

# THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION'S CHALLENGE TO THE MONROE DOCTRINE: *Sandinistas and Western Europe, 1979–1990*

**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes the revolutionary diplomacy of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) through the prism of Nicaraguan and Western European relations during the final decade of the Cold War. It contends that—despite the FSLN's ideological affiliation with Third World national liberation movements, Cuba, and the socialist bloc—the campaign to influence Western European foreign policies was central to the Sandinista government's international strategy. By pushing Western European governments to play a prominent role in Central America's violent Cold War conflicts, the Sandinistas sought to undermine US power in the isthmus and alter the inter-American dynamics that shaped their region's history up to the late 1970s. Furthermore, by building financial ties with Western European countries, the FSLN could avoid complete financial dependency on the Soviet bloc and strengthen Nicaragua's image as a nonaligned state. The Sandinistas' campaign to challenge US hegemony in Central America through a pragmatic outreach to Western Europe was largely successful, but it came at the cost of implementing domestic reforms that ran counter to their own ambitions. Ultimately, this prompted the FSLN to hold elections in 1990, which resulted in their removal from power.

**KEYWORDS:** revolution, Western Europe, Nicaragua, Sandinistas, Cold War, diplomacy

**O**n July 19, 1979, as triumphant guerrillas of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN) streamed into the Nicaraguan capital, Managua, Eduardo Ramón Kúhl was already on his way to Sweden to attend a Socialist International (SI) conference.<sup>1</sup> Kúhl was a representative of Nicaragua's revolutionary government in exile, the Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional [Junta of the National Government of Reconstruction]. His mission in Stockholm was to mobilize support for the armed struggle against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle and to push for international recognition of the junta.

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1. Active during most of the Cold War period, the Socialist International was an influential umbrella organization of socialist, labor, and social democratic parties.

It was only on his arrival at the airport, therefore, that an exhausted Kühl received the news of the revolution's victory, as jubilant fellow delegates Olof Palme (former Swedish prime minister and leader of the country's Social Democratic Party) and François Mitterrand (leader of the French Socialist Party) greeted him with celebratory bottles of champagne.<sup>2</sup> In the days that followed, the fall of Somoza and the victory of the Sandinistas dominated the conference proceedings. Kühl's speech was the "high point" of the event, as American diplomat Paul Canney reported: "[The] special ambassador. . . unfurled a Nicaraguan flag and was greeted by the warmest applause of the day."<sup>3</sup>

By coincidence, then, Eduardo Kühl became the first official face of the *Revolución Popular Sandinista* (Sandinista People's Revolution, RPS) in Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> In July and August 1979, Kühl traveled to Bonn, Brussels, Oslo, Paris, and Madrid, where he met with hundreds of journalists, diplomats, activists, and politicians to drum up support for the RPS. Due to the chaotic situation in Nicaragua immediately following the dictator's fall, it was difficult for the young ambassador to communicate with the newly installed government in Managua. To prepare for meetings and interviews, then, he relied on the junta's revolutionary program, the advice of Cuban ambassador Quintín Pino Machado, and, in some cases, his own creativity.<sup>5</sup> According to the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*, Kühl proposed enthusiastically to the SI conference that each Western European government fund the construction of "a little city" in Nicaragua, to include churches, schools, and hospitals. These cities would then be named after their donors, he explained, so there would be Nicaraguan towns called "Sweden, Italy, and Holland."<sup>6</sup>

While this was clearly not a seriously thought-out proposal, Kühl's comments nonetheless indicate the open embrace that Nicaraguans extended to Western Europeans after the revolution triumphed, and their invitation—albeit not yet centrally directed—to play a role in their country's future.<sup>7</sup> Kühl was the first official representative of Nicaragua's revolutionary government in Western Europe, but he was certainly not the last. From July 19, 1979, onward,

2. "Eddy Kühl: Un ermitaño con mucho mundo," *El Nuevo Diario*, May 19, 2019; Author's interview with Eduardo Ramón Kühl, Selva Negra, Nicaragua, August 1, 2016.

3. American Embassy in Stockholm to US Secretary of State, July 20, 1979, Central Foreign Policy Files, US Department of State, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=144333&cdt=2776&dl=2169>, accessed September 20, 2020.

4. Even though he collaborated with the FSLN, Kühl did not describe himself as a Sandinista. A young upper-class Nicaraguan of German descent, he was more closely aligned with the center-left *Movimiento Democrático Nicaragüense*.

5. Author's email correspondence with Eduardo Ramón Kühl, December 8, 2016.

6. "Nicaragua krijgt hulp socialisten," *De Volkskrant*, July 23, 1979.

7. Primarily written from the Nicaraguan perspective, this article adopts a loose definition of Western Europe, which includes the European Commission, EC member states, and the Scandinavian countries, as well as Greece, Spain, and Portugal.

high-ranking Nicaraguan diplomats, ministers, and politicians frequently visited Western Europe in search of financial support, public sympathy, and political legitimacy. Nicaraguan leaders also pushed for a more active role of the European Community (EC) in Central American affairs, arguing that EC member states could make a positive impact on the future development of the region, which was in danger of transforming into a bloody Cold War battleground. In particular, after the Republican Ronald Reagan assumed the United States' presidency in January 1981 and launched a military campaign to stop what he perceived as the spread of Soviet-backed communism in Central America, Western Europe became a key target area for the Sandinistas' global diplomatic campaign.<sup>8</sup>

But why did the Nicaraguan revolutionaries attach such importance to the foreign policy and views of Western European governments and peoples? And how successful was the Sandinistas' revolutionary diplomacy toward Europe in strengthening the RPS? On the surface, Western Europe was an illogical place for the Sandinistas to mobilize support for their ambitious revolutionary program. It certainly did not seem likely that Western European leaders would side with the Sandinista leaders as they sought to defend the revolution against potential attacks, most notably from the US administration. After all, in the Cold War context, Western European governments were the closest allies of the United States, the country that, in the eyes of the FSLN, was "the source of everything that had gone wrong in [Nicaraguan] history."<sup>9</sup> Ideologically speaking, too, Nicaragua's revolutionary leaders had little in common with Western Europe's social democratic, conservative, and Christian Democratic political elites. Rather, the FSLN was inspired by Fidel Castro's Cuba and—despite initially adopting a cautious approach to the Eastern bloc—considered the Soviet Union to be an ally in the global struggle against imperialism.<sup>10</sup>

By analyzing the international strategy of the FSLN following the revolution's triumph, this article explores why and with what results Western Europe

8. For more on US foreign policy toward the Nicaraguan Revolution, see Roy Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy: The Making of American Policy in Nicaragua, 1981–1987* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988); William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977–1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power in Nicaragua, 1977–1990* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); and Robert P. Hager Jr. and Robert S. Snyder, "The United States and Nicaragua: Understanding the Breakdown in Relations," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 17:2 (2015): 3–35.

9. Sergio Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos: A Memoir of the Sandinista Revolution* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 94.

10. For a recent account of the socialist bloc's relations with the FSLN, see Radoslav Yordanov, "Outfoxing the Eagle: Soviet, East European and Cuban involvement in Nicaragua in the 1980s," *Journal of Contemporary History* 55:4 (2020): 871–892. For an overview of Soviet views of Central America, see Danuta Paszyn, *The Soviet Attitude to Political and Social Change in Central America, 1979–90: Case-Studies on Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

mattered for Nicaragua's revolutionary project. Drawing on archival research, memoirs, online resources, and oral history interviews in Nicaragua, Cuba, the Netherlands, Britain, Germany, and the United States, it contends that—despite the FSLN's ideological affiliation with Third World national liberation movements, Cuba, and the socialist bloc—the campaign to influence Western European foreign policies was central to the Sandinista government's international strategy. Crucially, the revolutionaries believed that European involvement in Central American affairs could function as a counterweight to the power of the United States, which the Sandinistas regarded as the principal threat to their revolution's survival. By pushing Europeans to play a prominent role in Central America's Cold War conflicts, the Sandinistas sought to undermine US power in the isthmus, thereby challenging the Monroe Doctrine which, the FSLN believed, was still at the heart of US foreign policy toward the region.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, by building financial ties with Western European countries, the FSLN could avoid complete financial dependency on the Soviet bloc and strengthen Nicaragua's position as a nonaligned state. Far from being illogical, then, the Sandinistas' outreach to Western Europe was a rational move to secure their revolutionary project in the context of the global Cold War.

The Sandinistas' campaign to challenge US hegemony in Central America through a pragmatic outreach to Western Europe was largely successful, but it came at a cost. Even though most EC member states did not have a lot of sympathy for the revolutionaries, they shared the FSLN's view that US president Ronald Reagan's attempts to overthrow the Sandinista government were misguided and dangerous for the stability of the international system. This Cold War system, as the Europeans understood it, was defined by a global struggle between capitalism and socialism and dominated by the two superpowers that embodied these respective ideologies, the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

Concerned that the US involvement in a costly Central American war would damage its commitment to European security, Western European governments thus launched an alternative foreign policy toward Central America, supporting the efforts of Latin American states to offer a diplomatic alternative to the militaristic route that the US administration propagated. To be admitted to these multilateral negotiations, however, the Sandinistas had to implement domestic reforms that ran counter to their original ambitions and beliefs, such as negotiations with the counterinsurgents, amnesty laws, liberal democratic

11. "David resistió a Goliat: 10 años de política exterior," *Revista Envío* 95 (1989), <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/597>, accessed July 19, 2021.

12. This definition draws on Odd Arne Westad's *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

elections, and austerity programs. For the Nicaraguan Revolution to survive, it had to evolve and give in to the demands of its critics.

Through an analysis of Nicaraguan and Western European relations from 1979 to 1990, this article seeks to make two key contributions. First, it demonstrates that a revolutionary state in the Global South was able to shape, utilize, and adapt to the international Cold War environment. As a result of its ambitious and constantly evolving diplomatic campaign, the FSLN isolated enemies and mobilized supporters from around the globe, challenging US influence in Central America and, by extension, the Monroe Doctrine. Building on the work of historians such as Matthew Connelly, Paul Thomas Chamberlin, and Lien-Hang Nguyen, who point out that national liberation movements used Cold War dynamics to their own advantage, this article shows that revolutionary leaders, once they achieved their goal of obtaining power, continued to rely on diplomacy to strengthen and defend their revolutionary ideals.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as the Sandinistas realized soon after the revolution's triumph, building a revolutionary government in the so-called "backyard" of the United States required a more pragmatic foreign policy than previously envisaged, with space for concessions and closer ties with Western Europe. Building and defending a revolutionary state, in other words, came with a different set of challenges than organizing an armed insurgency. In making this point, this article not only adds to the still rather fragmented body of literature concerned with the history of the Nicaraguan Revolution, but also helps us understand how revolutionary states operated in the international arena and the impact of global politics on revolutionary trajectories during the Cold War.

Second, by looking at Nicaragua's connections with governments beyond the Americas, the article seeks to break away from what Tanya Harmer has called the "historiographical Monroe Doctrine" that shapes much of the scholarship on Latin America's experience during the Cold War.<sup>14</sup> The battle over the Nicaraguan Revolution, this article demonstrates, was never confined to the inter-American system; a wide range of actors from beyond the Western Hemisphere shaped and participated in its trajectory. To be sure, Western Europe is not the only region that has been systematically excluded from international histories of the Nicaraguan Revolution. Future research will hopefully pay attention to the FSLN's relations with the Eastern bloc, the Vietnamese guerrillas, the Palestine Liberation

13. Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Lien-Hang Nguyen, "Revolutionary Circuits: Toward Internationalizing America in the World," *Diplomatic History* 39:3 (2015): 411–422.

14. Tanya Harmer, "Review of *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War* by Federico Finchelstein," *Cold War History* 15:3 (2015): 419.

Organization, and other movements in the Global South. For now, however, this article adds a crucial corner piece to the broader puzzle that documents the international struggle over Nicaragua's ideological future.

The article that follows first provides an overview of the Sandinistas' diplomacy and vision of the world, tracing how the FSLN envisaged the international system and Nicaragua's place within it following Somoza's fall in July 1979. An understanding of this period immediately after the revolution is essential to grasping the central place Western Europe had after Reagan assumed the US presidency in 1981, in particular after the US invaded the Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983. The article then zooms in on Nicaragua's foreign policy toward Western Europe in the mid 1980s, analyzing the Sandinistas' key objectives in the region and the tactics they employed to encourage EC involvement in Central America at a time when the US-sponsored counterinsurgency campaign against the Sandinista People's Revolution was rapidly intensifying, prompting fears of a military intervention. Finally, focusing on the decline of Cold War tensions in the late 1980s, the article assesses the impact of Nicaragua's international strategy on the foreign policies of European governments, asking how effective Sandinista diplomacy was in strengthening the revolution.

## SANDINISTAS AND THE WORLD

For the FSLN, it was obvious that Nicaragua's foreign policy after 1979 would have to be radically different from the past, when Somoza had implemented what Sandinistas described as a "policy of submission to Yankee imperialism."<sup>15</sup> Alejandro Bendaña, the general secretary of Nicaragua's Ministerio del Exterior (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MINEX), reflected in 1989 that Somoza had been the "most faithful ally" of the United States, and described his foreign policy as a "colonial" policy, dictated by North American economic interests and ideological preferences, rather than by the needs of the Nicaraguan people.<sup>16</sup> Throughout most of the twentieth century, former revolutionary junta member (1979–84) and Nicaraguan vice president (1985–90) Sergio Ramírez writes in his memoirs, the nation was "held hostage" by the Somoza dynasty, which allowed the US to plunder Nicaragua's "national resources."<sup>17</sup>

Anti-imperialism was thus at the heart of the FSLN's struggle for national liberation, and this fight did not end with the dictator's overthrow. On the

15. "The Historic Programme of the FSLN," as published in Bruce Mars, ed., *Sandinistas Speak: Speeches, Writings and Interviews with Leaders of Nicaragua's Revolution* (New York and London: Pathfinder Press, 1982).

16. "David resistió a Goliat."

17. Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos* (2012), 94.

contrary, Sandinista revolutionaries understood their triumph in the context of a *global* struggle, in which the “peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America” were up against a neocolonial system that unfairly benefited capitalist countries.<sup>18</sup> And to Sandinista revolutionaries, imbued with the hubris of having just won power at the end of the 1970s, the efforts of the Third World to challenge this “system of dependency” seemed to be going remarkably well.<sup>19</sup> With a Marxist revolution in Ethiopia, the defeat of US forces in Vietnam, the rise to power of Maurice Bishop’s New Jewel Movement in Grenada, and the decision of several African governments, such as Angola, to adopt Marxist-Leninism as an official state ideology, the FSLN leadership operated under the assumption—overly optimistic—that they were on the winning side of the global anti-imperialist struggle. Adding to this impression, the Sandinistas also predicted that the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN) would soon install a revolutionary regime in El Salvador. Hoping for another revolutionary triumph in Central America, the FSLN backed the FMLN. Throughout most of the 1980s, weapons from Vietnam, Ethiopia, Angola, and the Eastern bloc were shipped clandestinely via Cuba and Nicaragua to Salvadoran insurgents.<sup>20</sup>

With regard to the Cold War competition, Sandinista leaders certainly sympathized more with the socialist bloc than with the West. Indeed, Sandinista leader Bayardo Arce argued that the Soviet Union was not an “imperialist” country, because “imperialism” and “capitalism” were two intertwined processes.<sup>21</sup> The FSLN’s closest ally was undoubtedly Fidel Castro. While we still know too little about Cuba’s relations with the FSLN during Nicaragua’s revolutionary decade, it is clear, as Emily Snyder’s work has shown, that the two countries carefully coordinated their foreign policies and that Cuban officials advised the Sandinista government on a range of topics, including diplomacy, military affairs, and government organization.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, the Cubans advised the FSLN to move cautiously. The Cuban ambassador to Sweden, Quintín Pino Machado, urged the Sandinistas on July 20, 1979, to be careful with implementing their revolutionary plans, stressing the need to prevent foreign intervention and isolation, pointing to what had happened to Cuba.<sup>23</sup>

18. “Historic Programme of the FSLN.”

19. “David resistió a Goliat.”

20. For more on El Salvador, see Dirk Kruijt, *Guerrillas: War and Peace in Central America* (London: Zed Books, 2008); and Andrea Oñate-Madrado, *Insurgent Diplomacy: El Salvador’s Transnational Revolution, 1970–1992* (PhD diss.: Princeton University, 2016).

21. Bayardo Arce Castaño, “La intervención extranjera,” *Encuentro* 15 (1980): 56–64.

22. See Gary Prevost, “Cuba and Nicaragua: A Special Relationship?” *Latin American Perspectives* 17:3 (1990), 120–137; and Emily Snyder’s contribution to this special issue.

23. Author’s email correspondence with Eduardo Kühl, December 8, 2016.

Indeed, Cuba's deputy foreign minister Pelegrín Torras told Bayardo Arce on February 6, 1980, that Cubans wanted to prevent the FSLN from making "the same mistakes" they had made in the first years after Fidel Castro's triumph.<sup>24</sup> The Sandinista leadership, confronted with the reality of having inherited a small country that was almost entirely dependent on aid and trade with the United States, shared this view, vowing to implement an "extremely careful" foreign policy.<sup>25</sup>

In this vein, in the years leading up to the revolution's triumph, Sandinistas had already established friendly relations with mainstream political forces in Western Europe and the Americas, such as the Socialist International and the governments of Panama, Venezuela, and Mexico. The FSLN had done so by presenting the war against Somoza as a nationalist struggle for social justice, democracy, and nonalignment in the global Cold War.<sup>26</sup> The FSLN understood that if it suddenly adopted a confrontational attitude toward the capitalist world it would be making a counterproductive move, which could ruin Nicaragua's changes of obtaining desperately needed financial assistance.

Therefore, the FSLN opted to present the RPS in a nonthreatening way to potential enemies, both at home and abroad. Critically, to assuage fears about the radical nature of the revolution, Sandinista officials downplayed the extent of their power. The official face of the revolution was not the FSLN leadership, but the Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional. The junta had five members, all of whom had actively contributed to the fall of Somoza. Violeta Chamorro, widow of the murdered *La Prensa* journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, represented the Unión Democrática de Liberación (Democratic Liberation Union), an opposition coalition that had opposed Somoza since 1974. Alfonso Robelo was a businessman who founded the Movimiento Democrático Nicaragüense (Nicaraguan Democratic Movement), another anti-Somoza opposition party. Moisés Hassan, a former guerrilla, represented the Movimiento del Pueblo Unido (United People's Movement), a grassroots organization closely aligned to the FSLN. Sergio Ramírez represented a group of 12 prominent anti-Somoza intellectuals, known as the Grupo de los Doce (Group of Twelve). The fifth member was Daniel Ortega, the only known Sandinista on the junta and one of the nine FSLN comandantes.

24. Bayardo Arce and Pelegrín Torras, February 6, 1980, Archivo Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Havana, Cuba [hereafter ACPMINREX], Ordinario, Nicaragua 1980.

25. Arce, "*La intervención extranjera*" (1980).

26. See Gerardo Sánchez Nateras, "The Sandinista Revolution and the Limits of the Cold War in Latin America: The Dilemma of Non-Intervention during the Nicaraguan Crisis, 1977–78," *Cold War History* 18:2 (2018),:111–129; and Eline van Ommen, "Isolating Nicaragua's Somoza: Sandinista Diplomacy in Western Europe, 1977–1979," in *Latin America and the Global Cold War*; Thomas C. Field, Stella Krepp, and Vanni Pettinà eds. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

Similarly, the new government was not dominated by ex-guerrillas. The FSLN appointed several popular religious figures to the revolutionary cabinet, such as foreign minister Miguel d'Escoto—who Raúl Castro described as one of the few “red priests” in Latin America—and minister of culture Ernesto Cardenal, a liberation theologian. Moreover, on the advice of Fidel Castro, the FSLN appointed Bernardino Larios Montiel, a former officer in Somoza's National Guard, as the country's new defense minister.<sup>27</sup>

Despite appearances and claims to the contrary, however, power in Nicaragua lay with the Sandinista movement and, more specifically, with the nine comandantes of the FSLN's Dirección Nacional (National Directorate).<sup>28</sup> As Raúl Castro explained to the Soviet ambassador in Cuba, Vitaly Vorotnikov, on September 1, 1979, Montiel's role as Nicaragua's defense minister was “mostly for show” since “all real power in this area” belonged to Sandinista comandante Humberto Ortega; he also revealed that the new Ejército Popular Sandinista (Sandinista People's Army, EPS) was “being built without [Montiel's] knowledge.”<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, in addition to Daniel Ortega, Ramírez and Hassan were also Sandinista militants, which meant that three of the five junta members voted in favor of FSLN proposals. Ramírez's membership was previously kept “secret” because his role “as the head of the Group of Twelve demanded an illusion of independence.”<sup>30</sup> Nicaragua's foreign policy was also determined by a small committee of Sandinistas, which consisted of three FSLN comandantes, namely, Arce, who supervised the FSLN's Departamento de Relaciones Internacionales (Department of International Relations, DRI), Daniel Ortega, and when necessary his brother Humberto Ortega, who presided over the EPS. The other three members were Miguel d'Escoto, MINEX vice minister Victor Hugo Tinoco, and the head of the DRI, a position held by ex-guerrilla Doris Tijerino until Julio López Campos replaced her in September 1980.<sup>31</sup>

In Western Europe, Nicaraguan diplomats used the pluralistic composition of the junta to the revolution's advantage. As they spoke with curious officials, representatives praised the moderate nature of the RPS while at the same time making clear that the country's future trajectory and nonaligned position in the Cold War depended on the arrival of sufficient economic aid from the capitalist

27. Soviet Ambassador to Cuba Vorotnikov, memorandum of conversation with Raúl Castro, September 1, 1979, Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111249>, accessed September 20, 2020.

28. For more on the consolidation of Sandinista power, see María Dolores Ferrero Blanco, “El diseño de las instituciones en el Estado Sandinista,” *Revista de Indias* 75:265 (2015): 805–850; and Dirk Kruijt, “Revolución y contrarrevolución: el gobierno sandinista y la guerra de la Contra en Nicaragua, 1980–1990,” *Desafíos* 23:2 (2011): 53–81.

29. Vorotnikov, memorandum of conversation with Raúl Castro, September 1, 1979.

30. Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos* (2012), 73.

31. Author's interview with Victor Hugo Tinoco, Managua, Nicaragua, August 17, 2016.

world. The unique ideology of *sandinismo*, Miguel d'Escoto told Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the foreign minister of the Federal Republic of Germany, on August 28, 1980, was not for sale on “the international market of ideologies.”<sup>32</sup> Eduardo Kühl, too, during his European tour in 1979, explained several times that “all political orientations were represented in the junta.”<sup>33</sup>

Sandinistas also smartly played into Western European concerns about Nicaragua's position in the Cold War. During a visit to Paris in July 1982, Daniel Ortega argued that “true non-alignment depended on the aid and support nonaligned countries could get from the West.”<sup>34</sup> And on May 13, 1982, labor minister Virgilio Godoy Reyes told Genscher that Western Europe could “drive Nicaragua into the arms of communism” if it did not provide the Nicaraguan government with sufficient financial support. When Chancellor Helmut Schmidt was unable to meet with Sergio Ramírez in April 1982, Godoy warned, it “immediately rained invitations from the East.”<sup>35</sup> This was an important point to drive home in Western Europe, where many politicians believed that Cuba's alignment with the Soviet bloc could have been avoided if the West had been more forthcoming with financial aid and political assistance in the early 1960s.

Since European officials did not understand the inner workings of the Nicaraguan state, this was a successful strategy. British diplomat Stephen Wall, for example, convinced Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher—a staunch anticommunist—that the junta was “a generally moderate, broad-based team with, so far, only one Sandinista member.”<sup>36</sup> The argument that Western European aid could keep revolutionary Nicaragua nonaligned in the Cold War, in particular, struck a chord. The primary reason for EC foreign ministers to send aid to revolutionary Nicaragua government was to “foster a political development as pluralist as possible and, in particular, less closely linked to Cuba and the Soviet Union.”<sup>37</sup> On July 25, 1979, therefore, Wilhelm Haferkamp, vice president of the European Commission, told Kühl that the EC supported “the economic and democratic reconstruction” of Nicaragua and informed him of the commission's decision to grant Nicaragua emergency aid of \$270,000.<sup>38</sup>

32. Besuch des AM von Nicaragua Miguel d'Escoto, August 28, 1980, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin, Germany [hereafter AA], Zwischenarchiv 127450.

33. Dublin to Foreign and Commonwealth Office Records [hereafter FCO], July 25, 1979, National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom [hereafter UKNA], FCO99/350.

34. Duncan to FCO, July 21, 1982, UKNA, FCO 99/1267.

35. Gespräch des Bundesministers Genscher mit dem nicaraguanische Arbeitsminister Godoy, May 13, 1982, Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland [hereafter AAPD], Document 140, 1982.

36. J. Stephen. Wall to Bryan G. Cartledge, July 26, 1979, UKNA, FCO 99/351.

37. Dublin to FCO, July 25, 1979, UKNA, FCO 99/350.

38. Bulletin of the European Communities: Commission 7/8 (1979); *The Courier: Africa-Caribbean-Pacific-European Community* 57 (1979).

This was only the first of many Western European donations to the revolutionaries, as the commission transferred around \$9 million in reconstruction aid to Nicaragua in 1979—almost half of its total budget for Latin America.<sup>39</sup> West Germany was the biggest European donor, providing the junta with around \$17 million in economic aid.<sup>40</sup> The Netherlands and Sweden, too, made significant contributions, donating respectively \$6.4 and \$8.1 million. Thus, for the year 1979, as British diplomat Alan Payne proudly concluded on February 7, 1980, the aid of “Western donors [to Nicaragua was] greater than that provided by the Eastern bloc.”<sup>41</sup>

In sum, the Sandinistas' revolutionary diplomacy mixed optimism about a new global order with a pragmatic assessment of the international system as they found it. As the FSLN comandantes held out hopes for more Third World revolutions, Western Europe was not yet as central to Nicaragua's international strategy as it would become in later years. True, it was important for the Sandinistas to maintain good relationships with EC leaders, as this strengthened their argument that Nicaragua—unlike Castro's Cuba—was not hostile to the West and wanted to remain nonaligned. Moreover, to follow through with ambitious plans for social transformation, Sandinistas were in need of money, which Western European countries were willing to provide because they believed that doing so could prevent Nicaragua from turning to the Eastern bloc. Despite the drastic increase in EC aid to Nicaragua following Somoza's fall, however, financial assistance from Latin American donors was greater than Western Europe's contribution.<sup>42</sup> The region was not yet at the heart of the revolutionaries' diplomatic campaign. This would change, as the next section demonstrates, when developments in the international environment convinced the FSLN that Western European involvement was crucial to ensure the revolution's survival.

## WESTERN EUROPE AND THE THREAT OF MILITARY INTERVENTION

In the early 1980s, Sandinistas grew concerned about the future. In the Americas, Reagan's rise to power emboldened Latin America's anticommunist regimes and weakened the position of revolutionary movements in Central America, most

39. Hazel Smith, *European Union Foreign Policy and Central America* (London: Palgrave, 1995), 60–61.

40. Europe and Central America, April 1979, Office of European Analysis, Directorate of Intelligence, CIA Records Search Tool [hereafter CREST].

41. Alan J. Payne to FCO, February 7, 1980, UKNA, FCO 99/558.

42. According to CIA data, Latin American countries provided Nicaragua with \$150 million in aid in 1980. In 1981, aid levels rose to \$300 million.

notably the FMLN.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, when the Mexican government defaulted on its external debt obligations, Latin America descended into a decade-long financial crisis. The “present political conjuncture” was “unfavorable,” Nicaraguan diplomats concluded in November 1980.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, the situation on the ground deteriorated. In 1981, conflict erupted between the FSLN and a number of indigenous communities living on the Atlantic Coast who rejected government programs that threatened indigenous land claims and languages, such as the literacy campaign mentioned above, which initially focused only on Spanish.<sup>45</sup> And with the backing of Argentina, Honduras, and the United States, Nicaraguan exiles based in Honduras and Miami launched another armed campaign against the FSLN. In the spring of 1982, these *contra* insurgents launched their first major attack on Nicaraguan soil, blowing up bridges near the Honduran border.<sup>46</sup>

In this context, the Nicaraguan government grew concerned about the possibility of a US intervention. Reagan’s anti-Sandinista rhetoric and support for the counterinsurgents, FSLN officials believed, were part of a larger imperialist plan to create the necessary conditions and “prepare” domestic and international audiences for an upcoming “military intervention.” Specifically, MINEX officials calculated, Reagan was waiting for a border incident between the Sandinista People’s Army and the Honduran army, as this would provide the administration with a powerful justification for an intervention.<sup>47</sup> The impending invasion, Julio López predicted to a group of Dutch activists on July 19, 1983, would almost certainly be launched from Honduras, where more than 14,000 Latin American “mercenaries” and former members of Somoza’s national guard were stationed.<sup>48</sup> Nicaraguan fears rose to unprecedented heights after the US invaded Grenada on October 25, 1983. The overthrow of Maurice Bishop’s left-wing government in Grenada, the editors of the Nicaraguan journal *Revista Envío* warned, created a “precedent and may also have created political momentum inside the White House for another invasion.”<sup>49</sup>

43. For the response of Chile and Argentina to the Nicaraguan Revolution, see Molly Avery’s contribution to this special issue.

44. Casimiro Sotelo, Saúl Arana, and Ramón Meneses to Miguel d’Escoto, Leonte Herdocia, Luis Vanegas, November 27, 1980, Alejandro Bendaña Private Archive, Managua, Nicaragua [hereafter ABPA].

45. Mateo Cayetano Jarquín, “Red Christmases: The Sandinistas, Indigenous Rebellion, and the Origins of the Nicaraguan Civil War, 1981–1982,” *Cold War History* 18:1 (2018): 94–95.

46. See Ariel Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997).

47. Consenso general sobre la coyuntura actual, MINEX, ABPA. The exact date of this file is unknown but based on the content, the document was written between May and September 1983.

48. Hans Langenberg to Western European solidarity committees, August 1983, Informationsbüro Nicaragua Wuppertal [hereafter INW; not catalogued], International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, The Netherlands [hereafter IISG].

49. “Nicaragua: a las puertas de la invasión,” *Revista Envío* 29 (1983).

Concerns about a US intervention, combined with an unfriendly international environment and escalating civil war, propelled the FSLN to adopt a more defensive foreign policy than it had envisaged when it came to power. Realizing that Nicaragua could not win a major military conflict with the United States, the Sandinistas implemented a range of measures to deter Reagan from launching such an attack, targeting both state and non-state actors. Crucially, as recent scholarship on the RPS demonstrates, the FSLN successfully coordinated a transnational network of solidarity activists in Europe and the Americas, mobilizing public opinion—and in the United States, Congressional opinion—against Reagan's foreign policy objectives in Central America.<sup>50</sup> The FSLN's outreach was highly successful in Europe during the first half of the 1980s.<sup>51</sup> "Every time Mr. Reagan went to Western Europe," Bendaña recalled, "someone reminded him of Nicaragua. And if it wasn't in the streets with FSLN flags, it was in government offices."<sup>52</sup> Reagan was frustrated. European journalists were not giving "fair coverage" to "our true goals" in Central America, the president lamented to Thatcher, who agreed he was "losing the propaganda battle in Europe."<sup>53</sup>

Yet, Sandinistas realized, popular support alone was not enough to weaken Reagan's resolve. To prevent a military escalation, it was also necessary to obtain the support of European governments or, at the very least, to prevent EC member states from taking the Reagan administration's side in the Central American conflicts. Therefore, Nicaraguan diplomats actively encouraged EC governments to pursue a foreign policy toward Central America that neutralized Reagan's anticommunist offensive. Western Europe, as Ramírez remembers, represented "a crucial counterweight to Reagan's politics during the war of aggression that spanned the decade of the eighties, even in the case of governments that were far from the Left, such as those of Giulio Andreotti in Italy or Wilfried Martens in Belgium."<sup>54</sup>

50. See Kim Christiaens, "Between Diplomacy and Solidarity: Western European Support Networks for Sandinista Nicaragua," *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 21:4 (2014): 617–634; Eline van Ommen, "The Sandinista Revolution in the Netherlands: The Dutch Solidarity Committees and Nicaragua (1977–1990)," *Naveg@américa: Revista electrónica editada por la Asociación Española de Americanistas* 17 (2016); and Christian Helm, *Botschafter der Revolution Das transnationale Kommunikationsnetzwerk zwischen der Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional und der bundesdeutschen Nicaragua-Solidarität 1977–1990* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018).

51. For a full discussion of why this outreach was successful, the foundations it built on, and how it evolved, see Eline van Ommen, "Sandinistas Go Global: Nicaragua and Western Europe, 1977–1990" (PhD diss.: London School of Economics, 2019).

52. "David resistió a Goliat."

53. Record of meeting by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, September 29, 1983, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA [hereafter Reagan Library], memorandums of conversations – President Reagan, Box 51, NSC: Subject Files, Executive Secretariat.

54. Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos* (2012), 95.

To encourage Europeans to play a more active role in Central American affairs, Nicaraguan officials used the argument that Europe, as a result of its “considerable influence” on the Reagan administration, could prevent the region from being swept up into Cold War dynamics.<sup>55</sup> In particular, they pushed the EC member states to back the efforts of the four Contadora countries (Mexico, Panama, Venezuela, and Colombia) to facilitate a regional dialogue between the Central American governments of Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras. Officially launched after a summit on the Panamanian island of Contadora on January 9, 1983, the purpose of this Contadora initiative was to find “Latin American solutions to Latin American problems.”<sup>56</sup> Contadora thus presented an “obstruction” to the US administration’s militaristic approach to Central American affairs, prompting the Sandinistas to use it as an “instrument” to prevent an armed intervention.<sup>57</sup>

At a time when Western European governments were already frustrated with Reagan’s tendency to understand international affairs solely through a Cold War lens, the FSLN’s efforts to grow an opposition fell on fertile ground.<sup>58</sup> The EC member states shared the Sandinistas’ concern about the possibility of further escalation in Central America and supported the Contadora initiative, hoping this would bring about a settlement in the region. Furthermore, the Sandinistas were not alone in pushing Europeans to become more actively involved in Central American affairs. Latin American leaders, concerned about the possibility of a regional war, called on European states to throw their political weight behind a diplomatic solution.<sup>59</sup> On September 29, 1983, Mexican foreign minister Bernardo Sepúlveda Amor told his Greek, French, and German colleagues that the EC member states should use their “political influence” to convince “all the parties . . . of the inadvisability of military solutions and to press them to seek a political settlement through diplomatic processes.”<sup>60</sup> Costa Rican president Luis Alberto Monge, too, despite his antipathy toward the Sandinista government, encouraged the EC countries to be more present “on the troubled Central American scene.”<sup>61</sup> Monge, who visited several European countries to encourage EC involvement in the region, told West German chancellor Helmut Kohl on June 4, 1984, that to “prevent a

55. Phone call from Francisco d’Escoto to Derek Day, January 13, 1982, UKNA, FCO 99/1269.

56. Bruce Michael Bagley, “Contadora: The Failure of Diplomacy,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 28:3 (1986): 1–32.

57. Obstáculos que la administración tiene para implementar una intervención directa contra Nicaragua, date unknown, MINEX, ABPA.

58. For more on the transatlantic relationship, see Kiran Klaus Patel and Kenneth Weisbrode, eds., *European Integration and the Atlantic Community in the 1980s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

59. For more on the Latin American peace effort, see Mateo Cayetano Jarquín’s contribution to this special issue.

60. Athens Coreu to Bonn, October 1, 1983, AA, Zwischenarchiv 136684.

61. Record of talks between the [US] Secretary of State and the President of Costa Rica, June 27, 1984, UKNA, FCO 98/1811.

war with international consequences, . . . Germany must play its role in Central America.”<sup>62</sup>

Encouraged by the Latin Americans, an intra-European consensus on a regional foreign policy emerged. In May 1984, Genscher successfully proposed a regional cooperation agreement between the EC and the Central American countries, which was designed to give new momentum to Contadora, as well as provide Central American states with increased (but still rather limited) financial aid and a forum to discuss their grievances.<sup>63</sup> Genscher's proposal, which was coordinated with Monge, culminated in a summit between Latin American officials (including Nicaraguan foreign minister Miguel d'Escoto) and their Western European counterparts, which took place in the Costa Rican capital of San José on September 28 and 29, 1984.<sup>64</sup> The historic and political significance of the summit was clear to all involved: this was the first time that EC foreign ministers had come together in an official capacity outside of Western Europe, and they had chosen to do so in Central America, a region traditionally seen as part of the United States' informal empire.<sup>65</sup> The fact that European leaders found it necessary to become collectively involved in Central American affairs at all—despite the absence of traditional ties and without the lubricant of extensive trade links—highlights the remarkable importance of Central America in the international system in the mid 1980s.

The San José summit—and particularly the fact that US Secretary of State George Shultz was not allowed to participate—offered Sandinistas an excellent opportunity to strengthen Nicaragua's position, while at the same time making clear that Reagan stood alone. In declarations and private meetings, Sandinista officials contrasted Nicaragua's commitment to “dialogue and reason” with the aggressive attitude of Reagan and his anticommunist friends.<sup>66</sup> By gathering in the traditional “backyard” of the United States, the editors of *Revista Envío* concluded, Europe “challenged the Monroe Doctrine” that was at the heart of Reagan's approach to Central American affairs. Triumphant, the authors cited French foreign minister Claude Cheysson, who responded to a question about US efforts to influence the proceedings by asking rhetorically: “What does Reagan have to do with this? As far as I understand, he is not part of the EC, the Contadora group, or the Central American group.”<sup>67</sup>

62. Gespräch des Bundeskanzlers Kohl mit Präsident Monge, June 4, 1984, AAPD, Document 159, 1984.

63. Bonn to Coreu, May 4, 1984, Archief Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, The Hague, The Netherlands [hereafter BZ], Inventarisnummer 25292.

64. Jürgen Ruhfus to AA, April 17, 1984, AAPD, Document 110, 1984.

65. The summit marked the beginning of the San José dialogue, which took the form of yearly meetings between Western European and Central American ministers.

66. Ayuda Memoria, May 24, 1984, ABPA.

67. “Brillante ofensiva diplomática, constante defensa militar,” *Revista Envío* 40 (1984).

On September 21, 1984, the Sandinista government capitalized on the upcoming conference in San José by announcing that Nicaragua was willing to sign the revised Contadora Act. In agreeing to sign the act, the FSLN made several concessions, such as limiting the number of Eastern bloc advisors in Nicaragua, reducing the size of its army, committing to a democratic process, and ending Nicaragua's support for the FMLN. In return, Nicaragua demanded that the United States sign an "additional protocol" to the revised act, promising to "cease immediately all the acts of aggression against Nicaragua."<sup>68</sup>

The Sandinistas' decision, made public just one week before the San José conference, was a cleverly timed move, challenging a key argument of the US administration. In the weeks leading up to the summit, the US had accused Nicaragua of obstructing Contadora. On September 7, 1984, Shultz sent a letter to the EC foreign ministers, demanding that the summit "not lead to increased economic aid or any political assistance to the Sandinistas." While the United States, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Guatemala considered the revised act an "important step forward," Shultz told his European colleagues, the FSLN leadership had "rejected key elements of the draft", including a reduction "in arms and troop levels."<sup>69</sup> By suddenly agreeing to cooperate, then, the Sandinistas turned the tables on Reagan at a time when Central America stood in the international spotlight. Indeed, as American journalist Stephen Kinzer wrote in the *New York Times* on September 30, 1984, the Sandinistas' offer was "a propaganda victory for Nicaragua and it caught the United States by surprise."<sup>70</sup>

Despite the victory, Nicaragua's willingness to sign the revised act did not push the US administration toward a less militaristic foreign policy, nor did it end the contra war. US diplomats immediately contacted their colleagues in Europe and Central America to argue that the FSLN was trying to use the peace process to its own advantage by pushing through an agreement that was unacceptable to the United States and its regional allies, as it lacked adequate control and verification mechanisms. Salvadoran president José Napoleón Duarte, too, urged EC foreign ministers to refrain from supporting the revised act at the summit, warning that the Sandinistas would not keep their promises.<sup>71</sup>

Less than a month after the Nicaraguan declaration, it was clear that the offensive against Contadora had succeeded. "Following intensive US consultations with El

68. Permanent Representatives of Nicaragua to the United Nations to President of the UN Security Council, September 21, 1984, United Nations Digital Library <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/69318>, accessed September 22, 2020.

69. Dublin Coreu to All Coreu, September 7, 1984, UKNA, FCO 99/1774.

70. Stephen Kinzer, "Managua Takes a Trick with the Contadora Card," *New York Times*, September 30, 1984.

71. San Salvador to Bonn, September 27, 1984, AA, Zwischenarchiv 17889.

Salvador, Honduras, and Costa Rica,” US Central Intelligence Agency officers concluded on October 30, 1984, “we have effectively blocked Contadora Group effort to impose the second draft of a Revised Contadora Act.”<sup>72</sup> As a result, EC leaders, unwilling to favor Nicaragua over the other Central American countries, refrained from publicly backing the act in San José, deciding to declare support for the Contadora *process* instead.

In addition to participating in Contadora, the FSLN took another crucial step to appease its critics: it made a commitment to organize elections, which took place on November 4, 1984. The FSLN, with Daniel Ortega and Sergio Ramírez on the ballot, won the elections with a landslide. Yet, a crucial part of the electoral campaign was fought out internationally. The elections, Ramírez writes in his memoirs, were “part of the war strategy.”<sup>73</sup> By holding an election, FSLN officials speculated, Nicaragua would demonstrate that it was not a “totalitarian state,” which would lead to less support for Reagan’s “policy of aggression.”<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the elections would “boost and deepen the economic cooperation between Western Europe and Nicaragua,” as well as lead to a renewed influx of expressions of solidarity from European politicians. The Sandinistas particularly hoped to repair their relationship with the Socialist International, which had pressured the FSLN about democracy, political pluralism, and elections for years. While the aspiration of the SI to “put its own stamp on the Sandinista People’s Revolution” irritated Sandinista officials, they recognized it was crucial for the RPS to maintain the support of social democrats.<sup>75</sup>

To be sure, the FSLN had a very different understanding of democracy than did most European politicians. The purpose of the electoral process in Nicaragua, according to Sandinista officials, was the international legitimization of a revolutionary process that benefited the Nicaraguan people as a whole. This process was under threat from forces outside of the country, most notably the “imperialism” of the US administration.<sup>76</sup> Democratic elections in capitalist countries were different, Sandinistas argued, because capitalist elections exist to “strengthen the interests of one particular group, while the Nicaraguan electoral process aims to improve the society as a whole.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, Nicaragua’s electoral process was up against foreign opposition, while democracy in the West was designed to neutralize domestic opposition.

72. Background paper for National Security Council meeting, October 30, 1984, CREST.

73. Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos* (2012), 101.

74. Evaluación, Perspectivas y Planes – 1984, date unknown, ABPA.

75. Nicaraguan assessment of international situation, February 14, 1984, ABPA.

76. Evaluación, Perspectivas y Planes – 1984, ABPA.

77. Nicaraguan assessment of international situation, February 14, 1984, ABPA.

With international legitimacy as the ultimate prize, public opinion once again became a powerful weapon. Before and after the elections, Sandinistas aimed to convince Europeans that the elections were a democratic success.<sup>78</sup> Solidarity committees in Europe embarked on a campaign to publicize the positive aspects of Nicaragua's transition toward democracy.<sup>79</sup> Recognizing that statements from social democrats would carry a lot of weight in the international debate, the FSLN specifically targeted members of the SI, encouraging them to disseminate positive information about the openness of the Nicaraguan electoral process.<sup>80</sup> Meanwhile, the US embassy in Bonn asked the West Germany social democrat Willy Brandt to put out a negative statement about Sandinista harassment against opposition parties, which he refused to do.<sup>81</sup>

Yet, despite the FSLN's victory in the polls, the electoral process failed to achieve its goals. Ramírez acknowledges that the FSLN only "partially" gained the legitimacy it sought by organizing elections.<sup>82</sup> Bendaña, too, notes that the 1984 elections "were called Soviet sham elections, even though by historical standards, or Central American standards, they weren't that bad."<sup>83</sup> Not all reports were negative, but an international consensus about the nature of the elections was not reached. The Netherlands, the only EC country to send an official observer team to the Nicaraguan elections, produced a generally positive report about the elections, which concluded that there were no irregularities during them and conceded that the FSLN had won the elections with a clear majority. Dutch foreign minister Hans van den Broek, however, explained at a European Political Cooperation meeting that this did not mean the Sandinista government was "representative" of the Nicaraguan people.<sup>84</sup> The British government, too, dismissed positive reports about the elections. On November 9, 1984, Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe declared that there had been "no possibility of a genuinely free and fair contest" in Sandinista Nicaragua.<sup>85</sup>

How then, from the Sandinistas' perspective, can we assess the heightened levels of European involvement in Central America in the mid 1980s? On the positive

78. Remarks by Ronald Reagan at the welcoming ceremony for President Jaime Lusinchi of Venezuela, December 4, 1984, Reagan Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/120484a>, accessed September 20, 2020.

79. Nicaragua Komitee Nederland to Paul Bremer, February 21, 1984, IISG, Box 14, Archief Nicaragua Komitee Nederland [hereafter NKN].

80. Nicaraguan assessment of international situation, February 14, 1984, ABPA.

81. US Information Agency, Public Diplomacy Activities on Central America, November 2, 1984, CREST.

82. Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos* (2012), 102.

83. Interview with Alejandro Bendaña by James S. Sutterlin, Managua, Nicaragua July 29, 1997, <http://dag.un.org/bitstream/handle/11176/89708/Benda%c3%b1a29Jul97TRANS.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>, accessed August, 24, 2021.

84. UK Representative Brussels to Immediate FCO, November 13, 1984, UKNA, FCO 99/1759.

85. House of Commons Debate on Foreign Affairs and Overseas Development, November 9, 1984, Hansard.

side, the support of European governments for the Contadora process and Nicaragua's participation in the San José summit functioned as a crucial deterrent to a US intervention. After all, by aligning themselves with Contadora, the EC countries made clear that Reagan's approach did not have the backing of his transatlantic allies. Confronted with a multilateral diplomatic initiative in favor of a negotiated solution, Reagan was limited in his ability to pursue a hostile foreign policy. While US support for the contra insurgents continued, an armed invasion or military strike did not occur.

Moreover, the Nicaraguan government benefited from Europe's aid package for Central America. Seeking to back up political declarations that the violence in Central America was the result of social injustice and economic inequalities—rather than Soviet and Cuban interference—the European Commission increased its aid levels to Nicaragua from \$6.9 million in 1983 to \$14.7 million in 1984. At a time when aid from Latin American countries decreased from \$220 million in 1983 to \$120 million in 1984, this economic support was absolutely vital.<sup>86</sup> Naturally, the rising levels of EC aid did not make up for the drastic decrease in Latin American assistance but, considering that the only other possible source of money was the Eastern bloc, the FSLN welcomed—in addition to the financial boost—any opportunity to avoid complete financial dependency on the Soviet Union and demonstrate Nicaragua's continuing nonalignment.

Even so, the growing importance of Western Europe in the struggle for Nicaragua's future also meant that Sandinistas needed to collaborate with governments that were ideologically different from the FSLN, and in some cases highly critical of the RPS. European governments, while supportive of Contadora, were skeptical of the Sandinistas' insistence that all of Nicaragua's troubles were the result of US hostility. They accused the FSLN of censorship, human rights violations, and totalitarian tendencies. Citing these concerns, the conservative governments of Britain and West Germany postponed or reduced the levels of bilateral aid to Nicaragua.<sup>87</sup> So, as regional tensions heightened and the threat of a US intervention loomed large, EC involvement in Central American affairs—like Nicaragua's participation in Contadora negotiations—became a necessary inconvenience for the Sandinista leadership. To survive in an increasingly hostile international environment, the revolutionaries needed to demonstrate that European states and politicians, who were perceived as moderate and relatively neutral parties in the Central American conflict, did not

86. Instituto de Relaciones Europeo-Latinoamericanas, *Centroamérica hoy: un informe de coyuntura* (Madrid: IRELA, 1986).

87. *Nicaragua: Annual Review for 1984*, January 4, 1985, UKNA, FCO 99/2141; *Nicaragua: Annual Review for 1983*, January 2, 1984, UKNA, FCO 99/1906.

share Reagan's preference for a military solution. To do so, the FSLN agreed to concessions it otherwise might not have approved.

## THE REVOLUTION AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR

Even though the Contadora process and EC involvement in Central American affairs challenged the hegemony of the United States, Sandinistas came under increasing pressure in the years following the San José summit. On June 25, 1986, the US Congress approved a \$100 million aid package for the contra forces, and as a result the conflict between the EPS and the counterinsurgents intensified rapidly in 1987. After years of struggle, it was clear that the war could not be brought to an end through military means. As long as the United States provided funding, Central American states allowed counterrevolutionaries to operate from within their territories, and disillusioned Nicaraguans were willing to take up arms against the Sandinista government, the conflict would most likely continue. Aside from having a devastating impact on everyday life in Nicaragua, the civil war used up most of the country's resources. In 1988, according to CIA sources, the Nicaraguan government spent more than 60 percent of its budget on the military.<sup>88</sup>

The deteriorating economic situation in Nicaragua in the late 1980s was thus not unrelated to the US-funded civil war. Changes in the international context, such as the economic embargo imposed by the Reagan administration on May 1, 1985, and the declining levels of Latin American aid, did little to help the situation. Furthermore, from April 1985 onward, Nicaragua's petrol supply was no longer guaranteed, as Mexican president Miguel de la Madrid informed Comandante Henry Ruiz that Nicaragua would no longer be able to import oil "on the favorable terms that had been in place up to now."<sup>89</sup>

In 1985–86, the Nicaraguan revolutionaries could still rely on the Soviet Union for the financial, military, and material support necessary to keep the economy afloat and the army in shape.<sup>90</sup> For example, on April 24, 1985, less than ten days after Ruiz's conversation with Miguel de la Madrid in Mexico City, the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS) announced that newly elected

88. *Nicaragua: Prospects for the Economy*, June 24, 1988, CREST.

89. Gespräch des Erick Honecker mit Henry Ruiz, February 11, 1983, DY30/43863, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR, Berlin, Germany [hereafter SAPMO]; Todor Zhivkov and Daniel Ortega Saavedra on the Situation in Central America and Bulgarian Aid to Nicaragua, May 2, 1985, Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111292>, accessed on August, 24, 2021. I want to thank Vesselin Dimitrov for providing me with a translation of this document.

90. Author's interview with Luis Ángel Caldera Aburto, Managua, Nicaragua, April 16, 2018; Author's interview with Jaime Wheelock Román, Managua, Nicaragua, April 18, 2018.

Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega would travel to the Soviet Union “within a week.”<sup>91</sup> In Moscow, as the Sandinista newspaper *Barricada Internacional* reported, the Soviet leadership told Ortega that they were willing to provide 80 percent of Nicaragua’s petrol needs on “favorable” terms, while the remaining 20 percent would be supplied by Libya, Iran, and Algeria.<sup>92</sup>

Despite efforts to obtain support from outside the Soviet Union, Nicaragua grew increasingly dependent on aid and trade with Cuba and the Eastern bloc. Tellingly, the contribution of the socialist countries to Nicaragua was around \$582 million in 1986, which stood in sharp contrast to the \$45 million offered in 1980. Meanwhile, bilateral aid from Western European countries, who were frustrated with the Sandinistas’ growing ties to the Soviet bloc, continued to decline. Economic assistance from the Netherlands went down from \$24 million in 1983 to \$15 million in 1986, and the West German government, which sent \$17 million in 1983, scaled down to only \$3 million in bilateral assistance in 1986. Financial support from multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, also decreased, from \$121 million in 1981 to \$35 million in 1986.<sup>93</sup>

Yet, as Sergio Ramírez found out during a visit to the Eastern bloc in June 1987, Nicaragua’s reliance on the Soviet Union also could not continue indefinitely. As tensions between the superpowers declined in the late 1980s, the Soviet Union showed itself unwilling to protect the Nicaraguan Revolution at any cost. In the summer of 1987, the socialist leaders agreed to provide Nicaragua with assistance, but they also told Ramírez that the FSLN should work harder to improve its relations with other Central American governments. The new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev wanted to pursue a “policy of détente,” Ramírez reported back to Ortega, and therefore pushed its ideological allies in the Global South to search for “quick negotiated solutions” to costly Cold War conflicts. Moreover, as socialist regimes struggled to raise the “standard of living” in their own countries, they were reluctant to provide the FSLN with further support. It was the wish of the Soviet Union, Ramírez concluded, that Nicaragua seek financial aid and political backing in Western Europe and Latin America, rather than in the East.<sup>94</sup>

Confronted with a deteriorating economy, festering civil war, and limited room for maneuver in the international arena, Sandinistas calculated that further concessions regarding Nicaragua’s internal and external affairs were the only

91. “Ortega to Visit Moscow,” *United Press International*, April 24, 1985.

92. “Gira exitosa del presidente Ortega,” *Barricada Internacional*, May 30, 1985.

93. *Nicaragua: Prospects for Sandinista Consolidation*, August 1987, CREST.

94. Informe del viaje al campo socialista 8.6.1987/22.6.1987, Ramírez to Daniel Ortega, June 25, 1987, ABPA.

way out of the dangerous status quo. Consequently, the government altered its attitude toward peace proposals made by the Costa Rican president Oscar Arias. Initially, the Sandinistas—who had not even been invited to the presidential summit where Arias first presented his peace plan on February 15, 1987—had been critical, calling the proposals “US-inspired” and announcing that it was “totally unacceptable” for other countries to “draw up recipes” for Nicaragua’s domestic affairs.<sup>95</sup> In particular, due to Arias’s claim that “democracy” was a necessary precondition for an end to hostilities, his plan appeared specifically designed to isolate the revolutionaries, reject the FSLN’s claims to democratic rule, and pressure the Sandinistas into implementing reforms.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, on August 7, 1987, the Nicaraguan government signed a historic peace treaty, known as the Esquipulas II Peace Accords. This document included promises to implement amnesty decrees, allow for greater press freedom, embark on processes of national reconciliation, and organize a second democratic election. Crucially, it also called for the termination of any “military, logistical, financial, or propaganda support” to “irregular forces or insurrectionist movements.”<sup>97</sup> By signing the treaty, the Nicaraguan government thus hoped to bring an end to the war.

What is more, the FSLN sought to use involvement in the Esquipulas process to improve its relations with Europe, hoping this would result in heightened levels of economic assistance. Arguably, an increase in financial support was even more important for the revolution’s survival than the termination of the war. The economy was Nicaragua’s “Achilles heel,” Ortega told East German leader Erich Honecker in Moscow, on November 3, 1987, that food shortages, hyperinflation, and growing unemployment had significantly weakened the Sandinistas’ support base. The growing discontent among the population as a result of the economic crisis, Ortega disclosed, was particularly worrying now that he had been forced to open up “political space” at home, which could be used by the opposition to undermine the FSLN. Ortega expressed hope that the Europeans would be more forthcoming with aid now that Nicaragua was implementing the Esquipulas treaty.<sup>98</sup>

Counting on Europe’s support for Esquipulas, FSLN officials linked the promise of peace to the necessity of economic assistance. Ramírez, before travelling to

95. Konferenz des Bundesministers Genscher mit Botschaftern in zentralamerikanischen Staaten in San José, April 9, 1987, AAPD, Document 103, 1987; “Nicaragua’s neighbours set to back US ‘peace’ platform,” *The Guardian*, February 16, 1987.

96. James Dunkerley, *The Pacification of Central America* (London: Verso, 1988), 45–46; Konferenz des Bundesministers, April 9, 1987, AAPD.

97. *Procedure for the Establishment of a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America (Esquipulas II)*, August 7, 1987, <https://peacemaker.un.org/centralamerica-esquipulasII87>, accessed January 22, 2020.

98. Honecker und Ortega, November 3, 1987, SAPMO, DY30/2385.

Europe in August 1987, urged that “a country without relative economic normality cannot fully commit to the peace process.”<sup>99</sup> Solidarity activists and left-wing politicians in Europe, too, felt that Nicaragua should be awarded with increased aid for its contribution to the Esquipulas process. The leader of the West German Social Democratic Party, Hans-Jürgen Wischniewski, to give one example, argued in a parliamentary debate in September 1987 that the FSLN had taken positive steps to implement the Esquipulas II requirements and that, in response, the Federal Republic of Germany's bilateral aid program to Nicaragua should be resumed immediately.<sup>100</sup>

Unfortunately for the Sandinista leadership, however, Western European governments refused to provide the Nicaraguan government with more aid until it had “fulfilled all the requirements” of the Esquipulas treaty. Nicaraguan officials such as vice-minister Pedro Antonio Blandón, who visited the FRG on December 16, 1987, tried to counter these European demands by pointing out that it was unfair to push Nicaragua toward compliance while the other Central American countries and the United States experienced much less pressure, even though they were less forthcoming than Nicaragua with implementing the peace treaty. The government of Honduras, Sandinista officials pointed out, had made no effort to close down the contra bases. And in El Salvador, the government was unable to prevent left-wing activists and politicians from being murdered by extreme right-wing forces.<sup>101</sup> Yet, the EC leaders, no longer concerned that Nicaragua would otherwise become too dependent on the Soviet bloc, did not change their minds. Behind the scenes, British diplomats felt free to admit that “the West” was clearly “demanding of Nicaragua a level of immediate democratization that [it did] not demand simultaneously from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.”<sup>102</sup>

In this context, the FSLN had little alternative other than to implement further domestic reforms. On February 14, 1989, after a Central American presidential summit in El Salvador, Ortega announced that, for the second time since the revolution's triumph, Nicaragua would have a democratic election. By organizing these elections, the FSLN leaders hoped to “secure and strengthen” the legitimacy of the RPS in the face of a hostile international environment.<sup>103</sup> In the run-up to the vote, Ortega guaranteed, there would be freedom of expression, international observers, equal access to state television and radio for

99. Managua to Bonn, August 20, 1987, AA, AV Neues Amt 16.917.

100. Deutsche Bundestag, Sitzung 39, November 12, 1987.

101. Besuch des nic. Vizeministers für auswärtiges Kooperations, Pedro Antonio Blandón, bei Staatsminister Schäfer am 16.12.1987, December 17, 1987, AA, Zwischenarchiv 136369.

102. Background note, Mexico and Central America Department, May 10, 1989, UKNA, FCO 99/2969.

103. Plan de Sandino a Sandino, May 23, 1989, ABPA.

all political parties, and a process of “national reconciliation.” Other Central American leaders made no such pledges, even though they were also required to organize elections in the framework of the Esquipulas process. In exchange for Nicaragua’s concessions, however, they did agree to draw up a “joint plan for the voluntary demobilization, repatriation or relocation . . . of members of the Nicaraguan resistance and their families.” In addition, they called on the international community, and particularly the Western Europeans, to “support the social and economic recovery process of the Central American nations.”<sup>104</sup>

The Sandinista comandantes set out their strategy for the electoral process in a secret document, which they shared with a number of MINEX officials and officials of the FSLN’s Department of International Relations in early 1989.<sup>105</sup> This electoral strategy was developed in collaboration with Cuba and the Soviet Union.<sup>106</sup> At its core, the plan recognized that legitimate elections were the only way to resolve Nicaragua’s conflict with the United States. To neutralize the threat of renewed military escalation and further economic hostility, the National Directorate argued, Nicaragua would have to comply with the concessions and promises made by Ortega in El Salvador. Indeed, if the government adopted a cooperative attitude toward Esquipulas, the newly inaugurated US president George H. W. Bush would no longer be able to “deny the legitimacy” of the RPS. Therefore, they concluded, the electoral process, which would naturally have to result in an “overwhelming” triumph for the FSLN, was the country’s “one single priority.”

The Sandinistas’ plan combined domestic and international components, focusing on the war, the economy, and legitimacy. To ensure victory, the FSLN reasoned, the government needed to “accelerate the defeat” and “demobilization” of the contras, bringing an end to more than a decade of violence and civil war.<sup>107</sup> It also needed to improve the economic situation. Indeed, Henry Ruiz admitted to the East Germans in 1989, the latter was more urgent than ending the war, because the counterinsurgents were on the brink of collapse.<sup>108</sup> To “reactivate” the country’s production process, the FSLN launched a readjustment program, which it combined with lobbying in Western Europe. Meanwhile, the Sandinistas shielded the population as much as possible from “the negative effects” of the austerity and anti-inflationary measures, as further deprivation could alienate voters. Finally, realizing that an

104. The representatives of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua to the United Nations Secretary-General, February 24, 1989, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/58245?ln=en>, accessed January 20, 2020.

105. Josefina Vigil (despacho del Cmdt. Bayardo Arce) to Alejandro Bendaña, August 3, 1989, ABPA.

106. Gespräch Hermann Axen, Egon Krenz und Gerhard Schürer mit Henry Ruiz, April 24, 1989, SAPMO, DY30/44301.

107. Plan de Sandino a Sandino, May 23, 1989, ABPA.

108. Axen, Krenz und Schürer mit Ruiz, April 24, 1989, SAPMO, DY30/44301.

electoral victory would be worthless without the international seal of approval, they launched a campaign to project “the fairness and honesty” of the elections, targeting audiences and governments in “the United States, Western Europe, and the rest of the international community.”<sup>109</sup>

The positions of Western European governments and people thus mattered greatly for the success of the Sandinistas' strategy. By convincing Europeans of the validity of the electoral process, the FSLN calculated, diplomatic pressure on the Bush administration to demobilize the contras would increase. And by demonstrating that Nicaragua was taking meaningful steps toward democratization and economic stabilization, the FSLN hoped to attract much-needed economic aid. Therefore, the FSLN asked activists to spread positive information about the elections and the peace process.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, in April and May 1989, Daniel Ortega, accompanied by Miguel d'Escoto, went on an extensive European tour, meeting with politicians, civil servants, solidarity activists, students, and journalists in France, Belgium, Greece, Italy, West Germany, Spain, Britain, Sweden, Norway, and Ireland.<sup>111</sup> Aside from propagating Nicaragua's democratization process, Ortega's journey was designed to push European governments toward participating in an upcoming donor conference in the Swedish capital of Stockholm, where the Nicaraguan government hoped to raise \$250 million for its economic recovery program.<sup>112</sup>

The results of the Sandinistas' campaign in the run-up to the elections were mixed. On one hand, Ortega received positive press coverage and a warm welcome from his European followers. His lecture in Brussels was attended by hundreds of enthusiastic activists, who praised the revolution's accomplishments and path toward democracy.<sup>113</sup> In Britain, the playwright Harold Pinter threw Ortega a soiree at his London home, which was attended by artists, activists, and intellectuals, among them Graham Greene, Bianca Jagger, Ian McEwan, and Peter Gabriel.<sup>114</sup>

On the other hand, EC governments generally preferred to adopt a wait-and-see attitude before making any commitments regarding long-term financial aid and contra demobilization. After all, with the Soviet Union seeking to pull out of

109. Plan de Sandino a Sandino, May 23, 1989, ABPA.

110. Report of meeting of solidarity activists, date unknown, IISG, NKN, Box 18; Comité Nicaragüense de Amistad, Solidaridad y Paz to Western European solidarity committees, September 26, 1989, IISG, NKN, Box 147.

111. Bonn Coreu to Madrid Coreu, May 12, 1989, BZ, Inventarisnummer 9112; Derek March to Colin Imrie, May 3, 1989, UKNA, FCO 99/3119.

112. Gespräch Axen, Krenz und Schürer mit Ruiz, April 24, 1989, SAPMO, DY30/44301.

113. March to Imrie, April 26, 1989, UKNA, FCO 99/3119.

114. “The evening Graham Greene introduced himself at a star-studded London party,” *The Guardian*, March 12, 2017; Report by Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign, July 1989, IISG, NKN, Box 146.

Central America, the primary reason for EC governments to send aid to Nicaragua (keeping the country out of the Soviet camp) was no longer relevant. West German officials told Ortega that the FRG would increase its bilateral aid only “after demonstrably free and fair elections” had taken place as scheduled in February 1990.<sup>115</sup> Tellingly, at \$50 million, the results of the Stockholm conference were significantly lower than the Nicaraguan government needed for an economic revival.<sup>116</sup> Meanwhile, the Bush administration also prevented the demobilization of the contras, arguing that the Sandinistas “would not go forward at all with democratization” if the army was completely disbanded.<sup>117</sup>

Ultimately, the FSLN’s electoral plan failed. On the morning of February 26, 1990, to the surprise and shock of the Sandinistas and their supporters, the Supreme Electoral Council announced that, with 60 percent of the vote counted, the FSLN had obtained only 41 percent of the vote, while the opposition alliance received 54 percent. After a decade of revolutionary change and hardship, the Sandinistas had lost the support of the Nicaraguan population. Ortega immediately conceded defeat, promising that the FSLN and the Nicaraguan government were going to “respect and obey the popular mandate coming out of the vote in these elections.”<sup>118</sup>

Two months after the FSLN’s loss, on April 25, 1990, Violeta Chamorro was inaugurated as Nicaragua’s president. In power, Chamorro received support from the US administration, which lifted the embargo, offered a \$300 million aid package, and assisted with the demobilization of the contras. The EC countries, like the IMF and the World Bank, also lifted their restrictions on financial aid to Nicaragua. To be sure, it took several years before some form of peace would return to the impoverished and war-torn country. Nevertheless, a new period in the country’s history and relations with the outside world had begun.

## CONCLUSION

The domestic trajectory of the Nicaraguan Revolution cannot be understood outside of an international framework that takes account of the Sandinistas’ view of the world, the evolving international context they faced, and their

115. Michael Brown to Richard Webb, August 25, 1989, UKNA, FCO 99/3116.

116. Shona Falconer to British embassy in San Jose, May 15, 1989, UKNA, FCO 99/3119.

117. George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, Telcon, Oscar Arias, July 27, 1989, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/>, accessed January 19, 2020.

118. “Turnover in Nicaragua,” *New York Times*, February 27, 1990.

efforts to challenge US power in the isthmus by encouraging Western European involvement in the Central American conflicts. As we have seen, the struggle for Nicaragua's ideological future was more than a military conflict between counterinsurgents and Sandinista soldiers. To a crucial extent, it was shaped by public perceptions of legitimacy, multilateral diplomacy, and state-sponsored propaganda networks. The "real battle" for Nicaragua, Alejandro Bendaña reflected in an interview in 1997, took place "in public opinion and in Congress, and with the Europeans."<sup>119</sup> Whether it was to tip the inter-American balance in favor of the Sandinistas, challenge US influence in Central America, or as an alternative to financial dependency on the Soviet Union, the survival of the Nicaraguan Revolution seemed increasingly to hinge on Western Europe as the 1980s progressed.

Encouraged by their own triumph in 1979, the Sandinistas set out to transform the international system through an ambitious revolutionary foreign policy, hoping to create a world in which the Sandinista People's Revolution could flourish and thrive. From the early 1980s onward, changes in the global environment, which had direct consequences for the Sandinistas' ability to usher forth revolutionary change, prompted the FSLN to adjust its strategy, agreeing to implement domestic reforms to appease international critics. To strengthen the RPS in the face of a hostile US administration and transnational anticommunist offensive, the FSLN created and seized opportunities that presented themselves in the form of Latin American peace processes and Western European ambitions to prevent the Nicaraguan Revolution from being swept up in Cold War dynamics. Ultimately, the Sandinistas were no longer able to balance their foreign and domestic policies. Their plan to stay in power through an electoral process with international backing failed because the Nicaraguan population no longer trusted the FSLN leadership to bring an end to violence and economic hardship.

Through the prism of Nicaraguan and Western European relations, this article explored how the Sandinistas were able to use the Cold War to the advantage of the Nicaraguan Revolution. In particular, by strategically playing into the ambitions of Western European and Latin American actors in an effort to transcend the binary logic of the Cold War, the FSLN contributed to the transformation of the inter-American system in the 1980s, challenging the regional power of the US administration and delegitimizing Reagan's anticommunist offensive. Given that Reagan's destructive foreign policy was determined by Cold War thinking, it is ironic that the decline of superpower tensions in the late 1980s limited the Sandinistas' room for maneuver in the

119. Sutterlin with Bendaña, July 29, 1997.

international arena, resulting in further concessions to the demands of the Western world. Crucially, as the Soviet Union retreated from Cold War conflicts in the Global South, the Sandinistas could no longer convincingly argue that financial aid and political involvement from EC member states would keep Nicaragua from aligning itself with the Eastern bloc, leaving the FSLN leadership in a more vulnerable position than in the early 1980s.

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