

# Nicaraguan History: An Overview

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## Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- identify the major epochs in Nicaraguan history.
  - analyze a timeline to determine the significant turning points in Nicaraguan history.
  - hypothesize about the major issues facing Nicaragua at various points in its history.
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## Materials

- Student Handout: **A Timeline of Nicaraguan History**
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## Activities

1. Distribute copies of the student handout entitled **A Timeline of Nicaraguan History** to each student and direct students to focus on the first two events in the timeline.
  - a. Ask students to analyze the first event. What does it imply about the indigenous peoples of Nicaragua? (diversity)
  - b. Explain to the class that by the 1500s, there were three principle tribes in the Pacific region (the Niquirano, the Chorotegano, and the Chontal) and that each was governed by a chief, or *cacique*, who, surrounded by his princes, formed the nobility.
  - c. Direct students to focus on the amount of time that separates the first and second events in the timeline.
  - d. Ask students to hypothesize what might have been taking place in Nicaragua during this time period.
  - e. After students have explained their hypotheses, explain that the differences in the origin and level of civilization of these groups led to frequent violent encounters, in which one group would displace whole tribes from their territory.
2. Direct students to examine the events of 1522 and 1524.
  - a. Write the term “conquistadores” on the chalkboard and ask students to guess at its meaning. What does the term imply about the intent of the Spanish in Central America?
  - b. Ask students to hypothesize about why the Spanish conquest would be considered a significant turning point Nicaraguan history.

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3. Direct students to examine the events between 1821 and 1838.
    - a. Ask students to explain if the events indicate that the Central American region was stable or unstable during this time period. Why?
    - b. Write the term “nationalism” on the chalkboard. Explain that nationalism, a person’s loyalty to and love of his/her country, has to first be based on a sense of shared identity. When does this sense of shared identity begin in Nicaraguan history? In 1838 or with the Spanish conquest?
  4. Direct students to examine the events between 1849 and 1856.
    - a. Ask students to explain if the events indicate that Nicaragua was politically stable or unstable during this time period. Why?
    - b. Refer students to the term “nationalism” written on the chalkboard. How might the Walker Affair have spurred nationalism in Nicaragua? Why would it be considered a significant turning point?
  5. Direct students to examine the events between 1893 and 1925.
    - a. Ask students to explain if the events indicate that Nicaragua was politically stable or unstable during this time period. Why?
    - b. Write the term “imperialism” on the chalkboard. Explain that imperialism is the policy of extending the rule or authority of one nation over another.
    - c. Ask students to explain why Nicaraguans might view American policy in this time period as imperialistic.
    - d. Ask students to explain why American intervention might be considered a significant turning point.
  6. Direct students to examine the events between 1927 and 1936.
    - a. Ask students why Augusto Sandino would be considered a Nicaraguan national hero. What did he accomplish?
    - b. Ask students to explain why the assassination of Sandino and the seizure of power by Anastasio Somoza might be considered turning points in Nicaraguan history.
  7. Direct students to examine the events between 1936 and 1979.
    - a. Ask students to analyze the events listed in this time period and to identify and explain which they consider the most significant turning points and why.
    - b. Ask students to hypothesize why the term “elected” appears in quotation marks in 1936 and 1967. What does this imply? (elections are rigged by the Somoza government)

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8. Direct students to examine the events between 1981 and 1990.
    - a. Ask students to describe the relationship between the United States and the Nicaraguan government in this time period. How do they account for the degree of hostility it represents?
    - b. Ask students to hypothesize why the term “elected” appears in quotation marks in 1984. What does this suggest has really changed in Nicaragua since 1967?
    - c. Ask students to analyze the events listed in this time period and to identify and explain which they consider the most significant turning points and why.
  9. Direct students to examine the events between 1990 and 2002.
    - a. Ask students to analyze the events listed in this time period and to identify and explain which they consider the most significant turning points and why.
    - b. Ask students to evaluate these events and to determine, based on the limited data available, what appear to be the biggest challenges facing the current Nicaraguan government.
  10. Concluding Activity
    - a. Ask students to write a reflection, based on their understanding of the timeline, that describes the major issues Nicaragua has faced in the past and how those issues may impact Nicaragua’s future.
    - b. Ask for student volunteers to share and discuss their reflections.
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## A Timeline of Nicaraguan History

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6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup>  
centuries

Native American groups begin coming from the North, from different regions of Mexico, and settle in the plains of Nicaragua's Pacific coast: the Chorotegas or Mangués; the Maribios, Nagrandanos or Sutiavas; the Nahuas, Pipiles or Nicaraguas. The Mískitos and Sumos arrive from the South and settle along the Atlantic coast.

1522

A Spanish military expedition, under Gil González Dávila, attempts the conquest of Nicaraguan territory. He encounters resistance from an army of 3,000 warriors, led by their chief, Diriangén. González retreats and travels south to the coast, returning to Panama with large quantities of gold and pearls.

1524

Spanish *conquistadores*, under Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba, impose their control over Nicaragua, controlling and enslaving the indigenous population.

1821

The confederation of Central American provinces proclaims its independence from Spain.

1822

Central American provinces annex themselves to an independent Mexican Empire under General Agustín de Iturbide, later Emperor Agustín I.

1824

Mexico becomes a republic. Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador form the Central American Federation.

1838

Political conflict between federation members increases. Central American Congress allows states to leave the federation. Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica secede and declare independence.

1849

Nicaragua and the United States negotiate a treaty that gives the United States exclusive rights to a transit route across Nicaragua. Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, an American businessman, negotiates a contract with the Nicaraguan government grants Vanderbilt's company exclusive rights to build a canal across Nicaragua within twelve years.

1853

Conservative General Fruto Chamorro takes over the government and exiles his leading Liberal opponents.

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- 1856** American mercenary William Walker is hired by the Nicaraguan Liberal Party to topple the Conservative government. He takes control of the government and sets himself up as president. He is ousted the next year, destroying the city of Granada in the process.
- 1893** General José Santos Zelaya is confirmed as president after a revolt by Liberals. Zelaya becomes a dictator who expands coffee production, boosts banana exports, promotes internal development, and modernizes Nicaragua's infrastructure.
- 1909** Civil war erupts. Dictator Jose Santos Zelaya is forced from power (partially due to the landing of 400 U. S. marines in Nicaragua). Chaos and instability follow.
- 1912** Civil war erupts again. 2,700 United States marines land at the ports of Corinto and Bluefields in order to protect American citizens and interests.
- 1916** The Chamorro-Bryan Treaty transforms Nicaragua into a near United States protectorate.
- 1925** President Carlos Solórzano contracts with a retired United States Army Major to establish and train the National Guard.
- 1927** Liberal-Conservative violence continues. General José María Moncada, the leader of the liberal rebels, agrees to the U. S. negotiated Pact of Espino Negro and agrees to disarm. United States forces take over the country's military functions and strengthen the Nicaraguan National Guard. General Augusto Sandino, denouncing United States intervention, refuses to accept the peace accord and leads a guerrilla force against the US Marines.
- 1933** General Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza García is named director of the new "non- partisan" National Guard in Nicaragua. The US Marines withdraw. President Sacasa offers Sandino, who is now a national hero, a general amnesty as well as land and safeguards for him and his guerrilla forces. Sandino agrees to discuss the issues.
- 1934** On February 21, while leaving the presidential palace after a dinner with President Sacasa, Sandino and two of his generals are arrested by National Guard officers acting under Somoza García's instructions and executed.

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- 1936** Somoza García openly confronts President Sacasa by using military force to displace local government officials loyal to the president and replacing them with close associates. Sacasa resigns and Somoza García is “elected” president by the margin of 107,201 votes to 108, establishing a military dictatorship.
- 1956** Anastasio Somoza García is assassinated. His son, Luis Somoza Debayle retains control of the government while Anastasio “Tachito” Somoza Debayle controls the National Guard.
- 1961** The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) is founded in Nicaragua.
- 1967** Anastasio Somoza Debayle is “elected” President of Nicaragua.
- 1972** An earthquake devastates Managua; Somoza’s mishandling of the crisis and of international relief funds increases resentment of the regime.
- 1979** Somoza is overthrown and a new governing coalition dominated by the FSLN (Sandinistas) assumes power. The revolution has cost the lives of an estimated 50,000 people, with another 150,000 Nicaraguans in exile.
- 1981** The US ends aid to Nicaragua on the basis that Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet Union are supplying arms to Salvadorian rebels.
- 1982** The U.S. House of Representatives passes the Boland Amendment, which prohibits the U.S. from supplying the Nicaraguan Contras (forces opposing the Sandinistas) with arms for overthrowing the Sandinista government.
- 1984** The CIA mines Nicaragua’s harbors in a covert operation, which is universally condemned in the world community. Nicaragua sues the US in the World Court, and in June 1986 the Court finds the US guilty of violating international law.
- 1984** Daniel Ortega, leader of the FSLN, is “elected” president of Nicaragua.
- 1985** U.S. president Ronald Reagan describes the Nicaraguan Contras as “freedom fighters” and initiates economic sanctions against Nicaragua.
- 1986** The Nicaraguan government closes *La Prensa*, an opposition newspaper. The US government announces that, contrary to the Boland Amendment, the US has been providing military aid to the Contras. The supplies were purchased with funds diverted from the sale of US arms to Iran. The covert operation becomes known as the Iran-Contra affair.

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- 1987** Daniel Ortega, the FSLN leader and President, begins a trip to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe seeking military and economic aid. Peace talks between the Sandinistas and the Contras break down. Ortega confirms rumors that the Soviets plan to supply Nicaragua with more military aid.
- 1988** The Sandinistas and Contras begin a cease-fire.
- 1990** Violeta Barrios Chamorro of the UNO party (National Opposition Union) defeats the FSLN's Daniel Ortega in internationally observed presidential elections. Sandinistas and Contras sign a permanent cease-fire. The Contras begin to demobilize.
- 1993** Rearmed Contras, by then called "re-Contras," take 38 hostages in an attempt to force Humberto Ortega, Daniel Ortega's brother and Chamorro's appointee as chief of the army, to resign. In retaliation, some Sandinista soldiers who had previously been demobilized kidnapped the UNO party's leaders.
- 1995** Humberto Ortega is replaced by Joaquin Lacayo after five years of negotiations with Violeta Chamorro.
- 1997** Arnaldo Aleman is inaugurated as President with around 49 percent of the vote compared to Daniel Ortega's 39 percent, thus completing the first democratic and peaceful transfer of the presidency in Nicaragua's history.
- 1998** Hurricane Mitch, one of the most destructive Atlantic storms on record, hits Nicaragua. 870,000 people, one-fifth of the population, are displaced; 3,000 die and 320,000 are injured. Losses, public and private, are estimated at \$1.3 billion.
- 2001** Enrique Bolanos, vice-president under Arnaldo Aleman, defeats Daniel Ortega in the presidential election. Many Nicaraguans contend U.S. diplomats intervened to block Ortega, suggesting that American aid and investment could dry up in a Nicaragua led by Ortega.
- 2002** Former President Arnaldo Aleman, accused of accused of stealing nearly \$100 million in public funds, is stripped of his immunity from criminal prosecution so that he can stand trial on a variety of corruption charges.
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