

***Caudillismo* Masked and Modernized: The Remaking of the Nicaraguan State via the National Guard, 1925–1936**

David C. Brooks*
United States Department of State

Michael J. Schroeder
Department of History
Lebanon Valley College
schroede@lvc.edu

This article examines the formation of the Nicaraguan National Guard before and during the period of the Sandino rebellion, U.S. military intervention, and its aftermath (1925–1936). Focusing on the radically abrupt, upward displacement of coercive capacities in these eleven years of war, we emphasize the agency of Nicaraguans in shaping the kind of institution the Guard became. We argue that the process of war against a homegrown nationalist insurgency most profoundly shaped Guard identity and that the Somocista state represented a masked and modernized form of *caudillismo*, as a political system within which political authority and power resided in personal and patronage relations.

Palabras clave: Nicaragua; Sandino; Guardia Nacional; National Guard; *caudillismo*; Somoza

Introduction

In the weeks leading up to April 18, 1935, Nicaraguan National Guard Lieutenant Abelardo Cuadra plotted with fellow officers to rebel against the Guard's freshly installed Director in Chief, General Anastasio Somoza García. Tensions ran high among the conspirators. The previous summer, another planned uprising had been betrayed, and its leader, Captain Gabriel Castillo, “publicly divested of his insignia of rank” and sentenced to twenty years hard labor. Lieutenant Cuadra's plot, too, was

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discovered before it could gain traction, and for this Cuadra was condemned to death. President Juan B. Sacasa commuted the sentence to twenty years hard labor, even though the acting U.S. military attaché in Costa Rica opined that “it certainly would have been immeasurably better if the President had forgotten legal amenities and permitted the sentence to stand.”¹ The next year, Somoza overthrew Sacasa and engineered his own election as president. For the next forty-three years (1936–1979), the Somoza dynasty dominated Nicaragua’s political life, with the National Guard serving as the institutional expression and guarantor of its power.

In his memoirs, Cuadra recalled events leading up to the abortive uprising. The immediate issues concerned reductions in pay for junior officers and enlisted men. Somoza’s growing practice of appointing civilians with no military experience to senior positions added insult to injury. But the core issue for Cuadra, as he recalled years later, was his underlying perception of the deep injustice of the Guard’s violent suppression of Nicaraguan nationalist leader Augusto C. Sandino’s rebellion (1927–1933), followed by its treacherous assassination of Sandino in Managua in February 1934: “I know there was a disquieting sensibility, a smoldering ember, in the hearts of many Nicaraguans, both among those of us with rifles in hand and those who watched the fight from afar, an ember that . . . said that Sandino was in possession of right and reason . . . it was . . . an unjust war that had tainted us forever.”²

Abelardo Cuadra’s sympathy with Sandino’s cause was rare among men who served in the Guard. Indeed, as his brother Manolo Cuadra, who enlisted as a *raso* (private) late in the war, emphasized in his short stories, the shared experiences of fighting against the Sandinista rebels in the Segovian mountains—privation, fatigue, hunger, thirst, and fear and loathing of “*los otros*” (the others, i.e., the Sandinistas)—came to comprise the early pillars of the Guard’s collective identity (1942).³ Offering yet another perspective was the Cuadra brothers’ distant cousin and former Guard officer Guillermo E. Cuadra G., who divided Guard history into two distinct phases in his *Memorias* (1962). The first, the period of U.S. Marine tutelage of the Guard until the U.S. withdrawal in 1933, he recalled as a kind of golden age of honesty, rectitude, and strict adherence to the rule of law. The second, after 1933, saw the institution profoundly corrupted and personalized, “converted into a political instrument” that served only the interests of its Director in Chief, Anastasio Somoza García.⁴

¹ Acting Military Attaché Alex Cohen, San José, Costa Rica, Report No. 2,879, 14 May 1935, United States National Archives, Record Group 165, Entry 77, Box 2660 (hereafter RG[Record Group]/[Entry]/[Box]). For the foregoing report, reports on the Gabriel Castillo conspiracy, and related material, see the digitized collection from the archives of the U.S. Military Intelligence Division, housed in www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/GN-MDOcs02.html, one of several dozen web pages housing primary documents cited and discussed here, at www.sandinorebellion.com, an online open-access digital historical archive published in tandem with this article.

² Abelardo Cuadra, *Hombre del Caribe: Memorias*, ed. Sergio Ramírez (San José, Costa Rica: EDUCA, 1981), 142–43. Unless noted otherwise, all translations from the Spanish are the authors’.

³ Manolo Cuadra, *Contra Sandino en la montaña* (Managua: Editorial Nuevos Horizontes, 1942); the portrayal of the Sandinista rebels as “*los otros*” is from the story, “Música en la soledad,” 129, 132; see also Manolo Cuadra, *El gruñido de un bárbaro: visiones y confesiones* (Managua: Nueva Nicaragua, 1994).

⁴ Guillermo E. Cuadra G., “Memorias de un ex-oficial de la Guardia Nacional,” *Revista Conservadora*, Jan., Feb., March 1962. See also Guillermo Cuadra’s report on his spy mission to Honduras in 1932, “Viaje a la República de Honduras,” 10 March 1932, RG127/209, at www.sandinorebellion.com/Top100pgs/Top100-p82.html.

Abelardo, Manolo, and Guillermo Cuadra's strikingly divergent yet frequently congruent representations of the Guard's formative years highlight a range of tensions, ironies, and debates in twentieth-century Nicaraguan history and historiography, most notably, the role of U.S. intervention and the war against Sandino in shaping the Guard and the formation of the Somocista state.⁵ The Nicaraguan case, in turn, finds many parallels in the expansive literature on populist authoritarianism and the development of military culture in Latin America.⁶ This essay seeks to contribute to this literature by mapping out an alternative framework for interpreting the formation of Guard identity and military culture and the rise of Somoza's brand of populist authoritarianism. It emphasizes first and foremost the agency of Nicaraguans in shaping the kind of military institution the National Guard became.

In recent years, scholars have challenged many of the ideologically charged assertions in two diametrically opposed metanarratives that have dominated popular and scholarly interpretations of the National Guard and Somocismo. In its simplest formulation, the Sandinista narrative portrays the Guard as the handmaiden of U.S. imperialism and the Somoza dynasty as a corrupt and pliant puppet slavishly serving foreign imperial designs.⁷ Inverting these emphases, the Somocista narrative depicts the Guard as the expression and guarantor of law, order, honor, and the integrity of the nation against the "banditry" of Sandino and the Soviet-inspired communism of the latter-day Sandinistas.⁸ Jeffrey L. Gould was among the first to challenge these metanarratives in his exploration of Somoza García's populist labor policies during and after World War II, followed by his masterful account of relations between Somocismo and Chinandega sugar workers.⁹ Knut Walter's meticulous reconstruction of the regime's political formation, building on Richard Millett's authoritative institutional history of the Guard, added texture and nuance to our understanding of the first Somoza's regime.¹⁰ More recently,

⁵ Somocista: Of or related to Somocismo, Somoza family control of the political system.

⁶ From a vast literature on populist authoritarianism, military culture, and foreign military intervention in Latin America, see Frederick M. Nunn, *Yesterday's Soldiers: European Military Professionalism in South America 1890–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Bruce J. Calder, *The Impact of Intervention: The Dominican Republic during the U.S. Occupation of 1916–1924* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984); Hugh M. Hamill, ed., *Caudillos: Dictators in Spanish America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992); Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915–1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); Robert H. Holden, *Armies Without Nations: Public Violence and State Formation in Central America, 1821–1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Erik Ching, *Authoritarian El Salvador: Politics and the Origins of the Military Regimes, 1880–1940* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).

⁷ See esp. Augusto C. Sandino, *El pensamiento vivo*, Sergio Ramírez, ed., 2 vols. (Managua: Nueva Nicaragua, 1984); Carlos Fonseca Amador, *Obras*, 2 vols. (Managua: Nueva Nicaragua, 1985); Juan Colindres, *Anastasio Somoza: fin de una estirpe de ladrones y asesinos* (México: Posada, 1979). More recently, see Fundación de Augusto Nicolás Calderón Sandino (FANCS), "¿Cómo, quiénes y por qué mataron a nuestro abuelo, el General Augusto C. Sandino?" *Siempre más allá*, no. 1 (Aug. 2013).

⁸ Anastasio Somoza García, *El verdadero Sandino; Guardia Nacional, Boletines*, 1933–1935, housed in www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/BoletinesGN.html; see also Juan Matagalpa, *Sandino, los Somoza y los nueve comandantes sandinistas* (s.p., ca. 1984), and Shirley Christian, *Revolution in the Family* (New York: Vintage, 1986).

⁹ Jeffrey L. Gould, "For an Organised Nicaragua: Somoza and the Labour Movement, 1944–1948," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 19, no. 2 (Nov. 1987), 353–87.

¹⁰ Knut Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza, 1936–1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), and Richard Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977). Reliable institutional histories of the Guard include Julian C. Smith, et al., "A Review of the Organization and Operations of the Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua," 1933, unpublished manuscript, Personal Papers Collection, Marine Corps Research Center, Quantico, VA (hereafter MCRC); Lt. Francisco Gaitán's unpublished manuscript, "Historia de la Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua," 3 vols.,

Victoria González-Rivera and Robert J. Sierakowski have offered empirically rich and theoretically informed accounts of the Guard and the Somoza regime, focusing on the role of women, social class, geographic space, and the agency of Nicaraguans in shaping their own history, further undermining the polemical binaries of earlier treatments.¹¹

Yet many lacunae remain. In his recent popular history of the Nicaraguan military, Francisco Barbosa Miranda emphasizes the role played by the United States in imposing the Guard to serve its larger geostrategic interests long after the U.S. withdrawal in January 1933. His points are accurate but insufficient, ignoring the radically abrupt upward displacement of violence-making under the Guard, and how the institution was swiftly appropriated by many thousands of Nicaraguans to serve their own ends.¹² Much the same is true of Andrew Crawley's deft and empirically grounded diplomatic history of Somoza's rise to power and relations with the Roosevelt State Department.¹³ In a weightier tome, Andrés Pérez-Baltodano examines Nicaraguan state formation over the past 500 years. We learn much about the discursive practices of Somoza García and the leading political actors of the era, but little about changes or continuities in the state's coercive capacities, the agency of ordinary Nicaraguans in shaping the Guard, or how rapidly the institution became embedded within the larger society.¹⁴

Historian Michel Gobat offers the most theoretically sophisticated treatment of the origins and trajectory of the early Guard. In a brief but trenchant analysis, Gobat touches on many of the dynamics examined in this essay, including the upward displacement of violence making from local and regional caudillos to the national state; the military culture that developed in the process of war against Sandino's rebels; the Guard's "anti-elite outlook"; the militarization of rural society and politics; and the embeddedness of the Guard in local society, especially in the sparsely populated Segovias, heartland of the Guard's war against Sandino's rebel army.¹⁵

This article builds on the work of Gobat, Millett, Gould, and others to draw on expansive bodies of mostly untapped evidence and offer a series of targeted interventions into extant scholarly literature on the National Guard and the formative years of the Somoza dynasty.¹⁶ We begin with

Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica, Universidad Centroamericana, Managua (IHNCA-UCA), 1929–1932; and Nicolás López Maltez, *Historia de la Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua (Tomo Uno)* (Managua: Nicolás Adolfo López Maltez), 2014.

¹¹ Victoria González-Rivera, *Before the Revolution: Women's Rights and Right-Wing Politics in Nicaragua, 1821–1979* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011); Robert James Sierakowski, "In the Footsteps of Sandino: Geographies of Revolution and Political Violence in Northern Nicaragua, 1956–1979," PhD dissertation, University of California Los Angeles, 2012.

¹² Francisco Barbosa Miranda, *Síntesis de la Historia Militar de Nicaragua, de las guerras intertribales precolombinas al Ejército de Nicaragua* (Managua: Centro de Historia Militar, Ejército de Nicaragua, 2007), accesible at www.radiolaprimerisima.com/files/doc/1266935189_HistoriaMilitar.pdf.

¹³ Andrew Crawley, *Somoza and Roosevelt: Good Neighbour Diplomacy in Nicaragua, 1933–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Andrés Pérez-Baltodano, *Entre el Estado Conquistador y el Estado Nación: Providencialismo, pensamiento político y estructuras de poder en el desarrollo histórico de Nicaragua*, 2nd ed. (Managua: IHNCA-UCA, 2008), 463–504 ff.

¹⁵ Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under U.S. Imperial Rule* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 205–21; quote on 219.

¹⁶ See the Guard web pages at www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/guardia.html.

transformations at the level of the state, borrowing from conceptual frameworks of Charles Tilly and other comparative historical sociologists who focus on the upward displacement of violence making in a polity long characterized by a weak central state and local-regional caudillos exercising effective military sovereignty over their respective domains. The Somoza regime represented a radical rupture in the *longue durée* of Nicaraguan history by successfully monopolizing the means of organized coercion at the level of the national state via a modern, professionalized military with clear chains of command, a modern bureaucracy, officers trained in a modern military academy, modern surveillance capacities, and troops equipped with the modern accoutrements of war making. Special attention is paid to the uneven, nonlinear, and rapid-paced qualities of these processes.

Second, we focus on the cultural dimension of everyday state making and identity formation among officers and enlisted men in the National Guard, especially as propelled by the process of war. We argue that what emerged from the violent crucible of eight years of regional civil war, insurgency and counterinsurgency, and foreign intervention (1926–1934) was a distinctive hybrid of old-style caudillismo grafted onto a substantially if unevenly modernized military institution. In a fundamental but neglected irony, Sandino’s nationalist rebellion accelerated the consolidation of the national army, whose primary mission became to destroy that rebellion. Unexpectedly and unpredictably, the focal point of the Guard’s most formative years became a no-quarter counterinsurgency campaign waged against a homegrown, regional, campesino-based nationalist insurgency. Guard identity was forged in the fires of deep mutual hatred and political polarization. We further show that the bureaucratic infrastructure and surveillance capacities of the Guard grew in tandem with its military power, such that by 1934 the national state exercised an unprecedented capacity to surveil and regulate the populace.

We then explore how these state-level and political-cultural dynamics spilled over into the postwar, postoccupation years. The upward displacement of coercive capacities made possible not only relative social peace and the spread of liberal-capitalist law across the whole of the national territory, but also the emergence of a new kind of caudillo and a modernized form of caudillismo. Ostensibly, the sources and exercise of military authority had shifted from patronage and personalism to constitutionalism, the rule of law, duty, and professionalism. In reality, political authority rested on the same pillars—personal loyalties, patronage relations, access to the authoritative and allocative resources of the state—only now within a modernized bureaucratic and administrative infrastructure, in a society most marked by stark social inequalities, mass poverty, and export-led economic growth. Somoza García framed this hybrid, modernized form of caudillismo as advancing “peace, ordered democracy, social justice, nationalism, education, and work,” an expression of the nation’s popular will. In reality, the Somocista state retained the most essential features of the political system it had displaced—with relations of power most shaped by personalism, patronage, and endemic corruption—but now backed by a vastly strengthened but still personally controlled national military.¹⁷

¹⁷ Here we refer not to the Sacasa regime (1932–36) but to the pre-1927 *ancien régime* epitomized by “el último caudillo” Emiliano Chamorro; see Emiliano Chamorro, *El último caudillo, autobiografía* (Managua: Ed. Partido Conservador Democrático, 1983), accessible via la Biblioteca Enrique Bolaños, at <http://enriquebolanos.org/>.

At a grassroots level, the sociocultural chasm between the Guard and civilians also spilled over into the postwar years. On the one hand, the legacy of war without quarter against locally-rooted rebels created conditions ripe for the abuse of civilians, especially in outlying districts. On the other hand, service in the National Guard represented a potential pathway of upward mobility for rural Nicaraguans, as did clientage relations with more powerful Guard and Somocista patrons. The political currents in the aftermath of the U.S. military intervention and war against Sandino created strong pressures for ordinary citizens to ally in some fashion with the regime and its local agents, especially the Guard.

We emphasize Nicaraguan agency in shaping the National Guard, while also recognizing that without U.S. intervention, the Guard would never have existed, and without the U.S.-propelled counterinsurgency campaign against Sandino's Ejército Defensor de la Soberanía Nacional (EDSN, Defending Army of National Sovereignty), the Guard would not have evolved in the way it did. The United States created the overarching context for the Guard's formation. Its first officers were U.S. Marines who sought to instill the notion of an apolitical military into the minds and spirits of enlisted men and the officer corps. The Marines introduced a wholly new military command structure, military bureaucracy, military academy, and militarily-driven surveillance apparatus. But within this externally-imposed institutional infrastructure, Nicaraguans shaped the Guard's core political-cultural features and everyday practices. Born of foreign imposition, the institution rapidly became a synthesis of North American military techniques and Nicaraguan political-cultural values and practices. We conclude by suggesting avenues for further research into the unique chemistry of the U.S.-Nicaraguan political-cultural encounter that created the Nicaraguan National Guard.

A word on sources. Readers will note that the bulk of our archival evidence is drawn from repositories in the United States, especially the records of the U.S. Marine Corps (Record Group 127 in the National Archives). This is because the masses of paperwork generated during the Guard's formative years (June 1927–December 1932)—at least those records not destroyed—were shipped to the United States when the Marines withdrew in January 1933 and jumbled together with Marine Corps records. Personal papers went to what is now the Marine Corps Research Center in Quantico, Virginia, and official papers to the Library of Congress. To our knowledge, Nicaragua's public archives hold no traces of the Guard's earliest years.

The Upward Displacement of Violence Making in the Crucible of War, 1925–1933

States make wars, argues Charles Tilly, just as wars make states.¹⁸ One of the most overlooked realities of modern Nicaraguan history is that in a little less than eight years—from the eruption of

¹⁸ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, A.D. 990–1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990). Also useful for conceptualizing these processes are Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. II, *The Rise of Classes and Nation-States, 1760–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence. Volume Two*

civil war in late 1926 to Sandino's assassination in February 1934—the military arm of the national state, for the first time in history, successfully monopolized the country's violence-making capacities in a single institution blanketing the whole of the national territory.¹⁹ This upward displacement of coercive power from local-regional caudillos to the central state—a process that took centuries of warfare in its European crucible—was made possible by two driving forces: the determination of the United States to see its state-building experiment succeed, and the process of war, mainly in the mountainous northern region of Las Segovias.

To understand how the National Guard became the institutional basis for a hybrid, modernized form of caudillismo under Somoza García, we need to examine how political and military power was exercised in the decades before the mid-1920s, especially the period of U.S.-supported Conservative rule (1912–1925).²⁰ From a vast literature, several prominent themes stand out. At bottom was (and, arguably, remains) an enduring legacy of Spanish colonialism: the dense entwining of civil and military authority in a state dominated by the executive branch. The president appointed almost every public official. Political authorities were also military authorities: *jefes políticos* (departmental governors) were also *comandantes de armas* (army colonels and commanders of military districts), and so on down the line in hierarchical chains of dispensed patronage and loyal clientage.²¹ After the 1912 civil war and the mostly symbolic U.S. military occupation that followed, the “ins” (Conservatives) successfully excluded the “outs” (Liberals) from any genuine political power through a complex machinery of managed elections.²²

The most powerful illustration of these practices is the phenomenon of *Chamorrismo*, the system of power exercised by the country's quintessential caudillo of these years, Emiliano Chamorro. The height of the Liberal challenge (1926–1928) threw into sharp relief the core attributes of Chamorrismo, especially during the eighteen months from the formal end of the Civil War in May 1927 to the U.S.-supervised elections of November 1928. In the National Assembly, Chamorro and his allies used every means at their disposal to block passage of the McCoy Electoral Law calling for

of *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985); Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation As Cultural Revolution* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985); Fernando López-Alves, *State Formation and Democracy in Latin America, 1810–1900* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Diane E. Davis and Anthony W. Pereira, eds., *Irregular Armed Forces and their Role in Politics and State Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ The principal exception here is Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream*, chap. 8.

²⁰ For a reasonably comprehensive bibliography, see Barbosa Miranda, *Historia Militar*, 69; see also Jeffrey L. Gould, “‘¡Vana Ilusión!’ The Highlands Indians and the Myth of Nicaragua Mestiza, 1880–1925,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 73, no. 3 (1993), 393–431; Michael J. Schroeder, “The Sandino Rebellion Revisited: Civil War, Imperialism, Popular Nationalism, and State Formation Muddled Up Together in the Segovias of Nicaragua, 1926–1934,” in Gilbert Joseph, Catherine LeGrand, and Ricardo Salvatore, eds., *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

²¹ See 1st Lt. Ross E. Rowell, USMC, “Military Monograph of Nicaragua,” chap. V, 30 March 1916, RG127/38/26, accessible in PDF at www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/GN-1916Monograph-Rowell.html.

²² On managed elections see John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), chap. 5; for Nicaragua 1910–1929 see United States Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Nicaragua (microfilm M632), discussed in www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/U.S.DS-Docs.html.

U.S.-supervised elections and almost succeeded.²³ But the most telling expression of the military-cultural practices of Chamorristo, as explored in detail in a previous study, can be found in the actions of the political gangs mobilized by regional Chamorrista caudillos in Las Segovias after May 1927.²⁴

It was this system of personalized, patronage-based caudillo rule that the United States sought to displace. The origins of U.S. intervention in Nicaragua, mainly rooted in geostrategic interests, are the subject of an extensive literature.²⁵ Suffice it to say that by the mid-1920s, U.S. policymakers had determined that only national elections perceived by a critical mass of the Nicaraguan populace as “free and fair,” combined with a newly constituted, nonpartisan, nonpolitical national military institution, could stabilize the country. This required wrenching apart two densely entwined dimensions of Nicaraguan political-cultural traditions, personified in caudillos like Chamorro, whose politico-military powers were predicated on personal as opposed to institutional loyalties, and who combined control of political office *and* autonomous violence-making capacities through private armies or gangs mobilized through webs of patronage and clientage.

The sheer ambition of the U.S. project here is breathtaking. The basic idea was to undertake a short-term intervention that would remake the core attributes of Nicaraguan political culture. Implanting “free and fair elections” and a “nonpartisan military” into the Nicaraguan body politic would move the perennial conflict between the country’s two rival parties from the battlefield to the ballot box. Loyalties and allegiances would henceforth be institutional and professional, not personal or partisan. Free elections and a nonpolitical national army would compel Nicaraguans to abandon the patronage and personal allegiances that had long formed the bedrock of political legitimacy and power and replace them with loyalties to abstractions like “duty” and “professionalism” in service to the “nation.” Ironically, this hugely ambitious exercise in power projection and institutional implantation, pursued as part of an exit strategy, saw certain successes, exemplified in the profound disgruntlement expressed by some junior officers (such as Abelardo Cuadra, Manolo Cuadra, and Guillermo Cuadra) against Somoza García’s corruption of the Guard’s honor and high ideals.

Beyond these internal tensions, the creation of the Guard had a tremendous influence on subsequent Nicaraguan history. In forging an entirely new national military institution, the United

²³ Henry L. Stimson, *American Policy in Nicaragua* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1927); Michael J. Schroeder, “Imposición de la democracia por el imperio norteamericano: Reflexiones críticas sobre las elecciones nicaragüenses de noviembre de 1928,” *Revista de Temas Nicaragüenses* 57 (enero 2013), 4–14, at www.temasnicas.net/rtn57.pdf. See also Andrew J. Bacevich, *Diplomat in Khaki: Major General Frank Ross McCoy and American Foreign Policy, 1898–1949*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989).

²⁴ Michael J. Schroeder, “Horse Thieves to Rebels to Dogs: Political Gang Violence and the State in the Western Segovias in the Time of Sandino, 1926–1934,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28, no. 2 (1996), 383–434.

²⁵ In addition to Gobat, Millett, and other sources cited above, see Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 231–52; Lester D. Langley, *The Banana Wars: An Inner History of American Empire, 1900–1934* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983); William Kamman, *A Search for Stability: United States Diplomacy toward Nicaragua, 1925–1933* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968); Harold Denny, *Dollars for Bullets: The Story of American Rule in Nicaragua* (New York: Dial Press, 1929); see also Stimson, *American Policy in Nicaragua*; Karl Berman, *Under the Big Stick: Nicaragua and the United States Since 1848* (Boston: South End Press, 1986); Neill Macaulay, *The Sandino Affair* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985).

States exercised a foundational influence in remaking the Nicaraguan state, not unlike the way in which the Spanish conquest of the Americas from the 1500s exercised a foundational influence on all subsequent Latin American history. In a dramatic rupture with the past that carried far-reaching implications for the future, Washington's heavy-handed role substantially accelerated and shaped the centralization of state power. Extant documentation makes abundantly clear that the U.S. drive to create the Nicaraguan National Guard, combined with the war against Sandino, led to the rapid consolidation of an enduring national military at once powered by U.S. technology and resources and profoundly shaped by local actors and local political culture.

As historical sociologists since Weber have shown, the upward displacement of violence making has many dimensions, including: expanding the state's fiscal base and beefing up its bureaucratic-administrative infrastructure; intensifying its gaze into the society, deepening its store of information about the populace, extending its surveillance capacities into hitherto remote or isolated geographic spaces; eliminating the violence-making capacities of local-regional powerholders through law, inducement, and force; disarming the general populace; and garnering popular legitimacy through propaganda, public ritual, educational systems, and the like—that is, convincing a critical mass of the population, as Guard Director in Chief General Elias Beadle expressed in his New Year message to the troops for 1928, that “the National Guard is a servant of the people of Nicaragua and is maintained for the benefit of the people of Nicaragua.”²⁶

All these processes were at play to varying degrees after the Guard's founding in May 1927. In this section we focus on the two principal material dynamics: first, the campaign by the Marines and Guard to actively disarm the populace, and second, the state's radically intensified surveillance and social control capacities. The war against Sandino dramatically accelerated and intensified the growth of state power in both these spheres. As soon as the ink was dry on the Espino Negro Accord ending the war, demobilized soldiers of both sides were required to turn in their serviceable weapons, receiving for each ten *córdobas*.²⁷ Compliance was far from universal, but for the first time in history, the national state was undertaking an aggressive and systematic campaign to disarm the populace (“gun control” in contemporary parlance). Six years later, that campaign had largely succeeded, with the exception of the EDSN. Seven years later, with the eradication of the EDSN, it had succeeded utterly.²⁸

²⁶ Brig. Gen. Elias Beadle, Jefe Director GN, 31 December 1927, RG127/202/1.

²⁷ See Crawley, *Somoza and Roosevelt*, 18; Rear Admiral J. L. Latimer, “Aviso / Notice,” 10 May 1927, RG127/220/1, at www.sandinorebellion.com/MDocs/MDocs-HojasVolantes.html.

²⁸ Extant archival sources, especially Guard military and intelligence reports in RG127, make abundantly clear that the Guard strictly enforced its prohibition against civilians owning firearms without a special permit. Disarmament began soon after the Espino Negro Accord of May 1927; see, e.g., M. E. Shearer, Matagalpa, “Permits to carry arms, report of,” 11 June 1927, RG127/220/6. The decree creating the National Guard (finally passed by the National Assembly and signed by President Moncada on 21 Feb. 1929) stipulated that “La Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua se considerará como la única fuerza militar y de Policía de la República . . . Tendrá el control de las armas, municiones y materiales militares y la supervigilancia del transporte y compra-venta de ellas en la República. . . . Las personas que violen el reglamento o las leyes relativas a la compra-venta y transporte de armas, municiones y petrechos militares, serán castigadas por las autoridades comunes con multa, arresto o prisión. . . .” See *La Gaceta*, 4 April 1929, www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/PDFs/GN-LaGaceta-4Abril1928.pdf. The phrase “illegal possession of

From May 1927, the law required all citizens wishing to possess firearms to apply for a permit, demonstrate need, secure the approval of both the civil and military branches of government (the *Jefe Político* and the local Guard commander), and pay a \$10 fee. Issuing and tracking such arms permits consumed prodigious amounts of time and attention. By mid-1928, several hundred arms permits had been issued, many to civilians. The relative abundance of firearms among the populace became of such concern that in October 1929, President Moncada issued an executive order to “disarm all those persons with or without license who possess or carry arms.” The order targeted civilians in rural areas and excluded civilian agents of the state.²⁹ Possessing unauthorized firearms could lead to stiff fines, arrest, or worse.

In the guerrilla war in Las Segovias, this disarmament campaign soon took on a deadly dimension. There, the conflict between the Marines-Guard and Sandino’s nationalist partisans quickly devolved into a no-quarter guerrilla war. The Marines dispatched patrols into “bandit” areas, hoping to quickly snuff out Sandino’s movement. Frequently ambushed by the elusive EDSN guerrillas, Marines and Guard soldiers soon came to see the mere presence of a man bearing arms or signs of flight on the part of locals as *prima facie* evidence of Sandinista sympathies and a reason to open fire. Guard patrol and combat reports over five and a half years (June 1927 to December 1932) document hundreds of instances of civilians shot and killed for bearing firearms and for running away. Patrols routinely searched the homes and belongings of Segovian campesinos, confiscating or destroying anything incriminating, especially firearms and ammunition. Reports brim with detailed lists of types and quantities of arms and ammunition seized after firefights and from rebel encampments, with instances of arms smuggling across the Honduran border and up the Río Coco. From its inception the Guard recorded and investigated the vaguest of rumors about arms smuggling operations and aggressively hunted down outlaw gangs. Asserting and expanding rigorous surveillance and control over the circulation and possession of firearms—an essential ingredient in the upward displacement of violence making—became one of the Guard’s principal preoccupations from its foundation.³⁰

If the state’s project to monopolize violence-making capacities had largely succeeded by the time of the U.S. withdrawal in early 1933, this process was neither linear nor uniform across time or space. The principal constraint was fiscal: the war against the EDSN and the broader goal of fostering order and stability across the national territory required more troops and resources than the state could afford. Private property owners, especially coffee growers, cattle ranchers, and mine owners, lodged repeated requests that Guard posts be established on their properties. Most were denied, leading to

weapons” frequently appears in official Guard reports, e.g., Major F. G. Patchen, “Capture of Bandits, Leon” (“recommended that they be tried . . . on a charge of banditry and illegal possession of weapons”), 10 Jan. 1930, RG127/202/13. See also the records of permits to carry arms in the Central Area (with over 100 entries from 11 June 1927 to 26 June 1928) in RG127/220/6.

²⁹ Telegram from Lt. Lowell, Jinotega, to CO Yali, 2 October 1929, RG127/204/5.

³⁰ The evidence here is voluminous; see, e.g., Michael J. Schroeder, “‘To Defend Our Nation’s Honor’: Toward a Social & Cultural History of the Sandino Rebellion in Nicaragua, 1927–1934,” PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1993, chap. 10, 425–485. See also Richard Grossman, “‘Hermanos en la patria’: Nationalism, Honor, and Rebellion: Augusto Sandino and the Army in Defense of the National Sovereignty of Nicaragua, 1927–1934,” PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1996, 262–451.

negotiations and various types of privately-funded civilian militias and auxiliary forces.³¹ At Neptune Mine, the Director in Chief's unwillingness to create a permanent garrison on a private property of little strategic value led to a hybrid solution: a garrison of twenty-plus Guard troops whose living quarters, food, and transportation were paid for by the company.³² Similar arrangements were negotiated with Standard Fruit Company near Puerto Cabezas, the San Antonio Sugar Estates in Chinandega Department, and the Pacific Railroad Company of Nicaragua in León and Chinandega. Many municipalities organized groups of volunteer civilians called *cívicos*; farmers and ranchers organized and paid for private guards or *cívicos en fincas*. The biggest difference with the caudillismo of old was that now all such militias were legally subordinated to the central state, and the law was enforced. Standardized forms were developed for each of these hybrid practices, all of which made unequivocal the Guard's ultimate authority.³³

One of the most revealing and best documented of these experiments took place in the first half of 1929 with the *Voluntarios* in Jinotega Department and the Western Segovias.³⁴ Created to bring more manpower to the task of defeating the EDSN and led by Liberal generals from the just-ended civil war, the Voluntarios acted autonomously and in collaboration with Marine-Guard forces. After some initial tactical successes, the force was disbanded: "I have served continuously with the Voluntarios for over two months," wrote Marine Capt. G. F. Stockes in April 1929. "[The] Volunteer force is partisan. . . . The Guard is nonpolitical. In a country where people are so violent in their political views, this is of extreme importance. . . . The National Guard should constitute the armed forces of the Nicaraguan Government. There should be no place in the scheme for an orphan organization."³⁵ Over the next four years, the countervailing pressures of too few Guards confronting too many rebels prompted a number of other authorized paramilitary forces, most notably, the *Auxiliares*, formed in late 1931 in response to Sandinista incursions into the Pacific Coast region, and the *Cívicos Expedicionarios* in Jinotega Department, which on the eve of the Marine withdrawal circulated a propaganda flier "in the name of the constituted authorities," urging "citizens" to reject the rebels' "false patriotism" and help them and the Guard in the "reconstruction of the Republic which will save the Homeland."³⁶

In sum, the upward displacement of violence-making capacities was not linear, even, direct, or simple, but its pace was rapid and its trajectory unambiguous. By the time of the Marine withdrawal in early 1933, the whole of the national territory had only two organizations capable of exercising

³¹ See, e.g., Matagalpa Coffee Growers Complaint & Response, Gen. McDougal, 2 April 1930, RG127/198/1.

³² Memorandum Agreement, Henry F. Springer, Manager, Bonanza Mines Company, and GN Col. L. L. Leech, Bluefields, 1 Oct. 1931, RG127/202/1, housed in www.sandinorebellion.com/eastcoast/EC1931B-p3.html. Notably, this Memorandum Agreement represented the culmination of a long negotiation begun nearly twenty months earlier; see Major Metcalf to Manager, Bonanza Mining Company, 19 Feb. 1930, RG127/43A/24, housed in www.sandinorebellion.com/eastcoast/EC1930A-p1.html, and *passim*.

³³ Smith, et al., "A Review," 29.

³⁴ For a more extensive discussion, see the web pages dedicated to the Voluntarios, at www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/Voluntarios1.html.

³⁵ Armed Volunteer Force of Nicaraguans, Capt. G. F. Stockes, 8 April 1929, RG127/206/2, housed in www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/Voluntarios1.html.

³⁶ "Conciudadanos," Cívicos Expedicionarios, Jinotega, 18 Dec. 1932, RG127/38/18, reproduced at www.sandinorebellion.com/MDOcs/MDOcs-HojasVolantes.html.

sustained coercive power: the National Guard and Sandino's EDSN. With the eradication of the latter after 21 February 1934, the Guard's military dominance stood unchallenged, as it would for the next four-plus decades.

The Guard's informational capacities grew hand in glove with its coercive capacities and proved just as vital to the institution's growth and development—capabilities that sharply distinguished the Guard from the caudillo-led militaries that had preceded it. The disarmament campaign exemplifies the Guard's growing informational power. Integral to this campaign but broader in its institutional scope was a radical expansion of the state's capacity to surveil and regulate the populace. All theoreticians of war emphasize the supreme importance of information as a war-making resource.³⁷ In the context of a guerrilla war waged by rebels who enjoyed popular support across much of Las Segovias, the state developed a radically intensified capability to monitor the populace, particularly subaltern groups in outlying districts that until then had eluded the state's gaze.

In forming the National Guard, the Marines introduced two overlapping military cultures and practices, both rapidly appropriated by the native Guard: intelligence analysis and field operations. The Intelligence Section in Managua mandated, gathered, organized, and analyzed streams of data from all military areas, districts, and posts. Requisite standardized and special reports by area intelligence officers, patrol commanders, and commanding officers at all stations—piles of paperwork routinely emanating from nested bureaucratic layers and produced on hundreds of freshly imported typewriters—in a few short years had generated masses of detailed information about the civilian populace.³⁸ As the rebellion grew and expanded in 1931–32, so too did the Guard's capacity to generate and control such information flows. Commanding officers in every military post compiled list upon list of names of “bandit” suspects, their places of residence, and their extended family members.³⁹ In the meantime, the Intelligence Section compiled extensive lists and brief biographies of prominent local citizens of all political orientations, in effect creating a massive database on the country's most important political actors and business leaders.⁴⁰

Field operations were of many types. Combat patrols “hunted bandits” and along the way collected extensive and detailed information about the social and physical landscape. Spies pursued secret missions; paid informants provided actionable intelligence; disguised infiltrators exposed community support networks; and powerful local patrons collected and passed on information

³⁷ From Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. By Victor H. Mair (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, orig. ca. 500 B.C.E.), to Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, rev. 1984), to Jill Long, “What is War? A New Point of View,” *Small Wars Journal* (Dec. 2012).

³⁸ On serial intelligence reports, see www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/IR-Docs.html, which describes B-2 intelligence reports (brigade-level intelligence; the Marine Corps 2nd Brigade was the unit deployed to Nicaragua); R-2 reports (regiment-level intelligence, with numerous regiments in the 2nd Brigade); Bn-2 reports (battalion-level intelligence, with several battalions in each regiment); and GN-2 (Guardia Nacional intelligence, starting Sept. 1930). Serial intelligence reports appear in various locales in RG127, many in RG127/43A/3 and 43A/29.

³⁹ See the lists of “known bandits” from commanding officers across Las Segovias, Aug. and Sept. 1932, in RG127/38/18, at www.sandinorebellion.com/EDSN-pgs/Gente/gente-soldados.html.

⁴⁰ On prominent citizens, see U.S. Electoral Mission to Nicaragua, “Prominent Citizens of the Republic of Nicaragua,” 1 July 1932, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Navy, General Correspondence, 1925–1940, Record Group 80, Entry 49, box 2010.

gathered by subordinate clients. Sources of information were as varied as the individuals providing it. Vivid illustrations of these expanded capacities can be seen not only in the proliferation of intelligence reports with detailed information about local actors, but also in the extension of military posts and airfields into remote districts, the expansion of roads and telegraph and telephone lines, and the creation of a radio net encompassing virtually the entire national territory.⁴¹ In sum, thanks to U.S. Marine Corps tutelage, the Guard developed significant capacities to extend the gaze and power of the state over the civilian populace. Images 1-3 illustrate the rapidity and extent of this process in Las Segovias.

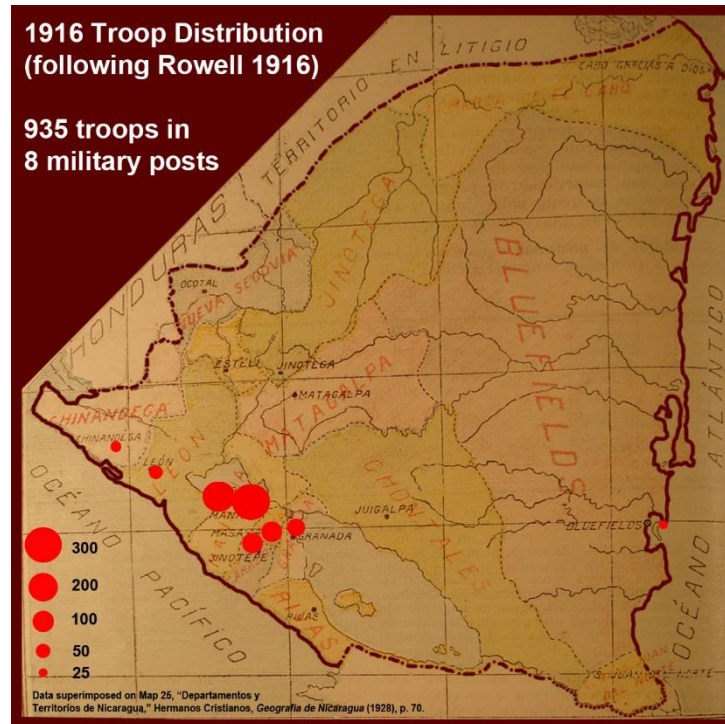


Image 1. Nicaraguan National Army troop distribution in 1916, following Rowell (1916), with modified base map from Christian Brothers, *Geografía de Nicaragua* (Managua, 1928).⁴²

⁴¹ See Smith et al., “A Review,” chap. X, (“Signal Communications”) and chap. XII (“Roads”). For maps of the pre- and post-intervention military and informational infrastructure in Las Segovias, see www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/GN-1916Monograph-Rowell.html.

⁴² Base map from Christian Brothers, *Geografía de Nicaragua* (Managua, 1928), 70, a much-used volume reproduced at www.sandinorebellion.com/PhotoPgs/2maps-ChristianBros1928.html. For the 1916 Rowell report, see www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/GN-1916Monograph-Rowell.html.



Image 2. National Guard military areas from August 1929, and troop distribution as of December 1929, on modified base map from Christian Brothers (1928), adapted from Smith et al. (1933).

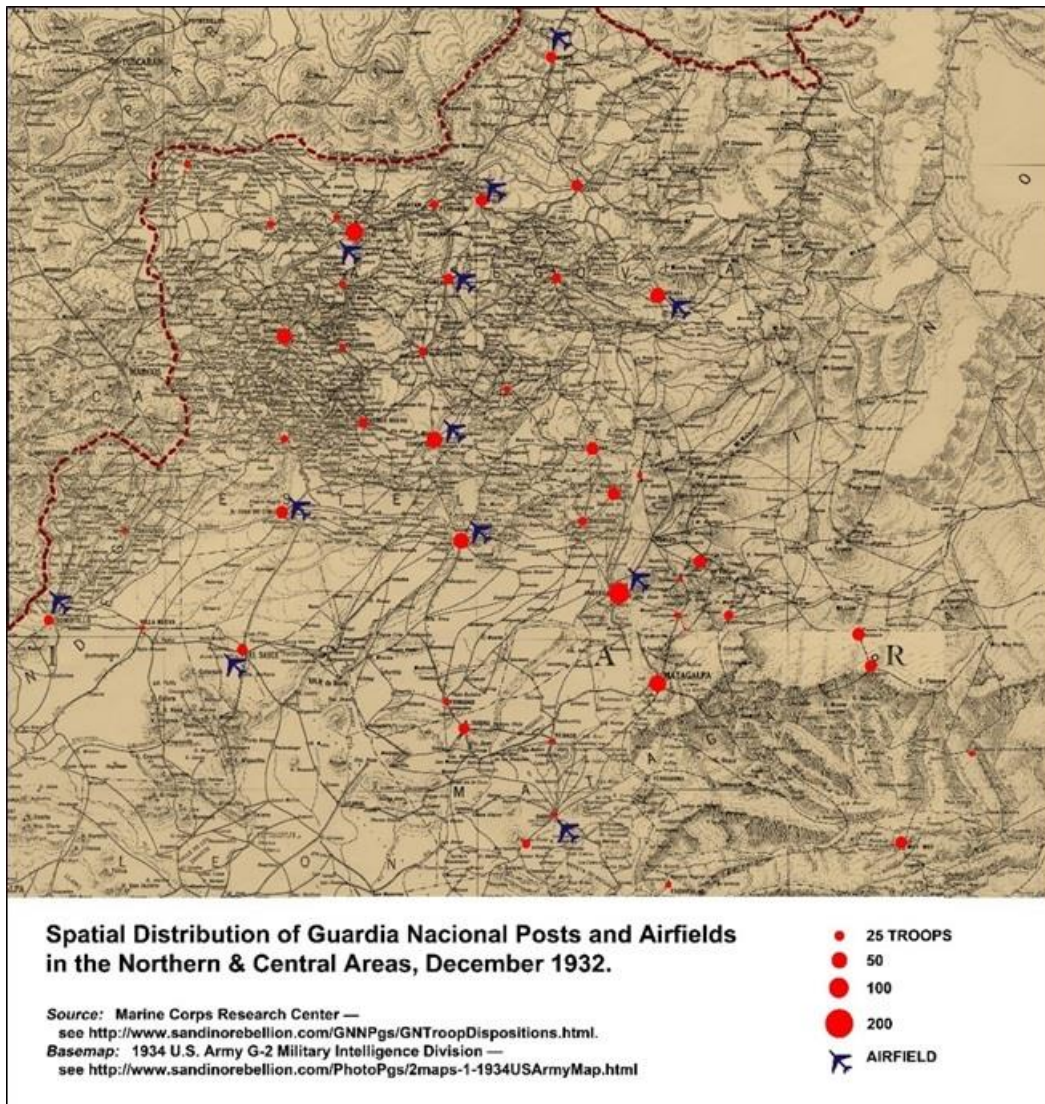


Image 3. Spatial Distribution of National Guard military posts & airfields in Las Segovias, December 1932, when 2,679 Guard troops were stationed across the country, more than 1,400 in Las Segovias. None of these airfields or national military posts existed before 1927. Map by Michael J. Schroeder, superimposed on 1934 U.S. Army base map.⁴³

Literacy Classes, the Military Academy, and the Process of War: Schools of Guard Identity Formation, 1927–1933

All military organizations develop a distinctive sense of collective identity, a cultural glue that binds its members together under a common set of beliefs, rituals, and traditions. For the Guard's critical first five years, that sense of shared identity emerged in overlapping spheres: in training and

⁴³ For the 1934 U.S. Army map, see <http://www.sandinorebellion.com/PhotoPgs/2maps-1-1934USArmyMap.html>.

indoctrination, in creative cultural borrowings, and in the process of war. The latter was most critical, a profoundly transformative, brutally violent counterinsurgency campaign spearheaded by a foreign occupying army. That process of identity formation in warfare developed in uneven, partial, and contested ways. The sources documenting it are also uneven—abundant in some ways, scarce in others, and always requiring critical reading, often against the grain of their intended meanings. The richest sources are the memoir literature and the actions of native Guards in the field. Official reports are essential, but the interstices of official reports are often more revealing. Also illuminating are semiautobiographical fictional accounts and the cultural observations of Marines in reports, letters, diaries, and oral histories. With these raw materials we work to describe the cultural process through which the Guard developed a collective sense of its institutional self.

From the outset the Marines worked to nurture that institutional identity, the Corps itself offering a prime example of the deep, almost mystical bonds that members of a military organization could share. But Nicaraguans were the principal agents shaping the identity of the Guard. The Sandinista narrative is correct that the Guard was a U.S. implant intended to serve broader U.S. geostrategic interests. But the Sandinista narrative effaces how the institution was quickly appropriated by Nicaraguans to become an integral part of the country's social, political, and cultural fabric. In practice that meant grafting the core elements of caudillismo—especially personal loyalties and patronage relations—onto a wholly new, modern bureaucratic apparatus configured to privilege loyalty to the office and not the individual holding it. “Salute the uniform, not the man,” a maxim popular in western militaries since the Age of Revolution, aptly expressed the U.S. efforts to inculcate this sense of depersonalized professionalism, integral to their larger project of wrenching politics out of the military.⁴⁴ In practice, Nicaraguans in the Guard strongly tended to invert these emphases, saluting not the uniform but the man wearing it.

From the institution's founding the Marines sought to recruit soldiers through material inducements—itsself a sharp break with the past. Since at least the time of President Zelaya (1893–1909), military service had been obligatory for all males between eighteen and forty-five years of age.⁴⁵ From May 1927 that service became voluntary, with privates earning \$12 per month—a powerful incentive in a social context of mass poverty. One photograph of a mobile Guard recruiting station from mid-1927 shows a signboard advertising not only the pay scale for privates, corporals, and officers, and food, but also free dental care (Images 4 and 5).⁴⁶

⁴⁴ See Henry J. Bienen, ed., *The Military and Modernization* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1971), 74.

⁴⁵ “Ley y Reglamento de Llamamientos Militares,” Presidential Decree, 29 Aug. 1928, translated by Capt. James L. Underhill, USMC, RG45/753, and 1st Lt. Ross E. Rowell, USMC, “Military Monograph of Nicaragua,” chap. V, 30 March 1916, RG127/38/26.

⁴⁶ Photos of National Guard recruiting station from RG127, Nicaragua photos, U.S. National Archives II, College Park, MD, reproduced in www.sandinorebellion.com/PhotoPgs/2Marines-GN/Pgs/GN01.html.



Image 4. National Guard recruiting station, no date, ca. 1928. Note recruitment placard at lower left (detail below).

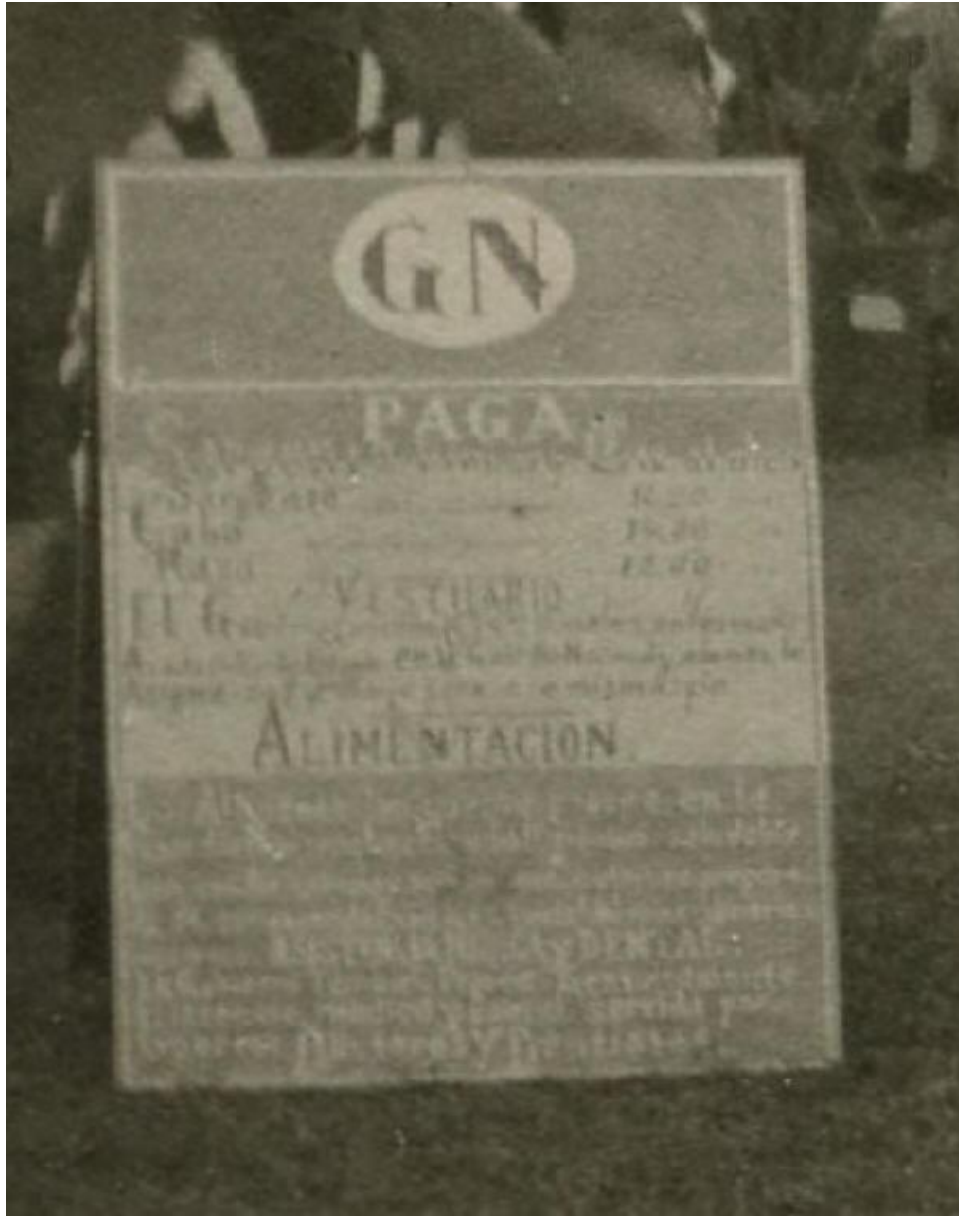


Image 5. Detail of Guard recruitment placard advertising pay, food, and dental care (the word “dental” visible at lower right).

Despite the Marines’ efforts to recruit the “better class” and “high type” of young men, few signed on. Instead the bulk of the recruits were poor, rural, and illiterate. “The enlisted men . . . are practically all from the lower, uneducated classes,” as one report described. “In the northern departments the type is far less literate but when well trained and officered make very good soldiers

for the hills.”⁴⁷ The initial literacy requirement was soon waived, as Segovian men of indigenous ancestry with no formal schooling signed on in disproportionately high numbers.

In response to this widespread illiteracy, in April 1929 the Marine-led Guard high command ordered all posts with twenty or more troops to hire a male teacher to instruct recruits in the rudiments of reading and writing.⁴⁸ Practice exercises sought to instill a sense of collective identity and institutional loyalty, with page after page of copybooks filled with laboriously penned sentences such as, “*La Guardia Nacional necesita hombres,*” “*La Guardia Nacional progresa,*” “*Tengo la honra de ser uno de los miembros de la Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua,*” and “*La base de nuestros actos es el cumplimiento de nuestro deber y el respeto a nuestros superiores.*”⁴⁹ These rustic schools doubtless helped to foster a sense of what it meant to be a member of the Guard, along with feelings of personal indebtedness to the institution. On 12 February 1930, Northern Area Commander Colonel Robert L. Denig, visiting Somoto, recorded one soldier’s exuberance at his newfound literacy: “Rushed about and got his copy book and smiled all over. He has learned to write since December.”⁵⁰



Image 6. National Guard literacy school in Somoto, October 1930. Source: RG127/220/1.

Guard literacy schools offer a vivid image for the two other schools that shaped the Guard’s formative years: the Nicaraguan National Military Academy, founded in April 1930, and the much deadlier “school” of guerrilla warfare in Las Segovias. Here our analysis of Guard identity formation

⁴⁷ Memorandum from Guard Headquarters, Managua, no author, 3 Dec. 1929, RG127/43A/30.

⁴⁸ See Michael J. Schroeder, “‘Y también enseñenles a leer’: Un archivo digital sobre la formación de la Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua, 1925–1979,” *Revista de Temas Nicaragüenses* 60 (abril 2013), 62–65, at www.temasnicas.net/rtn60.pdf.

⁴⁹ Exemplars of these practice exercises are housed in RG127/220/1.

⁵⁰ Robert L. Denig, Personal Diary, Personal Papers Collection, MCRC, Quantico VA, 71, accessible via www.sandinorebellion.com/USMC-Docs/USMC-docs-DenigDiary.html. See Image 6.

follows two interlaced paths. The first takes us to the war in Las Segovias and the enlisted footsoldiers led by U.S. Marines and a small cadre of Academy-trained Nicaraguan officers. The second takes us to the graduating cohorts of the National Military Academy, a key institution designed to form nonpartisan military officers who were to command the Guard after the U.S. withdrawal.

Virtually all observers agree that from late 1927 the war in Las Segovias devolved into a brutal guerrilla war, fueling violent acts of retribution on all sides, including torture and the mutilation of corpses. This is the overarching context for any understanding of Guard identity formation in these critical early years. Outside observers with no political axe to grind emphasized the deep mutual hatred that emerged between the two sides. The judicious Liberal intellectual and labor activist Sofonías Salvatierra, who played a key role in negotiating the provisional peace accord in February 1933, described the “irreconcilable hatred between Sandinismo and the National Guard.”⁵¹ Another Liberal intimately involved in the peace process, Salvador Calderón Ramírez, similarly invoked the intense “passions of hate” between the Sandinistas and the Guard.⁵²

This intense hatred shaped the war in Las Segovias in profound and enduring ways. The Sandinistas took few if any prisoners, and Guard soldiers who fell into EDSN hands could expect a torturous death. Guard members were no less severe in their conduct. While the language of official Guard reports reflects a certain restraint, it also describes the contours of a brutal counterinsurgency campaign, with scores of “bandit suspects” shot and killed “attempting to escape”; of campesinos’ homes and crops torched and destroyed; of hundreds of firefights between the Marines-Guard and the Sandinistas; and euphemistic renderings of what were clearly violent interrogations of rebel prisoners and civilians suspected of aiding them.⁵³ Read against the grain, the extant corpus of some 1,250 Guard patrol reports offers a powerful expression of native Guard soldiers’ hatred of the Sandinistas. Manolo Cuadra’s short stories also capture the profound sense of “otherness” dividing Guard from the “bandoleros,” while his brother Abelardo’s memoirs brim with tales of the Guard’s brutal violence against Segovian campesinos and “bandit” suspects.⁵⁴

The most telling episode of extreme Guard violence against Sandino’s forces came in the aftermath of Sandino’s assassination in February 1934, when Guard forces massacred scores of Sandino’s followers at his Río Coco Cooperative deep in the interior at Wiwilí. The killings spread across Las Segovias and beyond, with the Guard totally eradicating the EDSN except in memories and texts. Oral testimonies produced by the Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo in the early 1980s offer detailed descriptions of these massacres,⁵⁵ accounts corroborated by reports from the U.S. Military Attaché in Costa Rica: “On February 27th, the Guardia attacked . . . the remaining Sandinistas at Wiwilí . . . killing twenty two Sandinistas . . . the Guardia have thrown overboard all the ideas of

⁵¹ Sofonías Salvatierra, *Sandino o la tragedia de un pueblo* (Madrid: Europa, 1934), 76.

⁵² Salvador Calderón Ramírez, *Últimos días de Sandino* (México, D.F.: Ed. Botas, 1934), 87.

⁵³ See the patrol and combat reports in RG127/202, reproduced to April 1928 at www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/PC-Docs1.html.

⁵⁴ A. Cuadra, *Hombre del Caribe*, 49–98 ff.; see also the short story by Sgt. Manuel Escobar, “Los horrores de la guerra,” *Guardia Nacional, Boletín* (Julio de 1934), 34–36.

⁵⁵ For extended excerpts, see Schroeder, “To Defend Our Nation’s Honor,” chap. 1.

humane . . . warfare taught them by the Marines [and] have returned with enthusiasm to their . . . custom of cutting off the heads of their defeated enemies.”⁵⁶

In sum, shared suffering and sacrifice and visceral hatred of Sandino’s “bandoleros” constituted the core experience of Segovian guerrilla warfare for the enlisted men and junior officers in the Guard. That emergent identity expressed itself in everyday practice. Marine Corps officers expressed both satisfaction and surprise at native soldiers’ growing identification with the institution, as when Private Daniel Figueroa, in the midst of a firefight and “although slightly wounded, . . . when orders were given to advance he rushed forward shouting ‘Viva la Guardia’.”⁵⁷ A month earlier, Captain Evans F. Carlson described a similar incident: “In this district the operation has served to increase the confidence of the Guardia in themselves, . . . Their spirit was fine before as was evidenced in the course of the fire fight when some of the Guardia started a charge and shouted ‘Viva la Guardia Nacional’.” He added: “That was a complete surprise to me. Now they all want to take the trail, and they are most punctilious [in] the execution of all orders and instructions.”⁵⁸

The Marines introduced a range of practices intended to build and reinforce the loyalty of Guard recruits. Officers up and down the ranks paid special attention to treating Guard dead and wounded with utmost respect. Toward the end of his report on a firefight with rebels near San Juan de Telpaneca in March 1931 in which three native Guard soldiers were wounded and one killed, Captain W. F. Kelly described his patrol’s arrival at the Guard post in Telpaneca: “The arrangements made by the Commanding Officer . . . immediately upon our arrival there, for the treatment of the wounded and the burial of the dead made a very favorable impression . . . the expeditious arrival of the medical officer . . . helped the wounded considerably and raised our morale too. These may be small matters to mention but they were much appreciated by the Jicaro guardia.”⁵⁹ Such acts became common. Colonel Denig’s personal diary described a similar incident. A firefight on 12 January 1930 resulted in one wounded native Guard and the death and mutilation of another, his “left arm shot through, hacked in the crotch with a ‘cutacha’ also badly burned with torches in other places.” The next day an airplane evacuated the wounded man to Managua, after which Denig “held a military funeral with as much ceremony as possible,” including “three volleys . . . aimed into bandit land with the hope that one bullet would reach home.”⁶⁰

How did rank-and-file native Guard members respond to the lessons in institutional loyalty that the Marines sought to impart? Extant sources make clear that for the great majority, notions of “duty” and “the nation” remained remote and abstract concepts at best. In contrast, personal loyalties—in keeping with Nicaraguan tradition—were both palpable and paramount, and directed toward both comrades-in-arms and senior Marine officers. “The morale of the Guardia Nacional is in

⁵⁶ Major A. N. Harris, Military Attaché, San José, Costa Rica, 9 March 1934, RG165/77/2660, housed in www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/GN-MDocs02.html.

⁵⁷ Report of contact with bandits, Lt. Avery Graves, Jinotega, 20 Aug. 1930, RG127/202/10.

⁵⁸ Report of contact with bandit group at Pasmata, Capt. Evans F. Carlson, Jalapa, 10 July 1930, RG127/202/10.

⁵⁹ Patrol Report, Capt. William F. Kelly, Jicaro, 27 March 1931, RG127/202/11.

⁶⁰ Denig, Personal Diary, 49–50 (12–13 January 1930); the report describing the firefight is in GN-3 Memorandum, Major F. G. Patchen, 3 Feb. 1930, RG127/202/11.

general satisfactory,” reported Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Racicot in February 1930. “Their loyalty appears almost wholly based on personal loyalty to their officers. Development of loyalty to their government as the duty of a soldier, above everything else, is not apparent in any perceptible degree yet”—a refrain heard repeatedly throughout the war.⁶¹ As Captain W. Bales observed in late 1932, “[The] enlisted men of the Guardia . . . have been habituated by all their previous associations to personal loyalties. The only concept they have ever had of a military organization is that of a group of armed men belonging to some ‘jefe,’ personally known to every man in the group.”⁶² Racicot’s prognostication was grim: “With the Marines withdrawn, it is believed that the political schisms of the Nicaraguan civilians would soon disintegrate the Guardia.” Colonel Denig, writing in November 1932, also predicted the institution’s imminent politicization but offered a more realistic assessment of the likely consequences: “At best, there is sure to be a shake-up in the Guardia; it will soon become a partisan force, used to further the party in power.”⁶³ Denig’s prediction proved accurate, as the postintervention Guard integrated personal loyalties and patronage politics into a modernized, populist form of caudillismo.

Native Guard soldiers became renowned for their intense personal loyalty to individual Marine officers. Descriptions abound of Guard courage in battle and fierce devotion to their superiors, “a blind faith in their white leaders” in the words of one former Marine.⁶⁴ As another recalled, if the Guard recruits liked you, “they’d follow you to hell.”⁶⁵ Enlisted Nicaraguans sometimes obeyed orders to an excessive degree, as Colonel Denig’s diary recorded. In one instance, a Marine officer complained about the poor quality of food prepared by a Chinese cook, casually remarking, “Somebody ought to blow that Chinaman’s head off.” A Guard corporal promptly shot the cook dead.⁶⁶ After a similar incident in which one new recruit killed another for refusing guard duty, Denig deadpanned: “You must have a sense of humor to serve in the Nicarabian Army.”⁶⁷

The intense loyalty that many native Guard recruits felt toward their Marine commanders also had a double-edged quality. If native soldiers followed superior officers they respected and who respected them, they also reacted violently to perceived slights and humiliations, with sometimes deadly results. Ten Guard mutinies and more near-mutinies, most rooted in perceptions of disrespectful behavior by senior officers, attest to the delicacy of the Marines’ mission of imposing order and discipline without alienating subordinates.⁶⁸ “If they liked you, they were very loyal,” recalled

⁶¹ Estimate of the Situation, Lt. Col. A. Racicot, 28 Feb. 1930, RG127/206.

⁶² Capt. William G. Bales, “The Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua,” *The Leatherneck* (Oct. 1932), 19. See also Col. H. C. Reisinger, USMC, “La Palabra del Gringo!” United States Naval Institute *Proceedings* 61, no. 2 (Feb. 1934), 216.

⁶³ Lt. Col. R. L. Denig, “Native Officer Corps, Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua,” *The Leatherneck* (Nov. 1932), 77.

⁶⁴ Personal papers of Lt. Gen. George F. Good, P.C. 488, Marine Corp Research Center.

⁶⁵ Interview with George C. Smith by David C. Brooks, San José, Costa Rica, September 20, 1990. An ex-Marine who served in the Guard, Smith married a Nicaraguan woman after the war, as did several other Marines, and became a wealthy cattle rancher in Boaco department.

⁶⁶ Denig, Personal Diary, 211 (long version), Denig Papers, Box 2, MCRC. As Denig recorded, the corporal was later acquitted of murder “on grounds that he had obeyed the orders of a superior officer.”

⁶⁷ Denig, Personal Diary. The “Nicarabian” quip doubtless referred to T. H. Lawrence’s then-popular account of his service in Arabia during the Great War.

⁶⁸ Smith et al., “A Review,” 109–22.

then-Guard Lieutenant Edward Craig, “but if you crossed them or did not keep your word, they could be just the opposite.”⁶⁹ As Nicaragua veteran (and later four-star General) Robert Hogaboom recalled, Guard mutinies “almost invariably . . . involved some Marine corporal or sergeant who had . . . used the tough method rather than the ‘*patrón*’ relationship with his troops. You had to be a sort of father figure to the Nicaraguan troops.”⁷⁰

Among the most tactically successful Marine-Guard combat units to adopt this “*patrón*” approach was the famous (or infamous) Company M, led by Marine Corps Captain Lewis “Chesty” Puller and Gunnery Sergeant William “Ironman” Lee (see Image 7). Relentlessly pursuing and attacking rebel groups across the sparsely populated interior, Puller and Lee became charismatic chieftains, traveling light and remaining mobile, tracking their enemies and launching surprise assaults on their jungle camps, often with deadly effect. Lee spoke fluent Spanish, while Puller’s men dubbed him *El Tigre de las Montañas* (“Tiger of the Mountains”) for his audacity, fortitude, and courage. “Company M was made up of Indians,” Lee recalled many years later, “and when they were happy, they’d show it . . . they were enthusiastic about the outfit.”⁷¹ Decades later, “Lieutenant Lee” remained infamous among Segovian campesinos for his alleged acts of brutality against civilians.⁷² More importantly, Company M’s tactical successes must be balanced against the ominous parallels the unit developed to previous Nicaraguan practices of caudillo-led gang warfare. Here, in microcosm, one finds a U.S.-trained unit held together by a Nicaraguan cultural glue, an indication how the Guard’s actual practices could reinforce rather than dissipate the personalistic loyalties that had long characterized Nicaraguan political-military culture.

⁶⁹ USMC Oral History Transcript, Lt. Gen. Edward A. Craig (1968), 69, MCRC, housed in www.sandinorebellion.com/USMC-Docs/USMC-docs-Craig.html.

⁷⁰ USMC Oral History Transcript, Lt. General Robert E. Hogaboom (1972), 70, MCRC, housed in www.sandinorebellion.com/USMC-Docs/USMC-docs-Hogaboom.html. Then-Guard Lt. George C. Smith took the same view; in the pair of mutinies he knew of, “the Marine was to blame.” David C. Brooks interview with George C. Smith, San José, Costa Rica, July 1990.

⁷¹ USMC Oral History Transcript, William A. Lee, MCRC, 44.

⁷² See Schroeder, “To Defend Our Nation’s Honor,” chap. 8.



Image 7. U.S. Marine Capt. Lewis “Chesty” Puller and Gunnery Sgt. “Ironman” William Lee, flanked by National Guard detachment members Carlos Gutiérrez and Carmen Torrez, Jinotega, ca. 1931, U.S. National Archives.

If personal loyalty to Marine officers among the mostly poor and illiterate foot soldiers characterized the Guard’s rank and file, a different dynamic played out among the Guard’s upper echelons. Here we turn to the third “school” of Guard identity formation: the Nicaraguan National Military Academy at Momotombo on the northeastern outskirts of Managua, which opened on 1 April 1930. Modeled on the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, the school offered military education and training to select Nicaraguan junior officer candidates, focusing on military science and tactics, administration, laws and regulations, infantry weapons, and military engineering. The Academy’s first Director, Marine Corps Lieutenant Edward J. Trumble, waxed optimistic about the Academy’s first cohort of nine: “The health and conduct of the student body is excellent, and their morale is very high. The students are exceptionally bright and enthusiastic in their studies.”⁷³ This first

⁷³ Nicaraguan Military Academy, weekly report of Lt. Edward J. Trumble to the Jefe Director, Managua, 12 de Abril de 1930, RG127/202/16.

class graduated on 22 June after three months of study. Thenceforth the Academy expanded and deepened its courses of study and churned out a long series of graduating cohorts.⁷⁴

Identification with members of one's graduating class soon came to comprise one of the central pillars in a graduate's sense of his professional Guard identity. Memoir literature penned by former Guard officers conventionally begins with the author positioning himself within his graduating cohort, much as Guillermo Cuadra's *Memorias* commence with long lists of cadets and cohorts, himself among the affectionately named "First Trumble Promotion" (*Primera Promoción Trumble*).⁷⁵ This cohort-centric pillar of self-identification continued through the 1930s and after, even outlasting the years of Sandinista rule (1979–1990), carried on by devoted former officials decades after the Guard's destruction.⁷⁶

The National Military Academy was the first institution of its kind in Nicaraguan history to endure beyond a few short years.⁷⁷ Here Marine officers attempted to impart a cultural sensibility of military professionalism and duty to the constitution, the state, and the nation. There is ample evidence that many graduates took their studies with the utmost seriousness, appropriating and internalizing the lessons taught by their Marine Corps instructors.⁷⁸ For the United States, a functioning Military Academy represented the *sine qua non* for military withdrawal from the country, a process well underway by mid-1930 and completed on 2 January 1933, though a good number of U.S. military liaisons, advisors, and instructors remained through the 1930s and after. Control of the Guard thence passed to Nicaraguan hands, from Director in Chief Calvin B. Matthews to General Anastasio Somoza García, selected by the United States for his long administrative experience, sharp intelligence, charming manner, and excellent English.

With the Marines gone, so too was Sandino's reason for rebelling. The changed context led to talks between Sandino and Sacasa and in February 1933 a provisional peace accord. Most ordinary Nicaraguans had little stomach for more war after nearly seven years of civil war and armed conflict, a devastating earthquake in Managua on 31 March 1931 that caused the deaths of over 10,000 people and substantially strengthened the Guard's power in the nation's capital, and a crippling and continuing downward spiral in the world economy. By then, the whole national territory had just two organizations capable of sustained violence making: Sandino's EDSN and Somoza García's National Guard. The provisional peace treaty had created a sovereign rebel republic across a sizeable part of the national land, centered on the Río Coco Cooperative at Wiwilí, following Sandino's insistence that his forces maintain a monopoly of military control across the designated zone, albeit with only 100

⁷⁴ Select papers from the Academy's archives are housed in RG127/202/16.

⁷⁵ Guillermo E. Cuadra G., *Memorias*, 3. See also Abelardo Cuadra, *Hombre del Caribe*; Francisco Boza Gutiérrez, *Memorias de un soldado: Nicaragua y la Guardia Nacional, 1928–1979* (Managua: PAVSA, 2002).

⁷⁶ See the elegiacal manuscript kindly shared with the authors by ex-Guard Lt. Colonel José Wenceslao Mayorga D.; link to PDF file from the Guard Homepage at www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/guardia.html.

⁷⁷ The first military academy, under former President Zelaya and taught by German instructors, was in service from 1904 to 1909; José Mejía Lacayo, personal communication.

⁷⁸ See Lt. Trumble's reports in RG127/202/16; see also Boza Gutiérrez, *Memorias*, and Guillermo E. Cuadra G., *Memorias*.

soldiers in arms. Over the rest of the national territory, the Guard exercised undisputed monopoly of coercive capacity.

Peace, Order, and the Popular Will: Somoza Garcia's Poplar-Personal Nationalism, 1933–1936

In a momentous and decisive action still mired in controversy, on 21 February 1934 the Guard assassinated Sandino and most his entourage after a dinner with President Sacasa and his senior staff.⁷⁹ The annihilation of the EDSN swiftly followed.⁸⁰ With his main rival eliminated, Somoza turned to a bigger set of challenges: transforming the National Guard into his own personal army, ousting Sacasa, and becoming the constitutional president. Much about these events is well known. What is less understood are the discursive underpinnings of Somoza Garcia's cultural project to remake the Nicaraguan state and to create a cult of personality around himself. Here we focus on a remarkable and hitherto unexamined collection of seventeen issues of the Guard's official monthly publication, *Guardia Nacional, Boletín del Ejército de Nicaragua*.⁸¹

Averaging about forty-four pages each, with cardstock front covers in blue and white (the Nicaraguan national colors) and photographs sprinkled throughout, the *Boletines* were handsome volumes with high production values for this time and place. Apparently, they evolved from the "Guardia Newsletters," a typed, English-language, mimeographed packet of legal-size paper produced during the U.S. occupation.⁸² Each edition began with a column, "*Párrafos del Director*," wherein Somoza offered what were pitched as his sagacious commentaries on issues of vital import to the Guard and the nation. This was true of all but two in the collection (June 1933 and June 1934), which opened with a homage to the "*excelentísimo*" President Juan B. Sacasa, "Commander of the Army," two of the few times that President Sacasa was mentioned in the *Boletines'* pages. The articles, written mostly by Guard officers, covered a gamut of subjects, from military tactics and training to the vices of alcohol, reminiscences about the war against Sandino's "bandits," short fiction, and more. But the main focus increasingly became the Director in Chief and his immensely compelling political personality as expressed in speeches, laurels, and mounting acclaim from the masses of citizens and the nation's most distinguished and honorable families. Image 8 offers a composite of images from the June 1934 issue of the *Boletín*.

⁷⁹ Lt. Abelardo Cuadra offers one of the most detailed eyewitness accounts of these events; *Hombre del Caribe*, 115–138.

⁸⁰ See details in Schroeder, "To Defend Our Nation's Honor," chap. 1.

⁸¹ Housed in RG127/38/25; see the high-resolution PDF files linked from www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/BoletinesGN.html.

⁸² For a collection of 108 Guard Newsletters comprising 1,929 pages of text covering most of the twenty-seven months from October 1930 to December 1932, see RG84, M1273 (Microfilm 1273), Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Nicaragua, 1930–1944, reels 21–23; housed online at www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/GNNNewslettersHome.html.



Image 8. Composite image of the cover and select pages of the June 1934 issue of *Guardia Nacional*, *Boletín del Ejército de Nicaragua*. U.S. National Archives, RG127/38/25.

In his landmark 1936 ghostwritten book, *El verdadero Sandino o el calvario de las Segovias*, that portrayed Sandino as a crazed sociopath leading hordes of criminals bent on murder and mayhem, Somoza García showed himself a masterful propagandist and self-promoter. Essentially a thick compendium of carefully selected and deceptively edited, captured Sandinista correspondence, the book still forms the ideological touchstone of the Somocista narrative of Sandinismo. The *Boletines* show the book's discursive precursors. At a deeper level they reveal an ambitious ideological and cultural project to elaborate a discursive edifice in which the person of Anastasio Somoza García embodied—literally personified—the National Guard, now also called *el Ejército de Nicaragua* (the Army of Nicaragua). In this narrative, the General and Army symbolized every virtue and ideal: duty, loyalty, honor, patriotism, peace, justice, work, health, education, the wellbeing of the people and the nation, all incarnated in General Somoza's personality and heartfelt embrace of these virtues and desire to see them realized.

The *Boletines* show in detail how Somoza worked to create a discursive unity between himself and the Guard, and between the Guard and all such virtues, and thereby build the cultural foundations of his own exclusive political legitimacy and political power. It is doubtful that these journals circulated widely, and their readership was likely small, though a good number of the homages were reprinted from newspapers, part of a growing alliance between Somoza García and the press.⁸³ Together they offer a fine-grained illustration of Somoza's earliest efforts to give specific form to his own public persona as Director in Chief and the public personality of the National Guard. By the mid-1930s a number of leaders were using new methods of mass communication to build personality cults around themselves. Fascists and Communists across the Atlantic had embarked on far bigger and more elaborate campaigns to create discursive equivalencies among state, army, nation, and supreme authority embodied and personified in a supreme leader.

The final issue in the collection (December 1935) crowns Somoza García's success in appropriating the *Boletines*, openly telegraphing his presidential ambitions: "If the people desire that I assume the Presidency of the Republic," he wrote, assuming a posture of feigned humility, "my own dignity requires of me that I satisfy their wishes and fulfill their desires."⁸⁴ Thus, a professional military publication had become virtually a campaign flyer for Somoza's effort to gain the presidency.

Somoza García's drive to cement his image as the personification of the nation's highest aspirations and ideals finds ample expression in a series of articles reporting on his tours to various parts of the country from June to September 1934. The June 1934 issue featured sixteen pages of detailed reportage on his activities, with homages and accolades from a grateful populace in Jinotega, Chontales, Carazo, Granada, León, Nagarote, La Paz Centro, Masatepe, and San Marcos, with military parades, marching bands, concerts, ceremonial troop inspections, balcony speeches, elegant banquets and dances, enthusiastic crowds at train depots and along his route, and streams of praise from all quarters. July's issue reported more "*grandes homenajes*" from grateful, peace-loving

⁸³ In April 1934 Somoza used Guard funds to create a new newspaper, *La Nueva Prensa*, to serve as his mouthpiece; see Crawley, *Somoza and Roosevelt*, 54.

⁸⁴ *Guardia Nacional*, *Boletín* 34 (Dec. 1935), 1.

citizens in Managua, Diriamba, and Jinotega, with an especially fawning speech by a Capt. Pereira at a banquet held in the Director in Chief's honor.

And so it continued in the pages of the *Boletines*, in a narrative of patriotism, duty, discipline, peace, and “ordered democracy” that became more overtly political over the months, that waxed anguished but steely in the face of internal conspiracies and challenges, and that always projected the person of Anastasio Somoza García as the purest expression of the Guard's moral and constitutional authority. In reality these portrayals constituted an elaborate mask, an ideological construct that obscured deeper truths.

More realistic appraisals of the character and practices of the National Guard and Somoza García's leadership than those offered in the *Boletines* can be found in a variety of sources. Among the most pointedly candid are the records of the U.S. Military Intelligence Division and State Department.⁸⁵ Several main themes stand out: mounting factionalism rooted in personal and political loyalties; growing corruption and graft among appointed officers; deteriorating material conditions for soldiers and junior officers (progressively lower pay and poorer equipment); and abuse of civilians. A culture of routinized corruption soon prevailed. Robert J. Sierakowski characterizes the Somocista state as “primarily [a] network of privilege that distributed employment and permitted illegal behavior on the part of its local allies.”⁸⁶ Underpaid Guard soldiers in rural districts had ample incentive to compel payments and favors from the populace, just as the populace had ample motivation to comply. The U.S. military attaché in Costa Rica framed the issue as one of loyalty, especially among enlisted troops outside the major cities: “Reductions in pay, lack of uniforms, clothing and footwear combined by the example set by officers in charge of isolated districts in high-handedly recognizing no authority other than General Somoza . . . are all contributory factors towards making the loyalty of the enlisted personnel, especially in the outlying districts, a very uncertain factor at its best.”⁸⁷ Another consequence of these deteriorating material conditions, unremarked by the attaché, was the social ripple effects of impoverished Guard soldiers exercising authority over the local populace, especially in Las Segovias, where the Guard had just waged a counterinsurgency campaign against the EDSN and its campesino supporters. We cannot cite direct evidence for it, but it seems very likely that material poverty and the legacy of counterinsurgency created conditions under which local commanders and soldiers could act in parasitic and exploitive ways toward subaltern groups. By 1937, about one-fifth of the total number of Guard troops were stationed in Las Segovias (480 of 2,400), with garrisons in Ocotol, Somoto, and elsewhere actively patrolling the Honduran frontier against smugglers and outlaws—and, one suspects, at times working in cahoots with them.

A broad-ranging U.S. intelligence assessment of 1 January 1937 captured the irony of the longer-term process: “The dream of [the Guard's] organizers, who hoped they were leaving behind a strong, patriotic, stabilizing force, is far from being realized,” the report concluded. “In fact the exact

⁸⁵ RG165/77/2660 (U.S. National Archives II, College Park, MD), housed online at www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/GN-MDdocs01.html.

⁸⁶ Sierakowski, “In the Footsteps of Sandino,” 61.

⁸⁷ “Five Privates of Guardia Shot for Treason,” Acting Military Attaché Alex A. Cohen, San José, 29 May 1936, RG165/77/2660.

opposite is what is taking place. The Guardia is now one of the most serious threats to peace and quietude in the country. . . . [It] has developed into a political agency and may be credited with the political achievements of its Director [Somoza García].”⁸⁸ By the end of 1939, U.S. analysts had reached consensus that the Somoza García regime had fundamentally corrupted the Guard’s foundational ideals; that “wholesale graft” and embezzlement by senior officers were endemic; that loyalties were divided and disgruntlement widespread, and the institution was held together mainly through force—in our terms, by an effective monopoly of violence-making capacities—and a critical mass of personal loyalties to its Director in Chief.⁸⁹

Conclusion

In mid-1938, after three years imprisonment in León, ex-Lieutenant Abelardo Cuadra was transferred to house arrest in Granada. Two years later he escaped across the border into Costa Rica, where he became active in anti-Somoza circles. In 1947 he joined a revolutionary scheme hatched by the self-styled Caribbean Legion to overthrow Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo and the following year joined an uprising that helped restore democracy to Costa Rica. That same year, 1948, saw a revolt against Somoza García in Nicaragua’s northern mountains, inspired in part by the events in Costa Rica and led in part by old-time Sandinistas who had survived the massacres of the mid-1930s.⁹⁰ In a telling irony, the Guard officer who participated in Sandino’s assassination and helped Somoza’s rise to power became one of the leading opponents of dictatorial regimes across the circum-Caribbean.

In this article we have explored a series of entwined processes and ironies in the formation of the Nicaraguan National Guard and Somocista state. Emphasizing the radical rupture expressed in the rapid upward displacement of violence making, we show that this process was nonlinear, uneven, and unambiguous in its overall trajectory, such that by 1934, after eight years of war, the Guard had effectively monopolized all substantial means of organized coercion. We then highlight some of the many ways that Nicaraguans appropriated and shaped this externally-imposed national military organization, and what we call the three “schools” of Guard identity formation. The Guard literacy schools we consider important in themselves and a useful metaphor for two far more consequential schools: the National Military Academy, and the “school” of war against the Sandinista rebels. Much of Guard identity was forged in the crucible of war, violence, hatred, and the desire for vengeance against fellow countrymen, the Sandinista “others” and their campesino allies—Manolo Cuadra’s “*los otros*.” If substantial segments of an exhausted populace welcomed the post-1934 “order and stability” offered by Somoza García, it was an “order” enforced by a military organization deeply influenced by a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign against a homegrown nationalist campesino rebellion. After 1934, deteriorating material conditions for most Guard soldiers—lower pay, poorer equipment, fewer

⁸⁸ “Nicaragua, Abridged Combat Estimate,” Military Attachés, Panama and Costa Rica, 1 Jan. 1937, RG165/77/2660.

⁸⁹ Quote from “Nicaraguan Army,” U.S. Naval Attaché, Managua, 28 October 1937, RG165/77/2660.

⁹⁰ On the 1948 uprising, see Archivos Nacionales de Nicaragua, Colección Sandino, Caja 3, Archivo F-11, Declaraciones de detenidos, 1948–49.

opportunities for advancement—created conditions ripe for acts and attitudes of impunity toward the civilian populace and ample incentives for civilians to reach some kind of accord with the local Guard. Graft, extortion, corruption, abuse of power... all are amply documented in outline if not specifics.⁹¹ In the end, Somocismo represented a throwback to earlier Nicaraguan practices, jettisoning the notion of a nonpartisan military in favor of a graft-financed national army that owed its allegiance to a supreme leader. In this sense, Somocismo constituted a form of modernized Chamorristismo, with a vastly beefed-up capacity to inflict physical and social injury, thanks to the instruments created by the U.S. intervention.

A minority of officers—most notably, some graduates of the National Military Academy—internalized and embraced the core norms and values that the U.S. intervention sought to impart: duty, professionalism, obedience to superiors, service to the nation. Most, including political appointees, did not, or did so only very partially and selectively. There is no evidence that rank-and-file soldiers internalized these U.S.-imposed values. The institutional result was a cultural hybrid that wedded more traditional ways of exercising power to a modern bureaucratic infrastructure and modernized military techniques. Somocismo was also a cultural hybrid, an authoritarian dictatorship based on patronage and personal loyalties that selectively adopted U.S.-introduced techniques and practices of modern militaries. Somoza García's efforts to build a cult of personality around himself were intended to mask the actual qualities of the “order and stability” forged after 1933, though it is also likely that few were taken in by the masquerade.

At a macro level, this article has drawn on the work of Charles Tilly and others to examine a qualitative shift in the process of Nicaraguan state formation during the eight short years from 1927 to 1934, showing how that process was accelerated by U.S. intervention and the counterinsurgency campaign against the EDSN, while at the same time profoundly shaped by local political-cultural practices. At a micro level, we have highlighted some of the many ways that the everyday actions of native Guard members molded the power and authority exercised by their Marine Corps tutors. The complex cultural interactions between Marines and native soldiers and officers remains an arena ripe for investigation. A still more important question concerns the long-lasting influence of the political phenomenon of caudillismo as a set of enduring practices deeply embedded in Nicaraguan political culture. Some might argue that applying the term to Somocismo is anachronistic—that the tectonic shift in the nature of the national state requires a more precise, twentieth-century conceptual vocabulary: military dictatorship, or a kind of populist bureaucratic-authoritarianism, especially after the labor law reforms of the mid-1940s. We maintain that conceiving of this shift as engendering a masked and modernized form of caudillismo more aptly captures underlying political realities of the era.

Indeed, many longer-term continuities in the constitution of political authority and exercise of political power in Nicaragua arguably extend far beyond the formative years of the Somocista dynasty.

⁹¹ RG165/77/2660; housed online at www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/GN-MDocs-HOME.html; the richest empirical study of the microdynamics of the Guard's formation is Sierakowski, “In the Footsteps of Sandino,” which focuses on the period after 1940.

Some would maintain that Orteguismo under Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega (2007–2021 by the results of the November 2016 elections) constitutes yet another version of caudillismo masked and modernized in terms of its personalized rule, cult of personality, patronage networks, surveillance capacities, management of electoral processes, allocation of resources for political ends, and—especially since the uprisings and crackdown that began in April 2018—widespread application of state violence against dissidents, all framed for mass consumption as in the service of God, the people, and the Revolution.⁹² Such questions cry out for further research.

⁹² See, e.g., Alejandro Bendaña, “La derrota estratégica del orteguismo,” *Confidencial* (30 Aug. 2018), confidencial.com.ni/la-derrota-estrategica-del-orteguismo-2/, and “Ortega perdió al pueblo y el pueblo perdió el miedo,” *Rebelión* (2 May 2018), www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=241003.