
Children and War

A Historical Anthology

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“Baptized in Blood”
*Children in the Time of the Sandino Rebellion,
Nicaragua, 1927–1934*

Michael J. Schroeder

Toward the end of 1926, in the verdant Segovian mountains of northern Nicaragua, twelve-year-old Santos López joined the forces of Liberal General Augusto Sandino in the civil war raging between Liberals and Conservatives.¹ The following May the boy-soldier saw that war end and another begin, as General Sandino became Supreme Chief of a guerrilla army that for the next six years waged a struggle of national liberation in the northern mountains against U.S. intervention in Nicaragua. By 1929, the fifteen-year-old had become Colonel Santos López and one of Sandino’s most trusted lieutenants. Narrowly escaping assassination alongside Sandino after war’s end, he survived more than four decades of dictatorship to become one of the few living links between the Sandino rebellion of the 1920s and 1930s and the Sandinistas of the 1960s and after.

In 1976, the Sandinista Revolutionary Student Front published Santos López’s oral account of his years in Sandino’s Army. In common with similar testimonies produced after the 1979 Sandinista Revolution, his narrative offers insights into the lives of children in the time of the Sandino rebellion: before the war, crushing poverty, constant toil, and patriarchal oppression; during the war, many dangers, hardships, and opportunities, as well as new forms of community and much violence. Weaving together images of children as victims and children as agents in war, he crafted an ideologically inspired heroic story of national liberation that also captured key aspects of rural Segovian children’s lives and experiences in the 1920s and 1930s.

I come from a *campesino* family, my mother originally from Yalacaguina, a village in Las Segovias, my father also Segoviano; that one didn't help my mother sustain our humble home, made up of five children. . . . Since my father completely ignored his obligations to us, my mother had to work to sustain us, she sold corn beer and eggs; and since this wasn't sufficient she sent us to work on neighboring farms from the early age of eight years. Our pay was 20 cents a day, being mistreated physically by the landowners. My mother used to make trips to the San Albino mine and its outskirts to sell more, always looking for the best way to earn a livelihood. On one of these trips . . . we came upon a group from the troops of General Sandino. . . . I approached a group butchering a cow and asked for a piece of meat and asked if they enlisted kids, since I could see among them some of my age, at that time I was twelve.

After recounting many episodes of heroism and hardship among Sandino's "men" (himself included) and after discussing women's roles in the struggle, he returned to the topic of children:

I belonged to a group called the "Chorus of Angels" made up of kids from 13 to 16 years of age, the group numbered fifty kids divided into three smaller groups. . . . these audacious and valiant kids were in the vanguard of the struggle. . . . the children of [Sandinista] women, born in battle camps, baptized with the blood that flowed day after day, had to be doubly patriotic. . . . The Yankees began the repression against the defenseless *campesinos* . . . [raping and] shooting the women, throwing the children back and forth like they were balls, passed from one bayonet to another till they died skewered on them.

In the early 1980s more than a dozen elderly Sandinistas, interviewed as part of a state-sponsored memory project, recalled joining Sandino's Army as boys, remembered the Chorus of Angels (dubbed so by their chants and songs during battle), and told similar stories of children's victimization and agency.²

Using fragmentary, ideologically charged evidence, this essay examines the lives and experiences of rural Segovian children in the time of the Sandino rebellion. It focuses on how girls and boys were victimized and acted as agents in this conflict. *Campesino* children's lives and experiences in the war, I suggest, were shaped most profoundly by unrelenting toil, suffering, violence, fear, and loss, and by resilient impulses toward hope, creativity, courage, and variously constituted and deeply affective bonds of family and community.

Before examining this evidence it is necessary to sketch the war's social and historical contexts. From independence in 1821, Nicaragua's strife-torn

political history was played out in rural areas in longstanding practices of smuggling, banditry, political bossism, and political violence. The Sandino rebellion, drawing on this rich and complex heritage, found its social base among impoverished *campesinos* (rural folk) of Las Segovias—a rugged, isolated, thickly forested frontier zone bordering Honduras. Unevenly populated by some 100,000 mostly rural inhabitants, the region, like the country as a whole, was marked by extreme divisions: of social class (c. 85–90 percent *campesino*, 8–12 percent “middling,” 2–3 percent elite); of social race (c. 33 percent Indian, 66 percent *mestizo*, 1 percent “Spaniard”); of political affiliation (c. 60 percent Liberal, 40 percent Conservative); and of patronage-clientage networks, locale, and patriarchal families.

According to the 1920 census, the population of Las Segovias was weighted toward younger age sets, with children under eleven comprising 34 percent of the total, children under sixteen, 45 percent. The same data yield an average of 2.7 children (age 0–15) for women of childbearing years (age 16–45) and an average life expectancy of 42 years.³ Perhaps nine-tenths of children were poor *campesinos* living in extended families, with roughly one-third labeled “illegitimate.” If many adults engaged in multiple non-marital sexual relations, patriarchal cultural norms dictated that women bore most responsibility for all children.

The patriarchal family constituted the most important social institution for *campesinos*. In such families, often characterized by strong affections and loyalties, girls and pre-pubescent boys occupied a subordinate legal and social status similar to women. Prized for their labor power especially, *campesino* children older than five worked most of their waking hours. Girls older than three helped with women’s domestic and reproductive labor in and around the house, especially food-related work and care of smaller children. Boys five and older generally helped with men’s labor in pastures and fields. For *campesinos* there existed no educational or public health institutions. Common forms of structural violence suffered by *campesino* children included poverty, hunger, disease, overwork, racism, sexism, and various types of physical abuse.

Such peace-time patterns continued into the war years. In May 1927, in response to Sandino, the U.S. Marines began an invasion and occupation of Las Segovias that lasted five years. At its height in 1928, nearly two thousand Marines were stationed in the region. Thereafter the Marines slowly withdrew and an increasingly native National Guard (*Guardia*) assumed the state’s war effort. The war formally ended in February 1933, a few weeks

after the Marines' final departure. A year later the *Guardia* assassinated Sandino and crushed the remnants of his movement.

Throughout the war, and in common with many guerrilla wars in the modern era, the military arm of the state faced an insoluble paradox—an inability to distinguish the civilians it meant to protect from the rebels it meant to destroy. Most Segovian *campesinos* supported the rebels. Most Marines were convinced of their own racial and cultural superiority, well trained in the use of violence, and primed to teach violence-making skills to native *Guardia*, many of whom were eager to learn. The result was extreme levels of state violence against rural folk generally.

The Sandinista narrative of the rebellion accurately conveys the magnitude of state violence against *campesinos*, including children. Dozens of testimonies produced in the early 1980s paint a vivid, detailed portrait of this violence, and suggest some of the ways children experienced it. Emblematic of these patterns, one former rebel recalled: "Lieutenant Lee . . . was the most murderous of them all. Coming into the valleys he'd say, 'We're gonna kill us some bandits!' and he'd gather the people together and kill them. . . . And the children and women, he'd take the children and throw them in the air . . . and stab them." Another recounted: "When [the Marines] came into these mountains, the Yankee named Lee grabbed a baby by its arms and threw it into the air and waited for it with a sword where it landed, and he cut open its chest and pulled out its heart, and he ate it, the heart of that little baby."⁴

Whether Lieutenant Lee or any Marine speared babies on bayonets we cannot know, but these testimonies demonstrate that social memories of extreme Marine and *Guardia* violence in Las Segovias persisted well into the 1980s. Whether accurate in all specifics, these stories point to a larger field of violence, terror, and fear the Marines and *Guardia* created in the northern mountains. This environment of violence saturated everyday life for Segovian *campesinos* during the war, profoundly shaping children's lives.

Marine and *Guardia* (Marine-*Guardia*) violence came from two main sources: from the ground, by roving combat patrols, and from the air. Former rebel Calixto Tercero expressed the essence of the testimonial evidence on ground patrols: "If the [Marines] were going along the road, and someone came along, then paa! they'd shoot them, right in the main road! . . . If for example some little child went near them, 'Oh! I'm going to see if I can hit that little monkey!' and paa! they'd shoot him, a little baby who was crawling around, just for the pleasure of it!"⁵ Epitomizing many other testi-

monies, Tercero portrayed the Marines perpetrating wanton and systematic violence against all Segovian *campesinos*, including children.

This portrayal finds robust corroboration in Marine-*Guardia* records. During the war the Marines and *Guardia* undertook tens of thousands of combat patrols. Despite patrol commanders' reticence on violence against children—certainly none reported spearing babies or shooting children—their reports, read critically, brim with episodes of violence against children and women.

Marked by clinical, objectifying language and a passive voice that worked to mask their authors' agency, these reports provide a chilling portrait of children in war. In a typical report, a group of fifteen to thirty heavily armed men entered a *campesino* house occupied by women and children, often conflated into "a family," and searched thoroughly for evidence of "bandits." Finding such evidence, usually consisting of red cloth—the colors red and black signifying Sandinista—"excessive" amounts of food or medicine, or other "suspicious" items, they evicted the occupants and burned the house. Uncharacteristic only in its use of the active voice, Captain Croka's report epitomizes hundreds: "[Bandit suspect's] house was bountifully stored with . . . many articles not appropriate or normally kept by a family living in such an isolated spot. . . . After removing everything from the house I burned it." His terse language leaves to historical imagination the terror and fear children in this "family" experienced. Over the next five days Croka's patrol burned sixteen houses, probably leaving scores of children homeless.⁶ "Descended mountainside and surrounded a native shack which was occupied by a large number of women and children," reads another typical report. "While women were being questioned a native was seen in the brush and captured . . . Marines fired at bandits, . . . Fire continued for about 10 minutes. . . . destroyed bandit camp." The report characteristically inflates a small shack into a "bandit camp." Here as elsewhere the reactions and fates of the women and children went unreported, though fear, terror, displacement, destitution, hunger, and sickness probably ranked among the most common consequences.⁷

As one might expect in official documents (and expressing the invaders' self-image as gallant father-figures), Marines and *Guardia* almost always depicted children and women as inappropriate targets. As Lieutenant Brown reported of one attack, "I had a hand grenade in my hand but the presence of two women and several children made it impossible to throw it."⁸ Yet reports also demonstrate that attacks injured and killed children and women.

A few days later Lieutenant Brown noted that his patrol "accidentally" killed a woman and "wounded a small boy."⁹

Campesino children quickly learned to fear such patrols, as official reports attest. As one Marine reported, "Many women and children who appeared frightened on our appearance sought cover . . . they stated that they had not seen Marines before and that they were told we killed all we saw."¹⁰ Other reports show entire families sleeping in the bush for fear of attack.¹¹ Soldiers often forcibly impressed boys as guides. "A boy of about 14 years of age was found, who, after being threatened with death, admitted knowing the position of the bandit camp," reads one unusually frank report.¹² "Impressed as guides two boys" represented more typical phrasing.¹³ If they did the same with girls they did not report it. Similarly, no extant report describes Marines or *Guardia* raping girls, though former rebels insisted the practice was common.¹⁴

Attacks by airplanes comprised the second main source of Marine-*Guardia* violence against children. The gist of the rebel narrative on the air war found apt expression in the recollections of José Ucles: "The planes, when they saw smoke, when they saw someone making food for their children, mothers with families, they bombed them, they killed everybody. When they saw someone, it was a question of dropping bombs."¹⁵ Many recalled the deaths and displacements the air war caused. "In Quilal, the airplanes destroyed us," recounted Juan Sánchez of his fifteenth year. "They killed many people and burned many houses in that invasion. All the people from these villages fled to faraway places . . . many families had to flee to defend themselves against the airplanes."¹⁶

Marine-*Guardia* records show that while planes neither bombed every house nor killed every *campesino* they saw, they bombed and killed routinely and often. In a typical assault on a "bandit stronghold," for instance, a heavily armed plane "attacked [eight] houses and brush in the vicinity with good effect . . . Bombs were dropped among the horses and cattle, killing a few horses, cattle, and some men." Later that afternoon, "horses and cattle at three different [farms] were bombed and strafed with machine gun fire." Next day, "the places that had been bombed yesterday were fired into, and large numbers of turkey buzzards [feasting on the previous day's carnage] arose from each place." But if *campesinos* soon learned to hide from airplanes, reports consistently noted "smoke and fires, drying clothes," and "small washings" at many "suspicious" places they attacked, clear signs of women's labor and the likely presence of children.¹⁷

"Village . . . was filled with men, women and children," reads one report, "and when the planes approached a near panic occurred among the people. They rushed from place to place, falling over each other, and waving anything they could get. It was evident that . . . the villagers were in great fear of an attack by the planes."¹⁸ Two days later another pilot saw three armed men run inside a house in an isolated hamlet. "This house was strafed with machine gun fire but no one appeared. . . . the reason [nearby] houses were not bombed [was that] several women and children were present. . . . Four bombs . . . were dropped close to the houses. No people were seen leaving the houses although several women and children could be seen inside."¹⁹

Rural folk seem to have soon learned that the obvious presence of women and children could deter deadly air attacks. During one fly-over, in a gesture of courage and defiance, "a woman with a baby and two children came out and stood in front of the house." The gunner fired several bursts but attacked no villagers "on account of the women and children."²⁰ A month later a plane crew "observed three horses tied up under the porch of a house. Fired a burst into the hill and circled the house. One woman and a child came out and walked around." The firing reportedly ceased.²¹

Despite the state's efforts to create a contrary narrative, its own paper trail demonstrates that Marine-*Guardia* violence against children comprised a fundamental feature of the war. If exact numbers will never be known, thousands of children suffered injury and death in direct consequence of the Marine invasion. Many thousands more suffered trauma, forced migration, and enhanced likelihood of destitution, hunger, and disease. In its insistent emphasis on the victimization of children by the Marines and *Guardia*, the Sandinista narrative is strongly supported by their enemies' own records.

Waging war without quarter against a militarily superior foe, the rebels also committed violence against children, although of a much smaller magnitude overall. Sandinistas frequently robbed and killed other Nicaraguans and sometimes murdered children, usually in retaliation for aiding the enemy.²² At the same time, most *campesinos* sympathized with and aided the rebels, in large part precisely because their enemies perpetrated the great majority of violence against rural folk, including children.

Yet children in this war were not only victims but agents actively pursuing their own and their families' interests in the face of often extreme adversity. Asención Iglesias, expressing a pattern repeated across Las Segovias, recalled how Marine-*Guardia* violence against his family led him to join the rebels. "I joined the army when I was fourteen, I liked to watch the army's

movements and many times the gringos threatened us with death, because we'd see them pass by, bombing our houses for no reason." Predisposed to the rebels, he soon had reason to join their cause. "In my house they shot my brother and took him prisoner . . . they killed two more brothers in a room of the house, slit their throats and cut them to ribbons outside; my mother buried the pieces there." Framing the rebellion as a morally righteous act of self-defense, he acknowledged that larger ideological issues had escaped his comprehension: "We had no idea what it meant politically, we couldn't even read!, but we could see it was a just cause."²³ Jose María Cerro remembered joining as a youth because the Marines-*Guardia* burned his house and machine-gunned and decapitated his uncle; Cosme Castro recalled joining at fifteen because they burned the houses of his mother and brother and shot his sister.²⁴ Marine-*Guardia* reports corroborate frequent recollections of former rebels that many boys served in Sandino's army. "Several boys between the ages of 12 and 14 were seen with the bandits," reads one.²⁵ Bountiful further examples show much variation on the theme of wanton Marine-*Guardia* violence provoking boys to become rebels.

Boys' involvement in rebel information flows was even more crucial than their participation as full-time combatants. Acquiring and transmitting information comprised a fundamental feature of the war effort for both sides. Marines-*Guardia* generally controlled the towns, rebels the countryside. By all accounts the Sandinistas constructed an extremely effective "grapevine" system of communication linking both town and country. While patriarchal norms confined girls to domestic spaces, they permitted boys to move with relative ease within and between towns and rural areas. Thus, boys commonly served as rebel spies. Since information was critical to the war effort, since *campesino* culture was an oral culture, and since many children have a great capacity for memorization, it is likely that thousands of boys delivered tens of thousands of oral messages to rebel forces—messages never deposited in any archive. In this way the everyday actions of boys, all but invisible in the documentary record, made the rebellion possible.

Marines-*Guardia* also sought information incessantly, often from children. In their aggressive "hunting" expeditions, ground patrols prized nothing more highly than accurate information on rebel locations.²⁶ Boys often gave information, accurate and not, thereby becoming key (if often coerced) suppliers of one of the most critical resources in the state's war effort. In a characteristic portrayal, "a native boy finally admitted" information one patrol commander aggressively sought in a hamlet whose inhabitants he described as "afraid," phrasing that leaves to imagination the

coercive circumstances under which the boy made the admission and his courage in making it.²⁷

Girls' everyday agency, less dramatic and evident in popular memory, more spatially circumscribed, and more dominated by tedium and monotony, was just as critical to the Sandinista war effort. For most *campesinos* the war magnified labor expenditures enormously. Much of this labor fell to children, mostly girls. Domestic labor, especially relating to food—gathering firewood, tending fires, making cheese, pounding tortillas, tending and butchering livestock, cooking and delivering meals—comprised girls' principal contributions to the rebel cause. Making and repairing houses, washing and mending clothes, tending the sick and injured, and untold other daily labors, all but invisible in the documentary evidence, were also key arenas of girls' (and boys') agency. Luisa Cano Arauz's recollections of the war can be reasonably extended to most *campesino* girls: "We helped him [Sandino's army], we brought him food wherever they were, . . . I remember well all those I fed, I gave them food to eat . . . all the foods he ate, this I know about."²⁸

Courageous actions of girls rarely found their way into documents produced by men. One report hints at larger patterns: "Surrounded the house and captured . . . a seventeen-year-old girl, dressed in red and black, who announced herself as 'pura [pure] Sandinista.' (She is now locked up at this place.)"²⁹ This young woman's fierce defiance and assertion of dignity in the face of murderous, rapacious soldiers, her body draped in the symbols of her community and cause, stuns the imagination. If her courage likely found parallels in actions of girls across the region, few archival traces remain.

Overall, extant evidence from both sides underscores children's extraordinary dignity, courage, and commitments to family and community in the face of the horrors and destruction of war. Two vignettes meant to illustrate the invaders' goodwill and paternalism reveal from another angle children's tenacious efforts to recreate war-sundered familial and community bonds. In one, Colonel Robert Denig recorded in his personal diary:

We have a ten year old kid who sleeps on the back porch and is being trained as a messenger boy and boot-black. He is fitted up as a sergeant, has an old gun and a white pony. He was brought in from an outlying post. His father was killed by bandits. His mother then deserted the kid and ran off with another bandit. When found he was living in a lean-to that he made himself and was rapidly turning into a wild animal.³⁰

Painting the Marines-*Guardia* as saviors of an innocent child, institutional repository of moral decency and civilization in a sea of barbarism and moral decrepitude, Denig's account, read against the grain, also highlights the war's profound disruption of *campesino* community and family life, and suggests how children struggled to re-establish relations with kin or fictive kin—ironically, in this case, with those bearing most responsibility for destroying families and communities.

Newspapers told similar tales. One story, "A Little Hero Who Fought For and Against Sandino," told of a boy of thirteen who fought with Sandino in the civil war and later against the Marines. Scooped off the battlefield by the Marine who shot him, the boy reportedly became the faithful aid of his assailant.³¹ Like Denig's, the story illustrates both the victimization and agency of children while ironically underscoring their creativity and resourcefulness in reconstituting severed family and community ties.

But in the end, and despite many such tales of agency and resourcefulness, children were more victims than agents in this war. Many died, and many families mourned their deaths. "I came to [a] house . . . where they were holding a religious celebration on account of the death of a child," reads one report. Moments later a firefight with "bandits" erupted.³²

As an old man, Santos López, with whose story this essay began, vividly expressed the violence and suffering children witnessed and experienced, and their persistent impulses to act with dignity and forge meaningful affective bonds in an often cruel and dangerous world.

Though we went barefoot, nearly naked and full of pests, with innumerable sufferings, we never complained, and arriving at the General Headquarters our burdens lightened hearing the strumming of guitars and accordions. . . . [We were] to treat each other like brothers, respect the *campesinos*, . . . all the *campesinos* should see each other as brothers helping one another other . . . It's something grand and one ought never forget the great sense of brotherhood Sandino inculcated in everyone in our daily lives. We had a saying we used to repeat all the time: "How are you, brother? Enchanted with life."³³

Yet despite the truth of López's words and the optimism of his message to a new generation of youth, it is plain that on balance and for the children who lived it, the war destroyed far more love, beauty, and brotherhood than it created. Whether his and his comrades' sacrifices bequeathed a better world to subsequent generations of children, in Nicaragua and beyond, remains a knottier question.

NOTES

Many thanks to Nora Faires for her keen insights and ruthless pencil.

1. Santos López, "Memorias de un Soldado," *Frente Estudiantil Revolucionario*, July 1976, 1. Cf. *Barricada*, February 8, 1986. Evidence and arguments presented here draw from a larger research project; see Michael J. Schroeder, "The Sandino Rebellion Revisited"; "Horse Thieves to Rebels to Dogs"; and "'To Defend Our Nation's Honor.'"

2. Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo, *Ahora sé que Sandino manda* (Managua: Nueva Nicaragua, 1986), 212–217.

3. Calculated from Oficina Central del Censo, *Censo General de la República de Nicaragua de 1920* (Managua, 1920).

4. Testimonies of Luis Boedeker González, Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo (Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua, Universidad Centroamericana), document no. 055-1-2, p. 11 (hereafter IES [document no.] : [p. no.]), and Martín Blandón Rodríguez, IES 033:10.

5. IES 097-2-2: 4–5.

6. Patrol Report, Crocka, Ocotal, July 18, 1930, Record Group 127, entry 202, box 13, United States National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. (hereafter NA [entry no.] / [box no.]).

7. Patrol Report, Hakala, Somoto, June 18, 1929, NA212/1.

8. Engagement at Potrero, Brown, December 7, 1927, NA212/1.

9. Engagement at Cuje, Brown, December 11, 1927, NA212/1.

10. Report of Patrol, Atkinson, March 5, 1928, NA212/1.

11. Operation and Intelligence Report, Carlson, Jalapa, July 16, 1930, NA202/13.

12. Contact Report, Smith, Esteli, August 8, 1930, NA202/10.

13. Patrol Report, Hakala, Somoto, August 30, 1929, NA202/10.

14. IES 055-1-2: 11: "There were two young girls. 'One for me,' [the Yankee] said, 'and one for the sergeant.' They raped them, and after raping them, *paa! paa!* They killed them."

15. Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo, *Ahora sé que Sandino manda*, 80–81.

16. IES 104: 6.

17. Reports of Air Missions, Rowell, March 19, 20, 28, 1928, NA220/2.

18. Air Mission #1, Rowell, April 2, 1928, NA220/2.

19. Air Mission, Rowell, April 4, 1928, NA220/2. *Campesino* houses, with walls of spaced poles, sometimes permitted plane crews to "see inside" them.

20. Air Mission, Rowell, April 10, 1928, NA220/2.

21. Air Mission #3, Rowell, May 5, 1928, NA220/2.

22. IES 0-55-1-2: 5; Anastasio Somoza García, *El verdadero Sandino, o el calvario de Las Segovias* (Managua: Robelo, 1936); Schroeder, "'To Defend Our Nation's Honor,'" chap. 11.

23. IES 065: 1, 4, 5.

24. IES 088:1, and IES 049: 1; see also Macario Calderón Salinas, IES 043-2-2: 6; Cosme Castro Andino, IES 049: 13.
25. Bandit Attack, Spotts, León, December 30, 1929, NA202/10.
26. The phrase "to hunt bandits" in Patrol Report, Kelly, El Jacaro, January 6, 1931, NA202/13.
27. Patrol to San Antonio, Lewis, Yalí, May 25, 1929, NA212/1.
28. IES 037: 3.
29. Patrol Report, Broderick, San Juan, January 24, 1931, NA202/14.
30. Robert L. Denig, "Diary of a *Guardia* Officer," Marine Corps Historical Center, Museums Branch, Washington D.C., 11.
31. *La Noticia* (Managua), April 12, 1928.
32. Contact with Bandits, Stevens, León, November 20, 1930, NA202/52.
33. Santos López, "Memorias," 12, 18, 22.