



Review: The Nicaraguan Contras: Were They Indios?

Author(s): David Stoll

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When the AK-47s Fall Silent: Revolutionaries, Guerrillas, and the Dangers of Peace by Timothy C. Brown

The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua by Timothy C. Brown

Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979-1994 by Lynn Horton

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Critical Debates

The Nicaraguan Contras: Were They Indios?

David Stoll

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- Lynn Horton, *Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979–1994*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998. Photographs, maps, notes, bibliography, index, 391 pp.; paperback \$26, e-book \$40 (available through netLibrary/OCLC. <www.oclc.org/electroniccollections/ordering/default.htm>).

That peasants are structurally disposed to social revolution is one of the truisms of the last several decades in Latin American studies. It has been shared by an array of intellectuals, not just Marxists. Peasant-based guerrillas represent popular upheavals of the oppressed against their exploiters, according to the prevailing opinion. Skeptics stress the role of urban intellectuals in starting rural guerrilla movements, but everyone seems to agree that peasants—or at least the more literate and upwardly mobile—are a promising constituency for revolutionaries.

If so, what do we make of the Nicaraguan Contras? Could they be infamous not just for the atrocities they committed but for the expectations they violated? The highland peasants who revolted against the Sandinista revolution in the 1980s have not received much attention from scholars. They reversed the usual signs in the wars that ravaged Central America. Unlike the Marxist-led guerrillas of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, who fought right-wing dictatorships, in the Nicaraguan case culminating in the Sandinistas' 1979 overthrow of the Somoza regime, the Contras were supported by Washington and fought a Marxist government—a government that was doing more for peasants than any other in the region. The Contras seemed like such an anomaly that their very identity as peasant rebels took several years to establish. No one expected opposition to the Sandinista revolution to extend so deeply into the peasantry.

When the first Contra attacks occurred in 1980, the Sandinistas blamed the Somoza dictatorship's ex-national guardsmen. Some of the raiders indeed were former guardsmen. Most proved not to be, but the equation stuck, and for understandable reasons. The Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) was led by former *guardia* officers chosen by the Reagan administration, which also financed the base camps in Honduras. Shake-ups of the FDN leadership to mollify the U.S. Congress made it easy to dismiss the Contras as the manipulated simulacrum of a peasant revolt, not a real one. As U.S.-appointed FDN head Colonel Enrique Bermúdez said of U.S. involvement, it could be sensed like "the steps of an enormous beast" (Bendaña 1991, 30).

From my own perspective two countries away in Guatemala, the Contras looked like one more example of how elites project their power struggles into the most available supply of cannon fodder. In Guatemala, by the time I began systematic interviewing of war zone peasants in 1987, it was hard to find any who would admit to feeling represented by either Marxist rebels or army counterinsurgents. Some peasants acknowledged supporting the guerrillas at an earlier date, before they realized the high price the army would exact. The cost of guerrilla warfare for noncombatants was so high that, as far as I could see, it was guaranteed to burn off genuine support. Once soldiers were chasing guerrillas through populated areas, with both sides demanding cooperation from the inhabitants and killing anyone they suspected of being an informer, the predictable response from most peasants would be neutrality, if necessary masked by unenthusiastic collaboration with the stronger side (Stoll 1993).

This, however, does not seem to describe the many Nicaraguan peasants who supported the Contras. When U.S. journalists accompanied a Contra unit on a raid into Nicaragua in March 1983, they were amazed by the popular support that the Contras seemed to enjoy, and this after almost three years of counterinsurgency had sharply increased the cost of helping them (Dickey 1985). Ultimately the Contras recruited thousands of fighters from Nueva Segovia, the same mountainous department on the Honduran border where General Augusto César Sandino, the eponymous hero of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), had led resistance to the U.S. Marines half a century before. When the Contras demobilized in 1990, more than 80 percent identified their place of origin as eight northern and central mountain departments. Only 3 percent were from the Pacific coastal plain where the Sandinistas found the majority of their support (Horton 1998, vii). The Organization of American States registered more than 28,000 combatants, three times the expected number. True, demobilizations attract handout seekers. But the number for the Contras is substantially higher than for the Salvadoran guerrillas (some 14,500, of whom 8,000 were

combatants) and the Guatemalan guerrillas (2,954, of whom 800 to 1,000 were combatants). Living with the Contras who demobilized were more than 80,000 noncombatants.

The most thoughtful Sandinista analysts have refused to reduce the Contras to external manipulation, even though there was no shortage of the latter. Alejandro Bendaña concludes that peasants joined the Contras in numbers far beyond U.S. expectations, "not as the result of sophisticated rural recruitment campaigns, but principally because of the impact on peasant proprietors of the policies, limitations and errors of Sandinismo" (1991, 13). In the 1999 memoir *Adiós muchachos*, Sergio Ramírez blames the Contras' rapid growth on the FSLN's ideological blinders.

Youth trained in the rudiments of Marxism had taken party posts in rural areas . . . and measured the conduct of ordinary people according to ideological schemes learned in manuals. The vocabulary of *campesino*, *rico*, *burgues*, *pequeñoburgues*, and *explotador* confused and terrorized. In remote areas exploiters consisted of everyone who had something—a truck, a press, a finca—and was on the list of enemies to neutralize. (Ramírez 1999, 229)

Revolutionary egalitarianism collided with centuries of cultural tradition supporting the authority of men over women and of *patróns* over their dependents, Ramírez concludes. While the FSLN demanded a new consciousness, the Contra message was much easier to assimilate: the Sandinistas "want to take your liberty, they want to take your children, they want to take your religion, you're going to have to sell your crops only to them, and the bit of land that you have, they are going to take that too" (1999, 229–30).

For foreigners enthusiastic about the Sandinista revolution, the social distance between the Nicaraguans who led the FSLN and those who joined the Contras was easy to overlook. The Sandinistas claimed descent from Sandino's rural fighters, they had rural guerrillas of their own in the same region (although not many), and two of their proudest achievements were a literacy campaign and a land reform intended to benefit peasants. But the Sandinistas came to power in an urban rather than rural insurrection. The youth who helped them confront the national guard were of urban origin; the rural poor were mainly bystanders.

ARE NICARAGUAN HIGHLANDERS A DISTINCT ETHNIC GROUP?

Recently a new explanation has been suggested for the social chasm between the Sandinistas and their peasant opponents: could it have been ethnic? Now that ethnicity is a source of pride rather than stigma, scholars have been ferreting out its many forgotten or neglected mani-

festations. Among the mysteries they pursue: what happened to the Indians of the Central American isthmus below Guatemala? Indigenous peasants populate the accounts of nineteenth-century travelers. Indians were the protagonists of a 1932 communist uprising in El Salvador. But they mysteriously dwindle and vanish in twentieth-century censuses, replaced by the local term for mestizaje (for example, *ladinos*, *mestizos*, *morenos*) and proclamations about the march of civilization. Entire languages disappeared as parents decided to raise their children in Spanish. On the Pacific side of Nicaragua, only in a few communities, such as Monimbó and Sutiaba, did Nicaraguans continue to identify themselves as *indígena*. Without giving the issue much thought, the Sandinistas inherited the claim that Nicaragua is a mestizo country. When the U.S. historian Jeffrey Gould inquired about the local indigenous population, a Sandinista official told him, "There are no 'real Indians' in Matagalpa" (1998, 273–74).¹

No one has ever questioned the survival of Indians on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, notably the Miskitos, who are descended from Amerindians mixing with Africans who escaped from slavery. The Miskitos have a long history of preferring to cooperate with Britons and North Americans rather than the Spanish speakers of western Nicaragua. They had little to do with the insurrection against Somoza and soon incurred the distrust of the revolutionary government. Exploiting the rift, the Central Intelligence Agency fomented an insurgency, which the Sandinistas brought under control only after years of forced relocations, autonomy negotiations, and concessions. Still, the undeniable separateness of the Atlantic coast indigenous groups has reinforced the impression that the rest of Nicaragua is a mestizo country. And ethnicity has never been adduced to explain the Contra uprising in the central highlands.

Timothy Brown, a retired U.S. Marine and foreign service officer, believes that Nicaragua is far less mestizo than it appears and that this is the key to understanding popular support for the Contras. From 1987 to 1990, Brown was senior liaison officer to the FDN, in which capacity he operated out of a vault in the U.S. embassy in Tegucigalpa. In the 1990s he returned to interview his many contacts and to write a dissertation and then two books, neither of which seems to have received a single scholarly review. *When the AK-47s Fall Silent* is a collection of first-person testimonials, most of them from demobilized Contras, including a former Sandino bodyguard, along with other disillusioned Sandinistas. *The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua* argues that many of the Spanish-speaking highland peasants who joined the Contras saw themselves as indios, or Indians, in contradistinction to Nicaraguans on the Pacific Coast. Of the 44 ex-Contra fighters with whom Brown did formal interviews, 43 identified themselves as indios (2001, 11).

The germ of Brown's arguments can be traced to three photos on the wall of his embassy vault: pictures of the nine-member Sandinista directorate, of the civilians leading the FDN, and of the FDN field commanders. Most of the people in the first two photographs are what his Contras refer to contemptuously as *españoles*; that is, Nicaraguans of primarily European ancestry. But the FDN unit commanders in the third photograph are mainly short and dark, the kind of people to whom Nicaraguans refer politely as *morenos* and less politely as *indios*.

According to Brown, what makes his Contra peasants a different kind of Nicaraguan dates back a millennium, to the contrast between two indigenous traditions. Nahua culture bearers (from Mesoamerica) inhabited the Pacific coast. They lived in hierarchical societies, in which peasants paid tribute to chiefs living atop mounds. Chibcha culture bearers (from South America) inhabited the highlands. They were more egalitarian, were unaccustomed to paying tribute, and held out much longer against the Spanish. As a result, colonial bloodshed between Spanish miners and highland Indians continued into the nineteenth century. Led by a charismatic mountain caudillo named Bernabé Somoza—a progenitor of the next century's political dynasty—Indians sacked the city of León on two occasions (2001, 145–62).

Only in the mid-twentieth century did Nicaraguan intellectuals dare assert that indigenous resistance to the Nicaraguan nation-state was extinct. They did so through what scholars call a “myth of mestizaje,” which seeks to transcend ethnic differences by emphasizing intermarriage and shared descent. This might seem like a commendably inclusive approach to nation building, which is how the Sandinistas intended it. But its consequences were devastating, according to Brown, who makes his point with a foundation narrative told by Sandinistas who turned into Contras: the story of how Fidel Castro and the FSLN directorate of nine *comandantes* “stole the revolution” even before the Sandinistas took power. As related by Brown's source José Obidio Puente León, in 1978 a Cuban functionary asked Puente to choose three representatives from each of the three Sandinista tendencies—Prolonged Popular War, Proletarian, and Tercerista—whose feuding was impeding the war against Somoza. As Puente describes it,

By then the revolution was well under way, and all its real leaders were inside Nicaragua and couldn't come out, so I did the next best thing and called three from each faction from among those outside Nicaragua and not participating in actual revolutionary fighting and sent them to Havana via Mérida, Yucatán, in a small airplane I leased for them. Much to my amazement, far from simply getting together representatives of the three factions to try to reduce the tension between them, Castro made them our new national directorate, without even consulting with the real leaders of our Front. (2000, 46–7)

This version of history could be simplistic, but the new nine-man directorate indeed lacked representatives from the highlands. According to Brown's testimonials, the most strenuous objections came from Germán Pomáres ("El Danto"), a peasant leader and anti-Somoza guerrilla who, within weeks, was killed by friendly fire from his own ranks. Unlike most of the rest of the Sandinista movement, El Danto's combatants were peasants and called themselves the People's Anti-Somoza Militia (MILPA). Some of El Danto's men believed that he had been murdered by the new FSLN directorate (2000, 297), and it was they who morphed into the People's Anti-Sandinista Militia, which produced many Contra unit commanders (2000, 162).

In a series of maps, Brown shows the geographical overlay between the locations where Indian wars occurred from 1526 to the 1920s, where the first Contra groups emerged, and where demobilized Contras returned after the 1990 peace agreement with the Sandinistas. Of 274 fighters who joined the resistance in the first years, their birthplaces fall heavily in what used to be highland indio territory. Of the 17 communities to which the most Contras returned after the war, 15 are places where Indian-Spanish conflicts had recurred, the two exceptions being twentieth-century agricultural frontiers (2001, 12, 119–22).

Unfortunately, Brown presents no evidence that highlanders use *indio* as a contemporary identity, except in their interviews with him. If the term *indio* ever popped up in the movement's manifestos or was bandied about the camps or has come up in daily life since then, Brown does not tell us. Unless highlanders use the label in their own contexts, Brown has not documented an ethnicity being reasserted by highlanders. In all the recent Central American wars, the men giving orders tended to be lighter-skinned while the insurgents, draftees, and militias who did most of the dying tended to be darker-skinned. Labeling differences in pigmentation and social class with terms such as *indio* and *español* could be little more than a rhetorical response to the Sandinista revolution, to war trauma, or even to Brown's own sympathetic inquiries. Thus his ex-Contras might apply the derogatory term *indio* to themselves as a way of underlining their claim to be victims rather than perpetrators.

Still, Nicaragua specialists should check Brown's figures because, if these are correct, the highlanders are a much larger fraction of the Nicaraguan population than acknowledged in the 1995 census. According to a subsequent administrative census cited by Brown, the highland region includes 52 percent rather than 36 percent of the national population.² On the basis of the 1996 election, in which highland *municipios* voted for Liberal candidate Arnaldo Alemán over the FSLN's Daniel Ortega by margins of 4, 5, and even 8 to 1, Brown argues that "these faceless people are the largest definable ethnohistorical group in Nicaragua" and "the largest voting bloc in the country" (2001, 179–80, 184, 199).

Brown's ex-Contras accuse the Sandinistas of countless atrocities, including many against demobilized rebels after formal cessation of hostilities. But he avoids the subject that ruined the legitimacy of the Contras internationally, their own atrocities. Human rights organizations documented many more violations by the Contra insurgents than by state security forces. That murdering noncombatants and prisoners was typical Contra behavior can be concluded from the most sympathetic of the journalistic accounts, by *Washington Times* correspondent Glenn Garvin. The often-invoked Commandante Suicida may have been a worst case, but the FDN's gruesome execution of his cronies and him shows that he was not just a proverbial bad apple. Even after years of supposed improvement in human rights, in 1988 U.S. government auditors discovered jailed Contra recruits whom Contra counterintelligence had decided were Sandinista spies. All the women said they had been raped, and all the men said they had been tortured (Dillon 1991, 36).

Perhaps Brown avoids the subject of Contra atrocities because he asked his sources for life stories, a genre that requires lots of trust between narrator and scribe. But there is little need for coercion in his interpretation of the Nicaraguan resistance because it grows out of the informal networks that define highland life, a very different social world from the Pacific Coast towns that dominate Nicaraguan public life. "Within their own world the campesinos enjoy a great deal of interaction at the local level," Brown reports.

They may live in scattered farmsteads or clusters of houses too small even to be called hamlets, but they are not isolated from their fellow campesinos. To the contrary, while contact with outsiders is rare, interaction with neighbors is constant. . . .

Family relationships, both nuclear and extended, lie at the heart of this social interaction among campesinos. *Extended* in this form is very extended indeed and embraces a large number of connections at three levels—relatives by blood (siblings, uncles and aunts, cousins to several removes), by marriage (inlaws become like blood relatives), and by choice (compadres, or godparents). These extended families and clans often live not in one, but in several neighboring comarcas [settled valleys]. Furthermore, despite many exceptions, by and large the highlanders honor a system of what might best be described as extended incest taboos. In addition to condemning parent-child, sibling, and first-second cousin unions, unions are also discouraged between other residents of the same comarca. These patterns result in highly developed networks of comarca-to-comarca relationships. . . .

As their autonomous small guerrilla groups began to coalesce, the Comandos understood that they would need a regionwide network of contacts. They also understood that creating one would require only linking these comarca-comarca relationships into a sort of regional daisy chain. By linking each comarca to its neighbors

via correos who had long-established ties to the correos of the next comarca, they could cast a web across the entire highlands region from Nueva Segovia and Jinotega to southern Chontales almost to Costa Rica. (Brown 2001, 102–3, 104)

So this is why Brown's highlanders could subvert the Sandinista government so effectively: because they retained their own distinctive social networks. "These two Nicaraguan worlds, the one of its formal core, the other of its highland peasantry, often touch one another but each leads a largely independent existence," Brown argues.

The first Nicaragua is relatively modern, the second more traditional. When the Sandinistas triumphed, they took control only of the first Nicaragua's networks, and it was these that they used to try to revolutionize the country. But the highlanders controlled the second Nicaragua, and they used its networks to defend themselves. The Sandinistas were to find the comarca campesino networks virtually impenetrable. (Brown 2001, 102–4)

If support for the Contras was so overwhelming, why all the killing? Brown concedes that the Resistance was weakest in market centers and plantation districts where peasants benefited from the Sandinista revolution and were willing to die for it. But his portrait of a seamless quilt of social support for the Contras reminds me of idealized descriptions of indigenous Mayan support for the Guatemalan guerrillas. In each case, labeling an insurgency as an indigenous uprising invokes the stereotypic assumption that native people are more communal and united than nonindigenous people, and therefore that support for the insurgents must have been massive. Yet Brown focuses on interviewing Nicaraguans who joined the Contras, not the wider sample of opinion needed to test this assumption.

THE CASE OF QUILALÍ

Just such a wider sample is achieved by an earlier study that Brown fails to cite, Lynn Horton's *Peasants in Arms*. Horton focuses on the Nueva Segovia *municipio* of Quilalí, in the kind of hill country where everyone claims to be a campesino but a backwoods squirearchy controls much of the land and holds sway over poorer relations. Sandino's legendary stronghold of El Chipote is nearby. U.S. Marines bombed and burned the town of Quilalí, and after Sandino's assassination in 1934, the first of the Somoza dynasty waged a war of extermination against his many followers there. Fifty years later, Horton heard anti- as well as pro-Sandino narratives from her Quilalí sources, some of whom (apparently the ones with more property) remembered Sandino's men as terrorists and extor-

tionists. In the 1970s, young FSLN militants from the Pacific Coast tried to revive the Sandino tradition by setting up their own guerrilla *foco* in Nueva Segovia. One of them, Omar Cabezas, explains what happened in his 1985 memoir, *Fire from the Mountain*. National guard reprisals against the FSLN's civilian supporters were all too effective, and its fighters could survive only by retreating into inaccessible mountain jungles.

Around Quilalí, no one could point Horton toward organized resistance to *patróns* before the 1979 Sandinista victory. The Somoza dictatorship hardly garrisoned the area, and there were few grievances against its national guardsmen. Even the FSLN developed its local network among relatively well off landowners, not poorer peasants. It was the *patrón*-client networks of landowners, not landowner expulsions of peons, that brought poor Quilalians into the Sandinista underground. On the eve of the revolution, something like a hundred people actively supported the FSLN locally. Within months of Somoza's overthrow, *patróns* were organizing the first anti-Sandinista MILPA. The leader was a local Sandinista commander named Pedro Joaquín González, who had been one of El Danto's lieutenants when the MILPAs were still the Anti-Somoza Popular Militias. Eventually more than eight hundred Quilalians became Contra combatants.

Why was the Contra underground in this locality so much more successful than the FSLN's? During the revolution's first two years, the Sandinistas expropriated only larger properties held by Somoza cronies, but Horton believes that this alienated local elites who had supported the FSLN insurgency. Unlike Brown, she stresses how social class generated resistance to the revolution through the role of backcountry *patróns* in recruiting poorer peasants. But she agrees that Sandinista ideology clashed with traditional assumptions. Thus, even poorer peasants "viewed the wealthy and poor as mutually dependent and sharing common interests and tacitly accepted the existing social and economic hierarchy . . . market freedoms were highly valued and private property was considered an absolute right" (Horton 1998, 303). She thinks that some of the poorest, least-protected peasants were initially open to the revolution. Then the FSLN blocked their invasions of Somocista-owned cattle ranches, in order to preserve these as state farms.

Contra terror played an obvious role in shutting down Sandinista programs, with pro-FSLN survivors being chased out of the mountains and into lower-lying towns and cooperatives, which became Sandinista islands in a Contra sea. Only in some of the new river valley cooperatives did the revolutionary government build a solid political base. Once the Sandinistas were forced to flood the area with troops, this antagonized more people into joining the Contras. In contrast to Brown, Horton interviewed a wider range of Nicaraguans, who reveal the life-and-death pressures that forced them to go one way or another.

By late 1983, given the pressures from both the Sandinista Army and the contras to recruit combatants for their cause, Quilalí young men who did not wish to take up arms with either side found themselves increasingly 'caught between two fires,' as the Quilalí countryside became the scene of daily battles and the space for neutrality grew smaller. . . . Young men decided that they would be safer and better able to defend themselves as mobile, armed combatants, rather than as unarmed civilians awaiting a knock on their door in the middle of the night. . . . Anti-Sandinista peasants...reasoned that if they were forced to take up arms, they would rather do so with the side that shared their opinions and values, the group with which many of their family and neighbors were fighting. . . . Overall, 89 percent of the former Contras interviewed for this study expressed strong anti-Sandinista opinions. However, 44 percent of these ex-Contras, mainly poor peasants, indicated that they felt some reluctance to take up arms and in some cases attempted to avoid doing so for as long as possible. . . . In contrast, the other 56 percent of ex-Contras interviewed, generally those from more well off families, report that they voluntarily joined the Contras. (Horton 1998, 180–85)

QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Neither Brown nor Horton speculates about how the Contras would have fared without Argentine and U.S. military aid. According to some accounts, the Sandinista military was overwhelming the Contras as early as 1981. This is the usual fate of peasant rebels, however much social support they have, and it suggests that armed resistance would never have reached the dimensions it did without foreign assistance. Horton reports that at the level of male attraction to military hardware, the shiny new weapons and uniforms provided by the United States gave the Contras an edge over the Eastern Bloc–equipped Sandinistas.

Another question is whether the Sandinistas' relatively humane approach to the Contras' civilian logistical base hurt the insurgents or helped them instead. Critics of the Sandinistas believe that they were as indiscriminate as the Guatemalan and Salvadoran militaries, but the available numbers suggest otherwise. According to the Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights, which was no friend of Sandinismo, by the end of the Contra war in 1991, an estimated thousand detainees had disappeared in Sandinista custody (Leiken 2003, 179). This is not a small number in a country of four million. But it is of a lower order than the five-figure estimates of how many people the Guatemalan and Salvadoran security forces abducted and killed.

When the Sandinistas forcibly relocated tens of thousands of civilians from war zones, they did so without the gruesome village massacres committed by the Salvadoran and Guatemalan armies. When the

Sandinistas captured Contra cadres, the typical consequence was a rough time in jail, not murder. By being more respectful of civilian life than were the Guatemalan and Salvadoran militaries, did the Sandinistas breed more resistance than they crushed (compare Horton 1998, 213–14)? In Guatemala, most peasants who were “caught between two fires” reluctantly supported the group that was more likely to kill them—the army. In much of highland Nicaragua, many peasants who were “caught between two fires” ended up supporting the Contras; does this mean that they were more afraid of reprisals from the Contras than from the Sandinistas?

One of the implicit tests of whether an armed movement is “popular” is whether it commits atrocities. If a movement has lots of support, many scholars would like to believe that it does not need to resort to terror. Ipso facto, committing atrocities becomes a sign that a movement must terrorize the population to obtain support, so it probably does not have as much as it claims. But political terrorism is nothing new in Nueva Segovia, and it may not be a very good index of how popular a movement is. The historian Michael Schroeder has studied Segovian political violence through records from U.S. Marine Corps lawyers who dealt with the local justice system in the 1920s. According to Schroeder, “the sustained capacity to inflict physical injury had long been one of the primary determinants of power relations in rural Nicaragua” (1996, 430). In the late nineteenth century, in reaction to democratic elections, Conservative elites resorted to terror as a source of power. Their retainers organized gangs who “produce[d] power through fear, and fear through ritual, public violence” (1996, 432). Yet even atrocities could lead to a crude form of social contract, expressed through the idiom of the *garantía* as a formal promise by powerholders not to kill, injure, or destroy property of those who accepted their authority.

In the 1920s, the followers of Augusto Sandino inherited this system of intimidation by committing atrocities against opponents who supported the U.S. Marines and the Nicaraguan National Guard and by issuing *garantías* to property holders who paid war taxes and respected their authority. The subsequent victory of the Somoza dictatorship ended the gang warfare of the first Sandinistas and their Conservative opponents, but the state-building exercises of the Sandinista revolution, local reactions, and foreign interference unleashed it again in 1980. In this respect, the true heirs of Sandino and the Nueva Segovia tradition may be the Contras, rather than the Sandinistas. Such is suggested by the short, brutal career of Comandante Suicida, who happened to be both a former national guardsman and a native of Nueva Segovia. He was one of a number of Contra commanders who became known as caciques, or Indian chiefs, for the private fiefdoms he set up, and he fancied himself another Sandino (Garvin 1992, 86–87).

In any case, peasant resistance to the Sandinista revolution should not be swept under the rug. Did anti-Sandinista highland rebels really view themselves as indios, as Brown argues? Or is this a needless mystification of how backcountry *patróns* turned local feelings against an intrusive exercise in state building? Whatever Nicaraguan highlanders think of the indio label, are they really the largest ethnohistorical group and largest voting bloc in the country?

For all concerned, the case of the peasant Contras should cause discomfort. If highland peasants were a historically ordained constituency for the Sandinista revolution, many failed to get the message. For observers like myself, who distrust reports of peasant enthusiasm for armed rebellion, this one seems to have become rather popular. For supporters of the Contras who saw them as freedom fighters, those ostensible ideals did not prevent the Contras from committing systematic human rights abuses. An estimated 31,000 people died in a civil war subsidized by the U.S. government. At minimum, the Contra case needs to be compared with the more familiar alliances between peasants and the revolutionary left to which so much attention has been given.

NOTES

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1. Gould and other scholars have gone on to work with indigenous communities in western Nicaragua, but these would appear to be small islands of indigenous identity in a nonindigenous sea.

2. The census includes Chontales, Boaco, Matagalpa, Jinotega, Estelí, Madriz, Nueva Segovia, Río San Juan, and the Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur.

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