

Title

Maintaining the Legacy of the Nicaraguan Revolution Amidst a Challenging Political Terrain

Abstract

The Nicaraguan Revolution (1979—1990) is a popular subject of study by art scholars due to its inventive practices in education and art in support of cultural expansion; however, the contemporary and political implications of the Revolution's achievements are overlooked. This thesis will investigate how specific triumphs in education and art, specifically the literacy crusade, poetry workshops, and painting, during the Revolution have extended their impacts into modern day Nicaragua by analyzing post-revolutionary cultural efforts. The following examination of political obstacles, particularly the Contra War of the 1980s and the current Ortega regime, will highlight the significance of these efforts in their success in maintaining the legacy of the Nicaraguan Revolutions into the present day.

Description of Project

The Nicaraguan Revolution is known for its innovative cultural advances in literary and artistic education as well as its ability to make art accessible to the popular class. The Revolution was led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), and its supporters were called the Sandinistas.¹ Their fight was deemed “a revolution of poets,” as many Sandinista leaders were accomplished authors and artists at the time of the Revolution's commencement, who aimed to “increase the cultural possibilities of the people.”² Two of the most notable achievements of the Revolution were 1) widespread education in reading and writing through *la Cruzada Nacional de*

¹ The FSLN was established in 1961 with the goal of removing Anastasio Somoza Debayle from power. Debayle was the son of Anastasio Somoza García. The Somozas governed Nicaragua through a corrupt dictatorship from 1936 to 1979.

² David Craven, “The Nicaraguan Revolution, 1979-1990,” in *Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 117.

Alfabetización (the National Literacy Crusade) and *los Talleres de Poesía* (Poetry Workshops), and 2) the avant-garde forms of painting, particularly *La Pintura Primitivista* (Primitivist Painting) and mural art.

La Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización was first implemented by the FSLN in order to eradicate illiteracy in Nicaragua. The crusade took place between March and August of 1980, during which over 500,000 people learned how to read and write, increasing the national literacy rate from 53% to 88% over the span of five months.³ Due to the success and popularity of the crusade, the Nicaraguan Ministry of Culture began to establish *los Talleres de Poesía*. Costa Rican poet Mayra Jimenez facilitated the workshops, who taught the reading, discussion, and analysis of poetry. By 1983, as many as 70 workshops had taken place and over 500 *campesinos* (rural farm workers) and artisans had participated.⁴ What does an improved education mean for the general public when it comes to understanding local politics and expressing resistance?

The visual arts, particularly painting, played a crucial role in capturing educational achievements. *La Pintura Primitivista*, named by Minister of Culture Ernesto Cardenal, portrayed everyday life, depicting scenes of field work or trade among villagers.⁵ “Primitivist” painters utilized vibrant tropical colors, artisanal shapes, and decentralized themes, reminiscent of pre-colonial and indigenous aesthetics. Mural art also emerged as a dominant form of painting.⁶ What do these movements in painting suggest about the intrinsic value of community in Nicaragua?

³ Craven, “The Nicaraguan Revolution,” 117-175.

⁴ Sarah Swong, “The Non-Nicaraguan Reader: Poetry Workshops and the Nicaraguan Revolution,” *The Yale Review of International Studies*, May 1, 2013, accessed January 24, 2024, <https://yris.yira.org/essays/987>.

⁵ Ernesto Cardenal established a religious community in 1966 on the island of Solentiname in Lake Nicaragua, comprising impoverished *campesinos*, artisans, and fishermen. Cardenal referred to their work as “primitive” due to the predominantly peasant composition of this population.

⁶ Craven, “The Nicaraguan Revolution,” 117-175.

Nicaragua's newfound cultural prosperity was only briefly enjoyed before it was jeopardized by the Contra War.⁷ The war was entirely funded by the United States government between 1981 and 1987, causing significant funds to be diverted from the FSLN's cultural programs to defense.⁸ As a result, all funding for these programs was cut by 50 % and the Ministry of Culture was dissolved in 1988, later replaced by a public Institute of Culture.⁹ Not only did the United States wage war on the people of Nicaragua in the 1980s, but domestic challenges arose 30 years later. In his second term as president starting in 2007, Daniel Ortega consolidated power through corrupt tactics and human rights abuses. In 2018, numerous college students protested his actions, leading to tragic consequences such as massacres, exiles, and imprisonments. Since then, hundreds of Nicaraguan cultural workers have similarly faced severe consequences.¹⁰ How did the Revolution prepare Nicaraguan cultural workers to navigate these losses and withstand counterrevolutionary actors for decades, both from abroad and at home?

Through my research, I will explore my theory that innovative and democratic approaches to pedagogy, as well as daily practices in literacy, poetry, and art during the Revolution, laid the groundwork for the Nicaraguan people to collectively navigate, survive, and resist the Contra War (1981—1990) and, decades later, the current regime of President Daniel Ortega (1985—1990, and 2007—present). My research findings and analyses not only challenge the prevailing narrative that the Revolution concluded with the Contra conflict, but also suggest that, by developing a strong sense of local and sovereign power through such cultural practices,

⁷ The Contra War was a counter-revolutionary conflict initiated with the aim of overthrowing the Revolutionary government, deemed "pro-communist." Operating from Honduras, the Contras received military funding from the Reagan Administration of the United States starting in 1981. The war concluded with a ceasefire in 1990.

⁸ The United States Department of Justice, *Appendix A: Background on US Funding of the Contras*, accessed January 10, 2024, <https://oig.justice.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/special/9712/appa.htm>.

⁹ Craven, "The Nicaraguan Revolution," 117-175.

¹⁰ Courtney Morris. "Ortega Faces a New Nicaraguan Opposition Movement." *Current History* 118, no. 805 (2019), 62-67.

the people of Nicaragua persist in carrying the Revolution's legacy into the present day, despite facing a challenging and corrupt political atmosphere. Applying various theoretical frameworks exploring art activism, avant-garde arts, and the intersection of text and image, along with careful formal analyses of contemporary Nicaraguan art, I aim to provide a modern interpretation of the Nicaraguan Revolution within the context of post-revolutionary efforts in education and art. This will illustrate how the Revolution's legacy continues to prosper in the present day despite dishonorable political circumstances.

Previous Works

Scholarly research on the Nicaraguan Revolution and its impacts is often very specific to the time period in which the Revolution occurred, from 1979 through 1990. The main focuses of study have been efforts in education and art, but the scope is limited to the 1980s. Most academic publications regarding these aspects of the Revolution were published before 1990, with a few extending into the early 1990s, and they fail to address how their impacts and practices have extended into the present day.¹¹ Additionally, the education and art of the Revolution have been examined singularly through the lens of local politics, failing to address their implications under other regimes. My research will expand on the educational and artistic works of the Revolution by investigating the contemporary efforts of Nicaraguan cultural workers who aim to honor the Revolution's legacy amidst a challenging political terrain originating abroad and at home, past

¹¹ For example, see Kent Johnson, "Nicaraguan culture unleashing creativity," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 19, No. 5 (1985): 8-11; Ingrid Mayrhofer, "Nicaragua: art before the revolution," *Border/Lines* 9/10 (1987); _____, *Nicaragua: Art and Culture in Resistance and Revolution*, MA Thesis (New York: York University, 1989); Ernesto Cardenal et al., "On Culture, Politics, and the State in Nicaragua: An Interview with Padre Ernesto Cardenal, Minister of Culture," *Latin American Perspectives* 16, no. 2 (1989): 124-133; Robert C. Morgan, "The New Concept of Art and Popular Culture in Nicaragua Since the Revolution in 1979," Vol. 24, No. 5 (1991): 629-631; Craven, "The Nicaraguan Revolution," (1991), 117-175; Tatiana Arguello Vargas, *Culture and Arts in Post Revolutionary Nicaragua: The Chamorro Years (1990-1996)*. MA Thesis. (Athens: Ohio University, 2010); and Brian Winkenweder, "Formative Art and Social Transformation: The Nicaraguan Revolution on Its Tenth Anniversary (1979-1989)" *Art History as Social Praxis*, Brill (2017), 333-339.

and present. To illustrate this view, I will examine not only local media but also that of the US through the post-revolutionary period, from the 1990s to the present.

Existing scholarship commonly mentions the Contra War when discussing the Revolution's demise, but fails to consider how the people of Nicaragua navigated the war in terms of maintaining the richness of the culture they had developed in the 1980s. David Craven's book published in 2002, *Art and Revolution in Latin America*, serves as an invaluable resource for gathering information on the specific cultural successes of the Revolution, including detailed descriptions of the most notable programs and a plethora of artworks that exemplify the time period.¹² Craven also provides a brief description of the Contra War, detailing the main consequences: the elimination of the Ministry of Culture, budget cuts to arts programs, and cultural regression with the unintentional reinforcement of the idea that art is reserved for the intellectual elite. What Craven fails to do in his argument is highlight the ongoing efforts made to combat such consequences throughout the 1990s, undermining the fact that the Nicaraguan people were not submissive to the Contra War or its effects. My research will investigate what the people of Nicaragua did to retain the essence of the Revolution after 1990 and beyond in terms of their continued educational and artistic efforts.

Much research supporting that of the Nicaraguan Revolution often pertains to the historical analysis of the cultural and political development of Nicaragua prior to 1979, unable to provide an explanation of such post-1990. Ingrid Mayrhofer's MA thesis from 1989, *Nicaragua: Art and Culture in Resistance and Revolution*, for example, recounts the history of Nicaragua during the period of the Spanish conquest in 1621, the rise of Sandino in the 1920s and '30s, and

¹² David Craven is a prominent scholar of Nicaraguan art in the 20th century, and his scholarship dates to the 1980s during the time of the Revolution. Among other works by Craven that I consulted, this book would encompass the latest updated version of his scholarship on the subject.

the Somoza regime that ruled from 1936 to 1979.¹³ While this history is incredibly valuable in understanding how and why the Revolution manifested, Mayrhofer's research cannot testify to how contemporary political circumstances have influenced education and artmaking in modern-day Nicaragua. I intend to offer a current analysis of Nicaraguan politics with an emphasis on the Ortega regime, through the lens of how local cultural workers are reflecting on the Revolution of the 1980s through education and art to resist his suppressive reign.

The Nicaraguan Revolution does not exist as a singular entity and should not be examined as such. Given that there is a substantial amount of scholarly research that addresses pre-revolutionary Nicaragua to support the research on the Revolution itself, I argue that post-revolutionary Nicaragua is deserving of equal investigation. Through my project, I will offer a unique perspective on the Revolution that illustrates how its legacy extended into the present day amidst challenging political terrain.

Significance

There is an undeniable connection between art and politics. In a world that is facing destruction at the hands of political conflict, it is no surprise that citizens across the world harbor a plethora of emotions that need to be expressed. Throughout history, this reality has prompted individual people to come together by practicing education to inform one another on global matters and producing works of art to cope with their impacts. The combined result of these efforts is a knowledgeable and creative society that values the lives of its people, but these efforts cannot always prevail politically. If one begins to question why politicians have not yet passed legislation to battle the issues that truly plague society, the answer will eventually reveal itself: consolidation of power. President Ronald Reagan waged the Contra War with the intention

¹³ Ingrid Mayrhofer, *Nicaragua: Art and Culture in Resistance and Revolution*, MA Thesis (New York: York University, 1989).

of overthrowing the Sandinista government because it was considered “pro-communist.” By doing so, the United States would remain influential in Nicaragua, maintaining its global dissemination of power. President Daniel Ortega continuously imposes human rights abuses on his own citizens with the intention of invoking communal submission, which would allow him to continue his reign without resistance. These two examples of counter-revolutionary forces, both past and present, provide points of departure to explore how Nicaraguan citizens have kept the legacy of the Revolution alive through the ways they have educated and expressed themselves through art. Through my research, I will work to illuminate how the spread of popular culture through education and artmaking continues to prevail against seemingly dominant political powers.

Methodology

I plan to proceed with my project by analyzing a variety of sources ranging from primary and secondary source material to fact-based testimonial evidence. The foundation of my research begins with the various accomplishments achieved by the FSLN throughout the 1980s, particularly in education and painting. Additionally, I will analyze the works of art themselves that were produced during the Revolution. The current information I have gathered on these points has been most substantially from Craven’s book, *Art and Revolution in Latin America*. My major in studio art and minor in art history have prepared me to thoughtfully and formally analyze various works of art and their lasting impacts on society. I intend to identify education and art’s influence on contemporary Nicaraguan history and long-term impact on communal prosperity.

To affirm how art and education efforts laid the groundwork for Nicaraguans amid political challenges, I will investigate the Contra War of the 1980s and the current Ortega

regime. Information is drawn from NGO reports and newspaper articles, shedding light on the consequences of the Contra War and the hardships that have since been imposed on cultural workers under President Ortega. The research aims to assess the war's impact on the Revolution and its influence on present-day struggles against the Ortega regime. I will also examine contemporary art and education under Ortega's leadership, providing insights into the lasting legacy. Further investigation involves researching current educational and artistic institutions in Nicaragua, as well as the practices of cultural workers in exile. Newspapers like *The Havana Times* and *La Prensa* will offer updates on Nicaraguan cultural workers and President Ortega. My proficiency in Spanish enhances my access to relevant articles. With my advisor, Prof. Sooran Choi, I will further explore theoretical frameworks on the intersection of the arts, politics, art activism, and vanguardism, as well as the complex and nuanced relationship between texts and images, innovative pedagogy, and the post-revolutionary legacy.¹⁴

In conclusion, this project necessitates extensive reading, critical analysis, and synthesizing facts to explain how the Revolution's impact persists in Nicaraguan culture despite active political opposition, and the power of the arts and culture in driving progressive changes.

Timetable

February 2024	Submission of proposal / Revolutionary culturally based institutions and practices
March 2024	Implications of above examples, ideological/theoretical frameworks, contemporary examples
April 2024	The Contra War, US involvement, Reagan Administration, ideologies, and motives
May 2024	Cultural works of the 1990s, efforts to combat the damage of the Contra War
September 2024	Ortega regime, consolidation of power, corrupt local politics
October 2024	Current events, cultural state of Nicaragua today, Revolution's legacy
Nov/Dec 2024	Completion of draft, make edits and revisions, defense of thesis

¹⁴ Please see the selected bibliography for the relevant references on this matter.

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