



Nicaragua: A Marxist Lesson Repeated

History teaches hard lessons, but it seems each generation forgets the past. Surely this is the case with many young Americans swayed by the sirens of socialism. While U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (who won the Democratic primary in New York's 14th Congressional district running as a socialist) and others are touting the advantages of socialism, American youth should look at Nicaragua today.

Under its socialist president, Daniel Ortega, Nicaragua has become a police state. Student protests which began in April have expanded to widespread public demonstrations. In response, Ortega has unleashed the police and paramilitary forces. The repression has been brutal and is escalating. As of this writing, **more than 350 people have been killed by the police and pro-government militias**, 2,000 wounded, and many have disappeared.

How often do people have to see the pattern of socialist experiments turning into dictatorships? Cuba and Venezuela came first; now Nicaragua. These countries were beguiled by socialist promises for a better life, only to find themselves faced with starvation, privation and chains.

Sanders *et al.* deny the reality of these failed socialist states. Debates over abstractions make for good late-night dorm conversation, but facts are facts. What is happening in Nicaragua (and Venezuela) today is history repeating itself as tragedy. Self-proclaimed social justice warriors should be outraged at the suffering that is occurring in those countries.

Economic Woes, Bloody Crackdowns

While the American press has been fixated on President Donald Trump, Russian collusion and the victory of Ocasio-Cortez in a New York primary, the Nicaraguan crisis has passed generally under the media radar.

Anti-government demonstrations started on April 16, when students began protesting the government's failure to handle forest fires in one of the most protected areas of the Indio Maiz Biological Reserve. Shortly after these protests, the government announced that it planned to cut pensions and social

security, while hiking employee and employer contributions. Pension payments were already anemic and business was stagnant. The economy had been hit hard by a global recession and a drop in agricultural prices. As tourism fell, the loss of hard currency infusions placed a strain on Nicaraguan currency, raising inflation from around 5 percent to nearly 20 percent. Poor investment, a military build-up and expansion of social welfare programs by Ortega contributed to the country's economic troubles.

In making the cuts, the government reported that that the Nicaraguan Social Security Institute was close to insolvency and unless cuts were made it would end up without any liquid assets by 2019. As the economy weakened under Ortega, investments in the country dried up, people began withdrawing savings from banks, tourism plummeted and 95 percent of restaurants no longer opened regularly. Meanwhile, Ortega continued to plan the building of an inter-oceanic canal, and his cronies pilfered from the government.

Protests intensified in late June when two students were killed in the university district of Managua, where students were holed up at the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua battling the police. In other districts, confrontations between demonstrators and the police led to the deaths of two others including a baby.¹ Hundreds of protesters were arrested, some disappearing into clandestine prisons. Church officials have sought to mediate, but Ortega appears adamant about staying in power, and reportedly **all Nicaragua's bishops have been threatened by Ortega supporters.**²

Nicaraguans living abroad have tried to call attention to the plight of their countrymen. On July 14, Zayda Hernandez and Victor Cuadras, two students at Nicaragua's National Engineering University, came to the United States to denounce the human rights abuses and social and political crisis in their country. They painted a graphic and sad picture of human suffering and brutal police repression. Cuadras told the press that the police and paramilitary gangs "kill in cold blood during the protest so the people won't be on the

streets, and they scapegoat people who lend their support, delivering food or caring for the wounded, and put them on trial for murders committed by the government.”³

Fellow student Zayda Hernandez declared, “We are governed by a genocidal couple [President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo] that has sunk the country under a wave of state terrorism. To join a peaceful protest for them is reason enough to order your death.”⁴ They pointed to the case of one of their friends, Keller Perez Duarte, whose body turned up at a site once used by the Somoza dictatorship—the one overthrown by the communist Sandinistas in 1979—to dump its execution victims. Duarte had been tortured and strangled by Ortega’s thugs.

While paramilitary forces take the law into their own hands, established law is turned against the people. The two students cited the example of two Afro-descendant youths charged formally with the death of Angel Gahona, a journalist killed while live-streaming a protest on April 21 in a small coastal town. Neither of the accused youths was in the town the day the journalist was killed. The journalist’s wife has defended the two youths, as have others who claim that police shot and killed the journalist.

Nicaraguan protesters are demanding the removal of Ortega and the establishment of a transitional government to oversee free and transparent elections. Ortega has responded in typical dictatorial fashion: repression. Cuban and Venezuelan intelligence agents have been active in Nicaragua since Ortega assumed power in 2007. As Cuadras observed, “Castro copied his recipe for repression and harassment in Venezuela, and now they are doing it in Nicaragua. There are many people who, while being tortured, heard the accents of Venezuela and Cuba in the clandestine prisons.”⁵ Cuadras, whose family supported Ortega’s Sandinista organization before it came to power in 1979 and whose grandfather was assassinated by the Somoza National Guard in 1978, now identifies with protesters in Venezuela and Cuba against the communist regimes. “I believe,” he said, “Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua will manage to be free, so long as the people take to the streets.”

Who is Daniel Ortega?

Born in 1945, Daniel Ortega left college in 1963 to join the underground Sandinista guerrilla movement aimed at overthrowing the regime of dictator Anastasio Somoza, whose family had ruled the country since 1937.⁶ First organized by a group of students at the National Autonomous University in Managua, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) announced that they wanted to establish a Marxist state.

Ortega’s road to Marxism began as a teenager.⁷ The third son of an accountant in a mining firm, Ortega received his education in private and Catholic schools. As a teenager he

began holding Bible studies for people living in poor neighborhoods. Many thought Ortega might become a priest because of his intelligence, oratorical skills and religious devotion. He excelled as a student, but his parents sent him to four different high schools in an attempt to keep him out of the growing anti-government movement in the late 1950s.

In 1959 he took part in widespread student anti-government protests. His involvement led to his arrest and torture. After his arrest in 1960, he joined Marxist founders of the FSLN in organizing the Revolutionary Student Front—the student wing of the parent group. He entered Managua’s Jesuit Central American University in 1961 to study law, but abandoned his university education to become a full-time revolutionary.

A Revolutionary Family

Whatever his parents’ intentions to keep Ortega away from revolutionary activity, the family had deep roots in the revolutionary movement. His father had fought in A.C. Sandino’s 1927-1934 rebellion against U.S. occupation of Nicaragua, and he served three months in prison. Two of Daniel’s brothers became Sandinista revolutionaries, with one brother, Humberto, eventually becoming minister of defense of the revolutionary government that came to power in the late 1970s. Another brother, Camilo, died in the 1978 insurrection. His grandmother was active in the 1970s protests and went to jail for her actions. Ortega’s wife Rosario Murillo worked with the FSLN in the 1970s. She became general secretary of the Sandinista Cultural Workers Association and in 1985 became an FSLN delegate in the National Assembly.

Ortega joined the FSLN in 1963. In 1964, he was captured with other Sandinista guerrillas in Guatemala. Once again he was imprisoned and tortured. Released in 1965, he rose quickly in the ranks of the movement. He headed FSLN’s urban guerrilla underground which was involved in the 1967 assassination of Gonzalo Lacayo, a military official accused of torture. In 1967, Ortega and several fellow Sandinistas were arrested for bank robbery. In prison, Ortega was repeatedly tortured. In 1974, he was released as part of a hostage exchange program.

After several months of further guerrilla training in Cuba, Ortega returned to Nicaragua, where over the next five years he helped lead a military campaign that ultimately forced Somoza to go into exile in Mexico. The overt corruption of the Somoza government and the regime’s ruthless measures alienated Nicaraguan businessmen and the middle class. By 1974, the nation was in a full-scale state of siege. In 1979, the government fell.

A five-member group calling itself the Junta of National Reconstruction, the Sandinistas, replaced the Somoza government. In 1981 Ortega became junta coordinator, and

in 1984 he was elected president of Nicaragua. Ortega drew praise and support from Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. Nicaragua coordinated with Cuba in sponsoring revolution in Central America. In response to the Marxist regime, the Reagan administration launched a counter-insurgency, directing funds to the anti-Sandinista forces known as the Contras. (At home, the Reagan administration's attempt to circumvent the spirit of a Congressional restriction on aiding the counter-revolutionaries caused a major scandal, the Iran-Contra Affair, in 1987.) On the left in America, Ortega became a hero in his resistance to what was alleged to be American imperialism.

Ortega in Power, 1984-1990

The civil war left Nicaragua devastated, with a \$1.6 billion debt, an estimated 50,000 war dead and 600,000 homeless. The Sandinistas assumed complete power. A Council of State, subordinate to the five-person junta, was created.⁸ Only 12 of the 47 seats of the Council were reserved for political parties, with only three seats given to organizations not aligned with FSLN. The rest of the Council seats were given to organizations of farmers, ranchers, women's groups and "defense committees." Ortega served as a liaison between the junta and these organizations. He helped oversee a literacy campaign that brought the national illiteracy rate down from over 50 percent to just under 11 percent.

In 1984, the junta held elections, with Ortega as their selected candidate. Under Ortega, the economy was mandated to be 40 percent public and 60 percent private—unusual for a Marxist regime. As president, Ortega was often abrasive and confrontational. Nevertheless, he established a modern team of technical experts. Initially his relations with the Catholic Church were cordial, but they became strained by the early 1980s, as he began to build up the military and security forces with Cuban advisers, increased trade with the Soviet Union and exported revolution to Honduras and Costa Rica. Facing a serious election threat, he began turning over estates seized by the government to FSLN officials, including Ortega himself.

Ortega looked well-entrenched in power until in 1990 Nicaraguan voters denied Ortega a second term by electing Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, who was not a Marxist. The American left accused the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency of rigging the election, but the fact of the matter was that Nicaraguans were sick of Ortega and wanted to forget the bloody civil war that brought him to power.

Ortega's Controversial Comeback

Out of power, Ortega seemed to have been relegated to the dustbin of history. In 1996, Ortega made a second run for the presidency, but lost after garnering only 38 percent of the vote. In 1998, he was again in the news

when his stepdaughter Zoilamerica Narvaez Murillo filed a 48-page report describing systematic sexual abuse by Ortega from the age of 11 to 22. Under immunity granted earlier and a five-year statute of limitations, he could not be prosecuted.

As Nicaragua faced another economic crisis in 2006, Ortega stepped forward to run for the presidency. He projected himself as a political moderate and a devout Catholic. He claimed to have rejected his revolutionary past.⁹ He won with 38 percent of the vote. Although he had downplayed his Marxist past, his first congratulations came from Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Fidel Castro in Cuba. In power he established closer ties with Venezuela, declared capitalism dead, and continued his anti-American rhetoric, contending that God was punishing the United States with a financial crisis in 2008 for trying to impose its economic principles on poor countries.

Ortega moved to take over the media, the army, the police, the courts, the legislature and the Supreme Electoral Council.¹⁰ For a while the Nicaraguan economy appeared to improve. As the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere, Nicaragua saw its annual gross domestic product grow over 5 percent, which marked a big improvement. Tourism expanded as Nicaragua became known as a less expensive alternative to Costa Rica. Ortega played on nationalist themes by promoting a government campaign, "Nicaragua: I love you just as you are."¹¹ In office he petitioned for a constitutional amendment to permit re-election, which allowed him to win a second term in 2011 and a third term in 2016, when he won more than 72 percent of the vote amid allegations of a rigged election. In 2016 his wife Rosario, a poet and revolutionary, was also elected as vice president.

Nicaragua in Crisis, 2018

Beneath the surface, though, things were simmering. In cementing his hold over government, Ortega made an alliance with the country's business leaders, who, in exchange for tax breaks and relatively unfettered markets, looked the other way while Ortega stacked the courts, intimidated the media and built his military. After the election Ortega reneged on his pledge to maintain corporate tax exemptions in a quid pro quo for private-sector support of severe fiscal retrenchment. Ortega tried to lure business back to the negotiating table, but by this time public outrage had been unleashed.¹²

The fraudulent 2016 elections marked by government suppression of opposition parties, and the elevation of First Lady Rosario Murillo to the vice presidency, raised echoes of the Somoza dynasty.¹³ The notoriously corrupt chair of the Supreme Electoral Commission, Roberto Rivas, came under investigation for money-laundering funds he received from Ortega for rigging the elections. Vice President Murillo

drew further student anger in her attempts to censor social media.¹⁴

When protests began, Ortega reacted with violence. As he was giving a speech on May 30, claiming that “We want peace,” his snipers opened fire on thousands of families peacefully marching against him in the university district. The Mother’s Day Massacre, as it became known, showed that the Sandinistas had been transformed into Ortegismo, a violent dictatorship intent on maintaining power in the hands of one man.

Ortega presents himself as a messianic figure sent to deliver the poor of his country to the “promised land.” His micro-credit program for small business and farmers is called “In the name of God.” To criticize Ortega or his policies has become akin to blasphemy.¹⁵ He continues to call himself a devout Catholic, although relations with the Catholic hierarchy have deteriorated with recent protests.¹⁶ Fr. Ernesto Cardenal, a former cultural minister under the Sandinista government in the 1980s, asserted of Ortega’s use of religion, “This is a great sin of religious and political hypocrisy. [Ortega] wasn’t a believer before, and he isn’t now. His message is pure opportunism.”¹⁷

Ortega has been revealed as another pretend messiah offering the people a false promise of a better life under socialism. If they protest that their lives are getting worse instead of better, he sends his police and paramilitary goons to kill them. Ortega is no messiah. He is another Latin American dictator accepting **financial and military assistance from Russia**.¹⁸

U.S. millennials flocking to the banners of socialist politicians should heed the cruel history lesson of Nicaragua. Leftists like to blame particular socialist strongmen for betraying the promise of socialism, but the fault lies not only with individual leaders. Socialism contains a design flaw that consistently produces leaders who resort to terror.

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SCHOOLS IN CHAOS. For decades “disparate impact” legal theory has advanced the notion that race discrimination may be inferred from statistical outcomes. The Obama administration used this theory as a sword to slash public school disciplinary measures, leading to increased violent behavior and setting the stage for recent shocking school murders. Ask for 7/18

THE TRANSGENDERING OF SEX EDUCATION. Transgender activists, not content with expanding legal rights as detailed in the May *Mindszenty Report*, are promoting their ideology in the earliest grades of U.S. public elementary schools, with the help of generous corporate funding. Ask for 6/18

TRANSGENDERED: WHEN RIGHTS BECOME SOLIPSISTIC. Using the heavy hand of government to enforce rights based on personal feelings is a dangerous precedent. The rapid development of transgender rights bodes ill for freedom of speech, religious expression and educational trends. Ask for 5/18

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- 4 “Nicaragua Unrest: What You Should Know,” *Aljazeera*, June 24, 2018.
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- 12 Mac Margolis, “How Nicaragua’s Comeback Started to Fall Apart,” *Bloomberg*, June 27, 2018.
- 13 Ortega’s reelection campaign is described in Alexandra Starr, “On the Campaign Trail in Nicaragua,” *Slate*, October 31, 2016; and Jonathan Watts, “Nicaragua President Re-elected in Landslide Amid Claims of Rigged Votes,” *The Guardian*, November 7, 2016.
- 14 Eric Mosinger and Kai Thaler, “A New Nicaraguan Revolution? Understanding this Week’s Popular Protests,” *Political Violence @ A Glance*, May 3, 2018.
- 15 Tim Rogers, “Rewriting the Book of Daniel,” *Time*, September 10, 2008.
- 16 His wife Rosario Murillo’s own religion is a mix of “New Age” spiritualism and militant leftism. She is a disciple of the “miracle worker” Indian guru Sai Baba. Her public speeches combine mystical spiritualism with the teachings of Jesus Christ, along with the homespun philosophy of Augusto Sandino. She throws in a pinch of indigenous religious beliefs for a truly curious concoction. Murillo is known to have a strange intellectual and spiritual influence on her husband.
- 17 Tim Rogers, “Rewriting the Book of Daniel,” *Time*, September 10, 2008.
- 18 Mary Anastasia O’Grady, “The Other Russian Meddling,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2018. Russia recently donated two military transport planes to Nicaragua, sold 50 tanks to Mr. Ortega in 2016, and reportedly provided funds to complete in 2010 an airfield north of Managua that was started with Soviet funds during the early 1980s. It was designed with a very long runway intended to accommodate heavy bombers.

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