

Introduction

On 7 November 1979, more than one hundred thousand people packed the Plaza de la Revolución in Managua, Nicaragua, to honor Carlos Fonseca Amador, the founder of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, FSLN). The demonstrators were overwhelmingly young men and women from poor barrios and rural villages, participants in the insurrection that, only a few months before, had toppled the four-decade-long Somoza dictatorship and swept the FSLN into power. Many thousands came to the rally armed, and they waved their rifles in the air when the crowd chanted, “Comandante Carlos, Ordene!” [At your command!].

It was the third anniversary of the date Fonseca died fighting Somoza’s army, and his remains had been exhumed and brought to the capital for reburial. The FSLN had planned a more low-key event, one that would commemorate not just Fonseca but several of the movement’s most important martyrs. But the announcement of plans to rebury Fonseca, like the call for a “final offensive” against Somoza six months earlier, generated a response that went beyond anything FSLN leaders anticipated. A simple ceremony planned for the remote town of Waslala, near the forested hillside where Fonseca died, was overwhelmed by the hundreds of peasants who arrived on mule, on horseback, and on foot, some walking for more than a day. A helicopter flew Fonseca’s remains to the town of Matagalpa, his birthplace. Nearly fifty thousand turned out, virtually the entire population of the town plus many who trekked in from the surrounding countryside. People gathered beside the highway and in small villages along the way as a car caravan carried the bones from Matagalpa to Managua.

Carlos Fonseca, though no longer alive, was the popular hero of the



Nicaragua. Map by Kikombo Ilunga Ngoy.

Nicaraguan revolution of 1979. He was much better known to the ordinary citizen than any of the people who made up the new revolutionary government. The young men and women who fought the National Guard in the insurrections of 1978 and 1979 considered themselves Sandinistas, but many knew only a few basic facts about the FSLN: its colors were the black and red of Sandino, its leader was Carlos Fonseca, it was serious about taking power, and it fought on the side of workers and peasants. That was enough.

Carlos Fonseca was also the FSLN leader who most epitomized the radical and popular character of the revolution, its anticapitalist and antilandlord dynamic. Two sayings of Fonseca's were especially prominent at the 7 November rally and preceding events. The first he appropriated from nationalist hero and guerrilla general Augusto César Sandino: "Only the workers and peasants will go all the way." The second, featured on the front page of the FSLN newspaper on 8 November, declared: "It is not simply a question of changing the individuals in power, but rather of changing the system, of overthrowing the exploiting classes and bringing the exploited classes to victory."¹

For nearly twenty years, Fonseca had been the central ideological and strategic leader of the revolutionary movement in Nicaragua. The writings that defined the political ideology of the Frente Sandinista—programmatic documents, historical and social analyses, key speeches, and manifestos—were almost without exception his work. Until his death, Carlos Fonseca also played a crucial role, even from prison or exile, in organizing the day-to-day work of the FSLN, recruiting to its ranks, expanding its political influence, and planning its military operations.

Before 1979, most people in North America and Europe, and many in Latin America, had never heard of Nicaragua, but the revolution captured the imagination of people around the world. The scruffy young FSLN guerrillas, affectionately referred to as *muchachos*, "kids," had won an armed revolution against an entrenched dictatorship. Television viewers far from Central America were shocked by the brutal violence of the Somoza government and National Guard and were impressed by the sight of ordinary people—students, housewives, workers—standing up to government tanks with homemade bombs and cobblestone barricades. Most participants in the urban and rural uprisings of early 1979 came from the lower classes, but at the end there was also widespread support for the revolution from the middle class, the Catholic Church, and even sections of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie. A genuine popular uprising finally forced President Anastasio Somoza to flee the country and destroyed the hated institution of the Na-

tional Guard. Of all the socialist and nationalist guerrilla movements that sprang up around Latin America in the decades following the Cuban revolution of 1959, only the FSLN of Nicaragua ever came to power.

It is impossible to understand this revolution or Carlos Fonseca's role in it without knowing something of Nicaragua and its history. Nicaragua in 1979 was an impoverished, underdeveloped, sparsely populated country in the middle of Central America, a region of poor and economically backward countries. The size of Illinois, Nicaragua had a population of less than 2.5 million.

When the Spanish conquered Nicaragua in the early sixteenth century, they found a land of lakes and volcanoes, of pine-covered mountains, tropical jungle, and hot, fertile plains, of vast forests of precious hardwoods. They did not, however, find what they wanted: gold and silver available for easy plunder. The most important economic activity carried out by the new rulers of Nicaragua in the early years was slave raiding, the capture and transportation of Indians to work in the silver and mercury mines of Peru. The violence of slaving, combined with the devastation of new diseases introduced by the Europeans, reduced the population of western Nicaragua from an estimated six hundred thousand to a few tens of thousands by about 1600. It took more than two centuries for the population to recover to preconquest levels.

Independence from Spain was won in the early 1820s, but the economic patterns of the colonial era persisted well into the twentieth century. Cattle raising on large haciendas was the most important commercial activity until the coffee boom of the 1880s. The production of agricultural goods for European and North American consumers dominated the market economy, making Nicaragua dependent on the vagaries of world prices, demand, and competition, and ensuring that, even in boom years, profits went mostly to wealthy landowners and merchants. The majority of the population continued to grow beans and corn much as their ancestors had before the conquest, although the decreasing size of peasant landholdings forced many into seasonal labor as well. The indigenous communities enjoyed a significant amount of autonomy, but the Indian population was also subject to coerced labor on public works and coffee plantations. Precapitalist labor relations and primitive technology were common in Nicaragua much longer than in other parts of Latin America. It was not until the cotton boom of the 1950s that fully capitalist agricultural production came to the country.

The political life of Nicaragua from independence to 1979 was characterized by the exclusion of workers and peasants from political power, the use of

violence to resolve conflicts between different factions of the dominant class, and intervention by the United States. Frequent wars between Liberals and Conservatives had little to do with ideology but rather were fueled by a jockeying for power among wealthy families and geographic rivalries between the two great colonial cities of Granada and León. In the 1850s, William Walker, an American adventurer backed initially by the U.S. government, took advantage of a war between Liberals and Conservatives to make himself president of Nicaragua, legalize slavery, and declare English the official language, before being defeated by popular resistance and a joint Central American army. In the decades before the construction of the Panama Canal, U.S. industrialist Cornelius Vanderbilt made a fortune exploiting the geographic advantages of Nicaragua to transport passengers and freight across a short land-and-water route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States intervened militarily to overthrow Liberal president José Santos Zelaya, impose Conservative Adolfo Díaz in his place, and begin a military occupation of the country that lasted, with only a few years interruption, until 1933. Nicaragua's banks, customs office, and railroads were signed over to American bankers, and the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty of 1914 gave the United States exclusive rights in perpetuity to build a canal across Nicaraguan territory.

In 1927 Augusto César Sandino, one of the Liberal generals fighting an imposed Conservative president, refused to sign a U.S.-brokered truce and went on to lead a six-year war against the U.S. Marines. The efforts of Sandino's peasant army, combined with growing opposition to the intervention inside the United States, led to the withdrawal of the American troops in 1933. Sandino was assassinated in 1934 at the orders of Anastasio Somoza García, the commander of a new U.S.-trained military force called the Guardia Nacional (National Guard). In the 1960s and 1970s, Carlos Fonseca resurrected the example of Sandino to inspire a new generation to fight against a government and National Guard led by Anastasio Somoza's sons.

Who was Carlos Fonseca? What aspects of his life and surroundings drove him to rebellion? How and why did his ideas change over time? What impact did Nicaraguan history and culture have on his political views, and to what extent was he influenced by events in the world outside Central America? Was he a Marxist? Nationalist? Internationalist? Castroist? Sandinista? How did he understand the class structure of Nicaragua, and what role did he envision for different social classes in the revolution? What was his view of the role of women in the guerrilla struggle and in postrevolution society? How did his ideas differ from those of others in the FSLN and in the broader

Left and opposition movements in Nicaragua? What difference did Carlos Fonseca make in the eventual victory of the Nicaraguan revolution, which came several years after his death?

This work, drawing on a sizable collection of hitherto unknown Fonseca writings, tells Carlos Fonseca's story by placing the development of his ideas in the context of the world in which he lived and the Nicaraguan reality he studied and fought to change. It stresses two dominant influences on Fonseca's life and political philosophy: the Cuban socialist revolution, and particularly the writings and actions of Ernesto "Che" Guevara; and the long tradition of resistance and courage on the part of Nicaraguan workers and peasants, exemplified especially by the anti-imperialist general Sandino. Carlos Fonseca followed in the footsteps of two individuals above all others, Che Guevara and Augusto César Sandino. They were Fonseca's personal heroes, and he also saw them as representing broader historical processes. Following in Che's footsteps also meant following Fidel Castro, the July 26 Movement, and the rebels who attacked the Moncada Barracks in 1953. Studying and emulating Sandino also meant learning from Indians who fought Spanish conquistadores, youths who hurled rocks at invader William Walker, and patriots who led the resistance to U.S. intervention in the decades before Sandino.

Carlos Fonseca's contribution lay in the interweaving of two themes: on the one hand, the fight for national liberation and against U.S. imperialism, and on the other the struggle for socialist revolution. His vision of a "Sandinista popular revolution" included both military victory over the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship and a social transformation to end the exploitation of Nicaraguan workers and peasants. Fonseca's goal was to build a movement that was deeply rooted in the material reality of Nicaragua and its rebel traditions symbolized by Sandino while looking to Cuba—and behind Cuba, the Russian Revolution—for inspiration and a sense of what was possible.

"It is not our job," Fonseca wrote in 1975, "to discover the universal laws that lead to the transformation of a capitalist society into a society of free men and women; our modest role is to *apply* these laws, which have already been discovered, to the conditions of our own country."² The task he set himself was not "modest"; it was difficult and dangerous, and success was far from guaranteed. Indeed, of all the guerrilla groups formed around Latin America in the years immediately following the Cuban revolution of 1959, the one that seemed at first to have the *worst* prospects for success was

probably the FSLN. The transformation of a handful of radical students into a movement leading a popular insurrection took almost two decades and was marked by more defeats than victories, prolonged periods of isolation, and the accumulation of a long list of martyrs. Even among students, the Sandinistas did not win hegemony until the decade of the sixties was well over. In the broad movement of opposition to Somoza and in the labor movement, more moderate voices than the FSLN's prevailed until the late 1970s.

Throughout this period, the FSLN was slowly winning to its ranks young students and workers, one or two at a time. Creating the kind of collective leadership that could take power at the head of a popular uprising was a long process involving sharp debate, discussion, conflicting proposals, experimentation, detours, and shared responsibilities. When the revolution occurred in 1979, everyone—friends and enemies—agreed that it was led by the FSLN. One of the themes of my work is that this experienced and committed leadership, this “vanguard” in the vocabulary of the time, was a necessary ingredient to the success of the Nicaraguan revolution. Like Che Guevara, I am convinced that one of the most important preconditions for revolution is the human one. The focus of this book is the men and women who struggled to build the FSLN through the 1960s and 1970s, and in particular the central role played by Carlos Fonseca.

Most books about the Nicaraguan revolution are by social scientists who are primarily interested in analyzing the FSLN's behavior after it came to power. They describe the ideology and program of the FSLN as it existed in the early 1980s, based on interviews and speeches of various party and government leaders, combined with some historical material from Carlos Fonseca and others. This approach enables them to show the complexity of Sandinista ideology in the early 1980s, but it does not reveal the organic development of this political ideology, the learning process, zigzags, debates, and rejection of failed strategies. It has led to several common errors, including a mystification of the process by which Sandino was chosen as a symbol, an overestimation of the importance of liberation theology in the formative period of the FSLN, and an insufficient appreciation of the role played by Carlos Fonseca at key junctures. The literature's focus on the FSLN in power creates the impression that the victory of the Nicaraguan revolution was somehow inevitable, whereas a more historical approach recovers the contingency and the drama of the process. Readers of this book may be surprised by the strength and stability of the Somoza regime during the 1960s

and early 1970s, the numerical and military weakness of the FSLN and its marginalization within the broader opposition movement, and the number of instances when the guerrilla movement could have been annihilated or just given up on the prospect of revolution.

The Nicaraguan revolution—like all revolutions—was the product of a particular national experience, history, body of traditions, and political culture. The key to developing a revolutionary nationalist ideology and program for Nicaragua was the resurrection and reinterpretation of Augusto César Sandino. In retooling the lessons of the 1920s for the needs of the 1970s, Fonseca stressed two main themes: the FSLN had to be anchored in the working class and peasantry, and it had to be prepared to take on U.S. imperialism, which he considered the main obstacle both to Nicaraguan national independence and to the struggle of the country's lower classes for social justice.

A necessary part of this process was the FSLN's rejection of the political perspectives and methods of the Communist Party. Fonseca, originally a member of the pro-Moscow party in Nicaragua, led this split at the beginning of the 1960s with his criticisms of the Communists' electoralism, their unwillingness to commit to armed struggle, and their lack of confidence in the ability of Nicaraguan workers and peasants to carry out a socialist revolution. This orientation to reform rather than revolution and to alliances with parties that represented the interests of capitalist and middle-class forces developed under Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in the 1930s and was common to all the Latin American parties that looked to Moscow for direction. Scholars of Nicaragua refer to this political philosophy as "Stalinism" or "popular frontism," or "the Third International tradition"; Carlos Fonseca called it "Browderism."³ Fonseca led a break from the Communist Party to the Left, rejecting the conservatism and bureaucratic methods of the Nicaraguan CP in favor of the revolutionary Marxism of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. Fonseca saw this turning point as a move toward, not away from, Marxism.

Some scholars argue that it was Fonseca's rejection of Marxism in favor of a more pragmatic nationalism that made the revolution of 1979 possible.⁴ Fonseca's political writings over a two-decade period show him, to the contrary, becoming more committed over time both to scientific socialism and to revolutionary Nicaraguan nationalism. Marxism and nationalism were two intertwined aspects of Fonseca's political philosophy, held together by the glue of anti-imperialism and symbolized by his constant pairing of Che Guevara and Augusto César Sandino.

I argue that the Cuban revolution of 1959 was the crucial turning point in Fonseca's political evolution, opening up the possibility of a deep-going social revolution in his own country, turning him to a study of Sandino's history, and leading directly to the formation of the FSLN. "We are the *fidelistas* generation," Fonseca said, with the goal of establishing in Nicaragua "the second free territory of the Americas."⁵

It should be noted that in the eyes of those who speak for what remains of the FSLN in the late 1990s, this is the most controversial argument of the book. Fonseca's writings, including his historical writings on Sandino and his last strategic document, written less than a month before his death, continually stress the importance of the Cuban revolution and its relevance for Nicaragua. At the time of the Nicaraguan revolution, the material aid and political inspiration of Cuba were both widely acknowledged. The FSLN—to the delight and astonishment of the Cubans—sent *twenty-six* of its thirty-six highest-ranking military officers to Havana for a celebration on 26 July 1979, only seven days after the Nicaraguan victory.⁶ At the November 1979 Managua rally commemorating Carlos Fonseca, and at other political demonstrations in the first months of the revolution, the crowd burst into chants of "Cuba! Cuba! Cuba!" and "Viva Fidel!" In the course of the 1980s, however, leaders of the FSLN mentioned Cuba less and less often, finally rewriting their own history by substituting a Swedish or Mexican model for Cuba.

Perhaps following the lead of these FSLN leaders, scholars of the revolution tend to downplay the importance of Cuba. They argue that after an early infatuation with Cuba, lasting perhaps until the defeat of Che Guevara in Bolivia in 1967, the Sandinistas abandoned the Cuban model and set out to make a different type of revolution, one that was multiclass, Christian, and nonsocialist.⁷ My study of Carlos Fonseca shows that the FSLN under his leadership, as it became more deeply rooted in Nicaraguan reality, continued at the same time to look to the Cuban revolution as an example of what was possible.

The reader should know that I have brought more than academic curiosity to this research project. I was already an active supporter of the Nicaraguan revolution when I first heard of Carlos Fonseca. In February 1980, only a few months after the rally welcoming Fonseca's remains to the capital, I made the first of many trips to Nicaragua. I lived in Managua during the early 1980s and wrote a series of pro-revolution articles chronicling the first few years of the FSLN government. During the U.S.-backed contra war, I spent one harvest picking cotton on a state farm near the war zone, and I gave talks in the United States in solidarity with the Sandinista revolution. At

the end of the decade, I moved back to Nicaragua to help on an FSLN project in the autonomous region of the northern Atlantic Coast. I was disappointed, although not surprised, when the FSLN was voted out of office in February 1990.

In the Nicaragua of the 1980s, Carlos Fonseca's image was everywhere on murals and posters. He looked a little ethereal, even snooty—half aristocrat and half Jesus Christ. As the FSLN began to publish some of Fonseca's writings, I was struck by the contrast between the way he was portrayed in these ubiquitous murals and the plain-talking radicalism of his own speech, his embrace of revolutionary violence, and his identification with the daily hardships and concerns of Nicaraguan workers and peasants. Unlike most Latin American Marxists, Carlos Fonseca wrote and spoke a language ordinary people could understand. I was impressed with his clarity and single-mindedness of purpose, and sorry when the FSLN rather abruptly stopped publishing Fonseca's work after 1985 and let his *Obras* go out of print.

When I returned to Nicaragua in the 1990s, the revolutionary murals had been sandblasted or painted over, and speeches by FSLN politicians never mentioned Carlos Fonseca. But I met many Nicaraguans from what they themselves call the "humble classes" whose memory of him was vivid. Men and women of various ages, encountered in the market, on buses, in small towns, in a clinic waiting room, responded in virtually identical terms to the news that I was writing a biography of Carlos Fonseca. "Carlos—he was one of us. He spoke our language." And often, "He would never have let this happen to our revolution."

By the time this book was written, the FSLN had become a center-left electoral party whose platform and actions were similar to those of other reform-minded parties in and out of office around Latin America. Some of the idealistic young guerrillas who had fought alongside Fonseca had become millionaire businessmen, large landowners, or corrupt politicians. The Nicaraguan revolution was over. Most books about Latin American revolutions published in the 1990s start from this framework. These post-Cold War postmortems are primarily concerned with explaining the *defeats* of all revolutionary efforts after Cuba, including Nicaragua. Insofar as they deal with Nicaragua, their starting point is the electoral defeat of 1990, not the victorious revolution of 1979. My purpose is to try, through the central figure of Carlos Fonseca, to reconstruct the events and ideas that produced the FSLN and the revolution of 1979. What drove Fonseca and his followers? What did they say and write at the time, and how did they end up the undisputed leaders of a popular insurrection? I think it is more interesting,

important, and unusual that many thousands of Nicaraguans were ready to die for the FSLN in 1979 than that they were unwilling to vote for it a decade later.

The fictional Irish bartender Mr. Dooley once criticized the kind of history that only “tells ye what a counthry died iv.” Like Mr. Dooley, “I’d like to know what it lived iv.”⁸