

# Historical Security Council

## The Nicaragua Contra Conflict



<b>Forum</b>	The Historical Security Council
<b>Issue:</b>	The Nicaragua Contra Conflict
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## Introduction

The Nicaraguan Contra Conflict was a conflict taking place roughly between 1979 and 1990, and was a violent and politically charged civil war between the Soviet backed communist Sandinista government and the US backed right-wing group the Contras. Although the conflict within the country itself was a result of the political and social unrest found within Nicaragua, it was used as a proxy war in the Cold War between the United States of America and the Soviet Union, exemplifying the deep rooted divisions of ideology.



Nicaragua, after recently coming out of the 40 year Somoza dictatorship (1937 to 1979) and having suffered widespread corruption and political repression, was experiencing mass structural changes by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The Sandinistas implemented socialist reforms following communist ideology, and allied themselves with the Soviet Union and Cuba. Additionally, after taking over the governmental and military structures the Sandinistas implemented land, education, and healthcare reforms which were met with both support and opposition. In response to the rise of the communist Sandinista agenda, the Contra counterrevolutionary front was founded and as part of the US foreign strategy aimed at counteracting the efforts of growing communism by the Soviet Union, the Contras received funding, training, and military aid from the United States.

The conflict formed due to the use of guerrilla warfare, assassinations, and widespread human rights violations by all parties involved, leading to the displacement and death of tens of thousands of Nicaraguan civilians. The conflict exemplifies the proxy war era of the Cold War, and

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exposes the covert nature of the US foreign policy in the 1980s, leaving lasting consequences on Nicaragua's politics, economy, and society.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Armed Conflict

An armed conflict is a confrontation between the armed forces of two or more countries, or between governmental authorities and an organised armed group.

### Boland Amendments

The Boland Amendments are a series of acts passed by the US congress during President Ronald Reagan's administration to prevent the aggressive interference in Nicaraguan internal affairs.

### Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

The CIA is the foreign intelligence service of the United States of America tasked with collecting and investigating information on the economic, military, political, scientific, and other developments of other nations.

### Communism

A system of social organisation advocating for the elimination of private property and state control of the economy, and aims for the elimination of social classes.

### Contra Government

The Contra government was the anti-communist group within Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990, the counterrevolutionary force which came up in opposition to the Sandinista government. They were supported by the US government and were accused of numerous human rights violations in their revolutionary actions.

### Drug trafficking

Global trading including the manufacturing, distribution, and sale of drugs and illegal substances.



### Foreign Aid

The transfer of capital, goods, services, financial resources, military supplies, technical advice, and training between one country or organisation to another.

### Guerrilla Warfare

Fast moving, small scale warfare against established military and government forces using ambush and sabotage techniques.

### Proxy War

A war instigated, funded, or fought by one or more major powers who do not get involved themselves. Typically formed due to ideological differences or competing interests, using minor states to orchestrate battles.

### Reagan Doctrine

The foreign policy of the USA during the Cold War aiming to eliminate the influence of Soviet communism, and a reason for the heavy US support of the Contras.

### Revolution

The forced overthrow of a government or social order, usually following a violent rebellion of the public due to unfair treatment by the people in charge.

### Sanctions

Economic and political penalties used to incentivise obedience to the law, rules, and regulations, usually from one state or organisation onto another. Typically sanctions come in the form of fines or trade restrictions.

### Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)

The Sandinista's were the left-wing political party in Nicaragua between 1979 to 1990, coming into power after overthrowing the Somoza dynasty.



## General Overview

The Contra conflict stems from deep rooted dissatisfaction from the civilians of Nicaragua after the 40-year Somoza dictatorship. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) came into power after the rising opposition to the Somoza regime throughout the 1960s and 70s broke out into a tumultuous revolution in 1978. The revolution was a result of the political corruption and social inequalities experienced nationwide under the Somoza family. By the late 1970s, the FSLN had managed to garner support from various sources including students, peasants, farmers, and business owners, and developed a strong military assault against Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the dictator of Nicaragua. Focusing on the use of guerrilla warfare and combat power, the FSLN used kidnappings and intimidation techniques to force a reaction from the Somoza government, finally resulting in the president's resignation and the rise of the Sandinista regime.

### The Contra's rise to power

Following the end of the revolution, Nicaragua was majorly destroyed and without any governmental structure, meaning extreme changes were starting to take place. Nicaragua and its people had suffered a revolution and civil war, natural disasters and political instability resulting in over 600,000 displaced and homeless. Foreign aid was given, mainly from the US and the Soviet Union who were both attempting to garner support for their respective sides of the Cold War. The Sandinistas, following the communist ideology, began focusing on agrarian reforms and changes to the agriculture industry, an industry the economy was heavily reliant upon. There was also a major shift in education, with extensive focus being placed on secondary and tertiary education, as well as training teachers and literacy campaigns throughout the early 1980s. However, aside from the social reforms attempting to improve the economic and political landscape of Nicaragua, the Sandinista's faced many human rights controversies. Amnesty International, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) focusing on collecting information on human rights globally, noted the disappearances of civilians after being arrested, the torturing of individuals in prison, the denial of due process and political rights, and the killings of suspected opponents to the Sandinista regime. A major crime was the accusation of mass executions, including up to 40 people in 1981 and 75 people in 1984. These violations eventually built up to the formation of the Contras.

As mentioned previously, the Contras was a group initially made of former Somoza National Guard members then exiled in Honduras, and were later enlarged by groups also in opposition



towards the Sandinista government, such as the minority groups along the western coast of Nicaragua. The Contras' opposition towards the Sandinistas was a result of combined factors, highlighted around the ideological differences between the two groups. Additionally, though the Sandinistas had come to power after a revolution against the previous dictatorship, the Contras believed they were straying away from the revolutionary ideals and were displaying authoritarian tendencies. The Contras themselves were also split in terms of motivation for fighting against the Sandinistas, as while some wished for political representation and autonomy from the government others were simply driven by financial incentives and personal desires for power. However, the Contras right-leaning outlooks and anti-communist agenda was what ultimately led to the US support towards them, a major driving force in the continuation of the conflict.

### US involvement and aid

The United States of America's involvement in the conflict is especially important, as it was a large reason for the continuation and growth of the conflict. Initially, the United States had begun supplying the Sandinista government with development aid and economic support, but quickly switched sides to supporting the Contras in the early 1980s after the Sandinistas grew closer to Cuba and the Soviet Union. The main forms of involvement from the United States was in the military and financial aid given to the Contras. Weapons such as rifles, ammunition, explosives, medical supplies, transport vehicles, and surveillance tools were given, as well as training for army officials and fighters in guerrilla warfare, sabotage, and intelligence operations in other Latin American nations such as Costa Rica and Honduras. In terms of financial aid, the USA supplied approximately \$80 million to the Contras in covert funding through the CIA between 1981 and 1984. The CIA, or Central Intelligence Agency of the United States, was responsible for many covert operations within the conflict. Its controversial support for the Contras provided structure, strategic policies, and logistics for the rebel army and supported direct acts of sabotage against the government of Nicaragua. These included blowing up oil factories, destroying infrastructure, and mining Nicaraguan harbors. There were also propagandist operations run to undermine the standing of the Sandinista government internationally by broadcasting anti-Sandinista messages over the radio and distributing false stories to manipulate the public's perception of the conflict.

### *Boland Amendments*

The Boland Amendments are a series of US amendments passed in the Congress between 1982 and 1984. The first amendment came into effect in 1982, aimed at restricting



the support the US was currently supplying to the Contras. The main point of the amendment was to prohibit the CIA's funding and military aid of the Contras, and limit the paramilitary operations in Nicaragua. The second amendment, passed in 1984, prohibited the US government entirely from providing direct military or financial aid to the Contras group, attempting to eliminate their operations in Costa Rica and Honduras and aimed to limit the international view that the US was attempting to overthrow the Nicaraguan government.

### Drug smuggling operations

Towards the early 1980s, multiple sources began reporting on the Contra supply networks and their alleged involvement in the smuggling of drugs throughout Latin America. The primary allegation was that the Contras were involved in the smuggling of cocaine across borders in Latin America, specifically using Costa Rica and Honduras as their base of operations, in order to finance their war against the Sandinistas. The US government consistently received criticism for allegedly ignoring the drug trade going on due to their support of the Contras, and the need to win over Nicaragua due to the globally ongoing Cold War.

### Current situation of the conflict

As of 1985 (the time in which the conference is taking place) the Contra conflict has escalated into a major point of contention within the Cold War, dominating US foreign affairs and attention from parties all around the world. The conflict is heavily militarised and armed by 1985, with ongoing warfare between the Sandinistas and Contras, and covert involvement from the CIA and backing from many countries globally. The humanitarian crisis and deaths of civilians is becoming increasingly mounting, meaning a solution to the conflict is more imperative than ever before.

## Major Parties Involved

### Amnesty International

Amnesty International is the largest human rights watch organisation globally. They are imperative to the conflict due to their numerous reports of human rights violations by both sides of the conflict, documenting the denial of political rights, unfair detentions, and hidden killings, as well



as many more. Additionally, by publishing the reports the NGO assisted in garnering international scrutiny of the conflict.

### Canada

While Canada was not directly involved in the conflict within Nicaragua, it did show its support through criticising the United States intervention in the conflict and promoting a diplomatic approach focused on democratic support such as development aid and peacekeeping operations. The main focus was on supplying humanitarian aid to the citizens of Nicaragua rather than supporting one side of the conflict.

### Costa Rica

Costa Rica, due to its proximity to Nicaragua, was a significant player in the Contra Conflict as a base of operations for the Contras. While the Costa Rican government never officially declared its support for either side of the conflict, it did face pressure from the Reagan led US government to allow operations from its land. Costa Rica did express its concern of the violations of its sovereignty, yet it still allowed the use of its airstrips for the supplying of the Contras, and involvement in drug smuggling operations.

### Cuba

Cuba was a major player in the conflict due to its ideological closeness to the Sandinista government. They were a large supporter of the Sandinistas, supplying hundreds of military advisors and experts to help train the Nicaraguan army, and aiding in defense planning and counterinsurgency training against the Contras. Cuba also criticised the interventionist policies of the US, labelling them as imperialist aggressive acts and drawing global attention to the conflict.

### Honduras

Honduras, similarly to Costa Rica, officially remained neutral throughout the entire conflict but became a major base of operations for the US's and Contra's insurgency. It often harboured exiled Contra leaders and factions, providing space for training, regrouping, and planning raids and attacks against the Sandinista government. It was also a key ally to the US due to the extensive military and foreign aid given under the Reagan administration. Again, similarly to Costa Rica Honduras also accused the United States of violating its sovereignty.



## Mexico

Mexico did not officially take any side in the conflict, but they did heavily advocate against the US involvement and interference in the sovereignty of Nicaragua and the surrounding Latin American countries. The Mexican foreign policy emphasised the non-intervention of foreign powers and the respect for internal conflicts, only providing humanitarian aid and diplomatic support to encourage the development of nations. They did, however, recognise the Sandinista government immediately after the end of the revolution in 1979.

## Soviet Union

The USSR was one of the two major foreign players within the Contra conflict in Nicaragua, as a key ally and supplier of the Sandinista government. Specifically due to the ongoing Cold War conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States of America, Nicaragua was a key proxy war where both the USSR and the USA were able to spread their respective ideologies. The Soviet Union mainly sent their support through military aid, such as supplying weapons, ammunition, and transport vehicles, as well as training the Nicaraguan army.

## Sweden

Sweden was not directly involved in the conflict, but played a significant role in the humanitarian and diplomatic aid towards Nicaragua. Following its Cold war era foreign policy, Sweden advocated for the peace-promoting and development focused states and organisations and encouraged the self-determination and acknowledgement of human rights globally. Sweden did, however, recognise the Sandinista government post-revolution, and provided them with non-military support such as education programs, healthcare initiatives and economic development.

## United States of America

The United States of America was one of the two major foreign powers involved in the Contra affair, involved diplomatically, ideologically, and financially. Due to the ideological commitment of the Sandinista government towards communism, the US sided with the right-wing Contras in the civil war. They were increasingly involved in aiding the Contras through funds, training camps, military weaponry and technology, in addition to pressuring neighbouring nations to aid in the Contras war against the Sandinista government. They also applied economic sanctions upon Nicaragua, and became invested in the internal affairs of the country. Especially the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)



of the US and its covert operations led to incredible influence in the conflict, specifically in the spread of misinformation.

## Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of event
1961	Formation of the FSLN in opposition to the Somoza dictatorship.
July 1979	The Somoza Dynasty was overthrown by the Sandinista Revolution, and the FSLN took over as the reigning governing body.
1979-1980	The Sandinista government begins implementing land reforms, literacy campaigns, and aligning themselves with communist countries such as Cuba and the Soviet Union.
November 1980	Ronald Reagan is elected president of the United States.
March 1981	Reagan suspends US foreign aid to Nicaragua after accusations of human rights violations and the growth of communist ideology.
December 1981	The US and CIA began funding and supplying aid to the Contras as opposition to the Sandinista government.
December 1982	The First Boland Amendment is passed by the US Congress.
1983	Escalating fighting between the Contras and Sandinistas.
April 1984	Nicaragua files a case against the US in the International Court of Justice.
May 1984	The Second Boland Amendment is passed by the US Congress.
November 1984	Nicaraguan national elections where Daniel Ortega (Leader of FSLN) wins; the legitimacy is dismissed by the US and the Contras.
1981-1985	Accusations of human rights violations towards both the Sandinistas and Contras gain prominence in international media.



## UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention and Interference in the Internal Affairs of States, December 1983, (A/RES/38/103)
- The Situation in Central America: Threats to International Peace and Security and Peace Initiatives, October 26 1984, (A/RES/39/4)
- Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States of America), International Court of Justice (**It is important to note that the case was filed in 1984, meaning the start of the case is within the realm of the conference. However, the final judgement is after the timeline, meaning the outcome cannot be considered within the conference**).
- The Contadora Process (Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Venezuela), 1983-85

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

- Contadora Peace Process: An attempt by Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, and Panama at promoting peaceful resolutions to conflicts ongoing in Latin America, and preventing the growth of regional conflicts. Key actions in the Contra conflict include negotiations involving Nicaragua and other central American nations and the drafting of the Contadora Act of Peace and Cooperation in Central America, both of which aimed to end foreign military intervention and aid (primarily from the USA), promote democratic practices, and establish human rights of all citizens.
- Several resolutions by the General Assembly of the United Nations: Due to being made in the UN GA the resolutions were non-binding, yet still shows attempts at garnering international support for the end of the conflict and holding nations involved in human rights abuses accountable for their actions.

In general, the conflict has not yet seen many serious attempts to end it by peaceful third parties, with the current attempts simply getting more attention placed on the conflict and encouraging mediating efforts between the Sandinistas and Contras and facilitating dialogue between them.



## Possible Solutions

Due to the nature of the conflict being a civil war, a solution for the conflict is difficult to come to. However, several options to encourage a ceasefire and a negotiated peace are possible:

- Proposing of an immediate ceasefire monitored by the UN Security Council and UN peacekeepers. This would mean if either side did not adhere to the ceasefire agreement, they would face consequences under international law.
- Direct negotiations between the FSLN and Contra leaders to attempt to come to a combined peace agreement. This would result in both sides being able to have a voice in the government of Nicaragua, and bring their individual concerns to light.
- The gradual disarmament of Nicaragua. Though this would be an intensely controversial decision, it would result in the limiting of armed combat and guerrilla warfare.
- Increasing humanitarian aid to rebuild infrastructure and public trust in the government.
- Condemning of US and Soviet support of political instability within Nicaragua for their individual agendas.



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