

A monument in Granada marks Nicaragua's independence from Spain.



tionaries removed the governor of Nicaragua. The city of Granada supported the revolutionaries, but the city of León remained loyal to Spain. On September 15, 1821, the province of Nicaragua declared its independence from Spain.

In 1822, Nicaragua joined the Mexican Empire, but this lasted only a year. Then, Nicaragua joined with Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to become part of a Central American Federation. This organization failed because some countries wanted to govern themselves, while others wanted one central government. Nicaragua finally became an independent republic in 1838.

Passage Across the Isthmus

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the United States had little interest in Nicaragua. The turning point came with the Californian gold rush. People and mining equipment needed to be transported across the continent from east to west as quickly as possible. The route from the Atlantic port of San Juan del Norte (then known as Greytown), along the San Juan River to Lake Nicaragua, and then overland to San Juan del Sur on the Pacific coast seemed to offer the best opportunity.

In 1849, the Nicaraguans gave the United States the exclusive right to develop the route. A company belonging to Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt was to build a canal within twelve years. In return, the United States promised to protect Nicaragua from foreign, namely British, invasion.

The British were far from happy with this arrangement and tried to stop the operations. The United States and Great Britain then agreed to work together, though they did not mention this to the Nicaraguan government. But the disputes continued. The Nicaraguan government also had other problems. One problem was William Walker, an adventurer. Another problem was a civil war. The route was built, but after only five years in use, the route was closed from 1857 until 1862 and completely abandoned in 1868.



Cornelius Vanderbilt



William Walker

The dictionary describes a *filibuster* as a "lawless adventurer, or one who engages in unauthorized and irregular war against foreign states." In the nineteenth century, William Walker was the most famous filibuster in Central America.

Walker was born in 1824 in Nashville, Tennessee. After becoming a doctor, he worked as a lawyer and newspaper editor in New Orleans, then moved to California.



Walker was a strong advocate of slavery, and he wanted to create a republic. He seized land in southern California and declared it a separate nation with himself as president. Walker's

rebellion was quickly put down and he stood trial. He was acquitted by a jury. Despite his failure, he had gained a reputation as a daring soldier of fortune.

In 1855, Walker and a band of about fifty men went to Nicaragua. He easily took control and set up his own government the following year.

Walker declared himself president of Nicaragua. An ancient Indian legend said that a saviour would come to the Nicaraguan region with light eyes, and Walker often referred to himself as "the grey-eyed man of Destiny." However, once in power he ruled like a tyrant. He angered the Nicaraguans by making English the official language and selling native land to American companies. His support of slavery met with

some approval in the United States, but many people in Central America were far from happy.

Walker dreamed of establishing an empire of Central American countries. He wanted to use the canal across the isthmus to attract shipping interests to Central America. He also planned to use slave labor on plantations in the region. Walker's biggest mistakes were underestimating Great Britain's interests in Central America and angering Cornelius Vanderbilt.

Led by Costa Rica, backed by Great Britain, and funded by Cornelius Vanderbilt, the Central American nations declared war. During the "National War," the filibusters were defeated in the battle of Rivas near the Costa Rican border. Walker fled to the United States. Later, he made other attempts to return to Central America, the last in 1860. The British Navy caught him as he tried to enter Honduras. After being turned over to the authorities, he was executed in Trujillo, Honduras. He was only thirty-six years old.



"The Thirty Years"

Compared with the 1840s and 1850s, when Nicaragua had more than thirteen leaders, the last part of the nineteenth century was a period of stability and prosperity. Nicaraguans refer to this period as the Thirty Years.

Several conservative governments were in charge during this period. The exporting of coffee, much in demand in Europe, led to an economic boom. Coffee growers became wealthy and the gap between them and the peasant farmers became wider. But with the profits from coffee and other crops, such as bananas, the government was able to improve communications with new telegraph lines, roads, and railroads.

Another important development occurred in 1857. Granada and León agreed to make Managua the seat of government and effectively the country's capital city.

Send In the Marines

In 1893, the Liberals, led by José Santos Zelaya, took control in a coup. A coup is when a particular group suddenly takes over a government, often by force. During his sixteen years in office, Zelaya made many improvements. He opened the country to foreign investment, increased coffee and banana production, created a professional army, and built new roads, railroad lines, schools, and government buildings. It was also during his time in office that Mosquitia was officially incorporated into Nicaragua.

Because Zelaya was a dictator, he upset the United States. By the turn of the century, U.S. companies controlled most of Nicaragua's production of coffee, bananas, gold, and timber.

José Santos Zelaya





Benjamin Zelaya

The United States was again interested in constructing a trans-isthmus canal. But Zelaya would not give his permission. His anti-American stance angered conservative groups in Nicaragua who were mostly landowners. In 1909, a revolt broke out. When two U.S. citizens, who had taken part in the revolt were killed, the United States sent 400 marines to Bluefields on the Atlantic coast to support the Conservatives. Zelaya was forced to resign.

But the troubles did not end there. The Liberals and Conservatives continued to be at each other's throats. In 1912, the United States was again asked to send in marines when a Liberal force led by Benjamin Zelaya threatened to unseat the Conservative government. When Zelaya's revolt crumbled, he was killed. U.S. marines remained in Nicaragua until 1933.

During this time, Nicaragua signed various treaties which gave the United States more control over Nicaraguan affairs. In 1916, the two countries agreed to the Chamorro-Bryan Treaty. This treaty gave the United States the rights to build a canal across Nicaragua.

In 1925, believing the Conservatives to be well-established in government, the United States withdrew the marines. But the next year the marines returned to stop a Liberal revolt. In 1927, most of the rival parties agreed to put down their arms and work together democratically. They signed the Pact of Espino Negro. One rebel leader, however, would not sign. He was Augusto César Sandino.

Augusto Sandino

Augusto Sandino was born in 1895. As a young man he spent time in Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. During his travels, he was influenced by the new ideas of communism and support for indigenous peoples. Returning to Nicaragua in 1926, he found work in a U.S.-owned gold mine and was soon lecturing the workers on social injustice.

Sandino formed a small army of workers and peasants. He vowed to wage his guerrilla campaign until the last U.S. marine had left the country. The marines left in 1933. However, in 1934, while in the middle of negotiations with the government, Sandino was arrested and executed by the National Guard.



U.S. marines in Nicaragua



Sandino, leading his Army for the Defense of Nicaraguan Sovereignty, continued to fight. But by the 1930s, the United States was tiring of the guerrilla war, and upset by the growing list of casualties. A plan was devised so that U.S. troops could go home. It was agreed that the North Americans would train a Nicaraguan National Guard to take over their job. Although Sandino had agreed that he would stop fighting once the marines left, he changed his mind because he believed the National Guard was a tool of the U.S. government.

As a compromise, President Sacasa offered Sandino and his men an amnesty. One night, after dinner with the president, Sandino was murdered. The person behind the assassination was the head of the National Guard, Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza Garcia. He was a very ambitious man who feared Sandino might persuade the president to get rid of the National Guard. With Sandino out of the way, Somoza Garcia was on the first step of a ruthless road to power. Once Somoza Garcia gained control of the country, he and his sons controlled Nicaragua for forty-two years.

The Somozas

Anastasio Somoza Garcia became president in 1937. He retained his position as head of the National Guard and used it to control virtually everything in Nicaragua from the radio stations to the public health service. He appointed only friends and relatives to important government and legal jobs. He bribed supporters to keep them loyal. Within a year, he was in a strong enough position to declare that he would stay in power beyond his presidential term.

Somoza Garcia was educated in the United States and understood North American culture. He knew he had to remain friendly with the U.S. government. To convince the United States, he created a government that was similar to a democratic government. He found ways to stay in power without appearing to override the constitution. The National Guard dealt with any opposition.

During World War II, it suited Somoza Garcia to declare Nicaragua's support for the Allies and the United States. Already enormously wealthy from coffee and cattle ranching, his fortunes soared with increased exports of timber, gold, and cotton. His family owned most of these industries. By the end of the war, the president was one of the richest men in Central America.

This was a turning point. The majority of Nicaraguans were still very poor, and the Somozas' wealth made them very angry. By this time, the United States no longer trusted Somoza Garcia. In 1944, Somoza Garcia's opponents felt confident enough to protest openly in massive demonstrations. Once again he deceived them. He placed another person as the new president, and made various promises to the labor unions. By also making peace with the United States, he managed to stay in power. However, in September 1956, he was assassinated by a young poet.

He was succeeded by his sons. The elder, Luis, became president, and Anastasio "Tachito" took over as head of

Anastasio Somoza Garcia (center) and his sons, Luis Somoza Debayle and Anastasio Somoza Debayle



the National Guard. Luis seemed not as ruthless as his father. But Anastasio preferred brute force. Together, they rigged the elections and appointed friends to important positions. They also impressed the United States by being strongly anti-communist, even supplying bases on the Caribbean coast for the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba in 1961.

End of the Somozas

In 1967, Anastasio Somoza Debayle became president. It took the 1972 earthquake to reveal just how corrupt his regime was.

The Sandinistas

In 1961, a group of university students led by Carlos Fonseca, Silvio Mayorga, and Tomás Borge (pictured) formed the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN—Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional), named after Augusto Sandino. The Sandinistas began as followers of Karl Marx, a German who believed that wealth should be spread evenly among all the people of a country. Marx's theory is the basis for Communism.

The Sandinistas' aim was to overthrow the Somozas. Many young people, inspired by Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution two years earlier, volunteered to join. As a small, ill-equipped group they were not able to make much headway during the 1960s. Occasionally, though, some successes against the National Guard gave them good publicity.

The Sandinistas continued to fight through the 1970s. In 1979, they forced the last Somoza into exile. That year, the political branch of the Sandinistas came to power. The Sandinistas remained in government for eleven years.



After the earthquake, members of the National Guard were involved in the widespread looting of homes and businesses. They also took food that overseas organizations had sent to help victims of the earthquake and sold it to people on the streets. Money intended for earthquake victims also found its way into Somoza government accounts. Anastasio Somoza Debayle later denied these things, but few believed him. By 1974, the president's personal wealth was estimated at US\$400 million. People in Nicaragua and in other countries were angered.

As the opposition mounted, so did the confidence of the newly formed Sandinista movement, the FSLN. In 1974, the Sandinistas kidnapped several Nicaraguan officials, including Somoza family members. The FSLN demanded and received a ransom of \$1 million and the release of fourteen prisoners.

The Somoza government became even more repressive. In 1974, Anastasio Somoza Debayle was again "re-elected" president. By now opposition politicians, wealthy businessmen, the Church, and the Sandinistas were working together. President Jimmy Carter threatened to cut off military aid to Nicaragua unless human rights improved.

Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, leader of the opposition and editor of a major newspaper, *La Prensa*, was assassinated in January 1978. A nationwide strike and mass demonstrations followed. The



Chamorro (right) was editor of *La Prensa*.

National Guard still remained in control, but their ruthless tactics led the United States to stop military aid to Nicaragua.

In 1978, the FSLN stormed the National Palace and took 2,000 people hostage—government workers and legislators alike. President Somoza gave way to their demands. Nevertheless, the following year, Somoza announced that he would extend his term in office to 1981. But this time, the opposition and FSLN had the upper hand. By the middle of 1979, the Sandinistas had control of most of the country. They forced Somoza to resign and flee to Miami, Florida. A year later, he was assassinated in Paraguay.

Daniel Ortega



Revolutionaries in Power

The FSLN created a new government, the Junta of National Reconstruction (JNR). It included the Sandinista Daniel José Ortega Saavedra and Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, widow of the assassinated Pedro Chamorro.

The country faced enormous problems. At least 50,000 people had been killed, and more than half a million had been made homeless. About 120,000 people had fled into exile, many of them skilled professional people. The economy was in ruins, and few people had land that they could farm. The majority of people were very poor, food was scarce, and medical help almost nonexistent. The country owed millions of dollars to international banks and organizations.

The U.S. Congress approved an aid package of millions of dollars. The Sandinistas took over the banks and businesses. They also took over the Somoza properties, which added up to more than 20 percent of Nicaragua's best land. The government organized a literacy campaign, and made great improvements in health care.

Not everyone approved of the government's program. Violeta de Chamorro thought it had gone too far. Others felt it had not gone far enough and split from the main party. *Campesinos*, people from rural areas, were frustrated by the long delays in carrying out land reforms. In the Mosquitia region, people were hostile to the FSLN's clumsy attempts to relocate them from their traditional homes.

Chief among the opposition to the FSLN were former National Guard members, many of them exiled in Honduras. The United States also worried about Nicaraguan links with the Soviet Union and Cuba. When President Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, he suspended aid to Nicaragua. In 1982, he authorized millions of dollars for recruiting and training Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries, called *Contras*. By the mid-1980s about 15,000 *Contras* were training in Honduras and Costa Rica. In response, the Sandinistas required all men over age sixteen to join the army. The government had to use

Contras in training



money to pay for the war, which should have been spent on the social needs of the people.

In 1985, the U.S. Congress voted to stop funding the Contras. President Reagan then announced a trade embargo preventing U.S. companies from doing business with Nicaragua. Until that time, the United States had been Nicaragua's main trading partner. The embargo, combined with the on-going war, had a devastating effect on the Nicaraguan economy. As the situation deteriorated, the Sandinistas themselves resorted to repressive measures, human rights violations, and press censorship.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the Irangate scandal was unfolding. Although Congress had decided not to back the counterrevolutionaries, members of the Reagan government

The Chamorros

When the Chamorros first arrived in Nicaragua from Spain in the eighteenth century, they settled in Granada. During the nineteenth century, two family members became president. The most prominent Chamorro was Emiliano Chamorro Vargas (1871-1966). Known as the Lion of Nicaragua, he served as president from 1917-1921. He was active in politics all his life, but when he failed to win the presidency a second time, he went into exile.

The great grand-nephew, Pedro Chamorro, who was the leader of the opposition and editor of *La Prensa*, was assassinated in 1978. His wife, Violeta, took over the management of the newspaper and continued her late husband's opposition activities. She

was elected president in 1990. But the Sandinista revolution split the family. Violeta had become disillusioned with the Sandinista government, thinking its politics too radical. Her newspaper reflected her ideas and was shut down by the Sandinistas in 1986. At the time of her election, Violeta Chamorro's eldest son and youngest daughter worked on *La Prensa* which had reopened. But her eldest daughter was a Sandinista diplomat, and her youngest son was editing the Sandinista daily newspaper, *Barricada*. Pedro's own brothers and a number of cousins in prominent positions also had opposing political views. It remains to be seen which Chamorro will hit the political headlines next.

were selling arms to Iran and sending the money to the Contras. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency also was involved in helping the Contras.

By 1987, all sides were prepared to enter peace talks. An agreement was reached and the Sandinistas promised national elections in 1990. The elections went ahead, with a result that astonished almost everybody.

A New Direction

In the 1990 election, Violeta Chamorro, leader of the coalition, anti-Sandinista UNO (the United National Opposition) defeated Daniel Ortega. The Sandinistas, and the world at large, were stunned. They had been confident of winning the election.

The United States supported the UNO. After the election the United States called off the trade embargo and cut off sup-



Violeta Chamorro celebrates her victory.



Arnoldo Alemán

plies to the Contras. Fearing further violence between the Sandinistas and Contras, Chamorro agreed that Sandinista officers could keep their positions in the army. Ortega's brother continued as head of the military. The Contras were invited to return to Nicaragua from Honduras, provided they turned in their weapons. Many followed orders, but others chose to fight on. These rebels became known as *recontras*.

Chamorro completed her six years in office, though many people believed that her son-in-law, Antonio Lacayo, was in control. Peace finally came to Nicaragua and the economy improved, but divisions within the UNO had surfaced, with right-wing support going to the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC). The party was led by an ex-mayor of Managua, Arnoldo Alemán. In 1996, he was elected president.

Alemán's Government

The inauguration of Arnoldo Alemán in 1997 marked only the second transfer of power in Nicaragua's recent history of one democratically elected president to another. He was supported by wealthy people, the Catholic Church, and many poor people of Managua who had witnessed the U.S.-style developments he had introduced when he was mayor. Though the poor people could not afford the drive-in movies, fast-food restaurants, or shopping malls, they approved of the changes.

Alemán had made a number of campaign promises, including improving the economy and settling the land problem. He has achieved some of his objectives. However, the economy remains weak, and poverty is still widespread. His government has been accused of corruption. Recently, workers and students have carried out demonstrations and strikes against the government.

The relationship between Nicaragua and the United States has improved in recent years, especially after U.S. troops helped after the destruction caused by Hurricane Mitch. Now the two governments are cooperating in the drug war, a problem in the whole Central American region.

There has been tension between Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador over a territorial dispute in the Caribbean waters of the Gulf of Fonseca. In early 2000, armed clashes occurred between Honduras and Nicaragua. The case has been taken to the International Court of Justice in the Hague.

Sandinista Split

Following his defeat to Violeta Chamorro, Daniel Ortega's position as leader of the FSLN was challenged. Some members of the party thought he had too much power. A former vice-president of the FSLN, Sergio Ramirez, called for democratic reform. Sandinistas began to take sides. In September 1994 Ramirez resigned. In the next year, he formed the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS). Many professional people joined his party, including two-thirds of the FSLN representatives in the National Assembly. However, in the 1996 election the MRS gained just one seat in the Assembly compared with the FSLN's thirty-five seats.

