

NICARAGUAN

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The FIU-USSOUTHCOM Academic Partnership
Military Culture Series

Florida International University’s Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy (FIU-JGI) and FIU’s Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center (FIU-LACC), in collaboration with the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), formed the FIU-SOUTHCOM Academic Partnership. The partnership entails FIU providing academic support to further USSOUTHCOM’s understanding of the political, economic, security, and cultural trends in Latin America and the Caribbean. The current research centers on understanding militaries’ cultures throughout the region.

FIU defines military culture as “the internal and external factors—historical, cultural, social, political, and economic—that shape the dominant values, attitudes, and behaviors of the military institution, that inform how the military views itself and its place and society, and shapes how the military may interact with other institutions, entities, and governments.” The research team identifies and expounds upon the cultural factors that inform the rationale behind the perceptions and behavior of select militaries by analyzing its historical evolution, its sources of identity and sources of pride, and their relationship with various actors, government, society, etc.

To meet the stated goals, FIU hosts academic workshops in Miami that bring together subject matter experts from throughout the U.S. and Latin America and the Caribbean to explore and discuss regional militaries. Additionally, in some instances FIU researchers conduct field research in select countries and examine these factors through in-depth interviews. At the conclusion of each workshop and research trip, FIU publishes a findings report.

The following Nicaraguan Military Culture Findings Report, authored by Randy Pestana and Dr. Brian Latell, is the product of a working group held in Miami on January 18, 2017, which included seven experts on Nicaraguan military history and culture: Roberto Cajina, José Miguel Cruz, Elvira Cuadra, Brian Latell, Frank O. Mora, Orlando J. Pérez, and Randy Pestana.

The views expressed in this findings report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. government, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Southern Command, FIU-JGI, Florida International University, or the institutional affiliations of the participants.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Military interventions, counter-insurgent operations, and a CIA-orchestrated paramilitary campaign by the United States in Nicaragua at different times during much of the 20th century gave rise to powerful anti-American sentiment.

- Through much of its history as an independent nation, Nicaragua's armed forces, defense policies, and leadership were strongly influenced by the U.S. Fifteen years after the country's independence, a succession of 11 American military interventions began. The most notorious, and still politically toxic one, occurred in 1856 when Nicaragua came under the control of William Walker, an American adventurer who seized power and anointed himself president.
- In the 20th century, American Marines helped establish the National Guard (*Guardia Nacional*), and then fought with it to contain a nationalist insurgency led by Augusto César Sandino. Sandino unquestionably developed into a patriot seeking to free his country from American domination.
- In 1932, command of the *Guardia* was bestowed on Anastasio Somoza Garcia, a ruthless general favored by the American Marine expeditionary force. He and his two sons ruled Nicaragua in dynastic succession until 1979. It was then that the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) defeated the dynasty and the *Guardia* with considerable Cuban support, establishing a Marxist dictatorship.

The Nicaraguan Armed Forces' identity has evolved from an apolitical and autonomous institution, to a re-politicized and opportunistic military force.

- Known between 1979 and 1990 as the Sandinista People's Army (EPS), official military doctrine was profoundly antagonistic toward the United States.
- The election of Violeta Chamorro in 1990 reshaped the identity of the Nicaraguan Armed Forces. They transitioned from a political force used by the FSLN, to a nonpartisan institution subordinate to civilian control and charged with defending the constitution and national sovereignty.
- With the return of Daniel Ortega and the subsequent changes to the military code in 2014, the military has become a more political institution tasked with protecting "national security" rather than "national defense." The Nicaraguan military remains opportunistic and supports Ortega's attempt to consolidate power provided that it is in their best interest as an institution.
- The military under Ortega has seen a dramatic rise in both the defense budget and armed forces personnel. This increase is largely due to Ortega's pursuit of re-politicizing the armed forces with increased training emphasizing heroic examples of Augusto César Sandino and Andrés Castro, among others.
- This shift has severe implications for both U.S.-Nicaraguan and Russian-Nicaraguan military-to-military engagement. For the U.S., Ortega's consolidation of power will likely lead to the pursuit of a transactional relationship whereby the Sandinista leadership is merely seeking resources in exchange for temporary cooperation. In contrast, arms and materiel provided by Moscow combined with Vladimir Putin's attempt to use Nicaragua

as a strategic center for Russian engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean serves as a primary threat to U.S. influence in the region.

The military is the most trusted state institution in Nicaragua.

- This level of trust speaks to the military's role as protector of the state of sovereignty. Levels of confidence in the military, however, have slightly decreased in recent years due to increasingly close relations between military leadership and Daniel Ortega.
- Citizens overwhelmingly support military assistance in combating crime and violence. However, this is not an indication of dissatisfaction with the Nicaraguan police; citizen perception of the police is third highest in Latin America and the Caribbean behind Chile and Ecuador.
- The Nicaraguan military serves to guarantee the nation's territorial integrity while also performing domestic disaster relief missions that have fostered good will with the populace.

THE NICARAGUAN MILITARY IN PERSPECTIVE

Born out of revolution, the Nicaraguan military (known since 1995 as the Army of Nicaragua (*Ejército de Nicaragua*—EN) is the most trusted state institution in the country. A professional and respected institution, it serves as territorial guarantor and supporter of domestic missions, earning strong support from the population. Because Nicaragua suffers from comparatively low levels of violence, the EN has rarely been called on to suppress crime or political opposition. By undertaking popular disaster relief missions it has fostered good will with the populace. The military remains popular despite its increasing dependence on Russia for arms and materiel and the role it plays as the increasingly compliant armed wing of the ruling Sandinista party.

The EN transitioned from the partisan, ideological force it had been under the Marxist Sandinista regime that governed from 1979 to 1990. Known as the Sandinista People's Army (*Ejército Popular Sandinista*—EPS), it served as the military adjunct of the revolutionary government dominated by brothers Daniel and Humberto Ortega. With substantial flows of Cuban and Soviet arms and materiel, and fighting a determined American-supported insurgency (the *contras*), the EPS grew into the largest military in Central American history.¹ Nevertheless, it was unable to defeat the insurgency that by 1987 operated with considerable impunity in half of the country.

When Daniel Ortega lost the 1990 presidential election to a broad coalition of political parties led by Violeta Chamorro, the EPS was gradually depoliticized. By the end of her term, the service had been reduced to just 13,000 personnel. In 1995, defense minister Humberto Ortega resigned and the Sandinista People's Army became the politically neutral Army of Nicaragua. With these changes, the Ortegas and their Sandinista colleagues surrendered the control they had exercised over military doctrine, policies, and international relationships. Notably, the dominant influence exercised by Cuban and Soviet advisers and benefactors was reduced or eliminated.

However, when Daniel Ortega assumed the presidency in 2007, the military began to revert to the politicized force it had been from 1979 to 1990. Winning reelection in 2006 and 2011 Ortega has continued to subordinate the EN to Sandinista control. Constitutional amendments enacted in 2014 reversed the earlier reforms that had resulted in a politically nonpartisan force. The military

¹ Roger Miranda and William Ratliff, *The Civil War in Nicaragua: Inside the Sandinistas*, (Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, 1993), p. 233.

now reports directly to the president. By law, its mission is to protect “national security” rather than to act in “national defense.” The difference is significant in that the EN now by law can perform unspecified domestic functions. Thus, also controlling the national police, Daniel Ortega has accumulated unregulated control over all instruments of legitimate state violence.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE NICARAGUAN ARMED FORCES

Through much of its history as an independent state, Nicaragua’s armed forces, defense policies, and leadership have been profoundly influenced by the United States. However, from July 1979 to early 1990, Fidel Castro’s Cuba exercised dominant influence by dint of his personal engagement with a new Marxist-Leninist leadership in Managua, and through his military and intelligence services. Virtually all American influence on Nicaraguan government policy was supplanted. Utilizing both Cuban and Soviet financial and military support, the Sandinista People’s Army (EPS) defeated the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship. The EPS served as a tool of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional*—FSLN) led by brothers Daniel (Chief Executive) and General Humberto Ortega (Head of the Army). The shocking electoral defeat of Daniel Ortega in the 1990 presidential election led to the transformation of the EPS into a more professional and less ideological military force. This shift coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and a severe contraction of Cuba’s economy during what Havana described as the “Special Period.” The devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 led to renewed U.S.-Nicaraguan military-to-military engagement based on mutual goals rather than ideological differences that had hindered relations in the first place. Also, the importance of having liberal leaders as opposed to FSLN leaders during renewed relations with the U.S. cannot be overstated. Despite the return to the presidency of Daniel Ortega in 2007, and his re-election in 2011 and 2016, U.S.-Nicaraguan military-to-military relations have remained strong, albeit limited, despite the anti-U.S. rhetoric spewed by the FSLN leader. U.S. influence today, however, is being challenged by external actors; namely Russia, Cuba, and Venezuela, no doubt with Ortega’s encouragement. As he continues to consolidate power, it is likely that anti-U.S. posturing in the government will increase, with the authoritarian leader looking toward Vladimir Putin as his partner of choice.

Early American Interventions

Nicaragua achieved its independence in 1838, and barely 15 years later a succession of 11 American military interventions began. The first was in 1853 when a small Marine force landed on the Atlantic coast to settle a dispute between an American millionaire and local Nicaraguan authorities. A year later, a U.S. naval gunship bombarded a small Atlantic coast town after an American diplomat was slightly injured in a street melee. The town was bombarded, and occupied by Marines, until hardly a structure was left standing.²

It was of much greater historical significance when in 1856 Nicaragua came under the control of William Walker, an American adventurer who seized power and anointed himself president. Not surprisingly, his brief reign, supported by his band of American mercenaries, provoked a powerful nationalistic backlash. Within a year he was expelled from power and later executed. Walker's importance in Nicaraguan history is reflected in the frequency with which his name and intervention have been invoked, mostly by leaders on the left of the political spectrum. Daniel Ortega often mentions Walker to stoke nationalist and anti-American sentiment.

Military interventions, counter-insurgent operations, and a CIA-orchestrated paramilitary campaign were conducted by the United States in Nicaragua at different times during much of the 20th century. They began with a Marine Corps intervention in 1912 that lasted until 1933, except for nine months in 1925. Nicaragua's first national constabulary force was established under U.S. supervision in 1925 and was put under the command of a retired American Army officer.

Soon, however, according to a U.S. diplomat, the force "was fast disintegrating into a politically controlled machine" under the sway of one of the country's dominant political parties.³ Since then, except for the years between 1990 and 2006, the military has continued reliably to support the partisan dictates of a succession of presidents and dictators. Therefore, the missions, doctrines, size, structure, and foreign influences on the armed forces have varied substantially over the decades.

² William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States and Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

³ Richard Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), p. 47.

The Guardia, Sandino, and the Somoza Dynasty

From 1927 to 1933, American Marines trained and assisted in the creation of the National Guard of Nicaragua (*Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua*) as it gradually coalesced into a professional armed force. For several years almost all of its commissioned officers were American Marines dispatched without consultation with Nicaraguan officials.⁴ Such was the pervasive role of the Marines, that when the *Guardia* assumed responsibility for police duties, an American Marine served as Managua's police chief.

In 1932, command of the *Guardia* was bestowed on Anastasio Somoza Garcia, an ambitious and ruthless general whose charm and fluency in English ingratiated him with a succession of influential American officials. Soon the *Guardia* was called to combat, confronted by a rebel guerrilla force led by dissident general Augusto Cesar Sandino. Originally Sandino's motives were "complex and ever-shifting," according to historian Robert Kagan.⁵ "Sandino's behavior does not square," Kagan adds, "with modern efforts to portray him as a forerunner of the revolutionary, anti-imperialist movements of the 1960s and 1970s: At one time or another Sandino claimed to adhere to a dozen different political and religious doctrines."⁶ Yet, during the course of the intermittent insurgency he led, Sandino unquestionably developed into a patriot seeking to free his country from American domination.

The low intensity war lasted five-and-a-half years. At its peak, the *Guardia* had about 3,000 men in uniform, relying on the operational support of between 1,000 and 3,000 Marines. Richard Millett writes that "the assumption of police duties influenced the *Guardia*'s development in many ways. In order to carry out those duties and continue to combat Sandino, it became necessary to create a much larger force than originally anticipated."⁷ After initial setbacks with poorly trained recruits, Sandino retained the initiative through most of the conflict. He was able readily to mobilize and arm up to 600 insurgents as circumstances in the field required. Operating mainly out of Nicaragua's rugged Northern provinces, he waged a brutal campaign, determined to decimate the hated *Guardia*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977-1990* (New York, NY, The Free Press, 1996), p. 13.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty*, p. 74.

Kagan writes that Sandino also “sought every opportunity to strike at Marine outposts, to embarrass the Americans and enhance his reputation as Nicaragua’s emancipator.”⁸ A Marine was killed in July 1927 in the first battle initiated by Sandino, and another was wounded. In December 1930, eight Marines died in a guerrilla ambush, and later American civilians and their properties were also targeted. News of the American losses spread widely in the United States, and soon a powerful anti-war sentiment took root. When the Marine’s continued presence in Nicaragua appeared to be unsustainable, they were definitively withdrawn in 1933.

Lured to Managua in February 1934 on the pretext of arranging a peaceful settlement of the conflict, Sandino was detained and then summarily executed by *Guardia* officers. Somoza had ordered the murder, according to Millett, “with considerable trepidation...and (as a result) Sandino’s ghost has haunted the Somozas ever since.”⁹

The reference is to Somoza Garcia, and his sons Luis and Anastasio, who ruled in succession as Nicaraguan presidents from the mid-1930s until June 1979. With some variations, the Somozas governed with iron fists while engaging in rampant corruption. Relying on the *Guardia* and generally supported by American policies, the dynasty endured as one of the longest family dictatorships in Latin American history, exceeded only by the Castro brothers in Cuba. The third Somoza, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, was indeed haunted and beleaguered during most of his time in power by a metastasizing radical and ultra-nationalist insurgency aptly named after Sandino.

The Sandinista National Liberation Front

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*—FSLN) began as a guerrilla nucleus in 1961 by three young Marxists—Carlos Fonseca, Tomás Borge, and Silvio Mayorga. They were determined to emulate the victory two years earlier of Fidel Castro’s 26th of July guerrilla movement, hoping to transform Nicaraguan society and liberate it from American influence. The Somoza dictatorship was almost immediately a prime target of Cuban subversion much of it channeled to the FSLN. Havana provided training in guerrilla and

⁸ Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, p. 16.

⁹ Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty*, p. 160.

clandestine warfare, arms and materiel, and a steady flow of propaganda to undermine the Somoza dynasty.

Assuming the presidency in 1967, while continuing to serve as Guard commander, West Point graduate Anastasio Somoza Debayle was loathed by the Sandinistas and their international allies, just as his father had been despised by Sandino. But the nascent guerrilla movement was unable to repeat the exploits of their namesake, and until the mid-1970s were kept on the run by the much more powerful and disciplined *Guardia*. The insurgents were easily routed in a series of small skirmishes, and were unable to establish a secure operating base anywhere in the countryside despite continued Cuban government support.

Sandinista fortunes improved somewhat in December 1974. Well-trained guerrillas invaded a house party in a wealthy Managua neighborhood kidnaping a dozen of the country's most distinguished citizens. The operation attracted considerable international publicity, and sympathy for the Sandinistas. A settlement negotiated with Somoza Debayle, was widely interpreted as favorable to the guerrillas. Fourteen of their comrades were released from Nicaraguan prisons in exchange for the prominent captives. The Sandinistas also garnered a one-million-dollar ransom and safe passage to Cuba.¹⁰

Somoza's vengeful actions in the aftermath also proved beneficial in the longer run to Sandinista hopes for attracting popular support. Somoza declared a state of siege and an intensified counterinsurgency effort. *Guardia* personnel "imprisoned, brutalized, and killed not only Sandinista fighters, but also hundreds of peasants suspected of helping them," according to Kagan.¹¹ Human rights organizations around the world condemned the crackdown, and perhaps most damaging for Somoza's standing at home, Nicaragua's Catholic bishops expressed damning criticism of the *Guardia's* brutality. Popular opinion in Nicaragua, that had scarcely even acknowledged the Sandinistas, now began to change.

Meanwhile, doctrinal and operational disputes undermined Sandinista unity even as the FSLN was reaching its nadir as a viable force in 1976. Three factions disputing guerrilla strategy and tactics sought predominance. Carlos Fonseca, one of the founders, returned to Nicaragua from Cuba, in an effort to assuage the deepening tensions. Yet, he was apprehended, and executed by

¹⁰ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*.

¹¹ Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, p. 28.

the *Guardia*. The newest of the three factions, the *Terceristas* (the Third Way), sought to bridge the gaps between the other two.

Tercerista leaders, brothers Humberto and Daniel Ortega, gradually emerged as the most powerful Sandinista figures. Humberto, with a co-author, issued a new strategy in his *General Political-Military Platform*. The plan, according to Kagan, attacked the other factions for failing to take advantage of rising tensions in society since the declaration of Somoza's state of siege. It quoted Lenin: "today the misfortune is in our routine, in our doctrinism, in intellectualism's immobility, in the senile fear of all initiative."¹² Kagan adds that the platform emphasized that the Sandinistas would seek to work with a broad opposition coalition, but that they would be "hegemonic." Through the remainder of the 1970s and 1980s, the intransigent Marxist and Leninist beliefs of the Sandinista leaders were impossible to ignore.

Their fortunes again improved, this time dramatically, in 1977 and 1978. In October 1977, the guerrillas, benefiting from increased covert Cuban support, launched small scale attacks on *Guardia* garrisons in five cities. The attackers were repulsed, but the scope and audacity of the coordinated actions gave lie to the widespread belief in Nicaragua and abroad that Somoza was invulnerable. At the same time, a dozen prominent Nicaraguan civilians in exile praised the "political maturity" of the Sandinistas and declared that the FSLN would have to play a role in any solution to Nicaragua's political impasse.¹³

Developments in 1978 revealed how deeply opposition to the dictatorship had begun to cut across political, class, and occupational lines.¹⁴ Businessmen and entrepreneurs had grown more resentful as their prospects were greatly constricted by the rapacity of the Somoza Debayle dictatorship. By then he and his family owned a substantial percentage of the national economy. William LeoGrande argues that by the time he was overthrown, Somoza "controlled an economic empire worth nearly \$1 billion, including one-third of the nation's arable land, the meat-packing industry, the construction industry, the fishing industry, the national airlines the only television station, radio stations, banks and more."¹⁵

¹² Ibid, p. 38.

¹³ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, p. 17.

¹⁴ Morris H. Morley, *Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, p. 14.

The Sandinistas Triumph with Cuban Support

In January 1978, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, scion of an aristocratic family and editor of *La Prensa*, a family newspaper that sharply criticized Somoza, was assassinated. The unsolved murder ignited waves of protest against the dictatorship, which most Nicaraguans believed was responsible. The pace of rebellion accelerated as the Sandinistas attracted new recruits who took up arms with them. The *Tercerista* faction led by the Ortega brothers was ascendant.

In his memoirs of the Sandinista rise to power published in 2004 Humberto Ortega wrote of the crucial importance of Cuba's support: "In March 1978, the Terceristas linked up with Cuban emissary Julian Lopez and we sent a small contingent of combatants to Cuba for training."¹⁶ He adds that on April 7, 1978 a *Tercerista* delegation headed by his brother Daniel traveled to Cuba to meet with Fidel Castro. He says it was the first time a group of FSLN representatives met with the Cuban leader. Humberto Ortega adds that in September 1978 he met several times with Castro who was accompanied by some of his most senior and experienced intelligence officers. Ortega elaborates in some detail about the large scale and variety of arms that Castro provided during the final months of the insurgency.¹⁷

In August two dozen *Terceristas* launched their most spectacular attack at the very heart of the dictatorship. Morris Morley described it in the following manner: "An estimated 1,500 people, including most (members) of the Nicaraguan congress, were taken hostage and released only after Somoza agreed to a series of guerrilla demands, among them a ransom payment and a freedom guarantee of safe passage out of the country for a substantial number of political prisoners."¹⁸

The congress had been in session at the time, and several of Somoza's relatives were among the hostages. After two days Somoza relented, but at tremendous cost. Tomás Borge, an FSLN patriarch and founder, was freed from prison and decamped to Cuba. Somoza's capitulation made him and the *Guardia* appear impotent. Kagan writes, "In one blow the Sandinistas shattered the image of invincibility that Somoza had carefully built..."¹⁹ It was the beginning of the end of the

¹⁶ Humberto Ortega, *La Epopeya de la Insurreccion* (Managua, Nicaragua: LEA Grupo Editorial, 2004), p. 391; Cuban intelligence operative Lopez continued to play a key role in coordinating Cuban support during the insurgency.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Morley, *Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas*, p. 122

¹⁹ Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, p. 56.

Somoza dynasty. It proved to be critical in persuading Fidel Castro to increase the infusion of Cuban arms and internationalist military and intelligence officers aiding the insurgency.

Morley adds that the rising domestic opposition that followed the seizure of the congress was compounded by the appearance for the first time of cracks in *Guardia* unity. Senior officers may even have initiated incipient plotting against Somoza. A major shake-up of the high command resulted as discontent among officers with Somoza's policies festered.²⁰ Then, in early September, the *Terceristas* launched a series of coordinated attacks in major departmental capital cities, hoping to ignite mass popular insurrection. According to Morley, "Popular support for the guerrillas enabled them temporarily to take control of a number of provincial cities and shake the regime to its foundations."²¹ The insurrection spread as many poor youths joined in violent protest.

Somoza responded by unleashing the *Guardia*. By various accounts, it had about 10,000 troops at the time. Kagan writes that "elite troops of the National Guard used tanks and trucks to shell and overrun the poorly armed youths in the streets. The small Nicaraguan air force bombed and strafed barricaded blocks in Matagalpa, killing civilians and damaging homes in poor neighborhoods. As the *Guardia* took control of the five embattled cities, troops executed young men they found in the streets, firing submachine guns at point-blank range."²² Kagan adds that "the furious assault was the most visible act of bloodletting in recent Nicaraguan history."²³

These events hastened the development of a Latin American consortium of countries and leaders who worked to provide military support to the Sandinistas. Leaders in Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica endeavored to help. Mexico's President José López Portillo provided diplomatic support. However, Cuba remained the most crucial ally in the final months of the war against Somoza. Encouraged by the accelerating pace of the struggle, Castro hosted a clandestine meeting with Borge and the Ortega brothers in September 1978. Roger Miranda, close aide of Humberto Ortega, later wrote (with co-author William Ratliff): "During early 1979 Cuban support became important as Havana shipped substantial quantities of arms to the FSLN, but managed to do so as to benefit mainly the Leninist-Stalinist members of the (*Tercerista*) faction."²⁴ Relying on the

²⁰ Morley, *Washington, Somoza, and the Sandinistas*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²² Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, p. 59.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Miranda and Ratliff, *The Civil War in Nicaragua*, p. 99.

depth of influence that its Cuban allies exerted over the Sandinistas, the Soviet Union stayed mostly on the sidelines during the insurgent phase of the conflict. Still, Cuban arms and materials provided to the insurgency had initially been provided to Havana by the USSR.

Most observers in Washington underestimated the growing strength and momentum of the Sandinistas, while overestimating the strength and resolve of the *Guardia*. The policies of Jimmy Carter's administration in Washington, reflecting the president's priority of promoting human rights and keeping dictators at arm's length, contributed to the waning support for Somoza. By late spring 1979, the Somoza family dictatorship was hanging by a thread.

The Sandinista Regime

Finally, on July 19, 1979, with massive Cuban support, including special operations forces led by experienced Cuban military and intelligence officers, the swelling ranks of Sandinista guerrilla forces took control of Managua. They arrived there amid a popular outpouring of support. Somoza fled the country along with many of his senior Guard officers. The victors had promised to pursue a nonaligned foreign policy, but within days of assuming power "large numbers of Cuban officials flew to Managua," according to Kagan.²⁵

Roger Miranda, aide to General Humberto Ortega, admitted that: "Immediately after the triumph of the revolution, the Cuban presence and influence were felt at all levels in the new government and society, sometimes even in excess of what some FSLN Leninists wanted, and far more than the majority of the people wanted."²⁶ Indeed, Castro took on the fledgling Sandinista government as his revolutionary offspring, with a sense of custodianship. Julian López, the ranking Cuban intelligence officer who had coordinated the flow of support from the island, was named ambassador in Managua at the outset of the Sandinista regime. He began to exercise considerable influence on the Sandinista leadership. Military and other support from the Soviet Union and some Soviet bloc nations, also bolstered Sandinista prospects.

The Ortega brothers and their dominant *Terceirista* faction were favored by Cuba. Three leaders of each of the Sandinista factions, including the Ortegas and Borge, formed a nine-man National Directorate to lead their movement and the new revolutionary regime. Emulating their

²⁵ Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, p. 126.

²⁶ Miranda and Ratliff, *The Civil War in Nicaragua*, p. 100.

Cuban mentors, the nine decided to call themselves *comandantes* (commanders) and typically appeared in public in military fatigue-type uniforms.

The Leninists among them thought of the directorate as Nicaragua's politburo, the country's supreme decision making body. And, for the next ten years or so that is exactly how it functioned. Daniel Ortega was acknowledged as first-among-equals in the collective leadership. Reflecting the senior structure of the Cuban leadership where Fidel Castro was served by his brother Raúl, the minister of the revolutionary armed forces, Daniel and his brother Humberto, the new defense minister, effectively controlled the new regime in Managua.

Humberto commanded the Sandinista People's Army. A substantial Cuban military mission got to work providing training for the EPS, mostly still a rag-tag irregular force. Sophisticated Soviet arms and materiel, sent, as before, mostly from Cuban stocks, arrived. Tomás Borge, freshly back from safe haven in Cuba, established a new ministry of interior housing internal security and intelligence functions. Cuban advisers helped to guarantee that the ministry was modeled closely on the Cuban ministry of interior. Other Nicaraguan government ministries and agencies worked with Cuban civilian advisers. Soviet and other Communist bloc advisers also were dispatched to help bolster the regime.

Built on the ruins of the Somoza *Guardia*, the EPS emerged as a totally new entity, but with the same mission as the Somoza *Guardia*: upholding the regime against adversaries domestic and foreign. Just as before, the new Sandinista military force was deeply politicized. Simply stated, the EPS served as the armed wing of the Sandinista national directorate.

In 1980 and 1981, Humberto Ortega led delegations to Moscow to arrange for greater Soviet support for the fledgling EPS. Fearing some kind of forcible intervention by the United States because of the strident anti-American policies they adopted and the covert support they provided Marxist revolutionaries in neighboring El Salvador, the *comandantes* were certain they had to build a large and powerful defensive force. After Ortega's second trip to Moscow, the regime announced that Nicaragua intended to build a military force of 200,000, including active

duty and militia.²⁷ One of the most ambitious of the other Soviet commitments to the defense of the revolution was the construction of a strategic airfield.

Former CIA analyst Robert Vickers wrote about it in the official journal of the intelligence profession. He explained that, with Soviet funds and Cuban technical assistance, construction at Punta Huete airfield began in 1980, with a more than 3,000-meter runway capable of handling any aircraft then in the Soviet inventory. Revetments for MIG fighter aircraft were also built. Vickers adds, “The status of the airfield and the possibility that Moscow might send jet fighters and other Soviet military aircraft there were key national security issues during the administration of President Ronald Reagan.”²⁸ He adds that the airfield was not completed until after the end of the Cold War, and the MIGs were never delivered.

The Contras

Rapidly constructing a socialist revolutionary regime in Nicaragua with international communist support was not as easy as Castro and the Sandinista *comandantes* believed. As Kagan writes: “The Sandinistas’ actions in the summer and fall of 1980 indeed set off the first stirrings of armed counterrevolutionary activity”²⁹ Violence had been increasing in the conservative countryside. Former members of the *Guardia* were established across the northern border in Honduras making forays into Nicaragua. Dissident Sandinistas and democratic socialists who had supported the FSLN, now locked out by the Ortegas and the Leninist *Terceristas*, were becoming disenchanted and more inclined to active opposition. Gradually, an armed and determined opposition to the Sandinistas developed.

In 1981, the Argentine military government began providing money, training and advisers to former *Guardia* officers in Honduras.³⁰ By the spring and summer of the following year, the nascent anti-Sandinista militants began to receive covert assistance from the Reagan administration, and they initiated an armed struggle from bases near the border in Honduras. They came to be known as the *contras* (counterrevolutionaries). Later in the year the ranks of the mostly

²⁷ Robert Vickers, “Intelligence and Punta Huete Airfield: A Symbol of Past Soviet/Russian Strategic Interest in Central America,” *Studies in Intelligence* 60, no. 2 (2016): pp. 13-24.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁹ Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle*, p. 148.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

peasant and farmer contra force had swelled to about 1,000. They accelerated attacks in northern Nicaragua where the populace had grown increasingly restless under the Sandinistas.

Roger Miranda writes about the EPS that: “As the war with the contras intensified in 1983, more and more specialized troops were needed. But it became increasingly clear that not enough young Nicaraguans were sufficiently dedicated to the revolution to voluntarily join the military.”³¹ Humberto Ortega was able then to persuade the national directorate to impose obligatory military service. By the following January young men were being involuntarily inducted. The draft law proved to be one of the most unpopular measures ever undertaken by the FSLN regime. However, the recruits needed were painfully slow to become even moderately reliable fighters. Meanwhile, the contras, mostly natives of the highland regions where they were fighting, were much more effective. The EPS was often on the defensive in skirmishes with growing contra forces.

Miranda revealed that prior to the American invasion of Grenada in October 1983, Nicaraguan national defense was based on traditional principles of conventional warfare as taught by Cuban and Soviet advisers. But the strategy made no sense in the face of the burgeoning unconventional contra challenge. All the arms and materiel received from the Soviet Union conformed, he said, to a strategy for mounting a conventional defense against an American invasion. No consideration had been given to the possibility of being confronted by a broadly-based peasant insurgency.³²

With fairly consistent and sophisticated covert American government support, the contra forces grew steadily into a formidable adversary committed to toppling the Sandinista dictatorship. The regime steadily lost popularity in the face of mounting economic problems and the hugely unpopular military conscription. Miranda, who collaborated with Humberto Ortega in the EPS’s efforts to contain the insurgency, wrote that “by 1983 the contra war had become a far-ranging peasant insurrection.” In response, he said, “the Sandinistas developed the largest and most sophisticated army in Central American history.”³³

This massive yet poorly trained and motivated force struggled against the dedicated and disciplined contras. By 1987, according to Miranda, the contras operated “with considerable

³¹ Miranda and Ratliff, *The Civil War in Nicaragua*, p. 204.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, pp. 232-233.

impunity in half of the country.”³⁴ Equipped with Redeye surface-to-air missiles, contra fighters “took down twenty Soviet helicopters” flying counterinsurgent operations, according to Miranda.³⁵ He also wrote that, according to the EPS’s own account, in 1987 alone 2,000 of its combatants died in action.³⁶ Bearing such losses, the Ortega brothers became more receptive to international diplomatic initiatives intended to end the conflict. As the Cold War was winding down, an accord was negotiated, and the Sandinista leadership agreed to hold free and fair presidential elections. Both sides of the conflict laid down their weapons in an historic settlement.

Daniel Ortega never imagined he would lose the election in 1990. Nor could he have envisioned that the many previously contentious elements of the political opposition ranging from the far right to the extreme left would join in a single coalition, behind a remarkably appealing candidate. Violeta Chamorro, the widow of assassinated journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, campaigned across Nicaragua wearing white dresses, usually attracting large, crowds of supporters. She won decisively, and with the sanction of international election observers, including former American president Carter, Ortega had no reasonable choice but grudgingly to concede.

SOURCES OF IDENTITY OF THE NICARAGUAN ARMED FORCES

The military’s sources of identity has adjusted over the course of three periods in Nicaragua: the post-revolutionary period, the professionalization period, and the Ortega era. During the post-revolutionary period, the Sandinista Popular Army defined its identity in political and ideological terms. The EPS closely aligned to both the Soviet Union and Cuban intelligence and military forces in an effort to defeat the “Yankee Imperialists” to the North. The election of Violeta Chamorro in 1990 led to the professionalization and transformation of the EPS into the National Army of Nicaragua (*Ejercito Nacional*—EN). This period was defined by pragmatism rather than ideology and would shape the formation of the Nicaraguan state to what it is today. The return to power of Daniel Ortega in 2007 saw the reformation of the National Army of Nicaragua to an opportunistic and increasingly political institution. In more recent years, Ortega has successfully coopted military leadership and removed the checks and balances that limited executive control over the

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 233

³⁶ Ibid.

armed forces. This has re-politicized the EN threatening to return the military's sources of identity to that of the post-revolutionary period.

The Chamorro era (1990-1997) saw the transformation of the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) into a professional and apolitical military institution. The Chamorro administration sought to demobilize the EPS, then transform it into an apolitical institution via Military Code Reform. Removing General Humberto Ortega as head of the armed forces was an obvious imperative and strongly advocated by the United States. During Chamorro's first year in office, the Army downsized to 27,864 troops.³⁷ By 1993, the number decreased to 15,250 troops.³⁸ Additionally, the defense budget decreased from \$177 million in 1990 to \$36 million in 1993.³⁹ Despite his trepidation, General Ortega worked with the Chamorro administration to transform the armed forces into a nonpartisan institution subordinate to civilian control. EPS leaders understood that to ensure the military's survival as an institution, they need to conform to civilian authorities and distance the military from the FSLN.⁴⁰ In reality, the transition to democracy and the process of demilitarization was due to negotiations between Chamorro and the FSLN unlike its Central American neighbors to the North.⁴¹ As Roberto Cajina contends, "Ortega and Chamorro needed each other despite their differences" to advance the nation.⁴²

The Code of Military Organization, Jurisdiction, and Social Provision in 1994 served as the final transition from the EPS to a professionalized and non-partisan military institution subordinate to the president. The EN's role as defined by the constitutional reforms was to defend Nicaraguan sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity," while remaining "a professional, nonpartisan, apolitical, obedient" force under civilian control.⁴³ The reforms also specified that the military should "govern itself in strict accordance with the Political Constitution."⁴⁴ It is only in

³⁷ Javier Melendez Quinonez, *El gasto de defensa en Nicaragua: la toma de decisiones en la asignacion de recursos* (Managua, NI: CEEN/NDI, 2000).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ J. Mark Ruhl, "Civil-Military Relations in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua," *Armed Forces & Society* 30, No. 1 (2003): pp. 117-139.

⁴⁰ Ruhl, "Curbing Central America's Militaries."

⁴¹ Jose Miguel Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America: The Survival of the Violent State," *Latin American Politics and Society* 53, No. 4 (2011): pp. 1-33.

⁴² Roberto Cajina, *El Ethos Cambiante del Ejército de Nicaragua*, (Miami, FL: Florida International University, 2017).

⁴³ Constitute Project, "Nicaragua's Constitution of 1987 with Amendments through 2005," *Oxford University Press*, n.d., https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Nicaragua_2005.pdf, accessed January 18, 2017.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

exceptional cases (e.g. severe internal disorders, calamity, or natural disasters) when the president should be entitled to order the intervention of the EN in support of the National Police.⁴⁵

The implementation of a fixed five-year term for EN commander-in-chief ultimately led to the peaceful transition from General Ortega to General Joaquín Cuadra in 1995. Cuadra had been nominated by the Military Council and accepted by President Chamorro creating favorable relations between the head of state and head of the military. General Cuadra continually stressed the army's subordination to the president and refused to become politically involved despite political divisions following the election of right-wing president Arnoldo Alemán.⁴⁶ As General Cuadra would later state, "the Army distanced itself from local leaders' infighting to make it more difficult for any particular person or interest group to use it as an instrument for personal gain."⁴⁷

Despite its identified role as guardian of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, the EN successfully assumed domestic roles as a means of improving relations with civil society while securing its place as a state leader. The EN participated in disaster relief operations, peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, combating organized crime and illegal fishing, and supporting the Supreme Electoral Council during elections.⁴⁸ These activities provided legitimacy to an institution in dire need of it. Disaster relief operations became a point of pride for the EN due to its disaster response efforts following Hurricane Mitch in 1998. They also showed the capabilities of the military to respond to national emergencies.

Hurricane Mitch marked the return of U.S.-Nicaraguan military-to-military cooperation following U.S. assistance and aid in support of the Nicaraguan population. President Bill Clinton announced in 1999 the allocation of nearly \$700 million in funding for those countries most affected by Hurricane Mitch.⁴⁹ Soon thereafter, U.S. officials began working with the EN in counter-narcotics cooperation and in 2000, signed an agreement reestablishing formal military relations.⁵⁰ This increase in cooperation coincided with additional foreign aid and military training. President Enrique Bolaños even sent a small unit to Iraq in support of the U.S. The EN perceived

⁴⁵ *Ley de la defensa nacional* (N° 748 – 2010/22/22).

⁴⁶ Ruhl, "Civil-Military Relations in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua."

⁴⁷ Joaquín Cuadra Lacayo, "Nicaragua: From War to Peace," *Military Review* 84, no. 6 (2004): 63-65.

⁴⁸ Elvira Cuadra, *El ejército y sus vínculos con la sociedad en Nicaragua* (Miami, Florida: Florida International University, 2017).

⁴⁹ Mark B. Rosenberg and Luis G. Solis, *The United States and Central America: Geopolitical Realities and Regional Fragility* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007).

⁵⁰ Ruhl, "Civil-Military Relations in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua."

itself as a partner to the U.S. military, and began forging a relationship based on mutual interests and respect. It did, however, remain wary of U.S. intentions and tempered American expectations by remaining targeted in its engagement. Therefore, U.S.-Nicaraguan military-to-military relations continued in areas of mutual interests (i.e. counter-narcotics, disaster relief, etc.).

The election of Daniel Ortega in 2006 started the slow transformation of military identity in Nicaragua. Immediately upon his election, Ortega exhibited distinctly authoritarian tendencies and showed little tolerance for dissent.⁵¹ He immediately made provisions to run for re-election—something that had not been constitutionally permitted since Nicaragua’s transition to democracy after 1990. Yet, in October 2009, FSLN justices in the Supreme Court ruled that the constitutional prohibition against presidential reelection did not apply to Ortega.⁵² Liberal justices in the minority could not overturn the FSLN’s ruling that made it possible for Ortega to run and win reelection in 2011.⁵³ The FSLN-controlled National Assembly repealed Article 147a in January 2014, essentially abolishing term-limits and allowing Ortega to run for reelection indefinitely.⁵⁴

Ortega also sought to re-politicize the military in 2014 by promoting loyal Sandinista officers, and reforming the military code to increase presidential authority over the military.⁵⁵ The already weak Ministry of Defense was further isolated from the chain of command, with Ortega allowing military officers to hold posts in the executive branch.⁵⁶ The code also allowed military personnel to remain in service for up to 40 years, with a retirement age of 65.⁵⁷ The latter favored Sandinista loyalists. Soon thereafter, Ortega declared that the Nicaraguan Army “is the son of the Revolution, because it was born of the Revolution.”⁵⁸ Simply put, Ortega succeeded in consolidating power and politicizing the military under his command. According to one expert, 17 to 26 Sandinista founders are still in military service.⁵⁹

⁵¹ Thomas W. Walker and Christine J. Wade, *Nicaragua: Emerging from the Shadow of the Eagle* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017).

⁵² Brendan Riley, “This Ongoing Institutional Crisis Brought to You by Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega,” *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, June 16, 2010, <http://www.coha.org/this-ongoing-institutional-crisis-brought-to-you-by-nicaragua%E2%80%99s-daniel-ortega/>, accessed on January 18, 2017.

⁵³ Walker and Wade, *Nicaragua*.

⁵⁴ David Close, *Nicaragua: Navigating the Politics of Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2016).

⁵⁵ Orlando J. Pérez, *Civil-Military Relations in Post-Conflict Societies: Transforming the Role of the Military in Central America* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Cajina, *El Ethos Cambiante del Ejército de Nicaragua*.

⁵⁹ This was a finding as result of a workshop examining the Nicaraguan military on January 18, 2017, in Miami, FL.

The Nicaraguan Military Today

There are three branches within the EN: the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force.

- The Army is the largest of the forces with approximately 10,000 troops.⁶⁰ It is the land force responsible for defending the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- The Navy is tasked with supporting the Army and undertaking independent missions as directed by the High Command of the Army. It is estimated that the Navy has 800 personnel.⁶¹
- The Air Force carries out missions in support of the Army and Navy and has approximately 1,200 personnel.⁶²

The military under Ortega has seen a dramatic rise in both the defense budget and armed forces personnel (see Figure 1). From 2008-2016, the defense budget increased from \$42,191,833 to \$72,558,630.⁶³ It peaked at \$85,080,114 in 2013 during initial military reforms that sought to bring military personnel closer to the administration.⁶⁴ It remained steady in 2014 at \$82,888,983 before dropping, albeit slightly, in 2015.⁶⁵ The overall trajectory in Nicaraguan defense spending is expected to increase; approximations for 2017 defense spending is \$78 million.⁶⁶ Similarly, armed forces personnel has also increased, albeit at a slower pace. From 2008-2016, armed forces personnel spiked from 9,412 troops to 12,793.⁶⁷ The most dramatic increase, however, occurred from 2014-2016 which saw an increase of 2,435 troops.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ IISS, *The Military Balance: 2017*.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Roberto Cajina, *A Comparative Atlas of Defence in Latin America and Caribbean, 2016 Edition* (Managua, NI: Resdal, 2016).

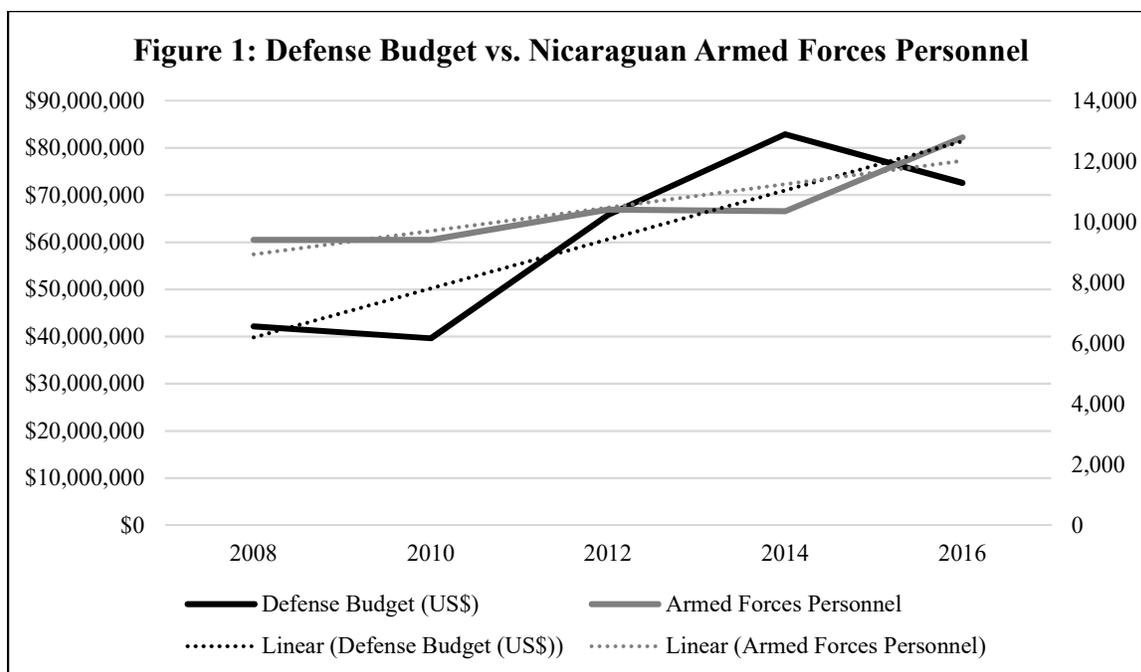
⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance: 2017* (London, UK: IISS, 2017).

⁶⁷ Cajina, *A Comparative Atlas of Defence in Latin America and Caribbean, 2016 Edition*.

⁶⁸ Ibid.



SOURCE: Created by authors with data from RESDAL

Regarding personnel breakdown, soldiers comprise 68 percent of the armed forces, with officers (14 percent), classes⁶⁹ (13 percent), and NCOs (5 percent) making up the rest.⁷⁰ The EN today remains largely a land-based unit that provides assistance to the police on border and internal security operations, although there has been increased focus on disaster relief, coastal-security, and counter-narcotics.⁷¹

Nicaragua’s constitution forbids compulsory recruitment making all military service optional. New soldiers attend the National School of Basic Infantry, “Soldado Ramón Montoya” (ENABI). This three-month training course educates new soldiers on the “moral values, ethical principles and military tradition of the Army, as well as to develop the optimal physical and psychic conditions for the accomplishment of the combat missions and natural disasters.”⁷² Education and training emphasize the “respect and fulfillment of the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Nicaragua,” while citing “heroic examples’ of Augusto Cesar Sandino, José Delores

⁶⁹ Classes are Sergeants and is the degree immediately superior to “first soldier.”

⁷⁰ Cajina, *A Comparative Atlas of Defence in Latin America and Caribbean*, 2016 Edition.

⁷¹ IISS, *The Military Balance: 2017*.

⁷² “Ejercito de Nicaragua,” *Ejercito de Nicaragua*, N.d., <http://www.ejercito.mil.ni/contenido/profesionalizacion-desarrollo/enabi/enabi-vision-mision.html>, accessed January 18, 2017.

Estrada Vado, and Andrés Castro, among others—all liberal military heroes used by Ortega to diminish conservative influence in the state.⁷³ Graduates of this school become temporary military members and are hired for a three to five year period which can be renewed for an additional five years. They also have access to additional military courses that allow them to become career military personnel.

Soldiers can receive additional schooling at the National School of Sergeants, “Sergeant Andres Castro” (ENSAC), the Superior Center of Military Studies, “General Division José Dolores Estrada” (CSEM), and the Superior School of General Staff, “General Benjamin Zeledon Rodriguez” (ESEM). ENSAC trains NCOs and sergeants with “patriotic values and leadership” on the “scientific, technical and professional development required by a modern army” in support of Chiefs and Officers⁷⁴ CSEM provides advanced education in a number of fields including military science, engineering, business, medicine, and nursing. CSEM also maintains educational exchanges with Russia, Venezuela, and the United States as well as Central American partners Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. ESEM trains senior officers to perform at Command and Staff positions at the operational level. Officers acquire the equivalent of a Master’s Degree of Postgraduate Studies in weapons and services, military intelligence, medical services, and international law and conflict. The school’s motto is “to reach greatness, one must walk through narrow and difficult paths,” emphasizing the patriotism and sacrifice senior officers must be willing to make in defense of the nation.⁷⁵

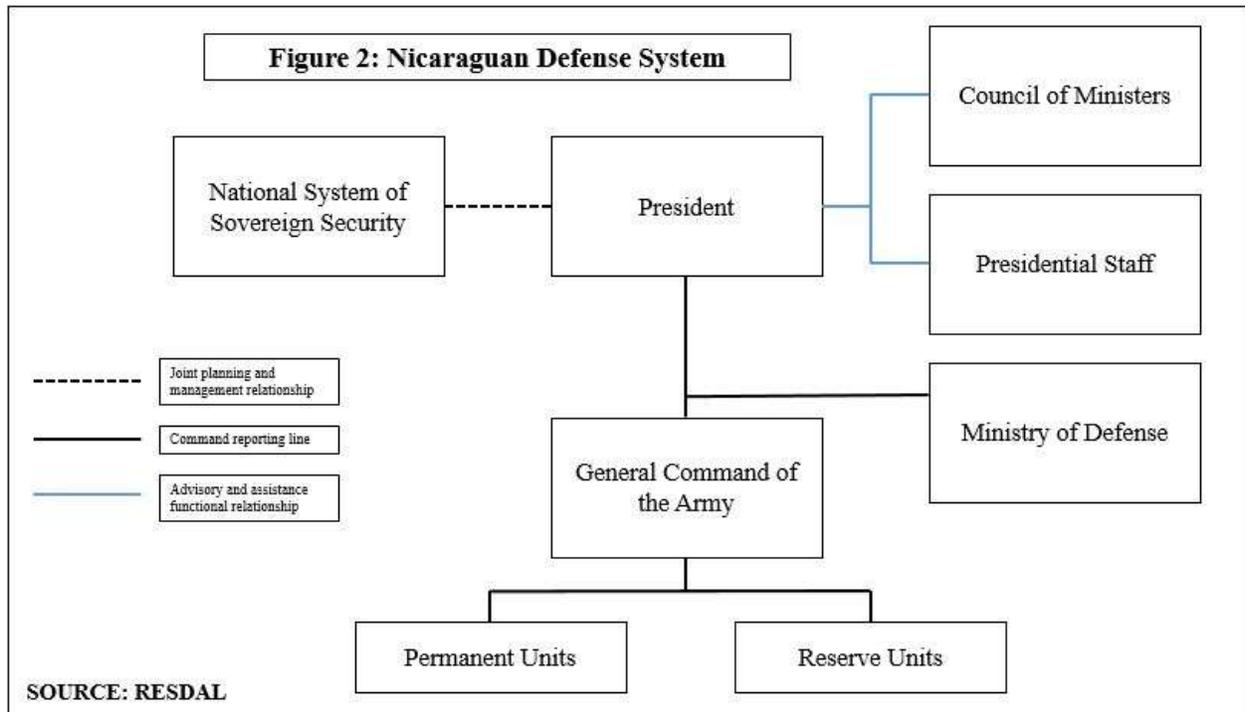
President Daniel Ortega is the Supreme Chief of the Army and controls all aspects of the Nicaraguan Armed Forces (see Figure 2). The Minister of Defense is Martha Ruiz Sevilla who is tasked with determining defense policy. In reality, Ortega has assumed direct control of the ministry and determines defense priorities and objectives. The Commanding General of the Nicaraguan Army is General Julio César Avilés Castillo. He exercises the general command of the EN (both permanent and reserve units) and reports directly to the president. The Council of Ministers and the Presidential Staff serve in an advisory and assistance functional relationship.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

The National System of Sovereign Security maintains a joint planning and management relationship.



The Ortega government has increased relations with the Russian Federation since his return to power in 2007. At the end of his first year in power, Ortega declared that the military forces “are daughters of Sandino, who came to fight Yankee troops.”⁷⁶ It was only natural that Ortega would return to his revolutionary partner in Russia. Relations began with Russia supplying mostly food and medicine. Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea, however, Moscow has sought to build its global footprint by providing security assistance to Managua. It is estimated that 90 percent of the EN’s equipment is Cold War-era, with some recent modernization and refurbishment.⁷⁷ In 2016, Nicaragua received 20 T-72B1 main battle tanks from Russian surplus stocks, with an additional 30 tanks expected in 2017.⁷⁸ Nicaragua also announced its intention to acquire new helicopters and patrol vessels (also from Russia) to support counter-narcotic and other internal

⁷⁶ Cajina, *El Ethos Cambiante del Ejército de Nicaragua*.

⁷⁷ “Russia-Latin American Relations: The Case of Nicaragua,” *MEMRI*, August 15, 2016, <https://www.memri.org/reports/russia-world-russia-latin-america-relations-case-nicaragua>, accessed on January 18, 2017.

⁷⁸ IISS, *The Military Balance: 2017*.

security efforts. Additionally, training relations with Moscow continue to improve Russian-Nicaraguan military-to-military relations. Further, Russia has built a new compound overlooking the U.S. Embassy in Managua—likely to be utilized as an intelligence gathering complex.⁷⁹ It appears that Russia is seeking to make Nicaragua its geostrategic epicenter in Latin America with Ortega and his wife (and new Vice President) Rosario Murillo likely to remain in power for the foreseeable future.

THE NICARAGUAN ARMED FORCES AND SOCIETY

The relationship between the Nicaraguan Armed Forces and civil society has shifted considerably over time. The EPS from 1979-1990 was seen as too political and closely linked to Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega. Its primary role was to defend the political project of the Revolution and provide a direct counter to the more repressive National Guard.⁸⁰ EPS forces reached 12,000 troops during the 1980s which provided care to civilian populations in war-torn areas.⁸¹ Their support of civilian populations earned them trust among society. However, as the EPS surpassed an estimated 100,000 troops,—the largest military institution in the region—military leaders (namely General Humberto Ortega) were viewed by parts of society as *piricuacos* (rabid dogs) more concerned with the preservation of power than the well-being of the state.⁸²

This ultimately led to the popular election of Violeta Chamorro in 1990 and the transformation of the military from a revolutionary force to a professionalized Nicaraguan armed forces. As previously mentioned, Chamorro depoliticized the EPS. The transformation from revolutionary force directed by the FSLN, to the newly minted Army of Nicaragua directed by the citizens of Nicaragua, created favorable impressions of the military as an institution that remain today. More importantly for a large portion of the Nicaraguan population at this time, was that the

⁷⁹ Joshua Partlow, “The Soviet Union fought the Cold War in Nicaragua. Now Putin’s Russia is back,” *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/the-soviet-union-fought-the-cold-war-in-nicaragua-now-putins-russia-is-back/2017/04/08/b43039b0-0d8b-11e7-aa57-2ca1b05c41b8_story.html?utm_term=.dd3d5c40dfb3, accessed on April 9, 2017.

⁸⁰ Cuadra, *El ejército y sus vínculos con la sociedad en Nicaragua*.

⁸¹ Army of Nicaragua, *30 years of international life: 1979-2009* (Managua, Nicaragua: Army of Nicaragua, 2009).

⁸² J. Mark Ruhl, “Curbing Central America’s Militaries,” *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 3 (2004): 137-151; Cuadra, *El ejército y sus vínculos con la sociedad en Nicaragua*.

Army had not been absorbed by U.S. domination like its Central American counterparts.⁸³ Additionally, their continued role in internal matters, especially those related to agricultural security, gained good favor with civil society.

The election of businessman Arnaldo Alemán in 1996 tested the relationship between the executive and the military. President Alemán came into office hoping to use the EN as his personal weapon to intimidate his political opposition. However, Alemán's autocratic tendencies and reputation as a corrupt politician gained him little favor with the military leadership and the general population.⁸⁴ For the military, this protection of the constitution and refusal to support undemocratic actions by Alemán gained them favor amongst the population. The military gained further public respect following the previously mentioned efforts by the EN following Hurricane Mitch in 1998. The support for the military combined with the dissatisfaction with Alemán prevented the president from denying the Military Council's recommendation of Major General Javier Carrión despite his preference for Brigadier General Roberto Calderón.⁸⁵ Carrión remained a check on presidential power through the end of Alemán's term.

Vice President Enrique Bolaños succeeded Alemán as president in 2003 and maintained a relatively strong relationship with military leaders. This was somewhat surprising given the rocky relationship his predecessor maintained with the military as well as Bolaños' previous comments questioning Nicaragua's need for an Army.⁸⁶ The Nicaraguan populace placed pressure on the president to increase public security leading to the increased use of the military domestically.⁸⁷ The population favored the use of the military to support the police to combat crime and violence; this remains true today.

The year 2007 marked the return of Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega to the presidency in Nicaragua. Ortega immediately began promoting loyal Sandinista officers and refused to name a Minister of Defense, allowing him to assume de facto control of the EN.⁸⁸ Military leadership initially rejected Ortega's overtures to concentrate control of the EN. However, they could not to

⁸³ Gary Prevost, "The Nicaraguan Revolution: Six Years after the Sandinista Electoral Defeat," *Third World Quarterly* 17, No. 2 (1996): pp. 307-328.

⁸⁴ Ruhl, "Civil-Military Relations in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua."

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Perez, *Civil-Military Relations in Post-Conflict Societies*.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

prevent him from amending the military code and increasing presidential authority over the armed forces. Ortega's consolidation of power has re-politicized and weakened the independence of the military.

Despite Ortega's power grab over the military, society maintained a favorable impression of the armed forces. The EN demonstrated its capabilities in disaster relief in following Hurricane Felix in 2007. In accordance with Article 23 of Law 337, President Daniel Ortega declared a state of emergency, and the military deployed 2,207 military and civilian personnel to move approximately 3,400 families out of affected areas.⁸⁹ The EN also secured the flow of humanitarian assistance thereafter, providing food, sanitary packages, and other critical supplies.⁹⁰ These actions have positively shaped society's opinion of the EN.

Citizen Perception of the Nicaraguan Armed Forces

Trust in the EN has remained consistently high especially when compared to that of the police (See Figure 3). From 2004-2012, trust in the military increased by 15 percent, with a slight decrease in 2014 and 2016, respectively.⁹¹ In contrast, trust in the police only increased three percent since 2004.⁹² Nevertheless, the Nicaraguan police remain one of the most trusted police units in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁹³ Interestingly enough, however, 75.9 percent of Nicaraguan citizens surveyed believed the armed forces should participate in security missions.⁹⁴ This is likely a byproduct of the perception that the military is best equipped and trained to counter crime and violence.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

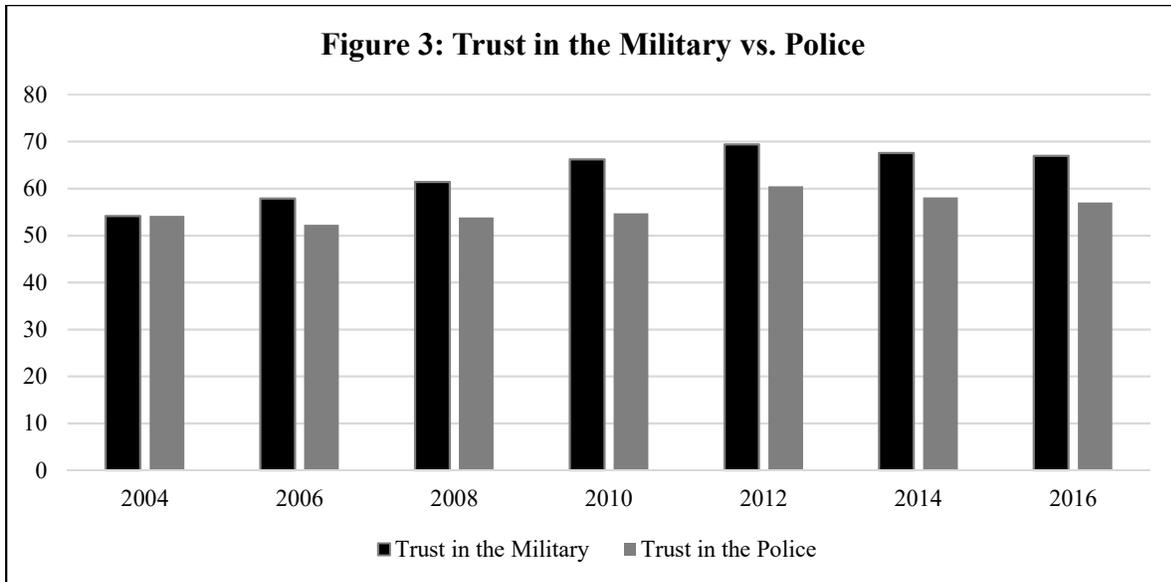
⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Kenneth Coleman and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, *Cultura politica de la democracia en Nicaragua y en las Americas, 2014: 10 años del Barometro de las Americas* (Nashville, TN: LAPOP, 2014).

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ In 2014, only Ecuador and Chile had higher levels of citizen trust of the police forces.

⁹⁴ Coleman and Zechmeister, *Cultura politica de la democracia en Nicaragua y en las Americas, 2014*.



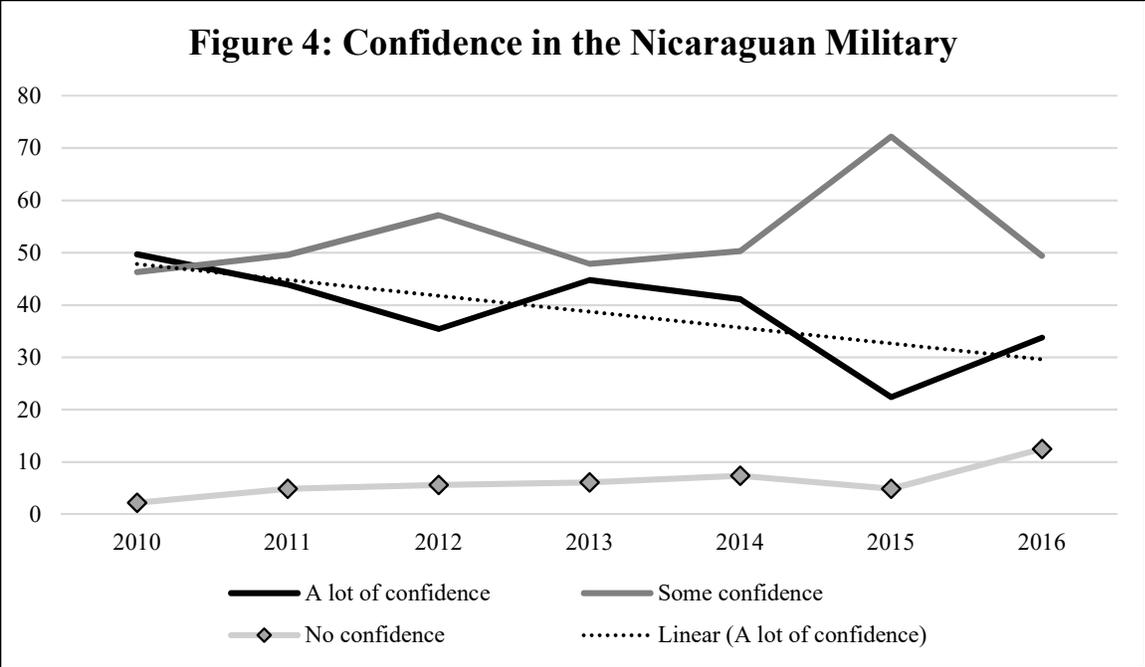
SOURCE: Created by authors with data from LAPOP

When examining levels of confidence in the EN, there has been a sharp decrease since 2010 (see Figure 4). In 2010, 49.7 percent of citizens surveyed show a lot of confidence in the armed forces as compared to 2.2 percent which had no confidence.⁹⁵ As of 2016, those who had high confidence in the armed forces had reduced to 33.8 percent, while those with no confidence in the military had increased to 12.5 percent.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, 83.2 percent of those surveyed showed some level of confidence in the EN.⁹⁷ Thus, while confidence in the Nicaraguan military has decreased, they are still well-perceived by the majority of society.

⁹⁵ Cuadra, *El ejército y sus vínculos con la sociedad en Nicaragua*.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.



SOURCE: Created by authors with data from SISMO/M&R⁹⁸

When compared to other state institutions, the EN remains the most trusted institution in Nicaragua (see Table 1). Citizen trust in both the president and the national assembly has increased dramatically since Ortega assumed office but still remains below that of the EN.⁹⁹ From 2008-2016, trust in Ortega has increased nearly 29 percent with trust in the national assembly increasing by more than 20 percent.¹⁰⁰ It remains to be seen how the continued consolidation of power by Ortega will affect citizens’ perception of the Nicaraguan leader or the military. As of now, however, there seem to be little negative effects.

Year	Military	Police	President	Congress
2016	67	57	62	57
2014	67.6	58.1	61.2	49.4
2012	69.4	60.5	61.3	51.3
2010	66.2	54.7	41.8	39.5
2008	61.4	53.8	33.3	36.5

SOURCE: Created by authors with data from LAPOP

⁹⁸ Percentages are through December of that year with the exception of 2016 which go through September.

⁹⁹ Coleman and Zechmeister, *Cultura politica de la democracia en Nicaragua y en las Americas*, 2014.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

U.S.-Nicaraguan military relations are positive today despite the increased anti-US rhetoric spewed by Daniel Ortega. At the Central American Air Chiefs Conference in December 2016, Air Force Lt. General Mark D. Kelly acknowledged the United States' willingness to support the Nicaraguan military in activities that are mutually beneficial. Kelly's main message to "Nicaraguan friends" was that "We [the U.S.] will be there for them as many times as they want us there."¹⁰¹ The primary focus of bilateral engagement remains combating transnational organized crime, but both militaries maintain strong ties due to joint disaster relief efforts and other small scale operations. This cooperation earns the U.S. favor within the EN, and also with the Nicaraguan population. As a whole, 64.2 percent of Nicaraguans surveyed in 2014 approved of American military cooperation.¹⁰² However, trust in the U.S. military remains one of the lowest in Latin America at 33.4 percent.¹⁰³ This suggests that most Nicaraguans have misperceived notions that the U.S. may resort to interventions like in the past. This is likely a byproduct of Ortega's continued references to William Walker's role in Nicaraguan history and to U.S. support from 1936-1979 for the Somoza family dictatorship, and its often brutal National Guard.

U.S.-Nicaraguan military relations going forward depend on the willingness of the Nicaraguan government to support U.S. efforts to counter threat networks and other security concerns facing the region. Relations must also be contingent on Nicaragua maintaining respect for human rights and democratic values. The U.S. should continue to build upon mutual respect and confidence with the EN by remaining ready to support, for example, in the event of a natural disaster. It is critical that the U.S. avoid a transactional relationship with the Nicaraguan government whereby the Sandinista leadership is merely seeking resources in exchange for temporary cooperation. Such a relationship could provide short term benefits, but would limit long-term security gains.

As Ortega continues to consolidate power, one can expect a decrease in U.S.-Nicaraguan military engagement in favor of Russian-Nicaraguan relations. Russia remains Nicaragua's

¹⁰¹ Geraldine Cook, "We are the Partner of Choice," *Dialogo*, December 22, 2016, <https://dialogo-americas.com/en/articles/we-are-partner-choice>, accessed on January 18, 2017.

¹⁰² Coleman and Zechmeister, *Cultura politica de la democracia en Nicaragua y en las Americas*, 2014.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

primary weapons supplier and is seeking to increase military cooperation between Moscow and Managua. While citizen support for the Nicaraguan military has decreased, albeit minimally, in recent years, they maintain high favorability among the majority of the population. The same could be said for Daniel Ortega who won reelection in 2016 with 72 percent of the vote, albeit in a much-disputed electoral process.¹⁰⁴ With a splintered opposition, and Ortega's wife Rosario Murillo serving as Vice President, it is likely that they will continue to politicize the military in ways not seen since the country's return to democracy in 1990. President Vladimir Putin views Nicaragua [and the Ortega presidency] as an area of opportunity; a geostrategic center for increasing Russian engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean. For the foreseeable future, Russia will remain the primary challenge to U.S. influence in Nicaragua.

¹⁰⁴ Joshua Partlow, "Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega wins third consecutive term amid questions about democracy," *The Washington Post*, November 7, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/05/nicaraguas-daniel-ortega-headed-for-third-consecutive-term-amid-questions-about-democracy/?utm_term=.a5a00288893d, accessed on January 18, 2017.

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