

Book Review

– *Nicaragua must survive. Sandinista revolutionary diplomacy in the Global Cold War*, by Eline van Ommen. University of California Press, 2024

Historian Eline van Ommen has written a fascinating book on the Sandinista revolution that succeeded in ending the long dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in 1979. The revolution promised so much, but eventually led to deep disappointment. *Nicaragua must survive* starts with the emergence of a more or less organized revolutionary movement around 1977. The spectacular occupation of the National Palace in August 1978 when the Sandinista rebels took more than one thousand members of Congress hostage, brought the insurrection into the public eye and strengthened the image of the revolutionaries as youthful heroes. This event can be seen as the symbolic start of the widespread international support for the revolution, which is the book's main theme. After their victory, the Sandinistas organized cultural campaigns destined to conquer the hearts and minds of the Nicaraguan people, but above all to impress an international audience that had become intensely involved in the country. Using the prestige of 'respectable' representatives like Gioconda Belli, Sergio Ramírez and Ernesto Cardenal, the revolutionaries convinced international observers of the moderate and democratic tendencies in the revolutionary movement.

The Sandinistas found an extremely receptive audience in Europe, where in the wake of the Vietnam War a large part of the population had become weary and even resistant to US dominance. The resistance against the Latin American military dictatorships in the southern cone had provoked a massive solidarity movement which swept Europe, but the Sandinista revolution offered more than only solidarity: it offered optimism and hope. Nowhere was this feeling more apparent than in the Netherlands which for a time became the undisputed centre of the solidarity with Nicaragua. Dutch-born Van Ommen uses the rich archives of this movement, stored in the International Institute for Social History, to great avail. It allows her to paint a fascinating picture of its composition, considerations and activities.

Having lived this period myself, I clearly remember the romantic attraction of the Sandinista movement which not only demonstrated that it was possible to overthrow an ugly dictatorship but also to present alternative avenues for

emancipation, social struggle and emancipation. Thousands of young people joined the voluntary brigades, picking coffee, repairing hospitals etc. Others organized events and collected money in their home countries. The cultural attraction of the revolution was immense, not only the alphabetization campaigns or the professed gender equality but also its cultural expressions. The *Concierto por la paz en Centroamérica* in Managua in 1983 was a world event, not only because of the musicians and people that attended it but also because of its global appeal. It is the merit of Van Ommen that she presents this European sympathy for the Sandinista revolution for what it was: a genuine wish to support Latin American social justice. At the same time, she draws attention to the romantic misconceptions held by many Europeans which were the result of their self-centred search for personal fulfilment.

This leads to another important theme of the book: the place of the Sandinista revolution in the context of the Cold War. While the success of the revolutionary project in Nicaragua was celebrated by progressive forces around the world, the Right considered it a real and present danger to capitalist stability. These forces were boosted when the staunchly anti-communist Ronald Reagan became US president in November 1980. The two terms of his presidency became the crucial context for post-revolutionary Nicaragua. His fear of a 'second' Cuba led Reagan to organize the bloody counter-revolutionary resistance of the so-called *contras*. The US military intervention in Grenada in 1983 shocked pro-Sandinista forces. They saw the invasion as a prelude to a larger military intervention in Nicaragua. It placed Nicaragua in the middle of what Van Ommen calls the 'global cold war' and deepened the bunker mentality among the Sandinista leaders.

Reagan's efforts to squash the revolutionary project brought economic hardship and bloodshed to the country but also bolstered European support. In Reagan's second term, this changed when he reached an agreement with Russian president Gorbachev. In an ironic turn of events, this took the air out of the Cold War rhetoric in Central America which had been the principal driver of European support for the Sandinista government. Van Ommen meticulously describes how the new situation led to the first clear fissures between the Sandinista leaders and their European supporters. The former demanded unconditional support while European NGOs tried to maintain their freedom to work outside the government directly with their Nicaraguan counterparts. This tension led, among other things, to the flourishing of city-to-city collaboration which was especially strong in the Netherlands.

The great strength of Nicaragua must survive is Van Ommen's keen eye for the power dynamics within the Sandinista leadership. She explains the internal differences between the movement's leaders as the result of diverging views on the international political context. While the European supporters were revering in imageries of cultural and social emancipation, the Sandinista leaders never lost sight of the need to pursue and maintain power before anything else. They coveted their European supporters as long as they needed them, but they never

allowed them to concretely influence their policies. After the consolidation of the revolution, they tried to centralize the financial flows into the country and to take control of international activities.

No reader can escape the book's subtext and wonder to what extent today's dire political situation finds their roots in the revolutionary period. Van Ommen refrains from answering that question. Indeed, she frequently warns against anachronistic interpretations which judge the past with the benefit of hindsight. In her conclusion, she admonishes that we should not "fall into the teleological trap of seeing the violence of 2018 as the inevitable result of the Sandinista triumph in 1979, or perhaps even of the cyclical nature of Nicaraguan history" (227). Of course, she is right in celebrating this core principle of the historical discipline, but her analysis of the Sandinista leadership contains elements that might help us answer the question. This is most importantly the case in her emphasis on the Machiavellian attitude of the Sandinista leadership and its ruthless power politics. The revolutionary leaders depended on massive international support but did not accept any external interference. Of course, the Sandinistas were elected out of office in 1990 only to return in 2007, but in hindsight, the first years of Sandinista leadership already seemed to show traces of today's repressive authoritarian regime of Daniel Ortega. Van Ommen's book makes clear that the quest for power has always been the essence of Sandinista leadership. Maybe, only former supporters who were enchanted by the romantic allure of the Sandinista revolution will be surprised by that conclusion!

Michiel Baud, CEDLA-UvA
j.m.baud@uva.nl