

University of North Carolina at Asheville

*Nicaragua, 1972:  
El Terremoto, el Revolución*

Senior Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Department of History in Candidacy for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts in History

By  
984

Asheville, North Carolina  
May 2008

Natural disasters have played a pivotal role in shaping human societies throughout history; the collapse of order that occurs in the wake of a disaster can alter or destroy the normal functioning of a society for years afterward. Traditional systems of power are uprooted and this vacuum of stability necessitates great change and a new social paradigm to rebuild from the rubble. This was the case in December of 1972, when a particularly destructive earthquake struck Managua, Nicaragua, the nation's capital and most populous city. The impact on the tiny Central American nation was disastrous. The economy ground to a standstill, civil infrastructure failed, and over half of the city's population was forced from their homes. The Somoza "dynasty," which had ostensibly ruled Nicaragua since the 1930s would soon be shaken to its core. Anastasio Somoza Debayle, then part of a ruling triumvirate and director of the National Guard, took control of aid and reconstruction efforts and declared a state of emergency. At the same time, leaders and groups emerged that would assist and advocate for the Nicaraguan populace like never before. A revolutionary political consciousness developed around the discourse of the earthquake and the national interest.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the fact that a groundbreaking popular revolution took place in Nicaragua less than seven years later is not entirely coincidental; many, including Somoza, have surmised a correlation between the two events. It is this correlation, between disaster and psychological, political, and social turmoil, which draws social scientists to the study of major calamities.

The earthquake in Managua clearly had profound effects on the society and the political makeup of the nation and can certainly be considered a catalyst for major unrest in the 1970s. In as far as the nation's 1979 revolution came as a culmination of many of the same kinds of radical political, religious, and bourgeois opposition that arose in response to the earthquake, it is necessary to understand the effects of the disaster on each manifestation in order to draw any sort of

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<sup>1</sup> For an invaluable history within the context of all of Central America, see John A. Booth and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 54-73.

correlation between the two events. There is an abundance of evidence supporting the claim that Somoza and others have made, that the earthquake signaled the end of the traditional patriarchal arrangement. However no significant scholarly research has compiled an argument in this case and there is clearly space for discussion on the topic.

### **Historiography and Academic Approach**

Historical research into the effects of the 1972 Managua earthquake is limited primarily to topical discussions of the circumstances surrounding the event. For example, political analyses of the Marxist opposition FSLN (Sandinista Front for National Liberation)<sup>2</sup> often mention the earthquake as a consciousness-raising event but do not seek specific correlations. However, a number of sources do address this crucial turning point. One of the most comprehensive secondary sources on this topic is Manzar Foroohar's *The Catholic Church and Social Change in Nicaragua*. Foroohar's scholarly study of religious and socio-political consciousness is referenced in a number of other secondary works but stands alone in its discussion of the role of religious and social upheaval from its colonial-era origins through the 1970s. It seeks to add "historical depth" to the study of Nicaraguan Church-State relations and elucidate the struggle of religious and social reformers. *The Catholic Church and Social Change in Nicaragua* puts forth the idea that the 1972 earthquake "deepened the sociopolitical crisis" and radicalized many Christian activists working in poor barrios of Managua and CEBs (Ecclesiastical or Christian Base Communities, organized to help alleviate poverty through social cooperation) throughout the nation.<sup>3</sup> While *The Catholic*

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<sup>2</sup> The guerilla struggle of the FSLN (Spanish: Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) in Nicaragua can be traced back to a group organized in 1961 by Managuan university students, including Tomás Borge and Carlos Fonseca, seeking armed insurrection and eventually succeeding in ousting the Somoza dynasty in 1979. Though tactics and strategy changed over time, the FSLN program eventually developed as a unique blend of Marxist nationalism and progressive Catholicism.

<sup>3</sup> Manzar Foroohar, *The Catholic Church and Social Change in Nicaragua* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 87-97, 126.

*Church and Social Change in Nicaragua* mentions opposition in the early years of Somoza family rule, the book also suggests that the earthquake was a turning point in the religious beliefs and sociopolitical standing of many Church members. In addition, its detailed discussion of government-sponsored neighborhoods like OPEN 3 and Christian Base Communities like El Rigüero provides insight into the mindset of activists working with poverty-stricken disaster victims.

Sources on the Sandinista movement, which swept into power in 1979, typically pass up the earthquake as a major factor in the organization's development, and for good reason. The FSLN was probably at its quietist formative stage from the late 1960s until at least 1974. However, one informative historical work, *Sandinistas* by Dennis Gilbert focuses on the development of the FSLN and other opposition groups which contributed to the development of revolutionary Nicaragua. Gilbert's work begins with a historical introduction that discusses the impact of the earthquake on the political atmosphere and outlines the development of opposition in the post-quake period.<sup>4</sup> Another more holistic secondary approach to revolutionary Nicaragua is included in a chapter of *Understanding Central America* by John A. Booth and noted Nicaragua scholar Thomas W. Walker. The book explores the impact of the earthquake on the increasingly-stratified national economy and the development of class consciousness throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Along with its scholarly, statistical approach to the "strong economic grievances" of the period, it also addresses the mobilization of opposition forces against Somoza by industrial laborers and Catholic social workers, as well as many young, disaffected Nicaraguans who joined the Sandinistas.<sup>5</sup>

The academic framework of this paper's approach is based on one set forth by a contemporary anthropological understanding of disaster studies which places "disaster" at the

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<sup>4</sup> Dennis Gilbert, *Sandinistas: The Party and the Revolution* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 1-16.

<sup>5</sup> Booth, 55-57.

confluence of human and ecological factors. This is not necessarily a new argument. According to *Catastrophe and Culture*, a historical and anthropological study of major natural disasters, disasters themselves should not be seen simply as isolated and random events but rather as the culmination of a human pattern of vulnerability. In the case of Nicaragua, the evidence is clear. Managua was built in a seismically active region and as a rising industrial city in a developing nation, neither the city nor the nation were prepared to face the reality of such a catastrophe. The authoritarian style of government meant that few sectors of society or the administration were adequately prepared to respond to an earthquake. Most important for this paper's purpose is the contextual understanding of a cultural response; in the aftermath of disaster, this vulnerability must be transformed in order for society to continue to function. In this way, "disasters offer a lens through which to view the relationship between the ideological and the material [...] lay[ing] bare ideological unity or tensions within the community and its constituents." The aftermath and later response to this pattern of vulnerability helps to explain the political and human implications of disaster.<sup>6</sup>

Some have argued that, given the nature of the Somoza regime and the political climate in Central America, revolution was inevitable. The precedent set by the Cuban Revolution in 1959 set in motion a series of political and military maneuvers throughout the hemisphere aimed at inciting or preventing further revolution. This argument holds merit. However, Nicaragua's revolution twenty years later carried the hallmarks of a more broad and popular uprising with similar aims but very different ideologies. The Sandinistas enjoyed support from all sectors of society, a society which had recently transformed in both efficacy and militancy. Father Uriel Molina, an admired Catholic priest, poet, and FSLN member once stated that the Sandinistas were on a different path

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<sup>6</sup> Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith, eds., *Catastrophe & Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 2002), 7-12.

and “did not follow the example of Cuba.”<sup>7</sup> According to FSLN Comandante Doris María Tijerino, “Sandinismo was broader [than Marxism-Leninism], and we arrived at it in Nicaragua through many different paths, Christianity; anti-Somocismo, through conservatism for some; for others, through shame, as Carlos Fonseca called it; and through the socialist party [...] this very breadth has characterized both the Frente and the revolution.”<sup>8</sup>

Disagreements as to the extent of the earthquake’s impact are primarily focused on the extent of opposition before 1972. Foroohar’s *The Catholic Church and Social Change in Nicaragua* emphasizes the strength of religious opposition while other works focus on conflict within the church. Sources on the FSLN are mostly in agreement that the Sandinistas were weak and held little popular support before the earthquake. One work, *Sandinista: Carlos Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Revolution* by Matilde Zimmerman offers a subtle change of emphasis, placing December of 1974, when the FSLN exploded into the national spotlight with a daring raid as “as much of a turning point” as the earthquake.<sup>9</sup> As Zimmerman suggests, there are a number of possible catalysts, going as far back as the early 1960s.

In order to support my argument, I have put to use a number of primary historical sources, including memoirs and biographies of various prominent figures of the time. *Nicaragua Betrayed*, Anastasio Somoza’s polemical autobiography published in 1980, provides a wealth of information (and some misinformation) on the earthquake and the government’s response. *The Patient Impatience*, the memoir and “personal narrative” of Tomás Borge, a prominent Sandinista, is also an important resource for understanding the process of national consciousness-raising. In addition to a number of post-disaster articles and editorials from the nation’s only major non-*Somocista*

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<sup>7</sup> John W. Murphy and Manuel J. Caro, *Uriel Molina and the Sandinista Popular Movement in Nicaragua* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2006), 77.

<sup>8</sup> Denis Lynn Daly Heyck, ed., *Life Stories of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 63-64.

<sup>9</sup> Matilde Zimmerman, *Sandinista: Carlos Fonseca and the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

newspaper *La Prensa*, an indispensable resource for insight into that newspaper's work in reconstructing a national ideology is *La Prensa: The Republic of Paper* by Jaime Chamorro Cardenal. Chamorro Cardenal was an editor himself and the son of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro and post-revolution President Violeta Barrios Chamorro. An interview with Dr. Gilberto Aguirre, an early member of CEPAD (the Council of Protestant Churches of Nicaragua) also provided insight as to the work and impact of aid and social justice organizations formed in response to the earthquake. A final resource, which has been important for understanding the physical impact of the earthquake, is a social science survey of the earthquake's effects published in the journal *Science* in 1973 entitled "Human Impact of the Managua Earthquake." This article explores the risk factors and early-term social and civil responses to the earthquake, providing invaluable firsthand scientific observation on victims and the national infrastructure.

## **Earthquake**

The earthquake which struck Managua in the early morning of December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1972 was not the city's first encounter with disaster. Located in one of the most active seismic regions in the hemisphere, Managua had been struck by major earthquakes in 1885, 1931, and 1968.<sup>10</sup> As a developing nation with a capital in an unusually seismic region, Nicaragua was particularly vulnerable to major disasters and still had not taken many practical steps toward preparedness. Only one emergency radio frequency, held in reserve for all of Central America, was available to rescue workers. Both the Managuan and national economies depended heavily on the rural countryside and foreign imports for sustenance. As the major national city, it was home to roughly twenty percent of the Nicaraguan population and contained the majority of the nation's industrial,

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<sup>10</sup> Kates, Robert W., et al., "Human Impact of the Managua Earthquake," *Science* 182 (1973): 982, 985.

commercial, transport, and governmental capacities. In essence, it was Nicaragua's only modern city.

To understand the context of this paper's argument, the reader must recognize the impact of such a disaster. The earthquake left some 200,000 homeless and roughly the same number jobless.

<sup>11</sup> An estimated 10,000 to 20,000 died. Victims were overwhelmingly middle class or poor.<sup>12</sup> The quake destroyed the majority of Managua's commercial buildings, ninety percent of residences, and four hospitals.<sup>13</sup> Downtown Managua, with its poorly-built highrises, was an uncontrollable flaming ruin, to the extent that it had to be dynamited. To this day, some sections of the city have not been rebuilt. A number of important government buildings and churches, as well as the publishing offices of the leading daily newspaper, *La Prensa*, were also destroyed. The Presidential Palace and the prominent US Embassy crumbled in the earthquake. In the immediate aftermath, Managua became an "enormous black pall of smoke" without electricity or water to fight the fires which had sprung up all over the city.<sup>14</sup>

On a national scale, "at least 10 percent of the industrial capacity, 50 percent of the commercial property, and 70 percent of the governmental facilities were inoperative."<sup>15</sup> A populace of around 350,000, almost ten percent of the national population, would need to be evacuated and fed for a period lasting a number of months.<sup>16</sup> This was, in some cases, already underway. An "enormous, spontaneous, self-reliant evacuation and relocation" took place in the immediate

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<sup>11</sup> Kates, 987.

<sup>12</sup> Anastasio Somoza, *Nicaragua Betrayed* (Boston: Western Island Publishers, 1980), 5. While no census of the dead or injured was ever undertaken, a discussion of the varying degrees of damage and death toll information reported from the disaster is available in Kates, 985.

<sup>13</sup> Somoza, 5; Francisco Lainez, *Terremoto 72, Elites y Pueblo* (Managua: Editorial Unión, 1977), 101-102, as cited in Foroohar, 87.

<sup>14</sup> Somoza, 4-6.

<sup>15</sup> Kates, 985.

<sup>16</sup> Somoza, 9.

aftermath, primarily achieved through the extended-family system.<sup>17</sup> The nearby department of León reported an influx of 50,000 Managuan refugees following the quake.<sup>18</sup>

At the time, Managua did not have a municipal police force; instead, the only significant force for maintaining public order was the National Guard which Somoza personally directed. While it is not known how many Guard soldiers were present in Managua, it is clear that many left their posts – either to check on family members or to loot. “In actuality,” according to Somoza’s autobiography, “Managua was completely without any semblance of law and order, or any structure of government.”<sup>19</sup> For nearly 48 hours after the disaster, the Managuan populace received no significant support or direction from the government or private organizations. For three to five days afterward, most emergency organizations in Managua were “denuded of personnel.”<sup>20</sup>

According to the researchers who published “Human Impact of the Managua Earthquake,” there were three main observations which help in understanding the social response to the earthquake. Each of these, as shall later be seen, seems to have impacted the long-term response. First, there was a highly centralized government “thin on human and material resources and operating in a delicate political matrix.”<sup>21</sup> The Nicaraguan government under Somoza did not possess the civil service force necessary for a timely and effective response. Because of its centralization and a poor communication infrastructure, the small civil corps that did exist, as well as NGOs such as the Red Cross, lacked proper direction and autonomy to function. Victims were forced to fend for themselves or seek help from local resources, notably local churches. The second aspect of the social response, a common Latin American pattern, was the pervasiveness of

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<sup>17</sup> Kates, 987.

<sup>18</sup> “Cincuenta Mil Damnificados Recibió Departamento de León,” *La Prensa*, March 6, 1973. For her help and advice with translating *La Prensa* and other Spanish-language sources for this project, I am greatly indebted to Lisa Phillips-Colominas of Asheville, NC.

<sup>19</sup> Somoza, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Kates, 986, 988.

<sup>21</sup> Kates, 987.

traditional extended family systems, even within the urban environment of Managua. An estimated 75 percent of the homeless in Managua found shelter in and around the homes of relatives.<sup>22</sup> Lastly, a broad socioeconomic disparity among the populace led to open looting and appropriation of materials in commercial districts, not only by citizens, but by National Guard members and government employees. These three aspects of a stratified social atmosphere effectively pitted disaster victims and their families against Somoza elites and the government.

Even before the earthquake, Nicaragua was in dire straits. It had one of the worst distributions of land and income in Central America, half of its population was illiterate, and public health lagged behind that in neighboring countries. The economy was dominated by a few elite families such that thirty percent of all income was owned by the richest five percent of income earners and eighty-five percent of all farmland was owned by five percent of the rural population.<sup>23</sup> The earthquake threw this already-backward economic makeup into a tailspin. International investments dried up and heavy borrowing from 1972 onward deepened the economic crisis; external debt grew from \$225 million in 1972 to \$1 billion by 1978.<sup>24</sup> Loans totaling over \$153 million were disbursed through various development agencies, including the IMF and USAID, for reconstruction of the city. Because of such a major loss in infrastructure and import availability, the years 1973 and 1974 saw an exponential increase in negative balance of trade and, respectively, 16.8% and 20.5% jumps in consumer prices, the highest change in over ten years. These years also saw some of the lowest wage indices since the early 1960s, an impact which enflamed urban

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<sup>22</sup> Kates, 988.

<sup>23</sup> Gilbert, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Bryan R. Higgins, "The Place of Housing Programs and Class Relations in Latin American Cities: The Development of Managua before 1980," *Economic Geography* 66, no. 4 (Oct 1990): 381.

workers.<sup>25</sup> The reconstruction boom, which began in 1973, eventually signaled a return to normalcy, but by the late 1970s the economy was again facing major crises.

## **Somoza**

Since the 1930s, Nicaragua had been ruled by successive patriarchal strongmen from the Somoza family. Anastasio Somoza Debayle (President, 1967-1971, 1974-1979) became the third and final Nicaraguan President from the Somoza dynasty. The family itself was one of the wealthiest and largest land-owning families in the country. With coordinated control over the National Guard, which functioned more as a private military force than a national institution, the Somozas consolidated and stratified political power. Far from a traditional military dictatorship, they also enjoyed support from the landed, export-oriented elite of the nation and, importantly, the US government. Like many Latin American regimes, the Somoza family had once appealed to the conservative elite of Nicaragua and US policymakers by suppressing labor, personalizing power, and orienting the economy in favor of liberal markets.

For various reasons, Anastasio Somoza himself was probably the most obvious cause for his violent overthrow in 1979. Thirty-plus years of family rule had revolutionaries like Carlos Fonseca and pro-democracy reformers like Pedro Joaquin Chamorro itching for a chance at self-governance. However, this sentiment was unsuccessful in its earliest manifestations. Many groups existed which stood against *Somocismo*, but few enjoyed popular support and even fewer could effectively voice their opposition. The FSLN and its predecessor organizations, notably the Moscow-line PSN (Nicaraguan Socialist Party), had attempted numerous armed insurrections before 1972 and most often they were brutally crushed.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Booth, 149-151; Foroohar, 32.

<sup>26</sup> Jaime Chamorro Cardenal, *La Prensa: The Republic of Paper* (New York: Freedom House, 1988), 8-9.

Somoza's response to the earthquake, though, seemed to turn the entire nation against him. He was in a unique position in 1972; as a nod to democratic reformists and the Conservative Party, he had stepped down as President to assume an interim role as part of a three-person junta ruling the country. But he, like his father and brother before him, maintained control over the country as Chief Director of the National Guard. The earthquake cut short the junta's rule. With the destruction of most of Managua and a subsequent declaration of martial law, representative institutions in Nicaragua became meaningless and Somoza's power literally shifted to his bedroom: he gained strong executive powers and set up an emergency command post in his home. The state of siege lasted for two years, until December of 1974; at which point it was reinstated only a few weeks later, and would last for the remainder of Somoza's rule. Somoza used these emergency powers to impose his will: a 60-hour work week for construction employees rebuilding after the disaster,<sup>27</sup> total control over the means of aid distribution and reconstruction, control over employment of thousands of workers through the Civil Corps for Reconstruction,<sup>28</sup> restrictions on freedom of movement, and a renewed offensive against his critics.

The excesses of Somoza's kleptocracy during this period have been discussed in nearly every historical source on the country since 1972. Abuses such as misappropriation of construction materials, vehicles, food aid, and land by Guardsmen, party officials, and prominent *Somocistas* were rampant. Land speculation, favoritism in clean-up and reconstruction contracts, and outright theft by Somoza and his cronies outraged domestic opposition and international observers alike. Priority for construction materials and other aid was also given to National Guard officers. Large sums of international aid money and supplies were unaccounted for. In a high profile case, Somoza

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty: A History of the U.S. Created Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua and the Somoza Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 238.

<sup>28</sup> Foroohar, 88-90.

was accused of appropriating Red Cross blood supplies and reselling them at a large profit to US markets, an exploit which became known as “Operation Vampire.”<sup>29</sup>

The earthquake even seemed to have affected electoral politics. Opposition on reconstruction issues came from a member of the ruling three-man junta, President of the Conservative Party Dr. Fernando Aguero. Because of his supposed subversive activities, Aguero was circumvented and ousted by Somoza in 1973, in favor of a more compliant junta member. And by 1974, Somoza had, again, maneuvered his way around constitutional limitations and into the Presidency. In his autobiography, Somoza claimed that he reluctantly ran for the Presidency at the rigorous behest of the Liberal Party for his role in “saving Nicaragua from disaster.”<sup>30</sup> All of these aspects would further enflame opposition to the regime, from all sectors of Nicaraguan society.

During the trying times after the earthquake, Somoza enjoyed the support of his friend, US Ambassador Turner B. Shelton, who airlifted an army force from the Canal Zone in Panama and supposedly encouraged Somoza to take direct control over the country.<sup>31</sup> As public opinion against Somoza began to turn, the President lost support from international donors and governments. Mauricio Solaún, US ambassador to Nicaragua under the less-friendly, human-rights oriented administration of Jimmy Carter, stated that he “found quite broad consensus [...] that the [...] earthquake of 1972 was a critical turning point ushering in a ludicrous period of exacerbated kleptocracy, wanton National Guard repression, debauchery of the ruler, corrupt expansion of his personal business empire and mismanagement scandals in it, and a syndrome of normlessness further delegitimizing the Somocista state.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Gilbert, 2; Heyck, 49-50.

<sup>30</sup> Somoza, 19-21, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Gilbert, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Mauricio Solaún, *US Intervention and Regime Change In Nicaragua* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 79.

## Reconstruction

Ironically, the tone of the government's outlook was well-captured in a publicity response which described the earthquake as "a revolution of possibilities."<sup>33</sup> Facing a major rebuilding crisis, political and civic leaders bickered over how to appropriately direct the reconstruction effort. Proposals for relocation of the city and conflicts over aid distribution slowed the process, while the patriarchal Somoza regime took an exclusive administrative interest in funds and food aid.<sup>34</sup> In addition, the plan for the future of the city was kept under wraps. The rubble of Old Managua, in the city center, was fenced off. It eventually became evident that Managuans were squatting or already rebuilding in earnest, with or without help or guidance from the government. "The city itself," wrote Pedro Joaquin Chamorro in 1973, "is coming back to life, re-growing in a chaotic way without anyone to offer resolutions [...] for guidance and regulation."<sup>35</sup>

The movement of large displaced populations provided cover for various anti-Somoza activists, including many high-ranking FSLN members, who were struggling to organize covertly. Radical clergy and supporters often provided protection for their political organizing. A majority of small commercial enterprises in Managua had been displaced or destroyed by the earthquake, leading to a major realignment in employment. Unemployment and underemployment remained high.<sup>36</sup> Rapid growth in construction industries provided new jobs to many displaced persons, but due to the long work days and low wages, workers also began to unionize and strike, often in concert with hospital and industrial workers.

The reconstruction effort was one marked by new efforts by Somoza to capitalize on the disaster. The plan to relocate the city to the outskirts of its original location met with resistance

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<sup>33</sup> Higgins, 381.

<sup>34</sup> Kates, 987.

<sup>35</sup> Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, "La Ciudad Planeada y La Ciudad Real," *La Prensa*, March 6, 1973, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Chamorro, "La Ciudad Planeada y La Ciudad Real."

because the once-valuable and densely populated land in downtown Managua was reduced to rubble and set to be abandoned. In addition, land speculation by prominent *Somocistas* on the outskirts of Managua had begun prior to the earthquake, leading many to believe the decision to relocate was a personal economic one.<sup>37</sup> In a few high-profile cases, real estate speculation fueled by government-sponsored housing programs left little to the imagination as to government priorities. In one instance, a prominent *Somocista* purchased vacant land for \$17,000 and days later, resold it to BAVINIC, the Nicaraguan Housing Bank, for \$1.2 million.<sup>38</sup>

Anxiety about placing and feeding refugees nationwide grew for months, and was exacerbated by the perceived lack or loss of aid. In April of 1973, there were nation-wide protests for access to more food.<sup>39</sup> Refugee communities around Managua, organized by the government to handle disaster victims, became hotbeds of revolutionary and religious organizing. The barrio, or neighborhood, of OPEN 3 (Permanent National Emergency Organism number 3, later Ciudad Sandino) is one of the more striking examples of this. The community was first organized in 1970 following severe flooding in Lake Managua but rapidly burgeoned in population and importance after the earthquake. Because of its charge as an intentional community for poor refugees, the situation in the barrio was particularly destitute; the most common type of homes were constructed from wood, sometimes with a cement base and/or zinc roof and roads were almost exclusively dirt. Struggles and mobilization over water and transportation rights with the Somoza-supported landowners, the Blandones, marked its earliest development.<sup>40</sup> Economic opportunities within OPEN 3 were limited and many citizens traveled daily to Managua, about 13 kilometers to the city

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<sup>37</sup> Somoza, 17.

<sup>38</sup> George Black, *Triumph of the People: The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua* (London: Zed Press, 1981), 59; as cited in Higgins, 382.

<sup>39</sup> "Protestas Por la Comida de Todo el País," *La Prensa*, April 7, 1973.

<sup>40</sup> "A Look At A Popular Nicaraguan Barrio," *Revista Envío*, September 1981, [www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3105](http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3105) (accessed February 2008).

center, on a crowded and expensive private bus system.<sup>41</sup> The barrio also received no centralized urban planning, so sprang up as an uncoordinated mash of housing; this situation was ripe for the unique combination of revolutionary organizing and Christian empowerment. Although OPEN 3 was one of the largest, there were numerous other semi-autonomous neighborhoods which appeared or burgeoned after the earthquake, and played a role in supporting revolution.

### **Bourgeois Opposition**

Somoza believed that he had somehow alienated the businessmen of his country in the aftermath of the earthquake. A ten percent tax imposed on all exports from the country was one reason, Somoza thought.<sup>42</sup> The tax was used to raise funds, which United States aid agencies would match, for rebuilding in the immediate wake of the disaster. However it directly affected the most important sectors of the economy not already under Somoza control: the traditional elite families of León, Granada, and Matagalpa, who depended upon exports of cotton, coffee, and other agricultural products.

*La Prensa*, the nation's major news outlet and an old source of opposition to the regime, was put out of commission by the earthquake, but broke a prolonged silence in March of 1973. It reconstituted its commitment to exposing fraud and advocating for reforms and economic development. The paper ran articles on how the nation should rebuild private enterprise, the national healthcare and educational systems, banking and infrastructure, and even the laws and political structure of society.<sup>43</sup> As editor, Pedro Joaquin Chomorro reported on the earthquake

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<sup>41</sup> Higgins, 384.

<sup>42</sup> Somoza, 16-17.

<sup>43</sup> "Como Resurgio la Empresa Privada," "Como Reconstruiran la Educacion," "Ley de Mora Fue Publicada y Vetada," *La Prensa*, March 2, 1973.

extensively. He once commented that there was “a fraternity among the victims.”<sup>44</sup> His newspaper became a mouthpiece for his advocacy, which he claimed represented the common interest of Nicaraguans, termed “the voice of the people.”<sup>45</sup> A champion of the free press and the middle class it catered to, Chomorro eloquently appealed for a systemic change in Nicaragua, a way of:

guiding and reorienting the traumatized minds of Nicaraguans – and we have all suffered a trauma – back to the path of achievement, a task that has yielded the fruit of optimism. But this urgent task does not mean that we think to renounce a political posture of demanding – an honest game of democracy – true independence from the current system, because this posture is INDISPENSABLE for true and healthy reconstruction of Nicaragua.<sup>46</sup>

In October of 1973, after articles in *La Prensa* accused government officials of stealing money, the regime passed a law subjecting journalists to fines for defaming public officials.<sup>47</sup> In fact, *La Prensa*'s vitriolic anti-Somocismo was even held up by the dictatorship as proof of a national free press. What is more, *La Prensa* claimed the inclusion of voices from liberals and conservatives, from labor and student groups to the disaffected, overwhelmingly poor victims of disaster. Indeed, the earthquake served as justification for renewed dialogue for all of these groups on the country's future, which hung in the balance.

Shut down and censored on-and-off for decades, *La Prensa* was in a prime position to be a forum for the dialogue on reconstruction. It was the only major news outlet capable of challenging Somoza, and editor Chamorro and co-editor Pablo Antonio Cuadra had become somewhat of a popular duo for their political opposition. Because of its new role as a forum for Managuans and the middle class, *La Prensa*'s renewed offensive on the Somoza regime following the earthquake was often singled out by the government as subversive. It was also held up by supporters as a champion of the average Nicaraguan's cause. In 1974, Chomorro, along with a former Minister of

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<sup>44</sup> Chomorro, “Secuencia de Hombria: del Estoicismo a La Risa,” *La Prensa*, March 7, 1973, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Chamorro, “En La Línea de la Reestructuración,” *La Prensa* March 1, 1973, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Chamorro, “No Con Éstas, Ni Con Ésas,” *La Prensa*, March 9, 1973, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Chamorro Cardenal, 9-10.

Education, established the Unión Democrática de Liberación, or UDEL, a political opposition party. UDEL was a broad coalition of business groups and traditional elites which attempted to promote a dialogue with the government to foster political pluralism and voice the average Nicaraguan's grievances. Chamorro's assassination, in 1978, turned out to be a final matchstick in the national tinderbox, sparking street protests in Managua.

## **Religion**

As in any disaster, religious groups played a crucial role in the response to the earthquake, through the Catholic Church, the Red Cross, and international organizations. What is more striking, however, is the role which religion played in the revolution of 1979, one which many consider the first large-scale revolutionary movement where members actively participated as Christians.<sup>48</sup> The typically conservative hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua at times enjoyed a close relationship with the Somoza regime, justifying the illicit or repressive behavior of the dictatorship. The emergence of liberation theology and the appointment of the progressive Miguel Obando y Bravo as Archbishop of Nicaragua saw the Church begin to subtly break with this tradition. Throughout the early 1970s, the Church expressed a need for change in published Pastoral Letters and in speeches from Obando y Bravo that were critical of Somoza's government and the repressive violence of the National Guard.<sup>49</sup>

After the disaster, in light of deteriorating social conditions – illiteracy, malnourishment, inadequate health services, and lack of proper housing – popular discontent grew and ignited criticism from the Church, which had initially taken the brunt of responsibility for post-disaster aid. Because resources were hardly getting through to those who needed them and legal means of

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<sup>48</sup> Dana Sawchuk, "The Catholic Church in the Nicaraguan Revolution: A Gramscian Analysis," *Sociology of Religion* 58 (1997), 39.

<sup>49</sup> Foroohar, 80-86.

recompense were limited, priests and nuns on the ground encountered the gross disparities and lack of aid first-hand.

One of the most striking features of the post-quake period was the emergence in importance of the disaffected masses, often organized by religious leaders. In some ways this can be seen within the context of change within the Church itself. Modern reforms, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1962-65), and the Second Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, Colombia (1968) reaffirmed the emergent ideals of liberation theology in the Roman Catholic hierarchy.<sup>50</sup> These conferences examined economic disparity within a social context and sought to reconcile political disenfranchisement which plagued Latin America and the world. The Church, particularly Latin American Catholic Churches, sought to rethink the nature of their role in empowering their populace. Ecclesiastical Base Communities (CEBs) first opened in the late 1960s, motivated by priests seeking to spread the ideals of liberation theology and social justice.<sup>51</sup>

Ecclesiastical Base Communities such as El Riguero, located on an island in Lake Managua, became hotbeds of radical communal organizing. Often dodging epithets of “Communists” or “spies” from government circles, radical priests, nuns, and students operating in these communities helped to rebuild after the earthquake. They also helped galvanize the Christian population against the Somoza regime and parts of their leadership structure were eventually incorporated into the FSLN revolutionary movement. In El Riguero, the people came together to build a temporary wooden church and other neighborhood structures. Father Uriel Molina, who worked in El Riguero, noted that after the earthquake, students volunteering in the barrio saw their work “in more political

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<sup>50</sup> Liberation theology is a relatively new and controversial school of theology within the Roman Catholic Church which emphasizes the role of Jesus Christ as both spiritual Redeemer and Liberator of the oppressed. As such, it emphasizes the importance of bringing justice to the Christian masses through political action and Church organizing.

<sup>51</sup> Foroohar, 45-55.

terms.”<sup>52</sup> Their mission became not simply to alleviate poverty, but to address the systemic ills which reinforced their poverty, through community organizing and consciousness-raising.

Organizations which arose from the need for earthquake aid included a number of Catholic and Protestant groups dedicated to social change. The Council of Protestant Churches of Nicaragua (CEPAD) was formed in 1972 after the earthquake. Comprised of thirty-two separate evangelical groups, it was the first Protestant organization in Nicaragua to participate in alleviating community problems and to intercede with the government concerning aid and disaster reconstruction. In addition to channeling 715,000 córdobas worth of international donations in the first few months after the quake, CEPAD established a loan fund for temporary housing and helped reconstruct the Polytechnic Institute in Managua.<sup>53</sup> Its members came from all walks of life and after some time, a contingent became full-time staff and worked toward empowering Nicaraguans. The organization eventually moved to the countryside and worked to stimulate local agriculture and small businesses. CEPAD was particularly effective because it actively sought to promote local leadership.

According to Dr. Gilberto Aguirre, the current Director of Development at CEPAD and an original member, “there were a number of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) that contributed to reconstruction, most of them from outside of the country. Something that we noticed was the lack of support to local movements [...] most of the NGOs came and established their own offices instead of promoting local leadership.”<sup>54</sup> While CEPAD did not actively participate in any political party in Nicaragua, the organization took a firm stance on community empowerment. Dr. Aguirre stated that “our situation in Nicaragua in Somoza’s time was that the great majority of the population was

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<sup>52</sup> Murphy and Caro, 75-76.

<sup>53</sup> “Organizaciones Evangélicas Ayudan a Reconstruir el Instituto Politécnico,” *La Prensa*, March 1973, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Dr. Gilberto Aguirre of CEPAD, November 21, 2007.

against Somoza. So, if we helped campesinos to know their rights, Somoza people saw that action as opposition [sic] to the government.”<sup>55</sup>

### **The FSLN**

The Marxist-Leninist Sandinista Front for National Liberation was the most effective and notorious driving force behind national opposition to Somoza. Formed in 1961 by student activists, the FSLN had launched numerous campaigns in the 1960s against prominent *Somocistas* and had given the Guardia headaches with its guerilla attacks, bank robberies and clandestine activities in both the countryside and in the cities. However its guerilla columns in the rural north-eastern mountains were struck crushing blows in a series of defeats in 1967.<sup>56</sup> The well-trained and equipped Guardia had helped reduce the size and effectiveness of the party such that only several dozen active members remained. A series of clandestine organizational maneuvers and small-scale bank robberies and kidnapping made up their primary operations after that time and reflected a strategic doctrine which attempted to build a peasant guerilla force supported by urban capital and recruitment.<sup>57</sup>

The 1969 publication of “The Historic Program of the FSLN” set out broad-based goals and a system of economic reform and redistribution significantly more radical than the one they eventually imposed after 1979. The program was inclusive, “allow[ing] the full participation of the entire people” and guaranteeing individual freedoms and respect for human rights, but called for extreme economic measures expropriating and nationalizing assets and lands of certain elites. It also stated that the Sandinistas would abolish capitalist estates, refuse to honor “Yankee” loans, and

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<sup>55</sup> Aguirre interview.

<sup>56</sup> Chamorro Cardenal, 8.

<sup>57</sup> Chamorro Cardenal, 8.

rigorously restrict the importation of luxury goods.<sup>58</sup> Needless to say, these aspects of FSLN doctrine had only a limited appeal to middle-class and elite Nicaraguans. However, the earthquake seems to have shifted focus from the anti-capitalist elements of the FSLN toward the anti-*Somocista* elements. Instead of an ideological struggle, the average Nicaraguan saw the FSLN's work as a revolutionary democratic and cultural movement which could oust Somoza, clean up graft, and amend the many ills and inequalities which the poverty-stricken nation faced. Creating jobs, eliminating debts and discrimination, putting idle land to work, and providing adequate housing were all included in "The Historic Program of the FSLN," which took on an entirely new and tangible meaning following the Managua disaster.

What is important to note is that the revolution would not have succeeded without the support of non-aligned groups and individuals across the social and political spectrum of Nicaraguans. An eventual progression to a more moderate message was implemented beginning in the 1970s with the emergence of various factions in the FSLN. It was also tempered by a major influx of student and bourgeois elements after the earthquake. The Insurreccional Tendency or Third Way (terceristas), led by brothers Daniel and Humberto Ortega Saavedra, sought to create a broad, pragmatic alliance of anti-*Somocista* elements.<sup>59</sup> A huge population of displaced and disgruntled peoples struggled in cities, especially Managua, where elites had also begun to form coherent resistance to Somoza. A shift away from the rural-focused "Prolonged People's War" doctrine of peasant organizing and guerilla tactics of the 1960s and early 1970s represented an embrace of the disaffected masses activated by the quake. With occasional support from founder

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<sup>58</sup> Tomás Borge, Carlos Fonseca, et al., "The Historic Program of the FSLN," in *Sandinistas Speak* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1982).

<sup>59</sup> Internal documents trace the origin of this stage of strategic conflict within the FSLN to as early as 1971, but by mid-1973, tercerista elements and issues were emerging in full force. Arguing for relaxed ideological strictures and a broader urban support base for creating a popular armed uprising, they sought strategic alliances with other sectors of society, including Conservatives and traditional elites. Foroohar, 124; Zimmerman, 164-165, 172-176.

Carlos Fonseca, terceristas would eventually dominate the leadership of the FSLN. The terceristas used their influence to incorporate a broad and diverse following, very different from the Marxist-Leninist tendencies which first guided the FSLN.

The creation of *Los Doce*, or The Group of Twelve, in 1977, as the “civic front” for Sandinista opposition, represented an understanding and rapprochement from the Marxist-Leninist aspects of the party toward the Nicaraguan elite.<sup>60</sup> The group was composed of prominent professional and political leaders, some of whom were Sandinistas, and departed significantly from the party line, proposing a peaceful transition to democracy and Somoza’s immediate resignation (rather than violent overthrow). The Group of Twelve did not succeed in their efforts, but stirred a significant following in the popular imagination. These institutional changes reflect the growth in importance of disaffected urban masses, Christians, and elites who were politically animated after the earthquake.

An especially telling recollection of FSLN organizing is that of Leticia Herrera, a former secretary to Daniel Ortega and coordinator of the Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS) which formed in neighborhoods throughout the country. Her story is typical of many activists at the time, who promoted the development of grass-roots organizations in response to local needs, particularly in neighborhoods affected by the earthquake. “In ’71 and ’72,” she states, “we began organizing in earnest; that’s when I worked so closely with the Christian base communities at the grass-roots level. These structures kept on growing stronger as alternative organizations for the people” and later incorporated themselves into the CDS structure. “They were composed fundamentally by people who were in opposition to Somoza; that was the common denominator [...] they

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<sup>60</sup> Solaún , 98. *Los Doce* formed as part of a public move to garner support among urban and bourgeois circles, as opposed to students and peasants, who formed the majority of the FSLN. According to Foroohar, 231, the group was composed of two lawyers, two businessmen, two priests, an academic, a writer, an agronomist, an architect, a banker, and a dental surgeon, each with a history of “commitment against the dictatorship.”

incorporated base communities, students, trade union members, individuals struggling for redress of grievances they had suffered, and those merely fighting to stay alive[...] Later, the Frente counted on large numbers of such people as collaborators.”<sup>61</sup>

Due to the nature of Latin American history, it would be imprudent to simply ignore the prevalence of international factors on the Nicaraguan situation. However, I have chosen to proceed without a discussion of important international factors, such as US support or foreign investment, because in the earliest stages the processes which this paper analyzes were almost exclusively indigenous. While millions in foreign loans and international aid flooded into the country, clearly much of this money had little impact on most Nicaraguans. In as far as the United States did not, on the whole, affect the opinions or actions of Nicaraguans, it is possible to exclude immediate influence from outside forces. Although many would claim otherwise, the same holds true for the Soviet bloc countries and Cuba, who, while influencing some tactical and strategic ideological tendencies within the FSLN, did not play a large role in mobilizing the populace.

## **Conclusions**

The 1972 quake exacerbated political, economic, and social iniquities in the developing Nicaraguan society and, over time, seems to have contributed to the overwhelming popularity and success of the nation-wide revolution of 1979. As with any historical movement, the revolution stemmed from a confluence of events: a broad cultural-normative shift, a rise in radical Christianity, the political/economic re-animation of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie, and the emergence of student and labor opposition. Each of these was, in some way, influenced by the 1972 earthquake. Not simply put-off by Somoza’s post-disaster antics, people across the whole spectrum of Nicaraguan

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<sup>61</sup> Heyck, 100-101.

society began to stand up for themselves. The formation of a few influential organizations, many of which would eventually collaborate with the FSLN, also played a role.

While for some scholars there is disagreement about causal relationships in tumultuous Nicaragua, the earthquake can most certainly be considered a major catalyst for social and political change in the 1970s. It set in motion a chain of events and excesses by the ruling regime and served as a pinion around which to discuss the future of the nation and build a movement for change amongst its people. The earthquake's scale and subsequent impact left no sector of Nicaraguan society untouched. Just as it affected the rural and poor in their effort for access to government and alleviation of economic dependence, so also it influenced the outlook of traditional bourgeois Liberals and Conservatives in their pursuit of wealth and political freedoms. In addition to impacting the way religious groups worked with– and spoke to– their flock concerning their roles as Christians and Nicaraguans, the earthquake also altered the messages sent by student and radical political opposition on power and redistribution of land and wealth. These forces would combine after 1972 to set in motion a series of events unlike any before, or since. The unraveling of the Somoza regime and the development of a revolutionary consciousness in the popular imagination became the central driving forces behind the 1979 revolution and the development of modern Nicaragua.

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