

The Sandinista Era

Objectives

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

- explain the hopes and expectations of the Nicaraguan people following the overthrow of the Somoza Dynasty.
 - describe the policies developed by the Sandinista government and evaluate their impact on the Nicaraguan people.
 - analyze the origins of the Contra War and evaluate its consequences.
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Materials

- Student Handout: **The Sandinista Revolution**
 - Student Handout: **The Sandinista Government**
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Activities

1. Explain that all revolutions have both an immediate cause (a particular incident that triggers rebellion) and a series of underlying causes that create the atmosphere in which revolution takes place.
 - a. Explain that according to historian Crane Brinton, revolutions such as the one that overthrew Somoza have four underlying causes. (List the four causes on the chalkboard.)
 - Political inefficiency
 - Economic discontent
 - Social class antagonism
 - Desertion of the intellectuals (when respected leaders in society openly speak out against the government and call for change)
 - b. Direct students to review their materials from the previous lesson (*The Somoza Era*) and ask them to identify any events or situations that indicate the presence of any of the four underlying causes.
 - c. Following their review, ask students to share their findings. List their observations on the chalkboard.
 2. Distribute the student handout entitled **The Sandinista Revolution**.
 - a. Direct students to read the first two paragraphs.
 - b. Ask them to explain why the assassination of Chamorro can be identified as the immediate cause of the revolution. What did Chamorro represent?
 3. Direct students to read the remaining paragraphs on the first page.
 - a. Ask students to hypothesize why the anti-Somoza movement had such broad support.
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- b. Ask students to evaluate the actions of the National Guard in Monimbo. What do their actions reveal about the nature of the Somoza regime?
 4. Direct students to read the remaining paragraphs of the handout.
 - a. Ask students to hypothesize why the anti-Somoza movement was eventually successful.
 - b. Write the phrase “Broad Opposition Front” on the chalkboard and ask students to explain the significance of the term. What does it reveal about the nature of the opposition to Somoza?
 5. Distribute the student handout entitled **The Sandinista Government**.
 - a. Direct students to read the first paragraph on the first page.
 - b. Ask students to summarize the cost to the Nicaraguan people of the overthrow of Somoza.
 - c. Ask students to place themselves in the situation of an average Nicaraguan citizen in July 1979. What are your hopes and expectations now that the Somoza regime has been overthrown? What is it that you want from this new government that is replacing Somoza?
 - d. Write student responses on the chalkboard.
 6. Direct students to read the first page in its entirety.
 - a. Ask students to review the list of hopes and expectations they had listed on the chalkboard.
 - b. Ask students to evaluate the Sandinista programs summarized on this page. Have these programs addressed any of these needs or expectations in a positive fashion? Which programs? How? (**Note:** the Minister of National Education, Carlos Tunnermann, received the UNESCO Prize in 1980 for the achievements of the National Literacy Campaign.)
 - c. Direct the attention of the class to the last sentence in the second paragraph. What does it mean to rule by “unappealable decree?” How much decision making power did the junta have? What limits were placed on its power? Is this democratic?
 7. Direct students to read the second page in its entirety.
 - a. Ask students to explain the reasons why opposition to the Sandinistas began to develop in Nicaragua. What policies were the Sandinistas following that created this opposition?
 - b. Ask students to review the list of hopes and expectations they had listed on the chalkboard. Have the Sandinistas achieved these goals? Why or why not?
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8. Direct students to read the third page in its entirety.
 - a. Ask students to explain and evaluate U.S. policy towards Nicaragua during the Reagan administration. How did it contribute to conflict in Nicaragua?
 - b. Ask students to evaluate Sandinista policies as the Contra War intensified. Are their policies in keeping with democratic principles? Why or why not?
 9. Direct students to read the fourth page in its entirety.
 - a. Ask students to evaluate Sandinista policies following the election of 1984. Are their policies in keeping with democratic principles? Why or why not?
 - b. Ask students to review the Esquipulas II proposed by Oscar Arias Sánchez as described in the last paragraph.
 - If you were in the Sandinista government would you agree to this plan? Why or why not?
 - If you were a Contra would agree to this plan? Why or why not?
 10. Direct students to read the text on the fifth page of the handout.
 - a. Ask students to hypothesize why Daniel Ortega agreed to negotiate with the Contras. What would be his motivation? How would it benefit the people of Nicaragua?
 - b. Ask students to evaluate the election of 1990 and to hypothesize why the Nicaraguan people chose to elect a new government.
 11. Direct students to examine the costs of the Contra War as indicated in the table at the bottom of the fifth page.
 - a. Ask students to evaluate the impact of the Contra War on the Nicaraguan people.
 - b. Direct students to re-read the first paragraph in the handout and ask them to evaluate the combined impact of the Sandinista Revolution and the Contra War on the Nicaraguan people.
 - c. Ask students to place themselves in the situation of an average Nicaraguan citizen in July 1979.
 - What are your hopes and expectations now that the Somoza regime has been overthrown?
 - What is it that you want from this new government that is replacing Somoza?
 - How hopeful would you be that your hopes and expectations would be fulfilled? Why?

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12. Concluding Activity

Direct students to write a critique of the following position taken by Sergio Ramierz in his book *Adios Muchachos*: "Although in its decline the Sandinista movement ended up burying the dreams of thousands of young people who took up arms, its main legacy was the establishment of democracy in Nicaragua."

The Sandinista Revolution

The immediate cause of the revolution that removed Anastasio Somoza Debayle from power was the assassination of newspaper editor Pedro Joaquin Chamorro on January 10, 1978, as he was driving to work. This dramatic assassination was the final catalyst for a war that culminated in the complete overthrow of the Somoza system eighteen months later. The revolution was the result of a concerted effort by virtually all major groups and classes in the country.

The assassination of Chamorro enraged the Nicaraguan people. Immediately after the assassination, angry crowds surged through the streets of Managua burning Somoza-owned buildings and shouting anti-Somoza slogans. Later, when it became apparent that the official murder investigation was to be a cover-up, the chambers of commerce and industry led the country in an unprecedented general strike that lasted for more than two weeks, with 80 to 90 percent effectiveness. When it became clear that it was hurting the Nicaraguan people more than Somoza, however, the strike was called off.

The fact that the strike was over, however, did not mean that Somoza's troubles had ended. To the contrary, Nicaraguans of all classes had experienced the thrill and surge of pride that came with defying the dictator and were, therefore, in no mood to let things slip back to normal. For the next several months, acts against the regime came in various forms. There were daring and quite successful attacks by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) on National Guard headquarters in several cities, mass demonstrations, labor and student strikes and civil uprisings in urban areas.

The events of February in Monimbo—an Indian neighborhood in Masaya—were a preview of what was to happen in most Nicaraguan cities that September, when poorly armed civilians rose up against the dictatorship only to be brutally pounded into submission. Fighting in Monimbo broke out between the local inhabitants and the guard on February 10, the one-month anniversary of the Chamorro assassination, and again on February 21, the forty-fourth anniversary of Sandino's assassination. On the second occasion, the inhabitants set up barricades, hoisted banners declaring Monimbo to be a free territory, and held the guard back for almost a week with a pathetic assortment of weapons consisting of homemade bombs, 22-caliber rifles, pistols, machetes, axes, rocks, and clubs. Before it could declare Monimbo "secure" on February 28, the regime had to use a force of 600 heavily armed men backed by two tanks, three armored cars, five 50-caliber machine guns, two helicopter gunships, and two light planes. In the process, the neighborhood was devastated and many dozens, perhaps hundreds, of civilians were either killed outright or arrested and never seen again.

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**El Combatiente
Desconocido
(León)**

On August 25, the Broad Opposition Front (composed of most of Nicaragua's political parties and organizations) demanded Somoza's resignation and declared another nationwide strike, which paralyzed the country for almost a month. Simultaneously, Monimbo-style civil uprisings occurred in cities throughout the country, including Masaya, Matagalpa, Managua, Chinandega, Leon, Jinotepe, Diriamba, and Esteli. Once again, young people armed only with an assortment of pistols, hunting rifles, shotguns, and homemade bombs erected paving block barricades and fought the National Guard. Several towns, including Leon, held out for a week or more against terrible odds. The outcome, however, was inevitable. The National Guard fought with unusual ferocity and vengeance, leveling large sections of several cities and taking the lives of between 3,000 and 5,000 people.

It was now clear to the Nicaraguan people that neither general strikes nor poorly armed mass uprisings would drive Somoza from office. The dictator and his guard had demonstrated their willingness to slaughter and destroy in order to preserve their position. The next uprising would have to be led by a larger, well-trained, well-armed guerrilla force.



**Sandinista
Guerrillas**

In the first half of 1979 recruitment and training of young men and women—primarily students from urban areas—increased dramatically as the regular FSLN army expanded from several hundred to several thousand. Members of the opposition traveled throughout the world explaining the Sandinist cause and soliciting donations that were used to purchase modern light, Western-made weapons on the international arms market.

The final offensive was declared early in June 1979. Paving-block barricades were erected in poor neighborhoods throughout the country, and National Guard outposts were overcome one by one as the dictator's control of the country shrank. In mid-June a broad-based government-in-exile was announced by the FSLN. The government of the United States arranged for the departure of Somoza to Miami on July 17. A day later, the provisional government took the oath of office in a ceremony held in Leon and, on July 19, the FSLN entered Managua and accepted the surrender of most of what was left of the National Guard. Ecstatic crowds tore the statues of Anastasio Senior and Luis Somoza from their pedestals and dragged the broken pieces triumphantly through the streets. On July 20, the provisional government entered the capital and appeared in the main plaza to receive the acclaim of a jubilant and grateful people.

Source

Adapted from *Nicaragua: The Land of Sandino* by Thomas W. Walker. Westview Press. Boulder, Colorado. 1981

The Sandinista Government (1979 – 1990)

The new government inherited a country in ruins, with a stagnant economy and a debt of about \$1.6 billion. An estimated 50,000 Nicaraguans were dead, 120,000 were exiles in neighboring countries, and 600,000 were homeless. Food and fuel supplies were exhausted, and international relief organizations were trying to deal with disease caused by lack of health supplies. Yet the attitude of the vast majority of Nicaraguans toward the revolution was decidedly hopeful. Most Nicaraguans saw the Sandinista victory as an opportunity to create a system free of the political, social, and economic inequalities of the almost universally hated Somoza regime.

The Sandinistas saw their revolution as freeing people from social, economic, and political oppression. With their triumph in July of 1979, a Government of National Reconstruction was created, composed of a five-member junta. Its first decision was to abolish the constitution of 1974 and to decree the confiscation of the possessions of Somoza and his "close friends." It also issued a decree guaranteeing individual civil and political rights. The declared objective of the new government was to work for political pluralism, a mixed economic system, and a nonaligned foreign policy. However, the junta ruled by *unappealable* decree under emergency powers.

In his book *Adios Muchachos*, Sergio Ramirez, who served as vice-president under Daniel Ortega in the 1980s, states that the revolution was an effort to change Nicaragua's fate in every sense. One of the immediate goals of the new government was reconstruction of the national economy. Pledging food for the poor, the junta made restructuring the economy its highest priority. At first the economy experienced positive growth, largely because of renewed inflow of foreign aid and reconstruction after the war.

One of the Sandinistas' first actions was to implement a literacy campaign, teaching peasants throughout the country to read and to write and making all education free. Illiteracy fell from 50 to 13%. Medicine was also made free, polio and measles were eliminated through extensive immunization campaigns and infant mortality was reduced by a third. The rate of inflation subsequently declined from 84% to 27%.

Prior to 1979, about 4% of the landowners controlled about 52% of the arable land. The new government attempted to address this issue by enacting the Agrarian Reform Law, which confiscated all of the rural properties owned by the Somoza family or people associated with the Somozas, a total of 2,000 farms representing more than 20 percent of Nicaragua's cultivable land. These farms became state property. The landlords that had had their land expropriated were also politically and socially persecuted.

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Another goal of the Sandinistas was a change in the old government's pattern of repression and brutality toward the general populace. In their first two years in power, Amnesty International and other human rights groups found the human rights situation in Nicaragua greatly improved.

However, political difficulties were on the horizon. The fight against Somoza and the National Guard had allowed the diverse segments of Nicaraguan society to come together in a common cause. Now, this diversity of interests also made it inevitable that the alliance would eventually fall apart.

In April 1980 two of the five members of the junta resigned due to their differences with the other members of the ruling body and the political direction the country was taking under the leadership of Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas. Although both were replaced, by May of 1981, the junta consisted of only three members, with Daniel Ortega clearly playing the lead role among the remaining three. Firmly in control of the government, the Sandinistas moved steadily to the left, eventually espousing Marxist-Leninist positions.

In addition to its increased political control of Nicaragua, the Sandinistas had the best organized and most experienced military force in the country. To replace the National Guard, the Sandinistas established a new national army, the Sandinista People's Army (Ejército Popular Sandinista—EPS), and a police force, the Sandinista Police (Policía Sandinista—PS). These two groups were trained by personnel from Cuba, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union. The EPS developed into the largest and best equipped military force in Central America. Compulsory military service, introduced during 1983, brought the EPS forces to about 80,000 by the mid-1980s.

An armed opposition movement began to develop in Nicaragua. These groups became known as the Contras (short for *contrarevolucionarios*). According to Contra leader Oscar Manuel Sobalvarro “It was the repression carried out by the Sandinistas which forced me to take the decision to fight, in particular because we saw that Nicaragua's democracy was under threat. The Sandinistas promised democracy, but what we began to see a few months after their triumph was very different.” By 1984, the resistance controlled the northeastern zone of the country and was receiving increased support from the United States.

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From late 1979 through 1980, the Carter administration had made efforts to work with FSLN policies. However, when President Ronald Reagan took office in January 1981, the United States government launched a campaign to isolate the Sandinista government. Claiming that Nicaragua, with assistance from Cuba and the Soviet Union, was supplying arms to the guerrillas in El Salvador, the Reagan administration suspended all United States aid to Nicaragua on January 23, 1981. Later that year, the Reagan administration authorized support for groups trying to overthrow the Sandinistas.

As the Contra war intensified, the Sandinistas' tolerance of political pluralism waned. The Sandinistas imposed emergency laws to ban criticism and organization of political opposition. Most social programs suffered as a result of the war because the Sandinista regime was forced to increase military spending until half of its budget went for defense. Agricultural production also declined sharply as refugees fled areas of conflict.

The bishops of the Roman Catholic Church, although supportive of the anti-Somoza movement during the late 1970s, later opposed the Sandinista regime in the 1980s. The church in Nicaragua became split. The radical branch included priests who joined the Sandinista government. Ernesto Cardenal Martínez, a Jesuit priest who had joined the Sandinista Revolution, became the Minister of Culture for the FSLN government. Father Miguel D'Escoto Brockman (also known as Jerónimo) was appointed Minister of Foreign Relations, and Father Edgardo Parrales Castillo was named Minister of Social Welfare. However, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo (the former archbishop of Managua) soon became as critical of the FSLN as he had been of the Somoza dictatorship. The cardinal's opposition brought internal divisions within the Roman Catholic Church, with one side, the hierarchy, rejecting the Marxist philosophy of the Sandinista leadership, and the other, the Popular Church, participating in the civic struggle of the people.

By 1981 the country's most influential papers, *La Prensa*, joined the growing chorus of dissent against the Sandinista government. Under the state of emergency declared in 1982, the paper was subject to prior censorship. Despite several instances of suspended publication, some mandated by the Ministry of Interior, and some in protest by the paper's editor over cut copy, the paper continued to operate. In anticipation of upcoming elections, the government eased censorship. Increased latitude in what it could publish only increased *La Prensa's* bitter criticism of the government.

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On November 4 1984, about 75 percent of the registered voters went to the polls. The FSLN won 67 percent of the votes, the presidency, and sixty-one of the ninety-six seats in the new National Assembly. The three conservative parties that remained in the election garnered twenty-nine seats in the National Assembly; the three parties on the left won a total of six seats. Foreign observers generally reported that the election was fair. Opposition groups, however, said that the FSLN domination of government organs, mass organizations groups, and much of the media created a climate of intimidation that precluded a truly open election. Inauguration came on January 10, 1985; the date was selected because it was the seventh anniversary of the assassination of newspaper editor Chamorro. Attending Ortega's swearing in as president were the presidents of Yugoslavia and Cuba, the vice presidents of Argentina and the Soviet Union, and four foreign ministers from Latin America.

Although the electoral process was recognized internationally as legitimate, the war intensified. The Sandinista government was forced to divert more and more of its economic resources from economic development to defense against the Contras. The FSLN government also suspended civil liberties. Both the media and the Roman Catholic bishops were accused of destabilizing the political system. The church's press, as well as the conservative newspaper *La Prensa*, were censored or closed at various periods because of their critical views on the military draft and the government's handling of the civil war.

In November 1986 the policy of the Reagan administration toward Nicaragua was shaken by the discovery of an illegal operation in which funds from weapons sold to Iran during 1985 were diverted to the Contras. In the aftermath of the Iran-Contra affair, the United States Congress stopped all military support to the Contras in 1987 except for what was called "non-lethal" aid. The result of the cutoff was a military stalemate; the Contras were unable or unwilling to keep on fighting without full United States support, and the Sandinista government could not afford to continue waging an unpopular war that had already devastated the economy.

After Oscar Arias Sánchez was elected to the presidency of Costa Rica in 1986, he designed a regional plan to bring peace to Central America. Known as Esquipulas II, this plan called for amnesty for persons charged with political crimes, a negotiated cease-fire, national reconciliation, an end to all external aid to insurgencies, and democratic reforms leading to free elections in Nicaragua.

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The dramatic internal situation facing the country, combined with diplomatic pressures, forced to the Sandinista government to negotiate with the resistance and to initiate a peace process. At a summit of Central American presidents held on January 15, 1988, when President Daniel Ortega agreed to hold direct talks with the Contras, to lift the state of emergency, and to call for national elections. In March the FSLN government met with representatives of the Contras and signed a cease-fire agreement. The Sandinistas granted a general amnesty to all Contra members and freed former members of the National Guard who were still imprisoned.

In February 1989, the five Central American presidents met once again in Costa del Sol, El Salvador, and agreed on a plan to support the disarming and dissolving of Contra forces in Honduras, as well as their voluntary repatriation into Nicaragua. President Ortega also agreed to move the next national elections, scheduled for the fall of 1990, up to February 1990; to guarantee fair participation for opposition parties; and to allow international observers to monitor the entire electoral process.

On June 6, 1989, fourteen parties, united only in their opposition to the Sandinistas, formed a coalition called the National Opposition Union (Unión Nacional Opositora--UNO), whose support was drawn from a broad base, including conservative and liberal parties. The anti-Sandinista coalition nominated Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, publisher of *La Prensa* and former member of the junta, as their candidate for president. The FSLN nominated Daniel Ortega for the presidency and Sergio Ramírez Mercado as his running mate. In the February 25, 1990, elections, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro carried 55 percent of the popular vote against Daniel Ortega's 41 percent. Exhausted by war and poverty, the Nicaraguan people had opted for change.

The Cost of The Contra War

Victims	1980-1982	1983-1995	1986-1989	Total
EPS/Civilians	606	11,699	20,004	32,309
Contras	397	12,280	16,840	29,517
Total	1,003	23,979	36,844	61,826

Sources

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