**Nicaragua: A Tortured Nation[(1)](http://www.historiansagainstwar.org/resources/torture/grossman.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22N_1_)**

**By Richard Grossman**

In the twentieth century, the Central American country of Nicaragua saw civil wars, foreign interventions, dictatorship, and revolution. Tens of thousands died violent deaths and many faced various forms of extreme political violence, or torture. United States interventions played a crucial role in the ongoing violence and U.S. policies greatly contributed to the use of torture. This article will briefly trace this tortured history of Nicaraguan.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the United States became concerned about Nicaragua since it was a prime sight for an inter-oceanic canal and U.S. Marines intervened and occupied Nicaragua in 1909, 1912, and again in 1926. In order to stabilize the country and facilitate U.S. control, the U.S. Marines created the Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua. The U.S. Marines conceived, created and commanded the Guardia; however the soldiers were to be Nicaraguans. The Guardia became the key instrument of U.S. influence for the next fifty years.

In 1927 a handful of Nicaraguan patriots decided to resist U.S. occupation. Their leader was Augusto C. Sandino, who organized the Ejército Defensor de la Soberanía Nacional de Nicaragua (EDSNN-Army in Defense of the National Sovereignty of Nicaragua). Sandino led a guerrilla war against both the Marines and the Guardia that lasted until 1933.

The United States Marines and the Guardia launched a counter insurgency war against the forces of Sandino. While he unquestionably organized a nationalist resistance force, U.S. policy makers defined Sandino and his soldiers as bandits. This decision helped define the military tactics that were to be used. Since the U.S. was not fighting a legitimate military foe, the rules of war (such as they were) did not apply. The Marines and Guardia made little distinctions between the Sandinistas and the civilian population: not only combatants but civilians were targets and subjected to the regular use of excessive force and torture.

Not only did the U.S. create the Guardia, Marines trained all the Guardia soldiers and commanded most of the patrols. When the war started in 1927, the Marines and Guardia launched a wave of death and destruction against the Nicaraguan population. For example, one Guardia patrol reported seeing people around a "suspicious" house. They opened fire, with no return fire, and the report then noted, "a woman apparently sixty or seventy years of age was found dead." The Marine commander stated that the shooting was "quite justified." In another example, an unarmed peasant was questioned by another Guardia patrol. This patrol's Marine officer reported that he "refused to divulge name of jefe nor could we get more information from him. He was left where he fell, seriously wounded, jaw broken, right arm broken also shot through back." The report does not say why he was shot or how his jaw and arm were broken, but the implication is that these wounds were the results of torture by the Guardia.

Beatings by the Guardia and Marines were the most common form of torture. These included the use of fists and feet since a number of prisoners were also kicked or stomped. A form of water torture, which consisted of forcing water down a prisoner's throat until the prisoner choked, also occasionally occurred. Peasant women were raped. Psychological torture was also used since Nicaraguans were routinely threatened with beatings and executions, including decapitation. These were more than idle threats. Ironically (given the horrified outcries at the beheading of U.S. citizens in Iraq today), photos of Marines and Guardia soldiers displaying the severed heads of Sandinistas they had killed were published in Nicaragua and throughout Latin America.

Although the war ended in 1933 when the last of the Marines were withdrawn, the torture and abuse of Nicaraguan human rights continued. The Marines left Nicaragua and turned command of the Guardia over to Anastasio Somoza García. Using the Guardia, Somoza García seized control of the government in 1936 and created a regime that would dominate Nicaragua for the next 45 years. Throughout its existence, the Guardia Nacional remained an army of occupation, at war against the Nicaraguan people. It refined and expanded the repressive tactics learned in the war against Sandino. Over the years, the Guardia killed thousands and tortured and imprisoned many more without trial. In 1981, after the regime was overthrown, the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists issued a report on "Human Rights in Nicaragua" that summarized their human rights record. The report noted that, "The scale of the assassinations and torture of opponents . . . was such that they cannot be regarded merely as the results of overzealous or abusive acts by the National Guard. Rather, they were part of a system of government . . . ."[(2)](http://www.historiansagainstwar.org/resources/torture/grossman.html#N_2_)

The U.S. government was clearly aware of the repressive nature of the Somoza regime since, in fact, it had helped to create it. For example, the U.S. Ambassador noted in 1937 that there was no opposition to Somoza due to "the efficacy of the Guardia Nacional as a threat of repression" and that any opponent was likely to be "arrested and beaten up."[(3)](http://www.historiansagainstwar.org/resources/torture/grossman.html#N_3_) Despite the lack of democracy and ongoing repression, the U.S. government continued to support the Somoza regime and provided it with training, equipment, and ideology.

As the Cold War was beginning, the U.S. saw the need to integrate the militaries of Latin America more firmly under U.S. hegemony. The U.S. opened the U.S. Army School of the Americas (SOA) as a special training facility for Latin American soldiers. From 1947 until 2000 over 60,000 Latin American soldiers were trained at the facility. The SOA was just one of many facilities and programs created by the United States to transform the Latin American militaries into secure allies. The School of the Americas was formally closed in January 2001 and replaced with a "new" school with the same purpose, the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

By 1979, when Nicaragua stopped sending students, 4318 Nicaraguans had attended the SOA, more than from any other country at that time. The importance of SOA training cannot be overestimated. In 1976 Father Fernando Cardenal, in testimony before the U. S. House of Representatives, accused 26 specific Guardia officers of human rights violations including tortures such as electric shocks, beatings, and rape. All of them had received training from the U.S., 25 at the School of the Americas. While the SOA was the best-known facility, the United States had many other training programs available to Nicaraguan soldiers. Many were trained at U.S.-based facilities including the Army Infantry and Ranger School, the Command and General Staff College, and the International Police Academy. Of the 26 officers accused of human rights violations by Father Cardenal, 12 had attended programs in the United States. The United States also had military advisors based in Nicaragua who trained over 4000 Guardia members.

Almost every officer and soldier of the Guardia received some direct training from U.S. sources. This training was not to prepare the Guardia to defend Nicaragua from foreign attacks. Instead the Guardia was taught to defend Nicaragua from internal threats. The training also provided the Guardia with a more formal ideology: anticommunism. This became the doctrine to rationalize any and every act since all challenges to the Somoza regime were seen as subversive. These "subversives" were to be eliminated by any means necessary, consequently encouraging the use of torture.

The School of Americas offered a wide range of courses which went from radio repair and auto mechanics, to counter-insurgency, jungle warfare, urban warfare, and military intelligence interrogation. Most of the courses, whatever their focus, had some class time devoted to discussing the threat of communism. For example, according to the 1969 catalog, the course for "basic medical technician" had a section on "Intelligence and Security" which included "Nature of the Communist world threat; countering the insurgency threat." Three Nicaraguans attended that specific course. Thus whatever technical skills being taught, the SOA also increased the repressive capabilities and tendencies of all of its students.

The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) began a guerrilla war that would culminate in 1979 with a widespread urban insurrection. As opposition increased, so did the repression. Execution, torture, and arbitrary arrests became commonplace, almost routine, in Nicaragua. The Inter-American Commission on Human Right of the Organization of American States (OAS) stated that the Nicaraguan Government was "responsible for serious attempts against the right to life", that "many persons were executed in a summary and collective fashion," and that "physical and psychological torture" occurred.[(4)](http://www.historiansagainstwar.org/resources/torture/grossman.html#N_4_)

Numerous human rights reports stated that tortures took place at this time. For example, in 1977 Amnesty International reported that 7 out of 10 prisoners captured by the Somoza regime had been tortured. The report also disclosed that in the countryside many peasants had been tortured and raped by Guardia patrols. It gave detailed testimony from individuals describing their torture which included beatings, electric shocks, and mutilation.[(5)](http://www.historiansagainstwar.org/resources/torture/grossman.html#N_5_) The International Commission of Jurists' report also stated that:

Torture was regularly used in the interrogation of political prisoners. Common practices included blows, hanging from the wrists, electric shocks, immersion of the head in water, hooding or blindfolding, exhausting physical exercises, keeping naked detainees in air-conditioned rooms at very low temperatures, and food and drink deprivation. . . . The nails and eyes of some victims were pulled out while others had their tongues cut off.

Thus evidence of torture was well documented and available to anyone who looked. U.S. officials were aware of these charges but generally denied that torture was rampant. In response to Father Cardenal's 1976 testimony before the U.S. Congress, which had discussed the torture and repression taking place in Nicaragua, the State Department declared that, "We do not have any reason to believe that torture has been resorted to in any widespread or concerted fashion."[(6)](http://www.historiansagainstwar.org/resources/torture/grossman.html#N_6_) They also rejected Father Cardenal statements that U.S. aid had facilitated this repression. U.S. military aid to the Somoza regime increased in the following years.

The insurrection triumphed, in July 1979, when Anastasio Somoza Debayle fled Nicaragua. The victory had been costly: at least 40,000-50,000 people had been killed, out of a population of less than 3 million. Many were tortured and mutilated before their deaths.

This fifty-year history also reveals how the U.S. routinely condoned and supported the use of torture. The Guardia Nacional was a creation of the United States, and even after the U.S. Marines were withdrawn, the abuse of human rights that they initiated continued unabated. Constant U.S. aid made it possible for the Somoza regime and the Guardia to function. U.S. training gave the skills and rationales that facilitated torture. Thus the United States government approved the ongoing repression and torture of the Nicaraguan people. Even when the administration of Jimmy Carter finally raised the question of human rights violations, direct aid was not ended until the very end. By 1979, at the moment when Somoza defeat was becoming obvious, the United States still tried to perpetuate the Guardia Nacional as the best institution to preserve order.

The relationships between the United States and the new Nicaraguan government led by the FSLN quickly soured. An armed counterrevolutionary movement (generally known as the contras) began to organize by 1980. Most of the initial contras leaders were former high officers of the Guardia. Of the eight individuals identified by the Central Intelligence Agency as the military leaders of the first contra organization, the 15th of September Legion, seven were graduates of the School of the Americas. These seven attended a total of 34 classes and two were honor students. By 1981, under President Ronald Reagan, U.S. aid began to flow to this reconstructed Guardia and the war for Nicaragua was renewed. The CIA turned the disbanded and discouraged former Guardia members into a new counter-revolutionary army. As money, arms, and advisors flooded into the contras, the legacy of terror, torture, and murder that had started in 1927 would continue until 1990.