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La Nicolasa: Her Life and Times



“The blue eyes of Nicolasa Sevilla resembled two embers of hatred and wickedness, while her mouth, always painted the red of a prostitute, seemed to spit tongues of fire and incandescent lava.”

Agustin Torres Lazo

La Saga de los Somoza: Historia de un magnicidio

The year was 2001. The place was Managua, capital of Nicaragua. Mayor Herty Lewites Rodríguez had committed to a nationwide crackdown on the government corruption that dominated the country under recently retired president Arnaldo Alemán. Among Lewites's targets were his former electoral opponent, city councilman and former Alemán confidant Alejandro Fiallos ("Calls"). Accusing Fiallos of rampant abuse of the city's vehicle fleet and extreme incivility, Lewites made headlines with his attacks when he added: "Everyone sees Fiallos as a *Nicolasa Sevilla*" (Collado Narvaez).

Though it happens that Fiallos was jailed for corruption three years later, at the time, this story could have easily been ignored as routine creation of political hay. What distinguished this incident was likely Lewites's invocation of Sevilla ("Calls"). Indeed, in Managua's *El Nuevo Diario*, coverage of Lewites's accusations ran with the headline: "Herty Lewites: Fiallos replaces *La Nicolasa*" (Collado Narvaez). Antipathy to Sevilla – a right-wing organizer in the old Somoza regime – remains so high in Nicaragua that the very forename "Nicolasa" has reportedly all but disappeared there (qtd in González).

Just *who was* Nicolasa Sevilla, and how had she, as an organizer in the 1940s through 1960s, achieved such enduring infamy? As I examined the life and times of *La Nicolasa*, several answers became apparent. Precisely because of her apparently contradicting identities – a politically enfranchised prostitute, a low-class supporter of a regime of wealthy elites, a powerful woman – Nicolasa Sevilla was positioned to play a critical and unique role in supporting the repressive Somoza regime. She did so at several critical points in the regime's history. Sevilla was a living embodiment of the secular fascist capitalist ideal of Somoza's Nicaragua, accepting and taking advantage of the virgin-whore moral dichotomy to advance her own personal and political interests.

Sevilla in Context

The early twentieth century in Nicaragua was marked by both ongoing military intervention by the United States to secure its economic interests, and the emergence of a strong national consciousness and anti-imperialist, anti-interventionist sentiment. In 1927, decades of cyclical resistance to and re-installation of U.S.-backed puppets were interrupted by open guerilla war, led by popular left-wing nationalist Augusto César Sandino. Though Sandino's forces achieved military victory in 1933, he and many of his troops were killed the following year by the forces of Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza García, commander of the U.S.-backed National Guard. Somoza restored authoritarian rule, assuming direct control of the country – which would remain, directly or indirectly, in his family's hands for the next 43 years – in 1936 (Prevost and Vanden 530-531; Diederich 4).

Somoza quickly moved to expand the scope and domain of his centrally controlled government, holding rigged legislative elections in 1938 (his National Guard was the principal election authority). The elections served their purpose, giving Somoza the pretense of legitimacy he needed to push through a Constitution that extended his presidential term to 1947 and gave him direct control of civilian election authorities and municipal government (Walter 92-93). In the following years, Somoza further compounded power by expanding the public sector and solidifying loyalty within the military and the business community, bringing abundant local and foreign capital into the fold (Walter 115). This included the formal, substantial military presence and heavy investment from the United States, which, in the early years, consciously ignored Tacho's internal repression, an attitude famously encompassed by President Franklin Roosevelt's quip: "He's a son of a bitch, but he's ours" (qtd. in Diederich).

Somoza's Nicaragua was an intriguing political hybrid, a fascist nation allied with the United States throughout World War II. These incongruities were by no means limited to foreign policy; in a nation heavily dominated by Roman Catholicism, Somoza's social policy, though unquestionably repressive and anti-feminist, was also quite explicitly secular. The government recognized prostitution as a tool of economic gain – not to mention a tangible means of strengthening relations with the U.S. Marines almost constantly stationed in the country – and institutionalized and regulated the sex industry. Prostitutes and criminals also played a consistent, significant role in the violent repression of political opposition (González 66-67). Somocista women in large part eschewed the maternalist rhetoric frequently employed in organizing right-wing women in Latin America, instead favoring strategies for empowering women that targeted their individual economic identities and interests (González 64-65). Thus, Somocismo was, above all, an embrace of the secular, fascist vision of capitalism.

By 1944, however, this vision, and Somoza's dream of unchallenged *continuismo*, were under serious threat from growing political opposition. Until substantial anti-Somocista mobilization and pressure from the United States in the summer of 1944, Tacho was clearly intent on pursuing constitutional amendment to allow for his continued rule (Walter 130). Though he superficially acquiesced, ultimately allowing the election of a puppet president in 1947, Somoza successfully subdued opposition, relying on violent repression by prostitutes and criminals (Diederich 26). Somoza remained commander of the National Guard and de facto dictator, and when this first puppet proved unsatisfactory a matter of months, Somoza replaced him with a second and then a third puppet (Diederich 29). By 1951, he had returned to the pretense of elected legitimacy, and in 1955, pushed through still more constitutional reform that would allow him to seek re-election (Diederich 41; 46). But this feigned bid for guaranteed re-election was Somoza's last; Tacho was shot and killed by left-wing activist and poet Rigoberto López Pérez on September 21, 1956 (Walter 234).

The transition after Tacho's death was predictable and seamless. His son Luis Somoza Debayle assumed the presidency, while son Anastasio "Tachito" Somoza Debayle retained control over the National Guard (Diederich 52). Luis was more or less committed to superficial liberalization paired with an emphasis on neoliberal economic modernization. Officially, he was succeeded by several puppets, but remained in control until his death in 1967, when the reins were passed to the considerably more repressive Tachito (Prevost and Vanden 535). Though few individuals and no opposition leaders had known of the assassination plot, the new government used assassination trials marked by intimidation by prostitutes and criminals to repress a number of opposition leaders (Walter 235; Diederich 52). Luis attempted to emerge as a more moderate voice, exploiting the position of pro-government mobs to appear more tolerant. This strategy of triangulation failed; it was during Luis's rule that the *Frente Sandinista Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), the left-wing guerilla movement that ultimately triumphed in 1979, was formally christened and began to mobilize aggressively (Prevost and Vanden 533). For all his commitment to modernization, Luis Somoza, like his father, ultimately turned to repression. He, too, relied on pro-government mobs of prostitutes and criminals (in addition to the loyal National Guard) to subdue liberal and conservative opposition media, and to repress anti-government demonstrations (González 62-63).

Right-wing Organizing and Impact

It was in this political climate – a corrupt Nicaraguan family dictatorship that embodied a secular, fascist, capitalist ideal – that Nicolasa Sevilla played a major role,

organizing right-wing criminals and prostitutes and pro-government media. Sevilla, who was most active from the mid-1940s through the early 1960s, was critical to the Somoza regime's efforts to maintain a strong rapport with the lower classes, and to public intimidation and suppression of anti-Somocistas. In "Somocista Women, Right-Wing Politics, and Feminism in Nicaragua, 1936-1979," the most extensive scholarly work including information on *La Nicolasa* to date, Victoria González includes unprecedented interviews with numerous Somocistas and anti-Somocistas who worked (or, in the case of anti-Somocistas, had encounters of a far less collaborative nature) with Sevilla. From González's collection of varied accounts, it is apparent that much of Sevilla's personal history is unclear. Characterizations of her background range from madam, prostitute and intimate acquaintance of Tacho (among her opponents), to mere "loose woman" (qtd in. González). Sevilla's motivations to participate in the regime are considerably less shrouded. It should be noted that there exists among old anti-Somocistas an account that Sevilla joined forces with Somoza to spite an anti-Somocista ex-lover (qtd. in González). Regardless of the truth, the prevailing interpretation is that Sevilla took advantage of the alignment between her own background (likely as a prostitute or madam) and the terms on which women at the time could make Somocismo their own.

What is explicitly clear is that Sevilla, in her work as leader of the paramilitary terrorist *Frente Somocista Popular*, did make Somocismo her own, was a pillar of the Somoza regime, and was willing to engage in whatever tactics were deemed necessary. In his confessional memoir *La Saga de los Somoza: Historia de un magnicidio*, former Nicaraguan public prosecutor Agustín Torres Lazo offers an insider's perspective on the Somoza regime once the superficial turnover of 1947 had passed, and Tacho had re-solidified control in spite of past U.S. pressure. Torres Lazo's narrative lists various members of the Somoza "kitchen cabinet," individuals responsible for the regime's airtight control over various aspects of its operations. He makes a point of including Sevilla:

It seemed that the days of crisis and storm had faded beyond the fertile mountains and the blue water of the country. The horizon lit up clean, and, after the necessary adjustments and readjustments, accommodations and re-accommodations, things were as they should be: Somoza governing from the headquarters of the National Guard, ... [Torres Lazo then lists the functions performed by the regime's political, foreign policy, and military wings.] ... and Nicolasa Sevilla, poised, with the lips painted of red unmistakable and the soul of a black jackal, waiting and despairing for the sign from her master to take to the streets with her horde of prostitutes and criminals. (95)

In a time and culture that were far from recognizing women's contributions on any kind of equal basis, Sevilla's contributions to the Somoza hold on Nicaragua were deserving of mention. Sevilla was willing to engage in and sanction all matter of violent acts, regardless of the age, gender, social position or political affiliation of her opponents; this characterization was not disputed, even in González's interviews with Somocistas (González 63).

Sevilla's use of physical violence and propensity for mobilizing the lower classes as leader of the *Frente Somocista Popular* was an enduring component of the Somoza regime, and her influence manifested itself at a number of critical points in the regime's history. During the summer of 1944, as serious internal and external pressure for Somoza to abandon ambitions for a 1947 re-election mounted, Sevilla swung into action. In "Call All Trulls," a story that helped make Sevilla a legendary figure of international proportions, *Time* magazine correspondent William Krehm reported on Sevilla's

interruption of a solemn demonstration by upper class, anti-Somocista women in downtown Managua:

Out of the Managua slums rushed mobs of prostitutes. They pressed around the horrified women and girls, slapped them, spat at them. Male relatives came to the rescue, dispersed the screaming trulls. Then, from an official Government auto jumped skinny, blue-eyed Nicolasa Sevilla, owner of a cut-rate brothel. Threatening the older women with a knife, she spluttered filth at the prettier girls.

Tacho having gained his point, the harlotry receded into the slums. But the President invited Nicolasa to the Palace, called her “his very good friend,” introduced her to outraged callers. She invaded the Chamber of Deputies, slapped a speaker. Given the run of two pro-Government newspapers, she flooded their columns with signed obscenities vilifying Managua society. (38)

Spring and early summer 1944 had been a heady, energizing year for anti-Somocistas. Anti-government demonstrations, originally instigated by a number of students, were growing in magnitude and frequency, and an ever-broadening swath of Nicaraguans was participating. Opposition, in fact, was better positioned than even it knew at the time; Somoza later admitted he had seriously considered resigning and fleeing the country in 1944, and would have done so, were it not for the fragmentation of his opposition (qtd in Walter). Enter Nicolasa Sevilla, with her seemingly unlimited capacity for violent and verbal intimidation, and her uncanny ability to galvanize the poor against Somoza’s upper-class opposition. The end result: Somoza remained, quietly laying the groundwork to retain power through commandship of National Guard, while his opposition remained frightened and divided (Walter 134)

Although, as discussed above, the 1956 assassination of Somoza García and its aftermath were in no way tenuous times for the strength and continuity of the regime, Sevilla worked to ensure that that message was explicitly clear, that popular resistance would in no way be emboldened. Under her leadership, members of the *Frente Somocista Popular* (somewhat ironically) assumed a tone of righteous moral indignation at Somoza García’s death. In early 1957, they were a massive and intimidating presence at court-martials for complicity in assassination, a series of sham military commissions prosecuted by Torres Lazo that targeted the regime’s political opponents (Walter 235). Among the accused was Pedro Joaquin Chamorro Cardenal, a prominent anti-Somocista conservative and editor of the anti-government Managua newspaper *La Prensa*. In his memoir, *Estirpe Sangrienta: Los Somoza*, Chamorro recalled the trial:

When the van arrived at the *Campo de Marte* barracks... we saw the surrounding area filled with people who, upon learning of the presence of the prisoners, let out a loud and resonant scream: “Murderers!”

And behind the cloud of dust raised by the vehicle, as in a cloudy echo of heterogeneous voices, were masses of men and women, dancing like savages over their victims, bearing placards and shouting in indescribable confusion: “Let’s kill them! Kill their children! Burn their homes! Murderers! You won’t get out of here alive!” ...

Headed by a woman named Nicolasa Sevilla, these mobs were known as the *Nicolasa*. (161-162).

Accusations of individual prisoners ranged from poisoning the bullets that killed Somoza to disrupting power so the assassin could escape under cover of darkness. In short, the charges, “sounded like a Hollywood script;” even so, 15 of the 21 individuals charged were convicted (Diederich 52-53). Unsurprisingly, as Torres Lazo recounted, Sevilla and her followers were outraged, even by that result:

... I read for all of them [the six who were acquitted] the same ‘not guilty’ sentence, returning them the liberty that for so many months had been unjustly stolen. The murmur of the mob was now as an uncontrollable waterfall of rough voices and furious shouts. They insulted the judge and rebuked me, demanding justice and demanding that the doors of the hell be opened for all the defendants. The blue eyes of Nicolasa Sevilla resembled two embers of hatred and wickedness, while her mouth, always painted the red of a prostitute, seemed to spit tongues of fire and incandescent lava. (428)

Yet again, Sevilla and her mob were an unequivocal force for Somocismo, intimidating political opposition and, for that matter, the general public with verbal and physical violence. By assuming an extreme position – that all the accused should be killed – the mob’s threats also had the net effect of making Luis Somoza’s publicly proclaimed view, that light sentences were a desirable outcome, seem more liberal. Upon assuming power, the triangulating Luis had decided a softer dictatorship that allowed for superficial liberalization was a better approach than that adopted by his father (Diederich 53) By helping Luis posture himself as a benevolent moderate, Sevilla’s presence facilitated the seamless continuation of Somoza rule (Diederich 53).

Still, opposition media, such as *La Prensa* and left-wing radio continued, to vocally criticize the actions of government. As an estimated 80 percent of Nicaraguans were illiterate at the time, Luis did not assess print media to be a significant threat, and its operations, though subject to frequent suspension, for a few years enjoyed relative freedom (Diederich 71). Radio, however, was obviously much more widely accessible and thus regarded quite differently. In 1962, a Somocista-dominated Congress considered and ultimately passed stringent radio censorship legislation. When anti-Somocistas came to protest:

They were expected. Waiting for them was a gang of eighty government thugs headed by Nicolasa Sevilla, a tough-looking woman who commanded the Somoza male street gangs in Managua. When the demonstrators cried, “Liberty” and “The Somozas must go,” they were met with knives and sticks. Some of Nicolasa’s boys even drew pistols and fired into the crowd. When the half-hour melée ended and the demonstrators had retreated, there were no dead, but there were thirty-five wounded, including “La Nicolasa” who had been hit on the head by a chair. The congressmen continued their session and passed the new broadcast law in the presence of the National Guard, guns drawn. (Diederich 71)

Yet again, Sevilla played a crucial role in suppressing dissent in the avenues in which it had the most potential to destabilize the regime. She and her mob also assaulted the owner and several broadcasters for liberal Radio Mundial (qtd in González). Time after time, Nicolasa Sevilla played a crucial role in cracking down on opposition and further solidifying Somoza rule.

There is, to date, little detailed documentation on Sevilla’s subsequent political activity. Her success in quelling popular protest in 1944, her intimidation tactics at the complicity in assassination court-martials in 1957, and her role in suppressing dissenting media in 1962 remain her most infamous moments. When the Sandinistas ultimately assumed power in 1979, Sevilla was, by all accounts jailed for her role in the regime, but ultimately released. Pedro Chamorro’s son, Jaime Chamorro Cardenal, claimed Sevilla was freed because she “offered her services” (presumably as an organizer) to the Sandinista regime (J. Chamorro Cardenal 5). In light of the numerous stories unearthed by González however, that particular narrative is somewhat dubious. According to both former Somocista Antonia Rodríguez and former FSLN Commandante Tomás Borge, Sevilla remained a vociferous Somoza loyalist upon her release, and the reasons for her

discharge had more to do with her age, and antagonistic, rather than vacillating behavior (qtd. in González).

Conclusions

At the height of her career, *La Nicolasa* successfully mobilized hundreds of lower and middle class Somocistas, ran several pro-government newspapers, frequently publicly assaulted and intimidated the wealthy and the powerful with impunity, and became a guest and confidant of the wealthiest, most powerful man in the country. But what had enabled a woman of ill repute and little means in a deeply sexist time and place to achieve so much?

First, the Somozas were very receptive to – and indeed, during the critical summer of 1944, dependent upon – tactics that solidified their credibility as sympathetic to the poor. Highlighting class divisions, they knew, had the effect of alienating the urban poor, who might otherwise have had cause to oppose the regime, from the opposition. As a person of lower-class background who frequently voiced her resentment of intellectuals and the upper crust, Sevilla was a loud, credible lower class voice for Somocismo. Without Sevilla and similar actors who marginalized, intimidated and divided the opposition against itself, the regime may well have collapsed, or at least changed dramatically in form, in 1944. Moreover, during the Luis Somoza years, Sevilla's explicit, unyielding cruelty made middle and upper class Somocista women's organizations, and the regime as a whole, seem more moderate by comparison (González 73). Whether Sevilla consciously played this role is unclear, but, in both re-enforcing class divisions and having the ultimate effect of making the official regime appear more moderate, she was clearly effective.

Additionally, it is worth noting that Sevilla operated within the accepted *machista* moral framework for Nicaraguan women, taking it to its natural conclusion. Women of Sevilla's day were afforded the choice of living as a submissive "Madonna" or as an amoral whore (Willman-Navarro 251). Rather than living as a "Madonna" and submitting to the expectations of a husband or a family, *La Nicolasa* lived as an embodiment of the whore ideal, choosing her actions based on their expediency, and allowing no one to stand in her way. Such a choice was encouraged by the secular fascist capitalist system established under the Somozas, which sought to engage women as self-interested individuals.

In her work on Sevilla, González included an anecdote about a man in contemporary Nicaragua who, when asked about the identity of a particularly vocal woman activist, replied that he did not know, but that it was probably "Nicolasa something or other" (González 74). In the years during and since her highest profile activity, Nicolasa Sevilla has come to embody the whore aspect of Somoza's secular fascist capitalist ideal in Nicaragua's national political consciousness. But it took no contrivance to conflate Sevilla with all that is evil in the view of Nicaragua's *machista*, heavily Roman Catholic, communitarian culture; that she lives on in memory as a symbol of violence and evil is not the product of some campaign of active demonization. Rather, it was Sevilla who, in the morally inverted universe of Somoza's Nicaragua, actively chose to live as a demon.

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