

THE SUCCESS OF THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION: WHY AND HOW?

VEGARD BYE

In the following paper, I shall try to discuss some of the elements I see as being decisive for the revolutionary victory in Nicaragua. Where appropriate, I shall make comparisons to the Castro-movement in Cuba. A fundamental question will of course be why this strategy succeeded in Cuba and Nicaragua, while it failed in so many other countries.

In this discussion, I shall not go into the characteristics and particularities of the imminent socio-economic and political crisis paving the way for the revolutionary situation. It is taken for granted that a profound crisis in this respect has been prevailing in most countries where guerrilla strategies were attempted. What is discussed here, is how the FSLN (Sandinist Front of National Liberation), compared with other guerrilla movements, has answered this crisis and built its revolutionary strategies. This is not to propose that a complete analysis of the Nicaraguan revolution can exclude a detailed analysis of the character of the crisis of Somozist Nicaragua and the particularities of the Sandinist answer to this crisis, but such an analysis is beyond the scope of this article.¹

I. The Castroist guerrilla tradition

In a study of guerrilla strategies in Latin America carried out at the German *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, Robert F. Lamberg distinguishes among three steps in the ideological and strategic development of what he calls the Castroist guerrilla after

¹ A good – though quite brief – analysis of the socio-economic crisis of Somozist Nicaragua is to be found in Herrera Zuñiga, René, “Nicaragua: el desarrollo capitalista dependiente y la crisis de la dominación burguesa, 1950-1980”, in *Centroamérica en crisis*, Centro de Estudios Internacionales, El Colegio de México, 1980, pp. 93-126.

the Cuban revolution.²

The first phase is represented by Che Guevara's summing up of the experiences from the Cuban revolution, published in the book *La Guerra de Guerrillas* in 1960.³ Che's most significant elaboration of classical theories of revolution, is his argument for creating the necessary conditions for a revolutionary situation through the establishment of a *foco guerrillero*, a guerrilla nucleus. His strongly subjectivist standpoint differs very clearly from the established theories of revolution until then, which took it for granted that certain objective conditions had to be fulfilled before one could talk of a revolutionary situation. His standpoint on this issue, though, is not as categorical as is sometimes claimed. In a 1961 article he wrote:

"The objective conditions for struggle are provided by people's hunger, their reaction to hunger, the terror adopted to crush people's reaction, and the wave of hatred created by the repression. (Latin) America lacked the subjective conditions. The most important among them is to be aware of a possibility of victory through violent struggle..."⁴

Che Guevara's position was that these conditions in general prevailed all over Latin America, and that the only missing link was the creation of the subjective conditions.

The second phase in Lamberg's classification was introduced through the Second Havana Conference in February, 1962. This took place shortly after the Cuban revolution had been declared Marxist-Leninist. The declarations from this solidarity conference gave, firstly, the guerrilla strategy a much clearer ideological content and, secondly a clear continental scope. The declared aim of the liberation struggle from then on was to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat. The leading role of the working class was further stressed. At the same time, the idea that the national bourgeoisie could take a leading position in the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle was abandoned. The internationalist character now attributed to the liberation struggle, was also the embryo of a new polycentrism in the communist world movement. Henceforth, Cuba looked upon itself as a centre of the continental liberation struggle for the whole of Latin America – the struggle for Latin America's second independence. Cuba took upon itself the role of leader of an alternative international movement to the Moscow oriented one, later to be institutionalized through the formation of OLAS (*Organización Latinoamericana de Solidaridad*). The emergence of this polycentrism in many countries resulted in serious problems for the development of unity between the guerrilla and the communist parties.⁵

The declaration from the Second Havana Conference also strengthened the understanding of the guerrilla nucleus as the embryo of the future people's army and the future state apparatus, as well as the necessity of combining guerrilla struggle with mass struggle. The condition for the latter is evidently that the small guerrilla nucle-

² Lamberg, Robert F., *Die Castristische Guerrilla in Lateinamerika*, Verlag für Literatur und Zeitgeschichte/Forschungsinstitut der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Hannover, 1971.

³ Guevara, Ernesto (Che), *La Guerra de Guerrillas*, from Guevara, *Escritos y Discursos* 1-9, Tomo 1, Ediciones Políticas, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, La Habana, 1977.

⁴ Tidskriftet *Verde Olivo*, 9.4.1961.

⁵ For further discussions on the polycentrism in the World Communist movement, see e.g., Jackson, D. Bruce, *Castro, the Kremlin and Communism in Latin America*, Baltimore, John Hopkins, 1969; Halperin, Ernst, *The Peaceful and the Violent Road. A Latin American Debate*, Cambridge, MIT, 1965, and Halperin, Ernst, *Peking and the Latin American Communists*, Cambridge, MIT, 1966.

us works in agreement with organizations that, through more or less open political work, are able to mobilize support in the countryside as well as in urban areas.

The third phase in Lamberg's classification is directly linked to the publishing of Régis Debray's book, *Revolution dans la Revolution?*, which appeared for the first time in 1967.⁶ Its main contribution was the categorical rejection of the communist parties traditional Popular Front strategy and in its claim that *el foco guerrillero* had to take an undisputable lead politically as well as militarily. The guerrilla had to be independent of – or superior to – the urban communist party. What Debray describes as “the astonishing innovation of the Cuban revolution, the revolution's decisive contribution to international revolutionary experience and to Marxism-Leninism”, was that the guerrilla nucleus was the embryo of the people's army, as well as of the party.

“Moncada was the nucleus of the rebel army, which in its turn was the nucleus of the party”⁷.

The classical position of the guerrilla as seen by both Mao, Ho Chi Minh and Giap, had been clearly subordinated to the leadership of the party.

Debray also raises the question of the relationship between armed struggle and mass organization, but again this issue is treated basically in a theoretical way and it did not seem to concern him much at the time of writing the book.

It is striking that a part of the struggle which is understood as being so decisive is not treated in more detail. Looking back, it now seems quite obvious that it was exactly on this point that the guerrilla movements in Latin America in the 1960's suffered their most decisive failures.

II. The ideology of FSLN – Sandinism and Marxism

From the start FSLN was a typical pro-Cuban guerrilla organization, a part of the “Cuban International” in Latin America. Its adversaries looked upon it as a typical tool of the Cuban “export of revolutions”. FSLN acknowledged the principles mentioned above and did not try to conceal its close relationship with Cuba. As the founder, Carlos Fonseca, said in an interview on his arrival in Havana in 1970 (after having been released from one of his many stays in prison): “In our revolutionary struggle we follow the most advanced principles: Marxist ideology, Commander Ernesto Che Guevara, Augusto César Sandino”⁸.

As this time FSLN had a strong ideological basis in the Marxist-Leninist tradition, as it was defined in Havana until about 1970. When this basis during the later years leading up to the revolution was not very strongly expressed and even consciously kept in the background, it had to do with the gradual modification of FSLN's strategy and tactics for the revolution. This we will come back to later. As I see it, this modification was not caused by any deideologization of the organization or by any abandonment of the longterm objectives of the revolution. Whether or not this necessary process of adaptation will in itself influence FSLN's ideology, it may still be too early to determine, but so far there is no indication of it.

The split of FSLN into three different organizations around 1976 was not due to – nor did it lead to – any fundamental ideological differences. Rather, the split was

⁶ English edition: *Revolution in the Revolution*», Monthly Review Press, New York, 1967.

⁷ Ibid., p. 105. Moncada is the name of the military barracks in Santiago de Cuba that was attacked by the group headed by Fidel Castro on the 26th July 1953. This was the first armed action by Fidel's liberation movement in Cuba.

⁸ Printed in *Barricada*, Managua, 7.11.79.

brought about by differing opinions about tactical aspects of the struggle, although the three tendencies differed quite significantly in their *description* of the ideological basis of their approaches. There were no fundamental differences as to the final objective of the revolution: the establishment of a socialist Nicaragua.

The fact that the ideological contradictions have been so modest in Nicaragua, within FSLN as well as between FSLN and other leftist organizations, has greatly facilitated the construction of a unified resistance movement. As opposed to most other countries in Latin America, Nicaragua has not been plagued to any considerable extent by the endless and bitter in-fights among the various leftist organizations. These struggles have been, in many cases, even more paralyzing than the struggle against the rightist forces. The absence of such in-fighting in Nicaragua is to a large extent the consequence of a poor political environment. Carlos Fonseca explained this particularity in this way:

"The reason (for this backwardness) is that Nicaragua is a country with a feudal economy, dominated by cattle-raising and coffee-growing, surrounded by other feudal countries. But it is also important that the country never had any immigration of European workers that carried with them revolutionary ideas, such as in other Latin American countries. The family names of people in Nicaragua are the same as the Spanish conquerors brought along"⁹.

Paradoxically, this earlier political poverty became an asset for the FSLN and prevented the resistance struggle from being torn down from the inside. This is also quite a significant political lesson from the Nicaraguan revolution.

III. Some elements for understanding the revolutionary success in Nicaragua

1. The first factor that I would like to point out is *the successful combination of armed struggle and mass mobilization which paved the way for urban insurrection.*

In Managua, two days or so after the revolution, I met the leader of the Argentinian *Montoneros* Movement, Mario Firmenich. When I asked him to sum up the significance of the Nicaraguan revolution for the rest of Latin America, he put strong emphasis on this factor:

"One of the great contradictions – false, but erroneously solved – for many revolutionaries in Latin America, is the contradiction between mass struggle and armed struggle, (...) between legal and secret political struggle, (...) between secret cadre organizations and mass organizations that can never be completely secret (...) As we see it, the insurrection in Nicaragua – with its special features rooted in the country's history and social formation – has succeeded in achieving good co-ordination between these factors".

As we have seen, the need for the guerrilla struggle to be accompanied by mass organization and political struggle is strongly emphasized in the Castroist guerrilla tradition. In *Cuba* this seemed to materialize, to a certain extent, through the urban cells of the revolutionary movement itself, the Communist Party, the student movement, and trade-union movement. But it was a mobilization based upon a general lack of confidence in the Batista government and general sympathy with the resistance struggle. No insurrection like the one in Nicaragua took place in Cuba. In fact, it was never attempted. After various failed attempts at organizing a general strike, the one that took place in the final phase did play an important role. But in the case of Cuba, such a loose mobilization of sympathy was sufficient, not least because Cuba came first. For the later guerrilla movements in Latin America, such loose

⁹ Ibid.

alliances were completely impotent against the counter-revolutionary offensive that was launched through out the continent.

The problem of reaching beyond the petit-bourgeois class background, of gathering a mass movement around itself, was a perennial one for all guerrilla movements in Latin America in the 60's. This was clearly pointed out in one major study of this issue:

"(...) the guerrilla (was) a minority movement of the emancipated Latin American middle class, without any attraction for the popular masses, and in most cases not even attempting to achieve it".¹⁰

"(...) the Castroist guerrilla (was) a middle-strata phenomenon and (...) workers and – according to guerrilla theories, even more important – peasants (have) hardly ever (participated) to any appreciable extent".¹¹

In drawing comparisons with *Nicaragua*, a clear distinction must be made between, on the one hand, the social and class composition of the guerrilla, and on the other hand, the organizational support for the FSLN. Also in Nicaragua, as in Cuba and in all other countries where the guerrilla strategy had been attempted, the large majority of the guerrillas were radicalized youths from the urban middle class. Nicaragua, it is true, had more in common with Cuba than with all the unsuccessful cases as regards the establishment of a relationship of mutual confidence between the guerrillas and the peasants in the areas where the guerrillas were fighting. But not even in Nicaragua did the revolutionary movement succeed in recruiting any significant number of peasants or workers for armed struggle until the final stages – that is to say, before the September insurrection in 1978. When this insurrection started, the FSLN had no more than 150 persons under its military command.¹² After September, however, this number was increased to a large extent by means of peasants and workers. This is, by the way, very similar to the Cuban case, where the guerrilla had no more than 200 members as late as half a year before the victory.

What Firmenich particularly refers to while speaking of the successful combination of armed struggle and mass struggle in Nicaragua, is the parallel civil organization that took place under the discreet leadership of the FSLN, without Somoza managing to stigmatize it. For a long time, the mass organization had very limited strength in Nicaragua and, until shortly before the revolution, it was repeatedly pointed out that the sympathy and participation of the masses in open protest actions did not materialize in any organized mass mobilization. The decisive step to solve this problem was the creation of various smaller front organizations among students, peasants, workers, slum-dwellers and women, and their joining together in the MPU (Movement of the United People) in July 1979. Once MPU had been created, there was a country-wide organization with the most important popular groups represented, able to launch a massive grassroots mobilization, particularly in the cities. The fact that the MPU had a clear program of government, which in reality was the FSLN's transitory program, was a significant strength for the MPU. The MPU thereby could build its own mass organization through neighbourhood committees with political objectives. At the same time, the repression, particularly after September,

¹⁰ Lamberg, op. cit., p. 35.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 37. Ernst Halperin arrived more or less to the same conclusions in his analysis. See Halperin, 1966, op. cit., p. 28.

¹² Information given by Comandante Humberto Ortega in an interview with *Bohemia*, Havana, Year 71, N° 52, 28. December 1979.

contributed to make these committees the only natural unity in the organization of first aid, food allocation, and even civil defense struggle. These committees thereby were made extremely important for the organization of the urban insurrection, particularly because FSLN cadres always directed the construction of the MPU and the neighbourhood committees (the Civil Defense Committees, CDC).

Even if the guerrilla theories had foreseen that the guerrilla war had to be accompanied by urban insurrection in order for the revolution to succeed, this principle had never been systematically put into practice before the revolution in Nicaragua. Paradoxically, it was to a large extent the internal split of the FSLN that led to the almost brilliant combination of various forms of struggle that materialized.

The guerrilla tradition in the spirit of Che Guevara was consistently maintained by the *GPP-tendency* (GPP: Protracted Popular War). This was the original tendency in the FSLN, that represented the continuity of armed resistance struggle. When the repression made any other form of resistance impossible, the mountain guerrilla was the only focus of resistance to survive. Its incessant small attacks kept a great part of Somoza's National Guard preoccupied and caused significant casualties among the Guardsmen. It was mainly in the GPP-guerrilla that youth joining the armed struggle after the September offensive got their training. And it was from the permanent guerrilla fronts that trained men and women came to assist the urban population at the outbreak of its insurrection.

When the *Proletarian* fraction split away, it was both in order to strengthen the political and the ideological work and to give high priority to the mobilization of the working class in the cities. This fraction had a great number of political cadres that worked openly in civil resistance groups without publicly recognizing their relationship to the FSLN. It was this work that to a large extent formed the basis for the creation of the MPU and that made the MPU the dominant civil resistance organization. This organization also contributed heavily to preparing the urban population, politically and psychologically, for their insurrection, and to a certain extent also trained it militarily.

The *Insurrectional* tendency had three important functions. The first of them, the building of national and international alliances, which I will return to later. The second, partly a consequence of the first, was to provide significant economic support from abroad and thereby give FSLN its high military-technical level. The third function of this tendency was to spell out in practice the theoretical concept of urban insurrection, i.e., to develop a concrete strategy for insurrection. The actions of this tendency was blamed for being impatient. As we shall also return to, these various actions at the respective points of time, had important political effects that, taken together, may have been decisive for the final success of the revolution.

Thus division of the FSLN into three tendencies tended to provide a very favourable division of labour, rather than to create serious contradictions in the organization. Without this division of labour it is difficult to see how the revolution could have succeeded.

It is claimed, though, that the division of labour that developed between the tendencies originated even before the split.¹³ Furthermore, the division was not as absolute as might be understood from the description above. The GPP-tendency, in some areas, also carried out significant organizational work in the cities, the Proletarian tendency in the final stage of the struggle showed surprisingly strong military

¹³ This is claimed for instance by Humberto Ortega in the interview referred to in note 12.

capacity, and the Insurreccional tendency in addition to its massive military strength on the southern front also launched important guerrilla fronts in the north of the country. But the main functions of the various tendencies were as described above.

The split of FSLN into three tendencies after the death of Carlos Fonseca also had another consequence, namely that the leadership of the FSLN was, and still is, made up of a collective of nine persons – three from each of the tendencies. This is one of the great peculiarities of the revolution in Nicaragua: there is no single person constituting *el dirigente máximo*. On the continent of the *caudillos* this is in fact quite conspicuous, and it was for long seriously discussed within the FSLN if it would not be preferable to have one leader. Up to this point however, everything seems to indicate that the collective style of leadership has been of strong advantage.

In order to illustrate how the FSLN and particularly the Insurreccional tendency developed its relationship between the vanguards and the mass struggle, it may be useful to reproduce some quotations from Humberto Ortega's summary of the Nicaraguan experiences:

"To us the entire strategy, all the political and military steps, developed around the masses in order to prevent the courage and decision of the masses from failing, (...), in order to continue motivating them (...), supply them with oxygen (...), in order to keep up the pressure of the masses (...), because only in that way a military victory would be possible. Our insurreccional strategy revolved around the masses and not around the military situation. It is important to make that clear".

"(... the guerrilla fronts) were not the nucleus of the victory, they were only parts of a superior nucleus that was the armed struggle of the masses. That is the most important contribution (from the Nicaraguan revolution)".¹⁴

This logic was the real innovation of the *insurreccional strategy* that was developed by the FSLN in Nicaragua. FSLN's – and primarily the Insurreccional tendency's – practice as regards this dialectical relationship between vanguard and mass, between guerrilla and insurrection, undoubtedly constitutes a decisive elaboration and deepening of the Cuban guerrilla tradition. It is according to a similar pattern that the resistance struggle is now being waged in El Salvador and Guatemala, adapted to the special conditions in each of these countries.

A strategy based on such a dialectical relationship between guerrilla war and urban insurrection, naturally implies strong conditions on the issue of which forms of struggle shall be given priority at various times and where the leadership shall be. This problem emerged in Cuba as well as in Nicaragua and in all other countries where the strategy has been attempted. In all these cases the problems of communication caused by the strong repression has contributed to strengthening the problems.

In Nicaragua, it was basically the contradictions between mountain and city, between guerrilla and mass-mobilization, between giving priority to work among the peasants or workers, that led to the split in the FSLN. The principle of the Proletarian tendency to give priority to political rather than military work, and to work among the urban proletariat rather than among the rural and mountainous peasants, was in direct opposition to the principles of the "Havana International". Even if this hegemonic struggle, unlike the Cuban, was never won by any particular fraction in Nicaragua, the important fact was that the various tendencies finally managed to join forces and to develop complete unity in the final phase of the resistance struggle. The Communist Party in Nicaragua, which by the way had also been split in three

¹⁴ Ibid.

fractions, rejected the armed struggle almost to the bitter end. The role of these small groups in the resistance struggle was by and large insignificant and partly confusing. Altogether it is probably correct to say that the various Communist Party fractions in Nicaragua were looked upon less favourably after the revolution than was the Cuban Communist Party.

2. The second decisive element for the revolutionary victory in Nicaragua was *the gradual accumulation of strength and confidence based on the dialectical development of the resistance struggle*.

According to the Cuban guerrilla tradition, this is exactly one of the main functions of *el foco*. In the development of the Cuban Revolution, Castro's guerrilla functioned in this way, too. It started with small symbolic actions gradually growing in strength until they constituted a serious challenge to the regime's monopoly of violence. The Moncada action of the 26th July 1953, which, seen in isolation may have appeared as a small action and in military terms was a failure, has come to be recognized as the historically indisputable starting point of the Cuban revolution. The men that today occupy the four superior posts in the Cuban Communist Party and state apparatus, all participated in the Moncada action.¹⁵ If we look at the accumulation of strength after the return of the guerrilla with the *Granma*, we see that a series of actions of increasing scope all failed in their immediate objectives of overthrowing Batista. But they succeeded in their efforts to sap confidence in the regime, they provoked the regime to launch repression that only confirmed the resistance movement's description of the tyrannical regimen, and they also generated a common opinion that only the guerrilla and the armed struggle would be able to crush the regime.

If we cite *Bolivia* as an example of the unsuccessful guerrilla attempts, the two decisive factors, as Che saw it, were the lack of communication with and recruitment from the cities, and the lack of response from the peasants.¹⁶ Behind these problems, however, is the fact that the guerrilla in Bolivia, and elsewhere, did not succeed in gradually gaining the confidence of its potential sympathizers by demonstrating increasing strength on its own side and proving the weakness of the enemy. In such a situation it was evidently also extremely difficult to develop any organized mass support for the guerrilla.

In *Nicaragua*, the armed actions from December 1974 up to the revolution followed a continuously rising spiral in vigour and extent. It started with the hostage action in the American Embassy, which, militarily considered, was a small action, but which had great political repercussions. After the lifting of the tremendous repression that was caused by this action, there followed the offensives of October 1977 and February 1978. These did not lead to the massive insurrection that the Insurreccional tendency had foreseen, but still they were a clear demonstration of the rapidly increasing strength of the FSLN. Then came the spectacular occupation of the National Assembly in August, 1978, and the first country-wide insurrection the following month. Even if the September insurrection did not achieve its objective of winning a definitive victory which had in fact also been the objective in October the year

¹⁵ Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro, Juan Almeida, Ramiro Valdés.

¹⁶ Guevara, Ernesto (Che), *El Diario del Che en Bolivia*. Siglo XXI, México, 1967, pp. 131, 152, 170, 232.

before – it was turned into a gigantic political victory for the FSLN and the armed struggle, and became a corresponding political defeat for Somoza. The effect of the September insurrection was really a classical example of accumulation of strength, and also of confidence and experience. From then on, everybody knew that it was only a question of time until the next confrontation, and both the guerrilla and the civil population attempts may well be seen as an extremely successful form of learning through “trial and error”.

One aspect of the timing of the ever more comprehensive actions, which perhaps was not clarified until after the revolution, was their importance for the *hegemonical struggle within the resistance movement*. The action in December 1974 came right after the establishment of the bourgeois opposition front UDEL, and contributed to focus on the armed resistance at a point when the bourgeoisie and the civil opposition were gathering strength. October 1977 was a direct answer to the bourgeois opposition being “on the verge of asserting hegemony in the crisis” after the lifting of the martial law, as Humberto Ortega expressed it. The same motive was also present before the occupation of the National Assembly in August 1978 when there were prospects for a coup d’état.

USA also made various attempts to strip the FSLN of its leading position in the resistance struggle through repeated attempts at coups d’états, negotiations, and proposals for a referendum. But at all these opportunities, the leadership of the FSLN showed an impressive tactical ability at regaining the hegemony. It seems logical to ask whether there could not have been other ways of gaining political hegemony than through military action. The answer has to do with the low level of mass organization in Nicaragua up to the latest phases of the struggle. As Humberto Ortega expresses it in relation to the occupation of the National Assembly: “We recognized that as we did not have any big party organization, as we did not have an organized working class, weapons were the only way demonstrating our political presence”.¹⁷

The very *dialectics of violence* also seems to have been decisive in Nicaragua. FSLN’s offensives of increasing strength and extent were invariably followed by more extensive repression from the regime. This repression in its turn caused a growing hatred against the regime, which finally – after the destruction of live cities in September 1978 – was almost total. Simultaneously, support for and confidence in the FSLN was increasing, and after September it was common throughout the population. The main effect of the repression from the Somoza regime was to cause total polarization between the regime and the armed resistance struggle. It was the compromising, cautious, moderate, and bourgeois resistance that was crushed through the repression, whereas the armed struggle only grew as a consequence of it. But it should not be concealed that in Nicaragua, as in so many other countries in Latin America, the armed struggle was also on the edge of being crushed.

To apply such a dialectic of violence in a conscious way as an important and integrated part of the revolutionary strategy, may seem very cynical. Supporters of non-violence may perhaps immediately reject it. In Nicaragua, the freedom struggle cost around 45,000 human lives. That is almost 2% of the local population. Humberto Ortega had the following answer when he was asked if the human and material costs of such a strategy had not been too high:

“This question has no sense, because it was the only way of achieving victory in

¹⁷ Humberto Ortega in the *Bohemia*-interview, op. cit.

Nicaragua.” “We simply paid the price for freedom.” “The Liberation movements have to learn that the price of their struggle will necessarily be even higher than ours. I, at least, am unable to imagine that a victory in Latin America or anywhere else can be achieved without the massive participation of the population and a total economic, political, and social crisis like that we experienced in Nicaragua”.¹⁸

3. The third element that I would like to point out in the analysis of the Nicaraguan revolution, is the FSLN’s *extremely flexible and successful alliance policy, nationally as well as internationally speaking*.

The *Cuban* revolutionary movement, the *26th of July-Movement*, was first and foremost a national, reform-oriented and anti-imperialistic movement, without any further ideological basis. It had never associated itself with Marxism and it was hardly accused of doing so by Batista. Therefore, it had no problems of an ideological character in achieving support from the bourgeois anti-dictatorial movement. It received relatively wide moral and political support, both nationally and internationally. The question of alliances, therefore, hardly existed as a problem for the 26th of July-Movement, if we exclude the problem of leadership and hegemony as treated above. From the moment when the Cuban revolution declared itself Marxist-Leninist, and at the same time presented itself openly as a centre for “the second Latin American freedom struggle”, which also was given an explicit Marxist-Leninist content, the guerrilla movements in other countries, in reality, excluded themselves from such alliances. Domestically, all groups that supported the guerrilla would be considered “communist”, which very few groups would be willing to risk. Internationally, it was considered fully legitimate for the US under president John F. Kennedy to launch a gigantic program for the building-up of strong counter-insurgency units within the national armies all over the Latin American continent. Their task was to crush the guerrillas, their methods to a large extent based on the experiences from Vietnam. No Latin American government apart from the Cuban, or any other Western government, would even dream of supporting a guerrilla such as Che Guevara’s in Bolivia.

It is already mentioned that the FSLN in *Nicaragua* from the start considered itself as a part of the “Cuban International”. But after Che’s defeat and death in Bolivia, and the corresponding fate of most of the guerrilla movements elsewhere on the continent, this “International” in reality faded out and died. This was of course also related to the internal political development of Cuba and its increasingly close relationship with the Soviet Union. Around 1970, the Soviet principle of peaceful co-existence had clearly prevailed as Cuba’s main line in Latin American politics. From now on it was more important for Cuba to break the US-directed diplomatic and economic blockade than to support guerrilla movements, which additionally no longer seemed able to succeed. The previously quoted Robert F. Lamberg, in his analysis of the guerrillas in 1971, came to the following conclusion (not seriously contested):

“Castro, the undisputed leader of the continental *guerrillismo*, had admitted that a repetition of Cuba, that a second liberation of Latin America through armed violence by means of guerrilla tactics, would not be realized”.¹⁹

This was the international situation that faced the FSLN during the seventies when the organization was to develop a realistic strategy and tactics for the armed resist-

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Lamberg, 1971, op. cit., p. 32.

ance struggle in Nicaragua. It was clear that the struggle had to be fought nationally without any substantial support. But the FSLN soon realized that this situation also offered new opportunities. By making the struggle a fully national, anti-imperialistic one in Sandino's tradition, Somoza's monotonous propaganda, accusing FSLN of being a tool of "international Communism", ceased to make any impression upon the larger sections of the opposition. Hereby the opportunity for the FSLN emerged to achieve a much broader social and political support than it or other guerrilla organizations in the sixties had achieved. In order to do this, the organization also started to tone down its ideological basis and political-strategic objectives. As we have seen, this materialized both through the creation of a fraction which did not define itself ideologically, and by the original organization, the so-called GPP-tendency, consciously toning down its ideological aspects. Of great importance in this respect was also the fact that FSLN could replace negatively regarded words like "socialism" and "communism" with the patriotic and national "Sandinism". The opening towards a broad national alliance broke through with the establishment of the oppositional group "The Twelve" (*Los Doce*) in 1977. The Twelve saw it as its main task to legitimize the FSLN and the armed struggle vis-à-vis the rest of the country's opposition.

Parallel to this, the leadership of the Insurreccional Tendency, which at this time lived abroad, started to build an international network of contacts. From 1977 onwards, representatives of the FSLN participated as observers at the conferences of the Socialist International (SI). The international movement of the social democratic parties in Western Europe had gradually begun to involve itself strongly in Latin America. In this respect, too, The Twelve seem to have played a significant role. Its most prominent leader, Sergio Ramírez, had for a long time stayed in Western Germany, where he had been in contact with circles within the SPD. The FSLN was never represented by any of its leaders at the conferences. Normally, the organization was represented by internationally recognized personalities like Ernesto Cardenal. FSLN members avoided associating themselves too directly with the International Social Democracy, which simultaneously maintained its alliance with the USA. In spite of this, however, the impression was spread that the Insurreccional Tendency was social democratic – as far as I know also within wide circles of the SI itself. This was a misunderstanding that the FSLN in fact saw no reason to clarify.

The alliance that the FSLN managed to build around itself in this way, made the armed struggle in Nicaragua a qualitatively different political challenge than the guerrilla movements had been in the sixties. Even if, at times, this led to doubts about hegemony in the struggle, such doubts as we have seen were elegantly clarified to the advantage of the FSLN.

FSLN's manoeuvres were so brilliant that the bourgeois opposition had at last no other alternative than to recognize the FSLN and the armed struggle as the vanguard of the struggle. Internationally, the FSLN succeeded in constructing a tremendously solid support group of all non-dictatorial regimes in Latin America headed by Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama and the Andean Pact, together with the social democratic governments and parties in Western Europe. We experienced the paradoxical fact that strongly pro-NATO and pro-USA parties and countries gave substantial political and material support to a guerrilla movement in Latin America. This would have been absolutely unthinkable ten years earlier. Just a Somoza's anti-communist propaganda now failed to make any impression on the bourgeois opposition in Nicaragua, USA's frenetic search for Cuban soldiers and weapons failed to impress in-

ternational opinion, including the pro-American one. This was the situation that confronted the US when its proposal of sending a "peace force" to Nicaragua was defeated in the OAS. It is hardly exaggerated to say that it was FSLN's policy of alliance that ruled out the option of a US-led invasion in Nicaragua.

In pure military terms, it is beyond doubt that the material support achieved by the FSLN through its international network of alliances contributed significantly to the military-technological strength it was able to demonstrate in the final struggle. This international situation also made it possible for militant internationalists from other Latin-American countries to join actively in the armed struggle in Nicaragua. Various international brigades came to Nicaragua before the final offensive, the most sensational one coming from Panama under the direction of Hugo Spadaforra. He resigned as vice-minister of health in order to direct the brigade. This internationalism perhaps was not of such a great military significance for the FSLN, but the political and symbolic value can hardly be exaggerated – not least in the countries from where the brigades came, where the regimes in many cases themselves were confronting guerrilla activity.

It was the same policy of alliances which formed the basis of FSLN's political plays parallel to the final struggle. In the government of five members, three were not directly associated with the FSLN and they were these three who represented the government externally, up to the revolutionary victory. By participating in this way through substitutes the FSLN avoided being directly committed by the "negotiations" that were carried out. The movement in this way maintained a much larger freedom of manoeuvre.

When an armed movement succeeds in building up a relatively broad alliance around itself, and where other groups in various way take part in the resistance struggle, disagreement tends to emerge as to how important each of the groups have been in the resistance struggle, in other words – what share of the honour belongs to each of them. This of course becomes important when the balance of power in the post-revolutionary regime has yet to be established. This problem arose in Cuba as well as in Nicaragua. Many US analysts in particular tend to argue that it was not Castro or the guerrilla that was decisive in the overthrow of Batista.²⁰ They point out that the middle class was alienated, that the rich felt insecure, that some generals betrayed Batista, that bishops sent pastoral letters, and even that the US introduced certain economic restrictions in its relation with Batista. Corresponding interpretations have also attemptedly been made in Nicaragua as a point of departure for a post-revolutionary struggle for hegemony there. The Secretary-general of the country's Private Enterprise Council (COSEP), William Báez, gave this typical expression of such an interpretation in an interview I made with him in February 1980: "Private enterprise really believes in this revolution, because we were a part of the movement against Somoza; we played an important role in destabilizing the regime..."

It has also been claimed that the social democratic support for the FSLN was the reason why the US failed to intervene in Nicaragua.

The question is, what provoked these reactions and how great their significance

²⁰ See, among others, Goldenberg, Boris: *The Cuban Revolution*, Frederick A. Praeger, New York 1965; Draper, Theodore: *Castroism: Theory and Practice*, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1966; Draper, Theodore: *Castro's Revolution: Myths and Realities*, Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1962. (References collected from Moreno, José A.: «Che Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare: Doctrine, Practice and Evaluation», in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Volume 12, nº 2, April 1970, pp. 114-133.)

have been in a total perspective. I am in agreement with the following conclusion on this issue, formulated by José A. Moreno at the University of Pittsburg. The conclusion is drawn from the study of the Cuban revolution, but to a large extent it is also valid in the Nicaraguan case:

"In my opinion, all these (above mentioned examples of resistance) are manifestations of a revolutionary situation, which was typical not only of Batista's Cuba, but of many other Latin American countries. By establishing a guerrilla, *foco*, Castro and his men affected the revolutionary situation in two ways: first they helped accelerate and spread the process of social disintegration of the old structure to the whole system, and second, they made people aware of such a situation".²¹

What is decisive then, is that the vanguard first contributes to creating subjective conditions for a revolutionary situation, then acts as a catalyst to elaborate this situation, and finally takes the lead in the mass struggle that leads up to the realization of the revolution. This line of development seems to have been even clearer in Nicaragua than in Cuba. But in both cases all attempts to generate doubt about the complete dominance of the revolutionary movement after the revolution have failed.

4. A tactical question of great significance for the revolution in Nicaragua should also be mentioned in such an analysis. I am referring to the question of *rearguards* as support for the armed struggle. The successful solution of this question in Nicaragua must be understood in the light of both the combination armed struggle/mass struggle, the policy of alliances, and favourable geographical and topographical conditions. In the case of *Cuba*, the cities constituted rearguards for the mountain guerrilla in the same way as the mountains were rearguards for the urban resistance. It was in the cities that the semilegal propaganda work was carried out; it was from there money, equipment and many new recruits came; it was through there that the links to the international support-work were maintained. Vice versa, resistance-people from the cities could flee to the mountains when their security was threatened, or in order to receive military training.

In the case of *Nicaragua* the relations between the city and the countryside were more intimate than in Cuba. Additionally, the FSLN also had access to neighbouring countries where important rearguards could be established. Of particular importance was Costa Rica, where the government virtually turned a blind eye to training camps and political activity. In Honduras, this activity had to be illegal, but even so it was of great importance. These options for retreat to the mountains as well as to the neighboring countries enabled the FSLN to admit itself the various trials and errors in armed mass insurrection. Had these options not been available to the guerrilla and supportive activists, these trials and errors could have led to a catastrophe.

IV. Conclusion

The "case of Nicaragua" in relation to the Cuban tradition of revolution, may be summarized as follows:

The thesis that guerrilla nucleus can create the necessary subjective conditions for the revolution was confirmed, if it is made clear that the function of the *foco* is defined and practiced on the basis of the objective conditions prevailing in each country. The conspicuous parallel between Cuba and Nicaragua in that respect is that, in both cases, one could struggle against a personalized and hated tyranny (Batista

²¹ Moreno, 1970, op. cit., p. 128-129.

and Somoza), and that the popular anti-imperialistic consciousness in these two countries was perhaps stronger than in any other country on the continent, for simple historical reasons that have been created by the US itself.

By comparing Nicaragua with the failed guerrilla experiments in the 60's, it seems possible to draw the conclusion that the principles of the Havana Conference in 1962, to give the armed struggle an explicit Marxist-Leninist content and to consider it as continental under Cuban leadership, were unsuccessful. The strategy of the FSLN, in direct contradiction to these principles, making the liberation struggle a *national* one through the construction of a broad *alliance* without yielding its hegemony, turned out to be the correct one. The thesis that the armed struggle had to be supplied with mass organization and urban insurrection, was earlier established as a theoretical principle, but never put into practice after the Cuban revolution. The most significant historical contribution of the FSLN may very well have been its transformation of this theory into a practical strategy.

As regards the thesis of the absolute political and military leadership of the guerrilla nucleus, and its function as an embryo of the army, party and state apparatus alike, Nicaragua has also served as a confirmation. True enough, the revolutionary movement gradually developed into something more than a guerrilla movement and the leadership in certain periods was not as homogeneous as the pure thesis indicated that it should be. But Sandinist unity finally was achieved. Neither has the FSLN so far developed into a party, although there is a clear tendency in that direction. But there can be no doubt that the organization today is the bearer of state power in Nicaragua. The common basic principle of this thesis, therefore, has undoubtedly been confirmed.