

THE U.S.  
AND  
THE  
SOMOZA DYNASTY: 1937-1979

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In this paper, I shall discuss the relationship between the United States and the Somoza dynasty that ruled Nicaragua from 1937 to 1979. The Somozas, who were put into power by the U.S., continually won the support of the United States government throughout their reign. Thus, the U.S., for its part is guilty of supporting and financing one of the bloodiest, cruelest dictatorships in all of Latin America.

→ To begin with, Nicaragua before Somoza's time and before US imperialists intervened in 1912, was essentially controlled by two opposing factions, one from León, and the other from Granada. The Granada elite was composed of traditional latifundistas and regional merchants, who favored the old Spanish order and its primitive form of organizations. They were dominated by the Chamorro family and were represented politically by the Conservative Party. In contrast, the elite of Leon was composed of people who favored the expansion of agriculture and exports, and other types of business like expansionist interests. Dominated by the Sacasa family and represented by the Liberal Party, this group favored free trade, modernization of the countryside and the appropriation of communal lands. Because of their differing interests, both sides fought continuously over these issues in a series of civil wars throughout the nineteenth century. *Savage*

In 1893, a man named Santos Zelaya came into power. A controversial liberal, he stabilized the political situation and introduced a series of changes into the Nicaraguan economy. Among these were the expropriation of communal lands and the redistribution of these lands to private coffee growers. Also, he began to modernize the country by introducing foreign capital, railways, banks and telegraphs, moving the country toward capitalist development. The U.S. and Britain, in the meantime, were battling for a canal route through Central America. Nicaragua was one of the most ideal places for its establishment, and both the U.S. and Britain looked to the country as a possible source. However, the U.S.,

instead chose to build the canal through Panama. Angered by this, Zela began to impose restrictions on U.S. industrial investment in the country, and he also began to turn to other countries for support. This move, in turn, greatly angered the U.S., who because of their imperialist interests in Latin America, felt justified to change the situation. The Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary were statements on the position taken by the U.S., The Nicaraguan case is a prime example of how the U.S. used these documents to justify their intervention of ~~LATIN AMERICA~~. Because Zelaya began to rule heavy handedly, opposition in the country began to increase. This opposition, in turn, looked to the U.S. for support in overthrowing Zelaya. The U.S. succeeded in putting the Conservatives back into power. <sup>How?</sup> They accepted the role of the U.S. in the country and allowed the Marines to stay to help rule ~~the country~~ until the mid-twenties. Not all of the people of Nicaragua accepted the role of the U.S., however. Among them were old Zelaya liberals and some peasant factions. Between 1910 and 1924, for example, these groups engaged in at least ten uprisings, in attempts to overthrow the Conservatives. <sup>1</sup>

With the situation somewhat stable, the Marines withdrew in 1925. The Liberals again set out to overthrow the Conservatives, and again in August of 1926, the Marines intervened. It was during this period that Anastasio Somoza began his rise to political power. Having been educated in the U.S. during World War 1, Tacho, as he was called, had perfect command of the English language. This helped him gain a position into the U.S. National Guard and eventually into a position as a military attache in Washington. <sup>2</sup> In October of 1926, he returned to Nicaragua, married into the Sacasa family, and then attached himself to the staff of General Moncada, a liberal who had called for the overthrow of the conservative government. Once on the staff of Moncada, Somoza became very friendly with the Marines. Because of his manners, his English, and his friendliness toward the Americans, he succeeded in getting on their good side. He especially impressed

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Henry L. Stimson, a U.S. official stationed there. In 1928, Moncada became President, and Somoza became his personal aide. In the following four years, Somoza, called El Yanqui, for his identification and friendliness with U.S. interests, wove his way through various bedrooms of the wives of U.S. officials and continued influencing the Americans with his Latin charm.

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In 1932, Somoza's wife's uncle, Juan Batista Sacasa, was elected to the presidency in the fall. Less than six months later, when the Marines finally withdrew from the country, Tacho was appointed to head the National Guard, an indigenous force created by the Marines to keep peace in the country, and to continue repressing radical factions within the country, especially that commanded by Augusto Cesar Sandino. For his part, Sandino was very critical of U.S. intervention, and he would not make any concessions to the Americans, as had Moncada and Sacasa.

The National Guard in Nicaragua was created by the U.S. in 1927, on the assumption that it would be non-partisan:

In theory, the guardsmen were drawn equally from the ranks of Liberals and Conservatives, ensuring that neither got the upper hand, and they were under the command of U.S. Marine officers. The Guard was to be a well trained, well armed internal police force dedicated to preserving law and order, and protecting the democratic process. It would thereby become a deterrant to the kind of internal strife that previously had racked the nation.<sup>5</sup>

When the U.S. withdrew its troops in 1932, it left behind the National Guard and Anastasio Somoza as its leader. Those years of influence and friendliness toward the U.S. paid off, and Somoza, at the age of thirty-seven, was on his way to the top.

Meanwhile, in that same year, the President, Juan Batista Sacasa, sought to make up with Sandino and his forces. This greatly disturbed Somoza, who had sought to kill Sandino at all costs. Acting as head of the Guard, he finally succeeded in having him shot on February 21, 1934. This was done

with the approval of the U.S., according to Somoza, but the U.S. vehemently denied its condoning of the murder. *should be documented this is important*

Two years later, Somoza moved to take control of the entire country. With the National Guard at his command, he succeeded in ousting Sacasa. He then assumed the presidency on January 1, 1937. For the next eight years, Somoza succeeded in acquiring millions of dollars in land and other holdings for himself, mostly through various forms of racketeering. The U.S., for its part, aided his regime by approving his rule, and by granting over two million <sup>6</sup> dollars in credit to the country. Upon his briefing and subsequent approval of Somoza, President Franklin Roosevelt was quoted as commenting, "He's a sonofabitch, but he's ours." <sup>7</sup> In this period, Somoza also began sending his children to school in the U.S.. His sons, Tachito and Luis both enrolled in West Point and other schools. Upon their return, they became leading officers in the Guard. Along with them, other members of the family began to join Somoza in running the country.

After eight years of dictatorial rule, Somoza nominated Leonard Arguello, an old Liberal, for the Presidency. However, when Arguello moved Tacho's sons to different posts in other cities, he became angry, and quickly withdrew Arguello from power. He then went on to appoint a Sacasa family member to the presidential seat, but changed his mind and appointed his uncle, Victor Ramon y Reyes to the post. The U.S. and other countries then recognized the Ramon y Reyes puppet government as legitimate.

During the puppet's rule, Somoza, as head of the Guard, continued to quell opposition, this time led by the old conservative Chamorro family. In the course of doing so, he murdered many people. *documentation - source* It is important to remember that although in theory the Guard was to be representative of the country and its differing factions, in reality the Guard was loyal only to Somoza. Thus, it carried out his orders without question. The U.S. was beginning to find Somoza a bit difficult to tolerate, but to get on their good side, he began in 1948 to spew forth exactly what the U.S. wanted

to hear, rhetoric against communism. "He offered to make Nicaragua a strong-  
hold and breakwater against the communists, 'who diligently seek to in-  
filtrate Central America', thus cementing the dynasty's role as regional  
watchdog." <sup>8</sup> In 1954, for example, Somoza allowed Nicaragua to be the main  
staging area for the CIA sponsored invasion of Guatemala, and the overthrow  
of the progressive Arbenz government. Further evidence of U.S. friend-  
ship to Somoza is suggested by the increase throughout the forties and  
fifties of military aid to Nicaragua; an air force mission, an army mission,  
and funding through the Military Assistance Program, all which helped  
Somoza tighten his grip on the poverty stricken, illiterate country. The  
U.S. further helped Somoza economically. "In a self perpetrating cycle  
the U.S. has funded capitalist expansion, in an effort to incorporate  
new bourgeois sectors with the one hand, then with the other, bolstered  
the repressive capacity of the Somoza apparatus to put down incipient mass  
movements or bourgeois challenges." <sup>9</sup>

After the death of Ramon y Reyes in the very early fifties, Somoza  
didn't even bother with an election, but kept himself at the head of power.  
With the advent of the Eisenhower administration and the anti- communist  
movement in the U.S., Somoza felt very secure in his position. Popular  
opinion in the U.S. felt that Somoza was a strong defense against commu-  
nism. Among his friends in the U.S. included Richard Nixon, who endorsed  
Somoza's rule in 1955.

Somoza's rule, however, came to an abrupt end in 1956. On September  
21st of that year, a poet by the name of Rigoberto Lopez Perez, in a  
heroic attempt, shot Somoza while he was touring the city of Leon. Somoza  
was quickly flown to the U.S., for medical care, but he was too badly  
wounded, and as a result died soon thereafter. Many people in the U.S.  
mourned his death, including the President, who said, "The nation and I  
personally regret the death of President Somoza of Nicaragua as a result

of the dastardly attack made upon him several days ago by an assassin." 10 After his death, Somoza's sons, Luis and Tachito took over the reigns of power. Luis resumed the presidency and Tachito took over the National Guard. They ran the country together, gaining the praise and approval of Eisenhower and Nixon.

When Castro overthrew the Batista regime in 1959, Nicaragua again offered assistance to the U.S., this time by providing an airfield code named Happy Valley, from where the CIA invasion of Cuba was to be launched.

The decade of the sixties for the Somozas proved to be prosperous for them, and in some ways for the country too. With funds from the Alliance For Progress, Nicaragua began forming a new bourgeois middle class, and a more secure state. Because Luis really wanted no part in running the country, it was also during this time that he appointed Rene Schick to the presidency. Schick quickly joined other Central American countries and the U.S. in signing the Declaration of Central America, which condemned the Castro regime in Cuba. Although Tachito was still in charge of the Guard, Luis felt that the country was making progress, and he wanted out. However, Tachito disagreed. He continued in his father's footsteps by repressing opposition, and secretly he was planning to assume the Presidency himself. Meanwhile leftist guerrilla movements were beginning to get off the ground. From these arose the FSLN, (Frente Sandinista Liberacion Nacional). In 1967, Luis died of a heart attack, leaving Tachito in power. Having recently aided in the 1966 invasion of the Dominican Republic, he was looked upon favorably by the U.S. When Nixon was elected president of the U.S. in 1968, Tachito had reason to feel very secure, for both were friends, and mutual friends of Bebe Rebozo. Somoza the third, as some have called him, continued repressing the people, and suppressing the FSLN, but it kept resurging and gaining momentum. Meanwhile, because of the Vietnam War, the economy of Nicaragua was doing well. Somoza succeeded in keeping the Congress, especially the traditional Conservative and Liberal

parties compliant. According to one source, "The government was run as an extension of the Guard, with little regard for other components of the apparatus and none whatsoever for the masses.." <sup>11</sup> *Would anyone disagree with this?*

In 1969, "U.S. training of the National Guard gave Nicaragua the third highest ratio of military advisors in Latin America.-- training centered <sup>12</sup> on jungle operations, military intelligence and interrogation.

The seventies were probably the most trying decade for the Somoza regime. Although the first couple of years went by smoothly for Tachito, the end of 1972 brought with it the disastrous Managua earthquake. According to one source, "about half a million people had been made homeless, at least twelve thousand had died, and three quarters of the city's buildings <sup>13</sup> had been damaged beyond repair." *why quote? - is it disputed?* Two hundred and fifty million dollars in aid came primarily from the U.S., but from other countries also. However, few of it ever even reached the people. Most of it was seized by the Guard or by Somoza himself. *source?* This inhumanity angered all sectors of the population, including the bourgeois business class. It also caused dissention within the Guard, something Tachito had trouble dealing with. Also the FSLN continued to build its own forces in the countryside.

Somoza, after Nixon's impeachment, began to lose his strength. In 1974, for example, the U.S. began to explore new options to Somoza's tyranny. Under President Ford, U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua, James Theburge, called for; 1) the end of the "old boy" collaboration with Somoza, 2) the cultivation of ties with the bourgeois opposition, and 3) the isolation of the more radical elements of the political spectrum.<sup>14</sup> However, the U.S. continued to supply Somoza with arms. In 1975, for example, a 100% increase in military arms supplies were granted to the country by the U.S. in order to eradicate the FSLN. <sup>15</sup>

Increasing opposition to Somoza caused him to retaliate brutally. The Frasier Subcommittee Hearings on Human Rights in Nicaragua, for ex-



ample, released reports of massive arrests, disappearances and atrocities committed by the Guard against the peasants in retaliation for the FSLN offensive. During the Carter administration, issues of human rights came to take precedence over security in the area. In Somoza's eyes, the U.S. was turning against him. However, between 1968 and 1978, the U.S. provided Nicaragua with almost twenty million dollars in military aid, making it the largest per capita recipient in Latin America.

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Clearly, Somoza was on his way out. What he was to leave behind was a country in turmoil. In September of 1978, during one of his massacres, between five and ten thousand lives were lost in reprisal against national insurrection. Four of Nicaragua's seven largest cities were left in ruins.

In the final years of Somoza's rule the Carter administration drastically cut aid to Nicaragua. It took in the end a position of non-intervention, leaving Somoza to his own resources, and the settlement of the country's problems to the native people. However, in 1978, the bloodiest year of Somoza rule, 66 million dollars in various forms of aid was given to Nicaragua. Clearly, the Carter administration was rather unclear as to its policies, on the one hand endorsing human rights, and on the other, supplying a dictator with money.

Somoza was finally ousted from power in July of 1979. Many attribute the leftist takeover to U.S. non-intervention. When the FSLN took over, lots of work and improvements were needed. With a population of 2.3 million people, the majority lived in extreme poverty (60%). 95% of those in urban areas led a marginal existence. Illiteracy, when Somoza stepped down, stood at 60% nationwide, and 80-95% in the countryside. Somoza fled Nicaragua in July of 1979, to the good ole USA. However, less than a year later, while on vacation in Paraguay in July of 1980, a bomb exploded inside his car, instantly killing him, and leaving no remains.

In conclusion, the U.S., with its concern for regional security

financed and for the most part condoned the Somoza family rule in Nicaragua, largely because they were anti-communists and pro U.S. However, along with this, the Somoza family succeeded in acquiring a vast fortune of over 500 million dollars, and in killing over thirty thousand of their own countrymen. Clearly, the U.S.A. is in part responsible for all the tragic atrocities committed by the family. Maybe someday it will be held accountable to the people of Nicaragua and the people of the world for its blatant disregard for human life.

*Since all of your sources seem to be anti-Somoza, it is impossible to ~~detect~~ detect any controversy about Somoza except that all agree he was bad & the U.S. helped him out. If you had consulted other kinds of materials, the disagreements + biases would have emerged.*

*B+*

Endnotes

1  
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2  
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Diederich, p.22.

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Diederich, p.21.

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9  
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Diederich, p.48.

11  
Bendana, p. 11.

12  
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13 Eduardo Crawley, Dictators Never Die, (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1979), p.148.

14 Bendana, p. 31.

15 Bendana, p.32.

16 Bendana, p. 32.

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