

Nicaragua: the somozas and the sandinistas



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The Somoza family exerted tremendous political influence and control over Nicaragua for 43 years (Country Studies, 2008). Anastasio Somoza Garcia (1896-1956) established the political dynasty by taking over the Nicaraguan presidency in 1937 (MSN Encarta, 2007). His sons, Luis Somoza Debayle (1922-1967) and Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1925-1980), assumed the position as well (MSN Encarta, 2007). Strong support from the United States and puppet presidents enabled the Somozas to remain in power despite plundering Nicaragua and using violence to silence their opponents (Country Studies, 2008).

Massive public unrest over the Somozas' despotism led to the rise of the leftist rebel group Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in the 1960s (MSN Encarta, 2007). The Sandinistas deposed the Somozas in 1979 and governed Nicaragua until its first democratic and multiparty elections in 1990 (MSN Encarta, 2007). The Somozas' Rise to Power Nicaragua briefly became a part of the Mexican Empire of Agustin de Iturbide after the former declared its independence from Spain in 1821 (MSN Encarta, 2007). After De Iturbide was dethroned in 1823, Nicaragua affiliated itself with four other states and established a federation called the United Provinces of Central America (MSN Encarta, 2007).

A Violent Transition to Independence However, the survival of the said coalition was threatened by conflicts and rivalries both among the member states and between the Conservatives and the Liberals (MSN Encarta, 2007). The Liberals " promoted free-market capitalism, a strong central government and limited power for the Catholic clergy" (MSN Encarta, 2007). On the other hand, the Conservatives " favored the traditional economic and social

structure, (which was) dominated by large landowners and the church” (MSN Encarta, 2007). The union collapsed in 1838 as a result, with Nicaragua and the other member-states becoming autonomous republics (MSN Encarta, 2007). The hostilities between the Conservatives and the Liberals in Nicaragua escalated into a full-blown civil war (MSN Encarta, 2007). Although it was the Conservatives who emerged victorious, Liberal general Jose Santos Zelaya managed to seize power in 1893 (MSN Encarta, 2007).

During his presidency, Zelaya crushed several Conservative revolts and assisted in the revolts of other Central American countries (MSN Encarta, 2007). He also sought to boost the country’s public administration system and economy (MSN Encarta, 2007). Banana exports were encouraged, railroads and ports were overhauled, the number of schools were increased and the military was reorganized (MSN Encarta, 2007). But a dispute with the US regarding Nicaragua as the venue for the construction of a Central American canal spelled the end of the Zelaya presidency (MSN Encarta, 2007).

The US had long believed that a canal will increase trade in Central America by linking its east and west coasts (MSN Encarta, 2007). Although the US already had plans of building one in the Nicaragua, the government of President Theodore Roosevelt chose a route through Panama instead (MSN Encarta, 2007). The incident strained relations between the US and Nicaragua to the point that the former started to consider Zelaya as “ an unstable element in the region who should be replaced” (MSN Encarta, 2007). US Intervention Zelaya was finally ousted through a US-backed revolt in 1909 (MSN Encarta, 2007). After Zelaya’s resignation, the US went on to <https://assignbuster.com/nicaragua-the-somozas-and-the-sandinistas/>

pressure his successor into handing power over to a coalition government (MSN Encarta, 2007). The coalition turned out to be ineffective, forcing the US Marines to arrive in Nicaragua in 1912 to impose order throughout the country (MSN Encarta, 2007).

By the time they left Nicaragua in 1925, they succeeded in defeating a Liberal force and ensuring the presidency of Conservative Adolfo Diaz (the US Marines would later return in 1926 and 1927 to support the Conservative government) (MSN Encarta, 2007). Even if the Conservatives were only a minority party, the meddling of the US Marines in Nicaragua allowed them to rig elections with impunity (MSN Encarta, 2007). As a result, Liberal general Augusto Cesar Sandino (1893-1934) formed a rebel army that waged a guerilla offensive against US intervention in Nicaragua until 1933 (MSN Encarta, 2007). This turned him into a symbol of Nicaraguan nationalism and opposition to US imperialism (MSN Encarta, 2007).

The US-supervised Nicaraguan presidential elections of 1932 ushered Liberal leader Juan Bautista Sacasa into power (MSN Encarta, 2007). The US Marines withdrew from Nicaragua shortly after Sacasa's victory, turning over the leadership of the National Guard (the country's US-sponsored police and military force) to Liberal politician Anastasio Somoza Garcia (husband of Sacasa's niece) (MSN Encarta, 2007). Sandino immediately attempted to arrange a ceasefire with the Sacasa government, but increasing antagonism between him and the National Guard led to his assassination by the latter's officials in 1934 (MSN Encarta, 2007). The Somozas in Power Sandino's demise became an opportunity for Somoza Garcia to put himself into power (MSN Encarta, 2007). He forced Sacasa to resign from the presidency in

1936 and installed several lapdog administrations before becoming president himself from 1937 to 1947 (he later severed another term from 1950 to 1956) (Country Studies, 2008).

Somoza Garcia's first presidential tenure marked the beginning of the Somoza's corrupt and brutal 43-year rule over Nicaragua (Country Studies, 2008). Anastasio Somoza Garcia (1937-1947, 1950-1956) The following passage from the article The Somoza Era, 1936-74 (2008) summarized how Somoza Garcia governed Nicaragua: A cynical and opportunistic individual, Somoza Garcia ruled Nicaragua with a strong arm, deriving his power from three main sources: the ownership or control of large portions of the Nicaraguan economy, the military support of the National Guard, and his acceptance and support from the United States. His excellent command of the English language and understanding of United States culture, combined with a charming personality and considerable political talent and resourcefulness, helped Somoza Garcia win many powerful allies in the United States. Through large investments in land, manufacturing, transport, and real estate, he enriched himself and his close friends" (Country Studies, 2008). Somoza Garcia's regime was also characterized with nepotism (Country Studies, 2008). He distributed important military and government positions among his family and close associates (Country Studies, 2008).

Somoza Garcia also managed to wield extreme clout over every aspect of Nicaraguan politics due to his family's control of the Partido Nacionalista de Nicaragua (PLN), which, in turn, dominated the country's lawmaking and judicial bodies (Country Studies, 2008). Political dissent was permitted provided that it was not detrimental to the interests of the ruling elite

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(Country Studies, 2008). To ensure this, the National Guard staged violent crackdowns on genuine political opposition and antigovernment protests (Country Studies, 2008). The National Guard eventually took over the national radio and telegraph networks, the postal and immigration services, health services, the internal revenue service and the national railroads (Country Studies, 2008).

Despite being in office for just less than two years, Somoza Garcia already intended to exceed his presidential tenure (Country Studies, 2008). He achieved this by creating a Constituent Assembly in 1938, which granted him extensive powers and another eight-year term (Country Studies, 2008). Somoza Garcia used these additional years in power to further enrich himself and consolidate his power (Country Studies, 2008). He supported the Allies during World War II in order for the Nicaraguan economy and military to receive much-needed financial assistance from the US (Country Studies, 2008).

Consequently, Nicaragua exported 90% of its raw materials such as gold, cotton and timber to Allied countries (Country Studies, 2008). But doing so resulted in its political and economic overdependence on the US (Country Studies, 2008). During the 1940s, Somoza Garcia and his family amassed a huge ill-gotten fortune that was derived from large investments in coffee and cattle exports (Country Studies, 2008). German properties were confiscated and sold back to the Somozas “ at ridiculously low prices” (Country Studies, 2008).

His diverse industrial enterprises included textile factories, sugar mills, rum distilleries, shipping lines, airlines and dairy companies (Country Studies, 2008). Somoza Garcia also profitted immensely from economic concessions to domestic and international firms, bribes and illicit exports (Country Studies, 2008). By the mid-1940s, Somoza Garcia gained an estimated \$60 million - one of the region's largest fortunes (Country Studies, 2008). Due to widespread opposition both in Nicaragua and abroad, Somoza Garcia decided against running for reelection in 1944 and endorsed PLN candidate Leonardo Arguello instead (Country Studies, 2008). But, in less than a month into power, Arguello's platform began to undermine Somoza Garcia's power (Country Studies, 2008).

As a result, the National Guard ousted Arguello through a coup and replaced him with Benjamin Lacayo Sacasa, a Somoza family associate (Country Studies, 2008). In order to mend fences with the United States, Somoza Garcia appointed a Constituent Assembly to write a new Constitution with a strong anti-communist slant in 1947 (Country Studies, 2008). He also enacted several progressive labor laws in 1945 to win the support of Nicaraguan labor unions and the Partido Socialista Nicaraguense (PSN), or the communist party of Nicaragua (Country Studies, 2008). However, bribes and concessions to labor leaders were dispensed; consequently, union leaders who were opposed to Somoza Garcia were booted out, replaced by Somoza Garcia loyalists (Country Studies, 2008).

Barely three years into the new Constitution, Somoza Garcia initiated a new Constitution in 1950 (Country Studies, 2008). This new basic law included clauses that were in favor of the country's business and agricultural elite

(Country Studies, 2008). He needed to appease these sectors, as they were crucial for his victory in Nicaragua's presidential elections that were held in the same year (Country Studies, 2008). The Nicaraguan constitution underwent another amendment in 1955 to allow Somoza Garcia to run for yet another term (Country Studies, 2008). Despite Somoza Garcia's immense power, his administration experienced numerous coups, some of which were instigated by the National Guard (Country Studies, 2008).

As a safety precaution, he had a secure compound built within his residence and had personal bodyguards everywhere he went (Country Studies, 2008). These security measures proved to be futile, as Somoza Garcia was assassinated by 27-year-old Nicaraguan poet Rigoberto Lopez Perez while the former was in a PLN party in Leon (Country Studies, 2008). Somoza Garcia was immediately transported to the Panama Canal Zone, where he passed away after eight days (Country Studies, 2008). Luis Somoza Debayle (1956-1963) Luis Somoza Debayle, Somoza Garcia's eldest son, succeeded him as interim president, in accordance to the Nicaraguan constitution (Country Studies, 2008). His younger brother, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, became the chief director of the National Guard (Country Studies, 2008).

After Somoza Garcia's assassination, a major political repression campaign was launched (Country Studies, 2008). Among the acts during this campaign included the imprisonment and torture of many political opponents, suspension of various civil liberties and press censorship (under orders from Anastasio Somoza Debayle) (Country Studies, 2008). When the Conservative Party boycotted the 1957 Nicaraguan elections due to Luis' repressive regime, he and Anastasio responded by founding the Partido Conservador

Nacional (PCN), a puppet opposition party (Country Studies, 2008). With token opposition, Luis won the presidency (Country Studies, 2008).

In his six-year presidential term, he “ provided citizens with some freedoms and raised hopes for political liberalization” (Country Studies, 2008). Luis also revived the constitutional ban on reelection in order to liberalize the government (Country Studies, 2008). But it was Luis’ anticommunist stance that won him the support of the US (Country Studies, 2008). Nicaragua was among the first nations to speak out against the Cuban Revolution of Fidel Castro, accusing him (Castro) of attempting to oust the Nicaraguan government (Country Studies, 2008).

In 1961, Luis even allowed Nicaragua to be the launching pad for the botched Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, led by Cuban exiles and financed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (MSN Encarta, 2007). Nicaragua’s involvement in the attack increased the antagonism between Castro and the Somozas (MSN Encarta, 2007). From 1963 to 1967, Somoza cronies held the Nicaraguan presidency (Country Studies, 2008). Luis tried to run for president in 1967, but poor health forced him to allow Anastasio to run instead (Country Studies, 2008). Their political opponents, on the other hand, formed Union Nacional Opositora (UNO), with Fernando Aguero as their candidate (Country Studies, 2008).

Repression and violence against the supporters of Aguero marked the victory of Anastasio in February 1967 (Country Studies, 2008). Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1967-1972, 1974-1979) Luis’ death from a heart attack two months after Anastasio’s ascendancy resulted in the latter becoming both the

president and the head of the National Guard (Country Studies, 2008).

Anastasio's absolute political and military control over Nicaragua led to intensified corruption and bloodshed (Country Studies, 2008). It also resulted in his regime's unpopularity among militant and business organizations (Country Studies, 2008).

When Anastasio's presidential tenure was about to end in 1971, he ammended the Constitution to prolong his stay until 1972 (Country Studies, 2008). But mounting opposition from both his own party and his political opponents made him sign the Kupia-Kumi Pact, a political agreement " which installed a three-member junta that would rule from 1972 until 1974" (Country Studies, 2008). But the pact was useless - the Nicaraguan public (including the Roman Catholic Church) became increasingly dissatisfied with Anastasio's regime due to abject social conditions such as illiteracy, malnourishment, inadequate health services and lack of proper housing (Country Studies, 2008). A powerful earthquake struck Nicaragua on December 23, 1972, with Managua, the capital city, being the hardest hit (Country Studies, 2008).

The earthquake resulted in around 10, 000 dead, an estimated 50, 000 families homeless and the destruction of about 80% of Managua's commercial structures (Country Studies, 2008). Instead of protecting, the National Guard even joined in the rampant looting of most of the remaining business establishments in Managua (Country Studies, 2008). Worse, the Somozas and their cronies pocketed large amounts of international aid that was supposed to go to the earthquake victims (Country Studies, 2008). As a result, Anastacio's personal wealth rose to an estimated \$400 million in 1974

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(Country Studies, 2008). Anastasio's second presidential bid in 1974 was faced with opposition not only from the Nicaraguan people, but also from his own party, the PLN (Country Studies, 2008). In order to defeat Anastasio in the upcoming polls, anti-Somoza elements, led by newspaper publisher Pedro Joaquin Chamorro Cardenal and former Minister of Education Ramiro Sacasa, created the Union Democratica de Liberacion (Udel) (Country Studies, 2008).

The party, composed of members from both the traditional elite and labor unions, called for a "dialogue with the government to foster political pluralism" (Country Studies, 2008). In response, Anastasio increased political repression and further tightened the noose on press freedom (Country Studies, 2008). Even though he was already being villified by the people, Anastasio won his second presidential term in September 1974 (Country Studies, 2008). The Revolt of the Sandinistas A small band of Nicaraguans formed an armed guerilla force in the 1960s in the view of overthrowing the Somozas (MSN Encarta, 2007). Naming themselves the Sandinistas, they called their movement Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), after General Sandino (MSN Encarta, 2007).

The FSLN was founded by Carlos Fonseca Amador, Tomas Borge and Silvio Mayorga, Marxists who had first met each other as anti-Somoza student activists (MSN Encarta, 2007). They were said to be "inspired by the Cuban Revolution and supported by Castro" (MSN Encarta, 2007). Although the Sandinistas started with just 20 members, their membership gradually increased due to strong support from rural Nicaraguans, students and poor urban youth (MSN Encarta, 2007). The Battle Lines are Drawn Many

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Nicaraguan youth, especially students, joined the Sandinistas out of resentment over the countless social ills that were caused by the Somozas (MSN Encarta, 2007).

But the guerillas suffered repeated setbacks at the hands of the National Guard (MSN Encarta, 2007). By 1967, majority of the Sandinista's leaders were imprisoned, murdered or thrown into exile (MSN Encarta, 2007). The organization, however, was revived in the early 1970s (MSN Encarta, 2007). The Somozas' regime and the need for change of the Nicaraguan people reached a head in January 1978 (MSN Encarta, 2007). During this period, Chamorro was killed by suspected business associates of Anastasio Somoza Debayle (MSN Encarta, 2007). Chamorro's murder resulted in nationwide strikes and riots calling for Anastasio's resignation (MSN Encarta, 2007).

Eden Pastora (alias Comandante Zero) led a Sandinista commando force that seized the National Palace and took the Nicaraguan congress hostage in August 1978 (MSN Encarta, 2007). Although the incident was resolved through certain negotiations, it elevated the people's level of confidence in the Sandinistas by destroying the invincible image of the National Guard (MSN Encarta, 2007). The victory of Comandante Zero's attack on the National Palace sparked a series of revolts, to which the National Guard responded by killing thousands of innocent civilians suspected to be members or sympathizers of the Sandinistas (MSN Encarta, 2007). This bloody reprisal of the National Guard resulted in a flood of disgruntled Nicaraguans flocking to the Sandinista movement and new massive strikes organized by the country's business class (MSN Encarta, 2007).

Trying to avoid more bloodshed, the US and other countries sought ways to get Anastasio quietly out of power (MSN Encarta, 2007). But it was too late – several Nicaraguan political and business leaders “decided that, despite the Marxist orientation of the Sandinistas, they were preferable to Somoza and the only alternative” (MSN Encarta, 2007). Other Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Panama, Costa Rica and Cuba also shared the same sentiment (MSN Encarta, 2007). The Fall of the Somozas The Sandinistas mounted an all-out offensive in May 1979, calling the people to what they call a “popular uprising” (MSN Encarta, 2007). The US made a proposal to send a peacekeeping force to Nicaragua, but this was rejected by the Organization of American States (OAS) (MSN Encarta, 2007). The OAS instead persuaded, albeit discreetly, for Anastasio to step down peacefully and relinquish his power to the Sandinista-backed Junta (Council) of National Reconstruction (MSN Encarta, 2007).

By the end of June 1979, the FSLN took control over the entire Nicaragua, except Managua (MoreOrLess, 2006). Anastasio’s impending defeat to the FSLN forced him to resign from the presidency on July 17, 1979 and flee to Miami and then to Paraguay (where he was assassinated on September 17, 1980) (MoreOrLess, 2006). The National Guard was also dissolved upon his exile, majority of its members escaping to neighboring countries such as Honduras and Guatemala (MoreOrLess, 2006). The Sandinistas took over the Nicaraguan government on July 19, 1979 (MoreOrLess, 2006). Conclusion Unfortunately, Nicaragua is still far from the “utopia” that the Sandinistas wanted it to be.

Inflation remains high, poverty is still rampant and most ordinary Nicaraguans still do not have access to the most basic social services. What is very ironic is that these were caused by the very same parties that removed the Somozas from power. Most political experts argue that one of the major hindrances to economic and political stability in Nicaragua is the conflict between the nation's elite, the Communist hardliners and the moderates and the Roman Catholic Church. This animosity between the major players in Nicaragua allowed the US an easy return to Nicaragua. Knowing that Nicaraguan society isn't as cohesive as it used to be, the US can impose its policies on the country by setting the former's people up against each other.

At the end of the day, Nicaragua still remains oppressed and marginalized.