Better a Familiar Evil than an Unfamiliar Blessing: Contra Peasantry in Nicaragua 1979-90

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Abstract
Although the Contras exhibited appalling human rights violations while accepting hefty sums of money, weapons, logistical support, and U.S. man-power, much literature has succinctly removed any possibility for further analysis as to who the Contras were. It is the objective of this paper to break through this fairly inattentive, dwindling research and delve into the multifaceted, understudied topic of rural peasantry within the Contra conflict, 1979-90. When factoring that peasants constituted the bulk of foot-soldiers in the Contra ranks, their foundation was much more complex than initially understood. Underrepresented and reasonably voiceless in Nicaragua, rural peasants linked together in mass, joining the Contras out of government repression, a mandatory military draft, and agrarian reforms that challenged traditional ways of life. In one-on-one interviews with peasants, reasons for joining reflected familial and community propensities. Studying the peasantry also revealed subtle, overlooked variables in why the Contras were unable to provoke mass change in Nicaragua through a decade of strife. Through the use of interviews, economic data, polling, and newspaper articles, I offer an alternative explanation for the Contra’s failure. The Contra’s image was unable to unify a country filled with disconnectedness between urban and rural. In addition, few battles or saboteur acts ever crossed over into highly populated municipalities, leaving the majority of the population with limited, highly vetted information from the Nicaraguan government. By no means a comprehensive study, this paper attempts to draw a gap in the research for myself and others to re-activate historical discussion.

Recommended Citation
The bloody affair, the Contra War of the 1980s, took the lives of tens of thousands of Nicaraguans and was the subject of fierce international debate. During the 1980s, both the FSLN (a leftist collection of political parties) and the Contras (a rightist collection of counter-revolutionary groups) received large amounts of aid from the Cold War super-powers (respectively, the Soviet Union and the United States). Nicaragua suffers from serious social problems, worsened by warfare and economic crises in the 1980s. Some 50.30 percent of Nicaraguans live in poverty, with the percentage highest in rural areas. In the eastern lowlands, poverty levels exceed 90 percent. Unemployment and underemployment are estimated as high as 50 percent, although official figures are lower.

By emphasizing class divisions, the Sandinistas created the first effective, mass-based political forces in Nicaragua. Economic and political turmoil through the 1980s and 1990s make it difficult to determine how the class structure has changed, but Sandinista support is strong among the urban poor, while the middle class and much of the rural peasant population support other parties.