

WARID: Nicaragua (Contras/FDN) 1982-1990
STARDATE: 1 January 1982
ENDDATE: 19 April 1990
Related cases: El Salvador (FMLN) 1980-1991
Guatemala (FAR I, FAR II, OPRA, EGP, URNG) 1965-1995
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Conflict overview

In 1979, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) achieved a military victory in a revolutionary war that was fought with extreme brutality by the Somoza dictatorship and its National Guard. After their triumph, the Sandinistas oppressed ethnic minorities and former members of National Guards.¹ Diverse guerilla movements emerged, which are referred to as the ‘Contra’ (‘contrarevolución’ or counter-revolution) or ‘Contras’ (counter-revolutionists). Their formation led to the onset of another war in 1982, which represented both a proxy war in the context of the Cold War and a complex class conflict with an ethnic component. The Contras consisted of a combination of anti-Sandinistas, ex-Sandinistas and indigenous minorities. Ex-guardsmen and other right-wing individuals who had fought for the Somoza dictatorship became part of the military wing of the Democratic Force in Nicaragua (FDN), the group with the largest capacities. The indigenous minorities were not of high importance to the Contras.

When Ronald Reagan was sworn in as US president in January 1981, he started to strongly support the Contras.² The FSLN was backed by Cuba and the Soviet Union. Neither the FSLN troops nor the Contras were able to achieve a military victory. When the USA stopped supporting the rebels, a peace plan was mediated by Central American Presidents; Costa Rica was actively engaged in particular. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) states that “the war in Nicaragua simply collapsed and negotiations were defined as scripts to guide disarming and demobilization processes”.³ The Contras were, by and large, completely disarmed by the end of July 1990. Thus, the UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset codes the end of the war as a ceasefire with further regulation [WARENDUC=2], which is in line with the common assessment in the case-specific

1 The National Guard was a military force created during the occupation by the USA. The occupation officially lasted from 1912 to 1933. The National Guard was a highly repressive force.

2 The Reagan administration supported the sale of arms to Iran, which was subject to an arms embargo, and used the money to finance the Contras (Kaufman 2010).

3 http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdata/gpcountry.php?id=117®ionSelect=4-Central_Americas# (14 Apr 2015).

literature [**WARENDOS=2**]. The war lasted for more than eight years [**WARDUR=100**].⁴ The UCDP Encyclopedia states a death toll of 6,589 battle-related deaths in the Nicaraguan civil war. It does not report victims of one-sided violence against civilians, though the Contras were notorious for terrorist tactics (Grandin 2006: 89) such as targeting medical personal and educators [**FATALUC=7000**]. The Peace Research Institute Oslo assumes a death toll of about 30,000.⁵ A case study by Reiber (2009: 271) presumes 31,000 fatalities [**FATALOS=31000**]. In 1981, the year before the war started, 3.3 million people were living in Nicaragua [**PREWARPO=3300000**].⁶ Thus, the war killed 0.21% of the pre-war population, 0.94% when taking the higher estimate [**INTENSUC=0.21; INTENSOS=0.94**].

The military balance at the end of the war

None of the warring parties was able to win the war [**VICTORY=0**].⁷ The rebel side claimed to control half of the Nicaraguan territory, which is considered an unrealistic figure (Sklar 1988: 382). Sklar assumes that the rebels did not control any territory during wartime.⁸ Cunningham et al. (2009) share this opinion, whereas Lynn Horton (1998: 173) presents a more detailed analysis and states that the Contras did control territory, especially in the mountains, of approximately 34,000 km². As such, 20%-30% of Nicaraguan territory was controlled by the rebels in 1983. Horton argues that the rebels likely lost it completely by the end of the war [**REBTERR= -1**]. Thus, the government controlled more territory throughout the war [**MORETERR= -1**]. Compared with the government forces, the fighting capabilities of the Contras were relatively low. Though well equipped, the Contras never had heavy arms or armored vehicles as the Nicaraguan army did (Krennerich 1996: 280; Landau 1993: 60). Thus, the assessment by Cunningham et al. (2009), which estimates the relative fighting capacity as 'low', seems accurate [**REBFIGHT= -1**]. None of the warring parties was able to continue fighting with the same intensity throughout [**CONFIGHT=0**].⁹ Neither the government nor the rebels captured their opponent's leader [**LEADER=0**]. Thus, the military balance at the end of the war favored the government [**WARBAL= -0.5**].

4 For more on the conflict, see: Arnson 1999; Horton 1998; Krennerich 2000; Kurtenbach 2003; Landau 1993; Reiber 2009; Sklar1988.

5 <http://www.prio.org/Data/Armed-Conflict/Battle-Deaths/The-Battle-Deaths-Dataset-version-30/> (14 Apr 2015). Zinecker (2012: 14) estimates about 50,000 fatalities.

6 <http://data.worldbank.org/country/nicaragua> (14 Apr 2015).

7 Reiber 2009: 276.

8 Salehyan (2011: 130) is also convinced that the Contras did not have significant territorial influence in Nicaragua.

9 Reiber 2009: 276.

The military balance in the post-war period

The Contras consisted of several oppositional forces that had about 15,000 combatants in 1989 and about 14,000 in 1990 [**SEPFORCE 1990=0**]. The governmental forces consisted of 80,000 active men in 1989 and of 63,500 in 1990 (IISS 1988/89: 198; IISS 1989/90: 200). A comparison of the ratios of troops indicates no significant change [**TROOPS 1990=0**]. The amount and type of arms cannot be assessed since they are not documented by the IISS [**ARMS 1990=n.d.**].

Due to the demobilization of the Contras in 1990 and the considerable reduction of the Nicaraguan military, no significant amount of former combatants became part of the national army or police force. 22,500 rebels were completely disarmed by July 1990 and participated in the reintegration program.¹⁰ The Contras were thus disbanded [**SEPFORCE 1991-2012= -1**].¹¹ The respective amount of troops and equipment cannot be compared [**TROOPS 1991-2012=n.r.; ARMS 1991-2012=n.r.**].

It is unlikely that a significant number of former rebels became part of the state's forces since these were reduced from 80,000 to 14,000 active men (Kurtenbach 2003: 278). In contrast, the influence of the FSLN within the military forces had persisted since 1990.¹² Even though the police started to incorporate former Contra members into local bases in 1991, no similar procedure was applied by the Nicaraguan army (Teuchler 1992: 63-64). Considering that the Nicaraguan army is seen as significant force – more important than the country's police – but failed to incorporate former Contra fighters (Teuchler 1992: 63), we assess that only the party governing at the beginning of war substantially participated in the state's security forces [**STATEFOR 1990-2012= -1**].

In the post-war period, territorial control was defined by taking part in governing the country. In 1993, former Contra members founded the Nicaraguan Resistance Party (Schuller 2002: 279). Three years later, it won only 1.6% of the votes in the parliamentary elections.¹³ The FSLN ran in all elections and had been governing the country since the end of 2006 [**TERRCON 1990-2006=d.e., TERRCON 2007-2012= -1**].¹⁴

As the FSLN controlled almost all territory at the end of the war, it did not win control over significantly more territory when in power during the post-war period [**TERRWIN 1990-2012=0**]. When not in opposition, the FSLN was less vulnerable than the former Contras [**VULNERAB**

10 IISS assumes about 10,000 to 12,000 Contra combatants. The figures differ due to rebels who can be considered 'part time combatants' and due to Nicaraguans who went to disarmament stations (even if they were not rebels) to benefit from the demobilization programs (Kurtenbach 2003: 279).

11 A few years later, ex-Contra combatants reunited to fight for their promised reintegration support payments, they called themselves "Frente Norte 3-80" (500 to 800 fighters) and achieved an agreement with the government. About 40 other groups likewise did so (Kurtenbach 2003: 277).

12 Spence (2004: 40) states that the official name of the Nicaraguan Army, 'Ejercito Popular Sandinista' can be translated as 'Sandinista People's Army'.

13 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicaraguan_general_election,_1996 (28 Apr 2015).

14 For details, see the section on the compromise after the war.

1990-2006=n.r., VULNERAB 2007-2012= -1].

The United Nations Observer Group in Central America (ONUCA) peacekeeping mission was present in Nicaragua from 7 November 1989 to 17 January 1992. During the disarmament process of the Contras, they were supported by armed personnel from March to July 1990. The UN consistently denied that ONUCA represented a full-scale peacekeeping mission¹⁵ Nevertheless, , the mission is seen as relevant despite the fact it only lasted four months [**PEACKEEP 1990=0, PEACKEEP 1991-2012=n.r.**].¹⁶

The US-Nicaraguan relationship was ambivalent and characterized by military and financial support for considerably different political groups.¹⁷ During the war, the Contras were heavily backed by the Reagan administration (Grandin/Joseph 2010: 406). Since this was motivated by the Cold War, which ended simultaneously with the civil war in Nicaragua, it seems reasonable that the USA was unlikely to intervene in favor of one of the former warring parties [**P5ALLY 1990-2012=n.r.**].

In total, the post-war military balance shifted to the benefit of the FSLN [**POSTBAL 1990= -0.2, POSTBAL 1991-2006= -0.67, POSTBAL 2007-2012= -0.8**]. Hence, it led to an overall military imbalance that served the FSLN [**BALANCE 1990= -0.35, BALANCE 1991-2006= -0.58, BALANCE 2007-2012= -0.65**].

Economy

After the war, Nicaragua's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita started at a very low level but quadrupled through 2001. It shrank in 2002 but increased constantly after 2003.

Table: GDP per capita in current USD¹⁸

<i>Year</i>	<i>Population (total)</i>	<i>GDP per capita</i>
1990	4,137,788	244
1991	4,237,154	351
1992	4,342,319	413
1993	4,450,371	395
1994	4,557,125	848
1995	4,659,458	889
1996	4,756,631	906
1997	4,849,272	905
1998	4,937,320	939
1999	5,021,079	967
2000	5,100,920	1001

15 ONUCA description by the UN: <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/onucabackgr.html> (14 Apr 2015). Fortna (2008) codes the peacekeeping mission pk=3. Armed for four months, it supported the demobilization process of the Contras.

16 Wrobel 1997: 9.

17 The USA supported the Somoza dictatorship until Jimmy Carter was elected president. He decided to end the cooperation in 1977 and started to support oppositional groups against the Somoza-Dictatorship, yet not the FSLN but rather bourgeois and oligarchic opposition groups. After Reagan became president in 1981, the USA supported the Contras until the Cold War and the Nicaraguan civil war ended. Further information in: Kaufman 2010.

18 <http://data.worldbank.org/country/nicaragua> (14 Apr 2015).

2001	5,176,685	1028
2002	5,248,577	995
2003	5,317,878	1001
2004	5,386,299	1076
2005	5,455,219	1159
2006	5,524,927	1228
2007	5,595,533	1333
2008	5,667,983	1498
2009	5,743,329	1459
2010	5,822,209	1535
2011	5,905,146	1676
2012	5,991,733	1777

The scale of compromise after the war

At the end of the war, the ruling FSLN was willing to hold free and fair elections, counting on a victory (Gomez Pomeri 2012: 51). The elections took place on 25 February 1990 and were widely considered as basically free and fair. The Contras had the opportunity to participate democratically but decided to abstain (Reiber 2009: 278). The United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO)¹⁹, led by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, won the elections. Therefore, neither the Contras nor the FSLN were part of the government during the UNO administration from 25 April 1990 to 10 January 1997 **[GOVERN 1990-1996=d.e.]**.

Following elections in October 1996, Arnaldo Alemán of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) became president. His party, united with other parties in the Liberal Alliance, held most seats in the National Assembly but was short of an absolute majority. The FSLN occupied the second-most seats and remained in the opposition **[GOVERN 1997-1999=d.e.]**.²⁰

In summer 1999, Alemán and Ortega signed an agreement titled ‘El Pacto’ that resulted in joint efforts by their parties to change the constitution and limit the power of other political parties (BTI 2014: 3-4). The yearbooks on Latin America continued to perceive the FSLN as the opposition but highlight its influence that exceeded the power of a typical opposition party. As an example, the FSLN was given posts in the Accounting Office’s executive board (Peetz 2000: 254, 268; Peetz 2001: 283-284). This unusual co-operation could be treated as quasi power-sharing. However, the neoliberal orientation remained in economic and social policies and there were no FSLN ministers appointed. Thus, we do not assess the FSLN’s participation as a substantial one **[GOVERN 2000-2001=d.e.]**.

After the presidential and parliamentary elections in November 2001, the position of the PCL was strengthened. It held an absolute majority in the National Assembly.²¹ Nevertheless, cooperation

19 The UNO was a broad alliance of opposition parties formed to contest President Daniel Ortega. At the time of the election, the coalition consisted of fourteen political parties, four were considered conservative, seven could be characterized as centrist, and three had traditionally been on the far left of the political spectrum. See: http://www.country-data.com/frd/cs/nicaragua/ni_appen.html#table10 (10 Feb 2015).

20 Kurtenbach 1997: 262; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicaraguan_general_election,_1996 (28 Apr 2015).

21 Schuller 2002: 277; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicaraguan_general_election,_2001 (28 Apr 2015).

between the PCL and FSLN reportedly continued. The position of the FSLN was strengthened ever since the PLC split up. However, upon winning the presidential and parliamentary elections in November 2006²² and November 2011²³, the party was able to establish its political orientation concerning economic and political policies [**GOVERN 2002-2006=d.e., GOVERN 2007-2012=-1**].²⁴

The United Nations Mission to verify the elections in Nicaragua (ONUVEN)²⁵ observed, controlled and guaranteed the correct and fair execution of the elections in 1990 (Krumwiede 1990: 119-123). All elections since had been assessed as basically free and fair by Freedom House²⁶ [**ELECT 1990-2012=0**].²⁷

The president can veto a draft law partially or completely. The National Assembly, however, can reject this veto “by a number of votes exceeding half of its total membership” (Constitution 2014: para. 143). In other words, an absolute majority nullifies the president’s veto. Consequently, he or she cannot act against the parliamentary majority. Therefore, mandatory consensus-based decision making did not exist [**VETO 1990-2006=n.r., VETO 2007-2012=-1; VETOSAT 1990-2012=n.r.**]. Pardo-Maurer (1990: 24) points out that the “FDN’s strength was that it adhered to no particular political doctrine; its followers were motivated mostly by a spirit of individualism, enterprise and [...] the right to mind one’s own business”. Even though Kröger (2008: 24) argues that the Contras’ political agenda was a weak one, the rebels had demands. They initiated their fight by demanding self-determination and autonomy (Hannum 1993: 381) but they did not question the borders of or within the country [**EXBORDER 1990-2012=n.r.; INBORDER 1990-2012=n.r.**]. They did not desire to rearrange competences among the political levels nor to urge a fundamental change of the economic order [**COMPETEN 1990-2012=n.r.; ECONOMY 1990-2012=n.r.**].

Particularly those Nicaraguans living along the Atlantic Coast demanded self-determination in order to reduce governmental oppression. Even though the indigenous population at the Atlantic Coast gained autonomy in 1987 (Law No. 28), indigenous Nicaraguans, in particular, faced structural difficulties when claiming their civil rights [**SPECRO 1990-2012=-1**].²⁸

Another central issue concerns the agrarian reform initiated by the Sandinistas in July 1979, which included the confiscation of land property, forced collectivization and the destruction of clientelistic

22 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2007/nicaragua#.VT-vj5OynXE> (28 Apr 2015).

23 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicaraguan_general_election,_2011 (28 Apr 2015).

24 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2007/nicaragua#.VT-vj5OynXE> (28 Apr 2015); BTI 2014: 5.

25 The ONUVEN was part of the ONUCA mission, a UN mission which took place in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. For further information, see: <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/onucabackgr.html#two> (9 Jun 2014).

26 Freedom House mainly labels Nicaragua as ‘partly free’, political rights are ranked 3 to 5, <http://freedomhouse.org/country/nicaragua> (9 Jun 2014).

27 BTI 2014: 3.

28 BTI 2014: 7. For further information: Brunnegger 2007 and Lamberg 2010: 97-106.

structures (Saravia-Matus 2009: 22, 34) without providing an alternative to the parties concerned, causing farmers join the Contras (Brown 2001: 68). This economic restructuring that intended to reduce inequality and dependence on export structures was significant for the FSLN period from 1979 to 1990; however, the reform did not achieved greater equality or economic improvement. Thus, the reform was reversed during the 1990s, which did not imply any substantial improvement for the farmers concerned (Merlet 2002: 25-28). The reversal was to the benefit of the oligarchic structures that had been challenged by the Sandinistas [ISSUE 1990-2012=1].

No other conflict issues were relevant during the war [ISSUE2 1990-2012=n.r.] and no new issues emerged in the post-war period [NEWCON 1990-2012=n.r.; NEWCON2 1990-2012=n.r.]. As there were no compromises on conflicting issues in the post-war period, the question as to which side benefitted more is not relevant [BENEFIT 1990-2012=n.r.; BENEFIT2 1990-2012=n.r.].

In sum, as long as the FSLN was in opposition, neither its interests nor those of the Contras prevailed. Since 2006, however, post-war development strongly favored the FSLN [COMPROM 1990-2006=0, COMPROM 2007- 2012= -0.4]

Stability of peace

According to the UCDP, civil war did not recur nor did any other wars take place in Nicaragua [SAMEWAR=0; DATESAME=n.r.; ANYWAR=0; DATEANY=n.r.]. The situation was peaceful until the end of the period under investigation in December 2012 [PEACMON1=272; PEACMON2=272].

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