contras: A Reporter in the Wilds of Nicaragua. (New York: Simon & Shuster, Inc., 1985) 161-162

## CHAPTER 5

### Women's Organizations

Many women's support organizations have organized in Nicaragua due to and since the Sandinista Revolution. These organizations have served a very important function in the daily lives of the working class or peasant women by providing resources, support, and opportunities never before available to women. Linda L. Reif mentions the work done by AMPRONAC or AMNLAE in trying to establish daycares, educational programs, health care working on female unemployment, to name a few.<sup>1</sup> Considering that at the time of the revolution women made up the majority of heads of household, the assistance and resources provided by these organizations have been invaluable. However, because women were the head of their household, being part of these organizations would be in itself a hardship. Attending meetings and participating in support activities (i.e. marches, protests, etc.) meant finding someone to watch their children, taking time away from work, and not running their households. The majority of working women or peasant women with husbands or boyfriends at home could not generally count on their support or acceptance in participating in women's organizations.

After the Sandinista's lost power to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro new women's organizations formed to specifically address women's issues. Women had learned from the 1980's organizations, that they were more powerful as a group and more likely to be

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<sup>1</sup> Linda L. Reif. "Women in Latin American Guerrilla Movements: A Comparative Perspective." *Comparative Politics*, Volume 18, Issue 2 (Jan., 1986), 159

heard. The fundamental difference between the women's groups of the 1990s and those of the 1980s is women's organizations of the 90's were more interested in supporting women's interests than those of a particular political party.

In December, 1980, an article by Alan Riding ran in the *New York Times*, "Equality-Disrupts Nicaraguan Homes." Riding quotes a Nicaraguan woman explaining she had to choose between belonging to the Women's Association and her husband, she ended up choosing the organization.<sup>2</sup> Many women would have to make choices between their family and their ideologies. Women's organizations would introduce women to the philosophy that they deserved to be treated well and that they should leave abusive relationships. Another article titled, "Nicaraguan Women: Equals in Battle, Not in Home," that ran in the *New York Times* two years later stated that many Nicaraguan men thought it okay for women to be involved in the revolution as long as it was not their wife. Empowered during the revolution, women, however, were not willing to go back to staying home and being the "little woman" after the revolution.

Women's organizations however, did not always promote women's independence. In the article, a member of the Women's Association, a Mrs. Henriques describes some of the organizations initiatives that supported domesticity as well as social efforts:

The women's group, she said, is devoting its efforts instead to promoting domestic work as 'a valuable social contribution' and acquainting mothers with proper health care for their families. It is also setting up daycare centers and rehabilitative training for prostitutes, some of whom are as young as 13.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Riding, "Equality –Disrupts Nicaraguan Homes." *New York Times*, 8 December 1980, sec. A13, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Hoge, "Nicaraguan Women: equal in battle, not in the home." *The New York Times*, 11 Jan. 1982, sec. B8, p. 24.

The main women's organization founded during the revolution was called AMPRONAC, the Association of Nicaraguan Women Confronting the National Problem.<sup>4</sup> Founded in 1977, it was created, supported and controlled by the FSLN to organize women and involve them in the revolution against Somoza. Its focus during the revolution was bringing women together to support the revolutionary activities of the Sandinistas. Some of their activities were staging demonstrations, rallies, and sometimes hunger strikes protesting issues such as the treatment of Sandinista prisoners in Somoza's prisons to issues regarding hikes in prices for basic needs, mainly food. In Sweet Ramparts, Jane Deighton describes the clandestine work of AMPRONAC:

The Association drew on its national structure to create a large, clandestine organising force. It set up safe houses, lines of communication between the popular organizations and the FSLN, and secret hospitals. Women began to organise against incursions by the Guard in their neighborhoods, forming the foundations of what are today the CDSs [Sandinista Base Committee]. In Monimbo and Esteli where fighting was amongst the heaviest in the country, women set up an intelligence system to alert their neighbours to the presence of the National Guard by switching lights on and off and banging pots and pans. This 'rearguard' work of civil defence was one of the crucial factors in enabling the final FSLN victory in July 1979.<sup>5</sup>

AMPRONAC would change its name after the war to Association of Nicaraguan Women, Luisa Amanda Espinosa (AMNLAE), after the first woman to die fighting for the Sandinistas, and broaden its work with women.<sup>5</sup> Many critics of the AMNLAE did not approve of its strict adherence of the party line and lack of autonomy from the male

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<sup>4</sup> Jane Deighton et al., Sweet Ramparts: Women In Revolutionary Nicaragua. (London: Lithoprint Ltd. 1983) 2, 39

<sup>5</sup> Deighton et al, 42-43



Sandinista leaders especially after the revolution. Deighton and others support this opinion of the AMNLAE:

AMNLAE is, essentially, a Sandinista organization. Its role of organising women as women has been balanced against its fulfillment of the goal of mobilising women in support of FSLN goals. This has meant that women receive strong AMNLAE backing when women's demands coincide with the priorities of the FSLN, as in the literacy campaign or the establishment of women's battalions. But there is a danger that AMNLAE's role as a women's organization may be dissipated in its readiness to promote women's involvement in mass organisations, and in its reluctance to avoid conflict with the policies of the FSLN.<sup>6</sup>

Many women's organizations splintered off from the AMNLAE because they did not feel that the AMNLAE was meeting their needs. Several of the groups to break way formed professional organizations for women that focused more on their professional interests and feminist agendas.<sup>7</sup> Another very important group to break free from AMNLAE was the Mother of Heroes and Martyrs.

The Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs organization was created after the revolution as a support group for women who had lost children who had died while fighting for the Sandinistas. The group was formed by AMNLAE shortly after the Sandinista victory to help console other mothers who had lost children, to attend demonstrations, and to spread Sandinista propaganda. According to the Mothers, their most important duties were notifying mothers of the heartbreaking news of their child's death, consoling these women, and bringing them into their organization. They would eventually break away from the AMNLAE for several reasons, but the main reasons were that they felt that they were being used as propaganda (the grieving mother) and because they felt that the

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<sup>6</sup> Deighton et al, 162

<sup>7</sup> Randall, Sandinista's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua. 27

AMNLAE listened too much to the Sandinista leaders and not enough to their members. Their organization would grow to be a commanding voice in their country.<sup>8</sup>

The Mothers of the Resistance was organized by the Contras and the US to work for the release of Contra prisoners in the Sandinista prisons. Although they were organized for the same purpose as the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs they never became as strong or influential as their Sandinista counterpart. This group of mothers, whose sons fought and died on the side of the Contras, were eventually invited to join the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs. Bayard de Volo explains that the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs empathized with the pain and suffering that the Mothers of the Resistance were dealing with. Both groups represented mothers who had lost children to war; the only difference was their ideology.<sup>9</sup>

One other important group of women organized to support each other and raise political awareness regarding the plight of their children and relatives is the Nicaraguan Mothers of the Disappeared. Sheila R. Tully asserts that these women challenge the public amnesia about what happened to Nicaraguans during the war. As a nation that had been ravaged by war for decades people have tried to put the war behind them and move on. The Nicaraguan Mothers of the Disappeared want answers to what happened to their loved ones and keep their sacrifices from being forgotten about by Nicaraguans.<sup>10</sup>

In 1990 Violeta Barrios de Chamorro won the presidency of Nicaragua. Although she was the first woman elected president in Central America she did not support a

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<sup>8</sup> Bayard de Volo, 79

<sup>9</sup> Bayard de Volo, 72, 122, 178-179

<sup>10</sup> Sheila R. Tully, "A painful purgatory: grief and the Nicaraguan Mothers of the Disappeared." Social Science & Medicine v.40, n12 (June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1995) p155

feminist agenda in Nicaragua. The Sandinistas' defeat and Chamorro's lack of interest in feminism did not however, keep women from organizing and empowering each other. Cynthia Chavez Metoyer, an assistant professor of political science at California State University, describes three important women's organizations that sprang up after the Sandinista defeat in the 1990 elections. These organizations were focused on women's issues and how to solve them. The first organization, the National Women Coalition (NWC), was set up to work with women politicians from all parties to unify in the struggle to protect women's rights. According to the article, the organization's most notable accomplishment was the creation of the document, Minimum Agenda during the 1996 elections. According to NWC, "This document calls for the state and political parties to protect the human rights of women. Basically, the Minimum Agenda seeks to transform unequal gender relations and promote solidarity among women."<sup>11</sup>

The next organization, Women's Unemployment Project (WUP) was developed in 1994 by former Sandinista Workers' Union. Its primary concern is women's interests which tended to be ignored by traditional trade unions. Metoyer states that unlike traditional workers unions, WUP does not try to organize women around a particular ideology. What it does do is offer job training, computer skills, and university scholarships to unemployed women and protects the employment rights of working women.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cynthia Chavez Metoyer, "Emerging Forces-Making Progress in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua." *World and I*, v16 i3 (March 2001) p. 194.

<sup>12</sup> Cynthia Chavez Metoyer, "Emerging Forces-Making Progress in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua." *World and I*, v16 i3 (March 2001) p. 194

Domestic violence in Nicaragua has always been a huge problem and was first really addressed during the Sandinista's time in power. Organizations like AMNLAE addressed the issues and worked to persuade women not to accept this abuse at home but did not seem to make a lot of head way. The last women's organization discussed in Metoyer's article was created to solely deal with this serious social issue. The Women's Network Against Violence (WNAV), whose agenda is to stop domestic violence against women has been able to get the word out that domestic violence is still happening at an alarming rate in Nicaragua. Metoyer explains the make up of the organization:

The network comprises 170 local groups located throughout the country. At the national level, the WNAV coordinates four commissions that take particular approaches toward eliminating domestic violence: the Commissions of Churches, Communications, Women's Police Stations, and Education and Youth.

The Commission of Churches, made up of more than sixty religions works to educate the public that spousal and child abuse is morally wrong. The Commission of Communications seeks to educate the media on the most professional and ethical way to report domestic abuse. The final commission is the Commission of Education and Youth, which works with teachers to "introduce educational materials that focus on preventing domestic violence." One brochure created by this group informs young people of what to do in case they are a victim or witness of domestic violence.<sup>13</sup>

The Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1994 for Nicaragua announced in their July report for the southwestern portion of the country that every 24 hours 5 women would be sexually assaulted by a family member. The report goes on to explain the difficulty in prosecuting domestic violence stressing that therefore it was

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<sup>13</sup> Metoyer,.194.

imperative that the issue be addressed. The following describes how this dilemma helped spur the formation of the WNAV:

The Ixchen centers and the Luisa Amanda Association of Nicaraguan Women [AMNLAE], a Sandinista mass organization, provided medical and psychological counseling to women, as well as legal advice in divorce cases and to victims of rape and other violence. In November these groups joined with some 20 other Nicaraguan NGO's dedicated to women's issues to create the "Women's Network Against Violence" to promote women's rights and to pressure the Government to ratify the Inter American Convention for the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence Against Women, which Nicaragua signed on June 9, 1994.<sup>14</sup>

The journal, Reproductive Health Matters, gives much of the credit for the National Network of Women Against Violence success of the passage of the Domestic Violence Law in 1996 to their "...strategic alliances with politicians, government officials, community leasers, and professionals from a broad range of disciplines." According to the article, data created by the research using all the sources previously mentioned and provided to policymakers is what convinced them to pass the law. The Domestic Violence Law included the following provisions:

- Allows women to seek protection from presumed violence, mandatory counseling, and confiscation of weapons.
- It includes psychological injuries under the crime of injurious assault.

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<sup>14</sup> Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1994, (United States Government, 1995) p. 463

- If the abuser is a family member he or she will automatically receive the maximum sentence.<sup>15</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Women's quality of life in Nicaragua, while still not good when compared to most developed countries, is much better since the Sandinista Revolution in 1979. The Sandinistas understood the power behind organizing woman to help their campaign and to improve the lives of the common woman. While the Sandinista male leadership has been guilty of using women as propaganda and trying to restrict their actions, they still empowered women who had never had a voice in the past. Women's groups branched out from the Sandinista founded and controlled AMNLAE to follow their own agendas, which generally meant focusing more on certain women's issues.

Women continue to better the way they organize their groups and have become more effective. Women have experienced empowerment in Nicaragua in the past couple of decades and continue to reach out to other women to help them achieve more fulfilling lives. In Bayard de Volo's perspective, as well as the perspective of other feminist writers, neither the Chamorro's presidency nor the latest, of Alemán's as doing anything to support feminist movements yet, "...if Nicaragua does reap a "gender revolution," the autonomous network of women's organizations will have helped to cultivate it, ensuring that this time the revolutionary harvest is also a feminist one."<sup>16</sup> The perseverance of

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Lijestrand, etl., "The Nicaraguan Network of Women against Violence-Using Research and Action for Change [Part 1 of 2]," *Reproductive Health Matters* n10 (1997), p 82-88

women's movements in an unaccommodating political atmosphere uphold Nora Astorga's comment that women have come to far to ever be apathetic again.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Randall, Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle, 128

## Chapter 6

### Violeta Barrios de Chamorro

Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, the first woman president of Nicaragua from 1990 to 1997, demonstrates the heights of women's participation in Nicaragua's politics and government. Wife of Pedro Chamorro, the famous editor of *La Prensa*, one of the biggest newspapers in Nicaragua, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro began her participation in politics when she married her husband, a lifelong opponent of the Somoza regime. Pedro Chamorro would fight Somoza through *La Prensa* and would even attempt to overthrow the government with a small army he helped put together. The Somozas retaliated by censoring *La Prensa*, shutting down the newspaper, imprisoning and torturing Pedro, and then forcing him into exile. Chamorro always supported her husband throughout his anti-Somoza campaign, visiting him in prison and even leaving her children behind with her mother-in-law to follow him into exile. Pedro later secretly returned to the country with a small army of one hundred Nicaraguan patriots to attempt to overthrow the Somozas but was captured and imprisoned instead. After his imprisonment, Pedro would go back to work at his paper, attacking the Somozas. The end of the line came when Pedro ran a series of articles titled the "Vampire Chronicles," in which he attacked the Somozas for allowing blood to be bought from the poor and exported to the United States. Weeks after the series ran, Pedro Chamorro was brutally executed on his way to work.<sup>1</sup> Many believed that the Somozas were directly involved in the assassination of Pedro Chamorro, and it helped fuel support of the revolt by the FSLN against the government.

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<sup>1</sup> Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, et al., Dreams of the Heart, (New York: Simon & Schuster 1996) 78, 112, 115



Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, her oldest son, and her daughter continued his fight through the family paper. Chamorro was invited to be part of a *junta* to help organize the government that would replace the Somoza dictatorship after Tacho and his followers left in 1979. In her autobiography, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro states that from almost the beginning she firmly believed that the Sandinistas were only using her for her dead husband's popularity with the masses and to give the false impression that the *junta* would be democratic.<sup>2</sup> According to Chamorro, she decided to resign from the *Junta* after constant friction between her and the Ortegas, Daniel and Humberto, the Sandinistas top guerilla leaders ( Daniel Ortega would become the Sandinista president of Nicaragua and Humberto Ortega would head of the military as army chief). Chamorro felt they were railroading her and others with their Communist agenda. The following quote from Violeta Barrios de Chamorro demonstrates how she and another democrat, Alfonso Robelo were used by the *Junta* to create a certain politic image:

Alfonso (Robelo) and I were kept as window dressing while Humberto Ortega build the Sandinista People's Army into the most powerful and disciplined force in Central America and Daniel consolidated his bureaucratic power, casting aside all moderates. We were props for the Sandinistas, to be used to promote the notion that the revolution was not merely a communist takeover of Nicaragua. They claimed that "if Pedro the martyr of civil liberties, were alive today he would be unfailingly on the side of the revolution."<sup>3</sup>

After the Sandinistas took over the country, Chamorro's family split over their attitudes to the new government. Her oldest son Pedro and her oldest daughter Cristina worked with her at their family's paper, which condemned the Sandinistas. Her youngest

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<sup>2</sup> Chamorro,156.

<sup>3</sup> Chamorro, 137, 152, 186, 193, 237.

son worked for the Sandinista paper, *Barricada*, which openly criticized *La Prensa*.<sup>4</sup> Chamorro goes into great detail about the abuse she and her family suffered under the Sandinista regime because of what was written about the Sandinista government in *La Prensa*. She speaks of harassment, intimidation, violence, censorship, and the paper being closed down on a couple of occasions by the Sandinistas, mainly under the directive of Daniel Ortega. The Sandinistas claimed that *La Prensa* was printing vicious slander, and they had no choice but to shut it down. Chamorro explains that *La Prensa* was only informing every one of the true intentions of the government. Meanwhile Chamorro was honored with the award, Guardian of Democracy by U.S. Senate majority leader, Robert Byrd for her paper's stand against the Socialist government and for not caving in under the oppression by the Sandinista government.<sup>5</sup>

In 1989, according to Chamorro, the economic situation for the Sandinistas became so desperate that they had no choice but to compromise with the contras and sign a plan of peace, one of the stipulations being holding free elections in Nicaragua in February of 1990. After the decision to hold free elections, Mrs. Chamorro explains in her autobiography that several friends, including Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez, and her own family encouraged her to campaign for the presidency. She eventually decided to run even though she suffered from a fractured kneecap. Despite this injury, she campaigned even in the most remote areas of Nicaragua. According to Chamorro, the Sandinistas did everything to sabotage the elections.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Chamorro, 196

<sup>5</sup> Randall, Margaret. *Sandinino's Daughters Revisited: Feminism In Nicaragua*. 52

<sup>6</sup> Chamorro, 255, 256, 262, 265

To the Sandinista's surprise Chamorro would win the election. In most of all the interviews that Randall conducted with women Sandinistas after the elections, they demonstrated their complete surprise and disappointment at the Sandinistas defeat. The following is the response of Milù Vargas, an attorney who at one time was the chief legal counsel to Nicaragua's Council of State under the Sandinista regime, to Randall's question of whether the electoral defeat came as a surprise to her:

Of course it did. Because in spite of everything I've said, in spite of all the criticism-which we did voice during the campaign itself-we were still absolutel sure we were going to win. I was sure of it. The alternative was unthinkable. So unthinkable in fact, that the UNO people themselves didn't even imagine they would win! Here the winners as well as the losers were products of overconfident attitudes. They didn't prepare for victory any more than we prepared for defeat.<sup>7</sup>

Bayard de Volo describes the image that Chamorro's campaign put forth to the Nicaraguan people as trying to be the Nicaraguan *María* and homemaker only interested in supporting the valor of our Nicaraguan men.<sup>8</sup>

Chamorro states that the data gathered by Sandinistas pollsters had them believing that the Sandinistas would win 75 percent of the vote. She also describes the way the international press predicted her defeat:

It's understandable that most people expected the Sandinistas to be sure winners. No one was more fooled than the American press. Four weeks before the elections, *Newsweek* magazine declare that "Violeta Chamorro and her party had been unable to make any significant gains against the Sandinista political machinery." *Newsweek* predicted an overwhelming Sandinista victory.

Even the *New York Times* was deceived by the splendid mirage created by the FSLN's Mass Organization Committees. Just before the elections they released

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<sup>7</sup> Randall, Margaret. *Sandinino's Daughters Revisited: Feminism In Nicaragua*. 139

<sup>8</sup> Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes And Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001) 1

the results of a poll that predicted a 2-1 win for Daniel Ortega. The opinion echoed throughout *the world*: the *Economist*, the *BBC*, and the *International Herald Tribune* were all stating similar odds against us.<sup>9</sup>

Chamorro as well as the Sandinistas have acknowledged that Chamorro represented peace to the people who voted for her. Chamorro represented peace from the counter-revolution and an end to the mandatory draft in place by the Sandinistas. On June 9, Chamorro would personally oversee the disarming two thousand contra troops, and the turning in of one hundred missiles.<sup>10</sup> Her victory, according to surveys, stemmed from the support of "... homemakers, particularly older, rural women or strongly religious women."<sup>11</sup>

There has been much criticism of Chamorro's presidency on such issues as the economy, women's rights, and the handling of the military. Lorraine Bayard de Volo says this about Chamorro's presidency:

Nicaragua is distinctive in the study of women and politics for another reason- in 1990, a woman, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, was elected president. This was not widely heralded as a triumph for women because Chamorro was explicitly anti-Sandinista and antifeminist. In her six years in office, she managed to reverse Sandinista progress in economic policies, health care, and education benefiting women. Yet paradoxically, the Sandinista bust was a feminist boon, and women's organizations blossomed in the post-Sandinista period.<sup>12</sup>

It seems to be the general consensus among women writers about the women of Nicaragua that Chamorro was an antifeminist and did nothing to support the women's movement. In fact, Cynthia Chavez Metoyer's article about the Women's Network

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<sup>9</sup> Chamorro, 270-271

<sup>10</sup> Sam M. Dillon, *Commandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company 1991) 314, 315

<sup>11</sup> Chinchilla, "Revolutionary Popular Feminism." 391-92 quoted in Lorraine Bayard de Volo, ed., *Mother's of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua* (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001) 156

<sup>12</sup> Bayard de Volo, 5

Against Violence (WNAV), accuses Chamorro's government of prohibiting the organization from going into the schools to work with youth on how to deal with domestic violence.<sup>13</sup>

Chamorro's refusal to rid her government of Sandinistas and hesitation to return property confiscated during the revolution caused anger and distrust in Contras and in Washington. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1992 describes the feelings of many in Washington, particularly the position taken by Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina against the Chamorro government:

First, he held up \$104 million in aid for Managua, pending more reform efforts. Then, he released a report charging Mrs. Chamorro's government with human-rights abuses, corruption, and failure to return thousands of properties that had been confiscated by the Sandinistas. The report asserted that Nicaragua still is controlled by the Sandinistas.<sup>14</sup>

According to Chamorro it was necessary to work with Sandinistas to keep the peace in Nicaragua and to make the transition from the powerful socialist party to her own presidency.<sup>15</sup> Chamorro's economic policy has not been exempt from criticism either or the implication that she depended too much on her son-in-law, Antonio Lacayo, who was also her cabinet minister. The *Economist (US)* published a scathing article titled, "The joys of democracy" in 1995 condemning the Chamorro government's economic plan and what it had done to the Nicaraguan economy. The following quote describes what has happened to the economy since Chamorro took over the presidency:

Alas, the economy continued to shrink, and the crumbs have grown ever scarcer. Real wages are barely a third of what they were 15 years ago. Well over

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<sup>13</sup> Metoyer, 194

<sup>14</sup> Robert S. Greenberger, "Washington Insight: U.S. Pressure on Nicaragua to Root Out Sandinistas Poses Risks in Fragile Society," *Wall Street Journal*, 14 1992, p.A8.

<sup>15</sup> Chamorro 295

half of the country's should-be working population is unemployed or under-employed; studies by international agencies say that alarming numbers of Nicaraguans are undernourished.<sup>16</sup>

The article does give some credit to Chamorro for making peace in her country, yet explains that her whole attention to this agenda kept her from taking care of other matters. It seems by most accounts that Chamorro's work for peace in her country is the only good most writers and fellow politicians could find in her presidency. In response to the criticisms regarding the power she has given her son-in-law, Chamorro explained that since he had experience as a business man and that she had complete trust in him it was logical to hand the economical matters over to him. She acknowledged that the United States press has little good to say about her government but reported that the economy had grown by the rate of 3.2 percent in 1995.<sup>17</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The truth is that Violeta Barrios de Chamorro inherited a country that had been fighting from within and from without for almost three decades. As a result of so many years at war and corruption by the previous governments, Nicaragua was bankrupt. The people that Chamorro would be working for were extremely anxious, physically and mentally exhausted, and mistrusting. Chamorro's only real experience with politics and government before being asked to join the *junta*, was through her husband, Pedro Chamorro. However, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro would be involved directly or indirectly for decades with the Nicaraguan government. She would be involved beginning with her support of her husband's work against the Somoza government, to the work on

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<sup>16</sup> "The Joys of democracy." *Economist (US)* v335, n 7913 (May 6, 1995) p. 40(1)

<sup>17</sup> Chamorro, 300, 301, 322

the *junta* with the Sandinistas, her fight with the Sandinistas through her paper, and finally with her presidency. Chamorro presents herself as a traditional and very religious woman who does not support the feminist ideology. For a country that had come such a long way in regards to its women's movement it is a shame that Chamorro did not do anything to nurture it while she had the power.

It is ironic that a woman whose adult life has been dominated by politics, ran one of the country's largest newspapers and became the first woman president of her country would turn her back on feminism and promote the traditional role of homemaker. Perhaps her husband's desires and actions were the main reason Chamorro's political and professional accomplishments were achieved and not through her own desire or works. Chamorro did not have an education in politics or economics and admitted that the only reason she was invited to join the *Junta* was to add credibility to the group using her husband's name. During her presidency she admittedly leaned heavily on her son-in-law to make important decisions regarding the country. Chamorro wrote in her autobiography that while trying to decide whether to run for the presidency that she would have wanted to stay home and reclassify her personal momentos.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

In a country traditionally run by men, Nicaraguan women demonstrated their willingness and ability to fight for their beliefs and for a better future during the political turmoil of the 1960s through the 1990s. Women proved that they were willing to sacrifice their family life and even their own lives for their ideologies. Women who fought in both revolutions displayed their ability to be adept spies, gun runners, warriors, and more. Doris Tijerino, Dora María Téllez, Monica Baltodano, and La Negra actually commanded troops during the battle. Dora María Téllez took a leading role during several major turning events in the war. Her accomplishments are even acknowledged by those that have written in support of the Contras.

When the Sandinista government did not live up to feminist expectations on women's issues and the Chamorro government turned its back on feminist programs, women took matters into their own hands. Nicaraguan women demonstrated their unity and persistence in advancing women's rights by forming organizations that supported and defended women's rights. Groups like Women's Unemployment Project (WUP) and The Women's Network against Violence (WNAV) are just a few examples of the resolution of the Nicaraguan women to push forward in promoting women's rights.

The Sandinista leadership was perceptive and revolutionary in the sense that it actively recruited and valued women's involvement in its armed struggle. Many women would state their male colleagues during the war had treated them as equals. According

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<sup>18</sup> Chamorro, 256



to Timothy Brown the Contras did not actively recruit women in their armies, but they were welcome to participate and were valued for their bravery and skill.<sup>1</sup>

Institutions like the Catholic Church, universities, and women and student organizations were a major influence in women's involvement in the war. They showed amazing change and flexibility during the Sandinista Revolution. It seems that the liberation theology introduced by the Vatican II and work of the Medellín conference were major forerunners for the Nicaraguan Church's support of a socialist revolution. The Christian Based Communities (CEBs) set up by local churches would encourage many poor Nicaraguans to join the war. The division in the Catholic Church after the revolution is partly due to the Sandinistas lack of respect for the Church's traditional hierarchy and the Church's return to conservative attitudes after the revolution.

The women's organization, AMPRONAC or AMNLAE created by the Sandinistas, was very effective in the recruitment and organization of women to support the revolution but less effective in dealing with women's issues. Many criticize the Sandinista male leadership in trying to control the organization's policies on women's interests and concerns. The organization has undergone many changes in its response to become a stronger voice for women.

Lastly, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro's electoral win for the presidency of Nicaragua demonstrates the climax of women's involvement in the politics during this time. Chamorro's support of her husband's dangerous political rebellion, her involvement in the *junta*, her stance against what she perceived as abuses committed by the Sandinista,

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy C. Brown, The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2001) 113

and her tolerance of children's differing political views are admirable as well. Chamorro should also be given credit for working to a peaceful resolution to the civil war that had done so much damage to Nicaragua and the courage to take on leadership of a country emotionally and economically devastated. Her presidency however, did not promote women's movements, in fact she publicly described herself as being antifeminist. Chamorro's presidency was not able to bring the country out of the economic crisis it was in either. According to feminist literature on NGOs, Chamorro's lack of support of women's movements did not cause their collapse, rather ironically they flourished during this period.

The Sandinista Revolution, the women who fought in it and the Catholic Church who supported it, challenged many conventional norms and stereotypes in and about Latin America. The revolution demonstrated the ability of women of all classes and organizations to change and unite for a common goal and the accomplishments that can occur. The Contra War illustrated that women were involved in the struggle against the Sandinista regime and even though they were not recruited they joined and fought as equally well as their male counterparts. Both wars prove that the women of Nicaragua have been an active part of deciding and promoting their future.

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