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Horse Thieves to Rebels to Dogs: Political Gang Violence and the State in the Western Segovias, Nicaragua, in the Time of Sandino, 1926–1934

MICHAEL J. SCHROEDER*

Abstract. This study of organised political violence in north-central Nicaragua from 1926 to 1934 focuses on the infamous Conservative gang leader Anastacio Hernández and on Sandino's rebels. The contexts of a weak central state and local-regional *caudillismo* are outlined. It is shown that after the 1926–27 civil war, Hernández and others produced ritualised spectacular violence in the service of their Chamorrista *caudillo* patrons. The language, practices, and characteristics of organised violence are examined. It is argued that Sandino's rebels appropriated these tools of political struggle, and that changes and continuities in the organisation of violence in Nicaraguan history merit greater attention.

In the early 1980s, in the flush of popular enthusiasm for the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, the old-time Sandinista Pedro Antonio Arauz penned a series of brief historical reminiscences about the era (1926–34) of his more famous brother-in-law, the national hero Augusto C. Sandino. One of his vignettes tried to capture some neglected features of the political turmoil that had engulfed the mountainous Segovias of north-central Nicaragua (see Map 1) – also the birthplace of Sandinismo – at the conclusion of the 1926–27 civil war. The story focused on the activities of a forty-eight year old Conservative gang leader and horse thief (*cuatrero*) named Anastacio Hernández:

* I would like to thank David C. Brooks, Fernando Coronil, Abdollah Dashti, Nora Faires, Lessie Jo Frazier, Jeffrey Gould, Carlos Jarquín, Paul Kobrak, Sabine McCormack, Jonathan Marwil, Rosario Montoya, John Peters, Karen Robert, Roger Rouse, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, Rebecca Scott, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on previous versions of this article; any errors are mine. Research and writing were supported by the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies of the University of Michigan, the Mellon Fellowships in the Humanities of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, and the Office of Research and the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Michigan-Flint.

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After the end of the Constitutionalist War (1926–27), there were small bands of thieves and armed men with national arms in different parts of the Segovias, acting of their own accord, and these were Conservatives, those who did not want to turn in their arms.... One such band was doing these things, murdering, robbing, raping, without the least concern for the anguish they were causing among the peasants. The chief of the band was named Anastacio Hernández Pérez. This man, with an overflowing barbarity, used to cut off the heads of those humble peasants who refused to serve him and stuff them in his saddlebags. His group had three guitars and an accordion, and he found the greatest pleasure in arriving in the valleys and meeting with the pretty women to dance all night long. He would remove the heads he had cut that day from his saddlebags and put them on a table, in plain view of the owners of the house, in order to induce a sense of terror (*para infundir terror*). And he would threaten the women who refused to go to the dance, and tell them, pointing to the table full of heads, ‘That’s where you’re going to end up.’ It was such an extreme terror, that he was pursued without mercy... and the terror finally stopped.¹

Arauz’s portrayal of the actions of the gang chief and his men provides a chilling glimpse into the most fundamental connections between violence, culture, and power in this place and time: the severed heads of recalcitrant peasants, stuffed into saddlebags and then lined up on tabletops, accompanied by music, song, dance, and presumably laughter, drink, torture, rape – a virtual celebration of death, terror, and the grotesque, a ritualised, eroticised public spectacle, layered thick with meaning and meant especially to be remembered. Anastacio Hernández, practitioner *par excellence* of gruesome political theatre, was the son of a middling cattle rancher and farmer from the *comunidad indígena* of Mosonte, a small and very old village and *municipio* in the northwestern Segovias near the Honduran border. One curt Marine Corps report described him as ‘Conservative, heavy, brutal face, pleasant to talk to, leader of Paguaga family “killers”, likes to fight with a machete, brave’.² Locally infamous as the ‘private assassin of the Paguagas’, he was the personal servant of the most powerful Conservative *caudillos* and families in the department of Nueva Segovia.³ What was Hernández doing, why was he doing it, and what did it mean? These are the puzzles this article seeks to engage, as

¹ Pedro Antonio Arauz, ‘Después de la terminación de la guerra constitucionalista’, unpubl. ms., Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo, Managua (currently Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua, hereafter IES), c. 1980. Hernández was euphemistically dubbed a ‘*cuatrero*’ by Luis Arturo Ponce of Ocotal, interview with the author, Ocotal, Oct. 1990.

² Untitled report describing active ‘bandits’, Office of the Director of Police, Ocotal, 11 Nov. 1927, United States National Archives and Records Administration, Washington D.C., Record Group 127, entry 43A, box 3, file B-2 Intelligence and Patrol Reports (hereafter cited as NA127/[entry]/[box]/[file]).

³ Quote from Intelligence Report, Ocotal, 8 Oct. 1927, NA127/198/1.

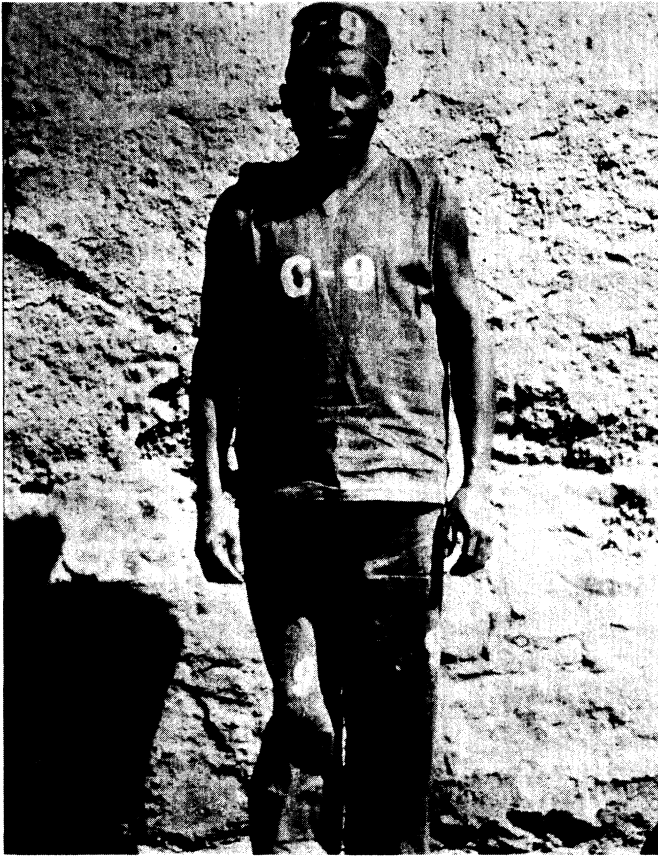


Fig. 1. Photograph of Anastacio Hernández, in the National Penitentiary, Managua, October 1928. Courtesy of US Naval Institute. Source: *United States Naval Institute, Proceedings*, vol. 59, January 1933, p. 29. I am grateful to David C. Brooks for this reference.

points of entry into some neglected contours of a much discussed but still dimly understood political past.

Nicaragua's tortuously violent history is by now the subject of an expansive literature. Yet in all of this there appears little of the violence itself, despite its pervasiveness throughout much of Nicaragua's modern history.⁴ Scant attention has been paid to how violence has been organised

⁴ For general introductions see John A. Booth, *The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution* (Boulder, 1985); Thomas W. Walker, *Nicaragua: Land of Sandino* (Boulder, 1981); for a useful bibliographic guide see 'Background Books: Nicaragua', *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1988), pp. 140–1. On the civil wars of the 19th century see E. Bradford Burns, *Patriarch and Folk: The Emergence of Nicaragua, 1798–1858* (Cambridge, 1991); José Dolores Gámez, *Historia de Nicaragua desde los tiempos prehistóricos hasta 1860* (Managua, 1889), and *Historia moderna de Nicaragua* (Managua, 1975); Fruto Chamorro, *Estudio sobre la ubicación histórica, sociológica e ideológica de los*

and practiced, and importantly, to how organised violence has expressed and shaped social struggles, social identities, and the nature of politics and the state. The present enquiry thus confronts a significant historiographic silence, a collective erasure – itself the product of a complex cultural materialist process – that situates this essay on the margins of most post-1979 research and debate.⁵ One result of the considerable outpouring of scholarship on Nicaragua over the past fifteen years has been an enhanced understanding of the formation of the Somocista state (1936–79), its principal modes of domination, and of popular struggles against its ruling blocs and the interests they represented.⁶ Yet the nature and exercise of power under its predecessor states, the multifaceted character of social and political struggles in the decades before 1936, and the question of how the organisation of violence changed over time, remain largely unexamined.⁷ This study of organised political gang violence in north-central Nicaragua

partidos políticos de Nicaragua (León, Nicaragua, 1961); José Coronel Urtecho, *Reflexiones sobre la historia de Nicaragua* (León, Nicaragua, 1962). For Sandinista-centric interpretations see Jaime Wheelock Román, *Imperialismo y dictadura* (Managua, 1985), and *Raíces indígenas de la lucha anticolonialista en Nicaragua* (Managua, 1985); Centro de Investigación y Estudios de la Reforma Agraria (CIERA-MIDINRA), *Nicaragua: ... Y por eso defendemos la frontera* (Managua, 1984); Oscar René Vargas, *La revolución que inició el proceso, Nicaragua, 1893–1909* (Managua, 1990), and *La intervención norteamericana y sus consecuencias, Nicaragua, 1910–1925* (Managua, 1989). Also read Karl Bermann, *Under the Big Stick* (Boston, 1986). For a more theoretically informed treatment see Carlos M. Vilas, *The Sandinista Revolution* (New York, 1986), chaps. 1–2. For more empirically grounded scholarship see Richard Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty* (New York, 1979); Knut Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza, 1936–1956* (Chapel Hill, 1993); Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912–1979* (Chapel Hill, 1990).

⁵ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977).

⁶ On the Somocista state see especially Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza*; Gould, *To Lead as Equals*; Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty*; and Paul Coe Clark, Jr., *The United States and Somoza, 1933–1956: A Revisionist Look* (Westport, 1992). For a useful bibliographic guide to the late Somoza and Sandinista periods, see Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales (CRIES), 'La política económica en Nicaragua, 1979–1988', *Cuadernos de pensamiento propio* (Managua, 1989).

⁷ It is sadly the case the Nicaraguan historiography remains nearly as impoverished and underdeveloped as the country itself. The considerable pre-1979 literature on the civil wars of the 19th century consists mainly of political chronicles and polemics (for a bibliographic guide see Wheelock, *Raíces indígenas*). The historiographic revolution paralleling the 1979 Sandinista Revolution advanced historical understanding in important ways; at the same time much of this literature tends to shoehorn pre-1930s social struggles into a handful of categories: anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist/nationalist, anti-oligarchic, and anti-capitalist or class (see the Sandinista-oriented works cited above). Little scholarly attention has been paid to struggles and motivations that do not fit neatly into these categories. Important exceptions include Gould's work (cited above and below), Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza*, and Charles Hale, *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894–1987* (Stanford, 1994).

in the 1920s and 1930s is thus offered as a critical intervention into a range of neglected but centrally important questions and issues.

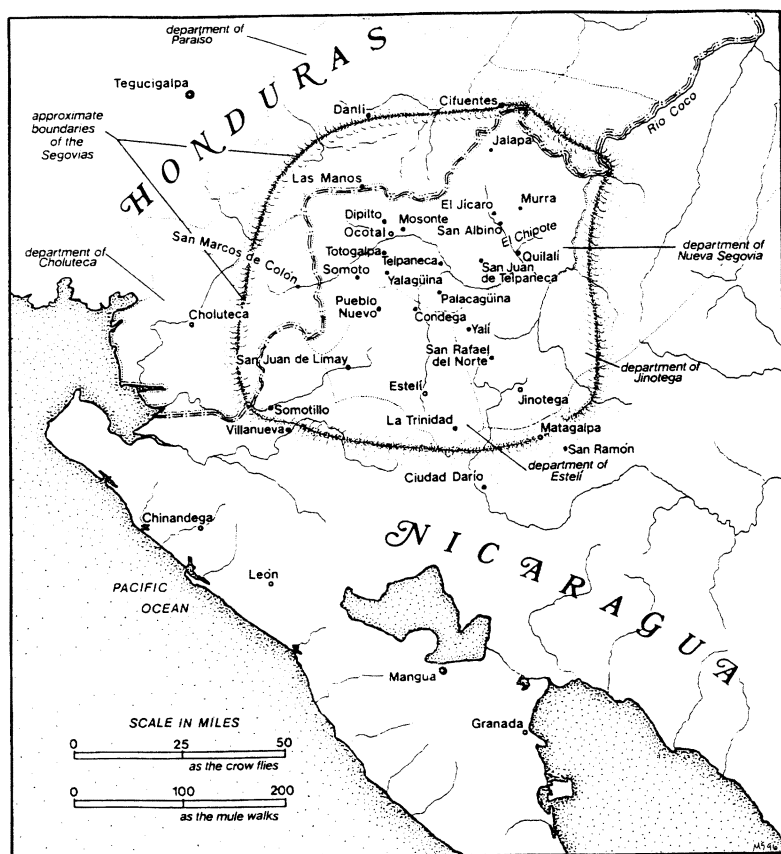
The violence perpetrated by Anastacio Hernández and his gangs represented the last gasps of a dying regime and its vision of state and society, a desperate bid to retain power that ultimately failed. The decade between the 1926–27 civil war and the consolidation of Somoza's regime after 1936 represented a pivotal moment in Nicaraguan history that saw fundamental changes in the organisation of violence, politics, and the state. By the time of Sandino's assassination in 1934, for the first time in Nicaraguan history, all significant means of organised coercion had been successfully monopolised by the central state. In the space of a decade, modes of political domination had shifted from those of an economically modernising Old Regime, committed to a decentralised state and rule by local-regional *caudillos* – epitomised by '*el último caudillo*' Emiliano Chamorro – to those of a substantially modern, centralised, bureaucratic-authoritarian capitalist state.⁸ The nationalist, anti-imperialist rebellion led by Sandino (1927–34) was key to this process, as both an expression of the incapacities of the Old Regime and as a catalyst for the consolidation of more modern state forms. Sandino's rebels, appropriating the Old Regime's ways of violence in order to strike at its decaying foundations, and at the expanding foundations of the new, provoked even more intense US political and military intervention, the rapid growth of a professionalised army (the Guardia Nacional), and the centralisation and consolidation of the state they were determined to supplant. The violence of Conservative gang leaders like Hernández, and of Sandino's peasant-worker-Indian rebels, thus serve here as exemplars of modes of elite domination and popular struggle, with deep and abiding roots in the political culture of the country and region, and on the cusp of far-reaching changes.

The first sections of this article situate the Hernández violence within overlapping contexts, the broadest of which is conceived as the process of postcolonial nation-state formation: Hernández can only be understood in relation to the historically developed peculiarities and weaknesses of the Nicaraguan state and the consequent localisation of power and authority in the countryside. The corollary of a weak state being strong regions, regionalism forms a second context, and the violence is situated within the unique political-cultural milieu of the Segovias, a rugged, isolated, and strategically located frontier region with its own exceedingly complex and violent past. The violence is then located within the more immediate historical conjuncture of the 1926–27 civil war and its aftermath. It is

⁸ Emiliano Chamorro, *El último caudillo: autobiografía* (Managua, 1983).

shown than Hernández, and many others like him, were acting at the behest of regional Conservative *caudillos* who had been entrenched in power for most of a generation, whose party had lost the 1926–27 civil war, and who were using violence and terror in a last-ditch bid to defend their power.

Once these contexts are established I turn to the violence itself. Using twenty eyewitness depositions and the prison declarations of Anastasio Hernández (see Figure 1) and his occasional partner José Torres, I attempt a more sociological and cultural reading of the violence, in order to show something of how it was conceived and crafted, its vocabulary and practices, how it was both closely tied to national politics *and* fundamentally local, with a local life and momentum of its own. Finally I turn to the rebel movement led by Sandino, a product of the same time, the same place, and many of the same processes, which replicated in many ways the violence of the Conservative gangs, despite its very different



Map 1. *The Segovias of Nicaragua, c. 1926–1934.*

aims. Sandino's rebels, this article maintains, refashioned for their own ends the timeworn tools of the dominant classes of the Segovian countryside: the idioms and practices of gang warfare, gang violence, and ritual terror in pursuit of political power. And in so doing they unintentionally accelerated the consolidation of the Somocista state.

Postcolonial State Formation or the 'Localisation of Sovereignties' in Nicaragua and the Segovias

In 1847, Pedro Francisco de la Rocha of Granada lamented 'the localisation of sovereignties' that had prevented the formation of a unified Nicaraguan nation and state since independence in 1821.⁹ Since that time Rocha's lament, expressed by scores of observers and analysts, has comprised a dominant theme in the literature on Nicaragua before Somoza. In 1889, José Dolores Gámez, the most prolific of the 19th century chroniclers, decried the 'frightful anarchy ... [and] militarism, this cancer that surrounds Hispanic American societies'; nearly a century later, Humberto Belli, grappling with Nicaragua's 19th century failure to create a centralised state, pointed to the 'jealousy' of the 'oligarchy ... jealous of their autonomy ... jealous of their independence and personal power'.¹⁰ But the answer to the question 'Why anarchy?' can be found in neither cancers nor jealousies; instead it must be sought in an empirically grounded and theoretically informed historical analysis – which this article does not pretend to offer – of the forms and formation of the state. Recent critical interventions in state theory, building on Weber and Marx in particular, emphasise a constellation of processes which together define the formation of 'modern' states: most fundamentally, the state's successful monopolisation of the legitimate use of violence, invariably coupled with the development of more intensive taxation strategies and the extension of national and transnational capitalist market networks; the growth of an administrative and bureaucratic apparatus that works to survey, regulate and control the populace under its jurisdiction; the construction of a shared sense of the state's moral legitimacy in the eyes of a critical mass of the citizenry (and of other states); the state's emergence as an 'organ of moral discipline' which works to transform and regulate moral sensibilities as much as economic structures and class

⁹ Pedro Francisco de la Rocha, 'Revista política sobre la historia de la revolución de Nicaragua' (orig. Granada: Imprenta de la Concepción, 1847), reprinted in *Revista del Pensamiento Centroamericano*, no. 180 (July–Sept. 1983), p. 25.

¹⁰ Gámez, *Historia de Nicaragua*, pp. 389, 463; Humberto Belli, 'Un ensayo de interpretación sobre las luchas políticas nicaragüenses (de la Independencia hasta la Revolución Cubana)', *Revista del Pensamiento Centroamericano*, no. 32 (Oct.–Dec. 1977), pp. 50–1.

relations; and insertion within a larger system of sovereign nation-states.¹¹

Across Central America – as across New Spain, the Andes, and Latin America generally – three hundred years of Spanish colonialism created not the rudiments of a modern nation-state but webs of hierarchical power relationships based, at bottom, on the patriarchal family, patron–client relations, and radically asymmetrical access to productive resources – especially land – and further segmented by region, city, town and village. In Nicaragua, as elsewhere, the process of postcolonial state formation reflected this legacy. Forms of identity and relations of power that had emerged over the preceding three centuries proved far more robust and resilient than any emergent sense of national identity or collective will to construct a genuinely national (or Central American) state. In Nicaragua this took the form, at one level, of the regional schism between Liberal León and Conservative Granada. At stake was nothing less than control of the state and the allocative and authoritative resources associated with it – and as scholars and observers since Dana Munro (writing in 1918) have emphasised, battles for control of the state and its sundry offices have historically comprised the principal source of political strife and organised episodic violence in Nicaraguan history.¹²

¹¹ Quote from Emile Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (London, 1957), p. 72. Landmark critical interventions in state theory include Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1979); Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, vol. II, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Berkeley, 1987); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), and *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York, 1984); and Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, 2 vols. (Los Angeles, 1986, 1993), esp. vol. II, chap. 3. A more compelling analysis of postcolonial Central American state formation might emerge through a sustained critical dialogue between the analytical frameworks developed in this comparative historical sociology and the considerable body of liberal and dependista-Marxist-oriented political-economic histories of Nicaragua and Central America, including Dana Munro, *The Five Republics of Central America* (Oxford, 1918); Héctor Pérez-Brignoli, *A Brief History of Central America* (Oxford, 1989); Edelberto Torres-Rivas, *History and Society in Central America* (Austin, 1993); Ralph Lee Woodward, *Central America: A Nation Divided* (Oxford, 1976), and ‘Central America from Independence to c. 1870’, *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, ed. Leslie Bethell, Vol. III, *From Independence to c. 1870* (Cambridge, 1985); James Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus* (London, 1988); and Robert G. Williams, *States and Social Evolution: Coffee and the Rise of National Governments in Central America* (Chapel Hill, 1994); and on Nicaragua, Alberto Lanuza, Juan Luis Vásquez, Amaru Barahona, and Amalia Chamorro, *Economía y sociedad en la construcción del estado en Nicaragua* (San José, Costa Rica, 1983).

¹² Dana G. Munro, *The Five Republics of Central America* (Oxford, 1918), esp. chap. 9. See also Fernando Jarquín, Jefe Político of Estelí, annual report to Ministerio de Gobernación, 1924, p. 211, in Records of the United States Department of State Relating to the Internal Affairs of Nicaragua, 1910–1929 (hereafter USDS), 817.00/4998; Whiting Williams in *The New York Times*, 21 Aug. 1927; C. B. Carter,

Such battles were not confined to the major urban centres of the Pacific littoral. Outside the cities, political and military power were wielded and contested by local and regional caudillos. *Caudillo* power, in turn, derived from a combination of factors: private ownership of large tracts of land; dense webs of personalistic, patrimonial relationships in city and countryside; personal control of local and regional state offices; and personal control of the means of organised violence. Despite the existence of a National Army with a formal command structure, the state held no monopoly over the legitimate use of violence, especially in rural areas; rather, regional *caudillos* created conditions more akin to a loose oligopoly.¹³

Battles for control of the state and its offices thus formed one key axis of social struggle. Battles over land, labour and the products of labour formed another. Across the country, class divisions ran deep. The observations of one US Marine analyst, writing of the Segovias in 1929, are broadly generalisable across time and space: 'The people everywhere are poor... the wealth of this area is in the hands of a comparative few [whose] wealth is derived from the rural sections.'¹⁴ By the late 1920s, capitalist social relations had only begun to emerge in select subregions, and on the whole remained subordinate to non-capitalist production relations. Throughout the first century of independence, national and regional markets remained small, links to the world capitalist economy tenuous, transport and communications infrastructures rudimentary, and more traditional social relations deeply resistant to change.¹⁵ The resultant political and social fragmentation was expressed in a long and bloody process of intra-elite civil war pitting local and regional power networks

'The Kentucky Feud in Nicaragua,' *The World's Work*, no. 54 (July 1927), pp. 312-21; cf. Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza*, pp. 15-26 ff., and Michael J. Schroeder, "'To Defend Our Nation's Honor": Toward a Social and Cultural History of the Sandino Rebellion in Nicaragua, 1927-1934', unpubl. PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1993, chaps. 3-5.

¹³ Cf. Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza*, chap. 1.

¹⁴ General Data, Northern Area, Western Nicaragua, Dec. 1, 1929, NA127/205/2/16D.

¹⁵ Jaime Wheelock's pioneering work was among the first to link the spread of the coffee economy and capitalist production relations to the Matagalpa Indian Uprising of 1881 and other episodes of rural unrest in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; see his *Imperialismo y dictadura* and *Raíces indígenas*. More recently, Jeffrey Gould has shown that capitalist production relations and land dispossession in the highland coffee zones of Jinotega and Matagalpa had only begun during this period, and were of lesser moment in sparking unrest than forms of labour control, violations of customary rights, and indigenous religiosity; see his "'¡Vana ilusión!'" The Highlands Indians and the Myth of Nicaragua Mestiza', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 73, no. 3 (Aug. 1993), and 'El café, el trabajo, y la comunidad indígena de Matagalpa, 1880-1925', in Héctor Pérez-Brignoli and Mario Samper (eds), *Tierra, café, y sociedad* (San José, 1994), pp. 279-376.

against one another, entwined with many layers and kinds of struggle between dominant and subordinate groups, and complicated further by the long history of US imperialist intervention. Until the consolidation of Somoza's regime in the late 1930s, in short, state power remained subordinate to other networks of power, with the state unable to consolidate its authority over the physical domain over which it claimed exclusive sovereignty.¹⁶

If postcolonial Nicaragua as a whole was characterised by the decentralisation of legitimate authority or 'localisation of sovereignties,' this was especially true of the Segovias, one of the most politically volatile regions of the country. A rugged, mountainous frontier region with a bewilderingly complex physical and human geography, the Segovias have long formed a unique, and uniquely violent, space in the political-cultural landscape of Nicaragua. During periods of civil war, the chronically tenuous hold of the national state on the region has essentially dissolved altogether – as during the National War of the 1850s and its popular prelude in the 1840s, the civil wars of 1910–12, and the civil war of 1926–27 (and, to a lesser degree, in the *contra* war of the 1980s).¹⁷ In the context of a weak state and rugged geography, the region's chronic political turbulence stems from two principal sources: the historical development of its political economy, including the survival of a substantial Indian population and the progressive (if punctuated) erosion of Indian *comunidades*' landholdings and political autonomy, and the region's strategic geo-political location as a frontier zone between Honduras and Nicaragua.

Let us first consider political economy. Prior to Spanish conquest the western Segovias supported a relatively dense sedentary population. The warfare, forced labour, slave trade and diseases of conquest reduced the population of the region by upwards of 90%. Recovery was exceedingly gradual. Well into the 18th century the chief economic activities were swidden agriculture and animal husbandry carried out by the few, small, and impoverished *comunidades indígenas*, along with some lumbering and gold mining. *Comunidades*, granted status as corporations with inalienable rights in land, were linked to the Spanish Crown and local notables

¹⁶ See Walter, *The Regime of Anastacio Somoza*, pp. 8–14; for a comparative treatment of the formation of European states over a 1000-year period see Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (London, 1990), pp. 87–91 ff.

¹⁷ For relevant literature on the 19th century see Burns, *Patriarch and Folk*; on 1909–1912 see Vargas, *La intervención norteamericana*, pp. 38–56, and Bermann, *Under the Big Stick*, chaps. 8–9; on the *contra* war consult the staff of the Resource Center of the Americas (formerly Central America Resource Center), 317 17th Ave. SE, Minneapolis, MN, 55414.

through various forms of labour obligation and tribute. From the mid-18th century, privately-owned *haciendas* devoted mainly to cattle began to emerge in the area, particularly in the rocky, semi-arid region between Pueblo Nuevo and Estelí, and further north around Ocotal and Somoto. Around the same time, 'mixed race' individuals and families at the margins of colonial society began to migrate into the region, building huts and planting subsistence crops, typically in a dispersed settlement pattern and without legal title to the land. These processes continued into the independence period, resulting in the formation of an extremely diversified and locally variable regional political economy.¹⁸

The liberal revolution hit the Segovias in the last quarter of the 19th century. Beginning in 1877, the national state passed a series of laws designed to stimulate coffee production, privatise Indian lands, and exercise greater control over the rural labour force. After 1880, coffee planters and the state radically intensified their assault against the land and labour of the rural poor, while the moribund mining industry underwent intensive expansion and capitalisation, especially in the El Jícaro region. By the first decades of the 20th century, the Segovias were in the midst of a partial and uneven transition to capitalist social relations. There is much to indicate that for most peasants, tenants, day labourers, and other direct producers – Indian and mestizo, who together comprised from 80 to 90 % of the region's inhabitants – these violent, wrenching changes generated deep animosities against the state and its local agents, landlords, ranchers, coffee growers, mineowners and the dominant classes in general. This is not to suggest that violent transformations in production relations generated intensified political violence, or that the liberal revolution destroyed all unequal but reciprocal relations binding direct producers to more powerful patrons. It is, rather, to emphasise that by the first decades of the twentieth century, many such patron-client relations had been substantially eroded, and that a substantial proportion of the region's labouring poor had accumulated plenty of reasons to lend their support

¹⁸ On this and the following paragraph see Murdo J. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America: A Socioeconomic History, 1520–1720* (Berkeley, 1973); William L. Sherman, *Forced Native Labor in Sixteenth-Century Central America* (Lincoln, 1979); Linda A. Newson, *Indian Survival in Colonial Nicaragua* (Norman, OK, 1987); David R. Radell, 'Historical Geography of Western Nicaragua: The Spheres of Influence of León, Granada, and Managua, 1519–1965,' unpubl. PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1969; Germán Romero Vargas, *Las estructuras sociales de Nicaragua en el siglo XVII* (Managua, 1976); CIERA, *Nicaragua*; Gould, '¡Vana ilusión!' and 'El café, el trabajo, y la comunidad indígena.' On violence as a 'background condition' in Latin American cattle frontier regions generally, see Silvio R. Duncan Baretta and John Markoff, 'Civilization and Barbarism: Cattle Frontiers in Latin America', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Oct. 1978).

to messages and movements demanding a greater measure of social justice in land, labour and ethnic relations.¹⁹

A glance at a map (see Map 1) reveals a second major reason for the region's chronic instability and violence: an isolated frontier zone equidistant from the power centres of Honduras and Nicaragua (midway between Tegucigalpa and the León-Managua-Granada axis), for the better part of two centuries the western Segovias have served as a conduit for revolutionary armies crossing to and from Nicaragua and Honduras – as well as for smugglers, bandits, and outlaws of every political stripe and description. Historically, armed gangs have flourished on both sides of the border, and mushroomed during times of state crisis, especially in the arc reaching from Somotillo in the south to Las Manos in the north, and embracing the Honduran departments of Choluteca and Paraíso and the towns of San Marcos de Colón and Danlí (see Map 1).²⁰ While some gangs were composed of independent brigands, most worked at the behest of regional bosses and revolutionary movements against one or the other government in power.

The border itself was crucial to the historical development of the post-independence Segovias, generating a kind of warping of political-military-juridical space. Where official national political jurisdictions ended, unofficial local ones began; where national armies were compelled to see a geo-political boundary between two sovereign nation-states, local *caudillos* and gangs saw a fluid frontier zone that held enormous opportunities for power and profit. The very existence of the border commonly meant political refuge and safe havens from which men and *matériel* were organised. It also stimulated smuggling and a flourishing market in contraband – most commonly tobacco, liquor, and guns. In practice the western Segovias did not end at the border, which was ill-

¹⁹ This becomes especially apparent in the widespread popular support enjoyed by Sandino's rebels. According to the 1920 census, of all departments in Nicaragua, Nueva Segovia and Jinotega had the highest percentage of farmers, cattlemen, and others who owned or rented land (62 % and 63 % respectively), and the lowest percentage of rural wage labourers (28 % and 29 % respectively); in Nueva Segovia, more than 90 % of the population fell into the following four categories: domestic labourers (*oficios domésticos*), without employment (*sin oficios*), agriculturists (*agricultores*), and wage labourers (*jornaleros*). Oficina Central del Censo, *Censo general de 1920* (Managua, 1920).

²⁰ For instance, the crises of the Honduran state from 1922 to 1924 provoked waves of armed bands of Honduran revolutionaries to move into adjacent areas of the Segovias; the León daily *El Centroamericano* reported on 19 Feb. 1922 that an armed band of Hondurans under Ramón Romero Rodríguez was near Somotillo; on 1 Apr., that 500 'Honduran revolutionaries' were in San Francisco de Guajiniquilapa; on 12 May, that 200 men under Honduran General Martínez were in Nicaraguan territory north of Ocotal; on 8 July, that several Honduran revolutionary bands were near Somotillo; on 6 Jan. 1924, that 300 Honduran troops were just outside of Somoto; on 8 Feb. 1924, that hundreds of Honduran refugees were in and around Ocotal; similar reports continued until at least early 1933.

defined or contested even in well populated areas. Rather, people on both sides were enmeshed in a broader political culture which revolved, in large part, around the effects of the border itself.²¹

Yet in virtually all of the literature on Nicaraguan civil warfare before 1927, the Segovias appear maddeningly distant, blurred from vision by vague generalities and stock descriptions of destruction and anarchy – ‘vandalous incursions in all directions’; ‘pillage and devastation’; ‘groups of bandits devastating the towns with depredations and robbery’.²² But such generalities only beg the questions: How exactly was violence organised and practiced in the Segovias? Who were its principal patrons and perpetrators, and how were its victims victimised? And how did locally produced violence help to construct local sovereignties and undermine the power of the central state? The following sections attempt to address these questions, beginning with a closer look at who had what to lose in the wake of the 1926–27 civil war.

Political control in the western Segovias, 1911–27

The Chamorrista faction of the Conservative Party dominated Nicaraguan politics for most of nineteen years, from the overthrow of the Liberal dictator José Santos Zelaya in late 1909 until the presidential elections of November 1928. For most of this period, provincial Conservatives under the titular leadership of Emiliano Chamorro held a stranglehold on the political offices of the northern departments. In Nueva Segovia, the leading Conservative families of the departmental capital of Ocotal – Paguaga, Lobo, Gutiérrez, Albir, Ortez, Jarquín, Calero and Aguirre in particular – directly and indirectly controlled virtually all political posts, including the *jefaturas políticas*, the seats in the National Assembly, the sundry local branches of the executive, the judgeships, the municipal police, and the mayorships.²³ While Zelayista and other Liberals chafed at the bit, electoral fraud, violence, and intimidation were routinely employed to retain Conservative control.²⁴

²¹ On borders, frontiers and states see Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence*, pp. 49–52, 79–90 ff.; on these phenomena in the Segovias see Schroeder, ‘To Defend Our Nation’s Honor’, chaps. 3–5, 7.

²² Quotes from Rocha, ‘Sobre la historia de la revolución de Nicaragua’, pp. 39, 51, 57.

²³ Interviews by the author with Luis Arturo Ponce, Ramón Salgado Lobo, and other prominent elderly members of the Liberal and Conservative parties in Ocotal who wish to remain anonymous, Ocotal, Oct. 1990. Lack of evidence prevents a conclusive demonstration that all of these posts were Conservative-controlled from 1912 to 1927, but Conservatives controlled the executive branch and *jefaturas políticas* from 1912 to 1924 and 1925 to 1927, and this and the evidence presented below makes this a reasonable supposition.

²⁴ From 1911 to 1924 the Conservative-dominated national state and local Conservative *candillos* controlled most political posts across the country. In 1924 the Liberal Nationalist Party (a Liberal-Conservative coalition of Conservative presidential

After the formal end of the 1926–27 civil war, the elderly patriarchs of three of the leading Conservative families of Ocotal emerged as the chief sponsors of the Hernández violence: Gustavo Paguaga, Abraham Gutiérrez Lobo, and Pedro Lobo. Sadly, the available evidence permits only glimpses into the life histories of these provincial potentates. It is known that all had been key players in the Byzantine world of local-national politics since at least the last civil war. Gustavo Paguaga, evidently the most powerful *candillo* in Nueva Segovia, had been active in politics since the time of Zelaya; in 1906, he, José Paguaga, Ramón Lobo, and other members of the Ocotal ruling elite invited the Liberal President Zelaya to a dance and party in Ocotal (an irony not lost on the editors of the Liberal newspaper which reported the event more than twenty years later).²⁵ He continued his political career in the prominent posts granted him during the next fourteen years of Conservative rule (1910–1924).²⁶ Salvador Paguaga was appointed President of the Board of Elections for Nueva Segovia for the 1924 elections, and *Comandante de Armas* for the

candidate Carlos Solórzano and Liberal vice-presidential candidate Juan Bautista Sacasa) won in Nueva Segovia with 82% of the vote, again permitting Emiliano Chamorro and his Conservative allies, via President Solórzano, to appoint their allies to the political posts in the region; see Consejo Nacional de Elecciones, *Informes sobre las elecciones de autoridades supremas, 1924 y 1928, República de Nicaragua* (Managua, 1929), pp. 17, 37. The evidence indicates that Nueva Segovia Conservatives retained power during the turbulent 1923–1925 Martínez-Solórzano period; e.g., Gustavo Paguaga was *Ministro de Gobernación*, 1923–1924; Abraham Gutiérrez Lobo was *Comandante de Policía* in Ocotal in 1924; and José María Paguaga was Senator in the National Assembly in 1925; sources detailed below. In Sept. 1926, Emiliano Chamorro appointed Conservative Luis Paguaga Interim President of the Departmental Electoral Council for Nueva Segovia, and in the November 1926 elections for Deputy seats which he supervised, the Conservative candidates Domingo Calero and Abraham Gutiérrez Lobo won with 99% of the votes (808 to six) over the Liberal candidates Camilo López Irías and Adán Maradiaga, an outcome clearly indicating massive electoral fraud; see *La Noticia*, 30 Sept. and 16 Dec. 1926; figures from 16 Dec. The 1927 municipal elections were cancelled due to the violence and disorder produced by the Conservatives expressly for that purpose; see below. In the elections of 1928, probably the first elections in Nicaraguan history in which outright fraud played an inconsequential role, the Liberal party won handily in the district of Somoto – 58% to 42% – but lost by a small margin in the district of Ocotal – 48% to 52% (Consejo Nacional de Elecciones, p. 55). The latter results were evidently due to the atmosphere of violence and intimidation the Conservatives created in order to retain political control, as detailed below.

²⁵ On 25 Aug. 1927, *La Noticia* published this historic document of March 1906, noting that ‘now the Paguagas are the most terrible persecutors of Liberalism in Ocotal’.

²⁶ As Senator in the National Assembly in the late 1910s; *Jefe Político* of Nueva Segovia in the early 1920s; *Ministro de Gobernación* under Presidents Diego Chamorro and Bartolomé Martínez, 1923–1924; Deputy in the National Assembly for Nueva Segovia, 1925–1928, and again, 1928–1932. *El Centroamericano*, 8 March 1922, 30 Nov. 1923, 10 Jan. 1924, 1 June 1924; Dennis to Kellogg, Managua, 11 Dec. 1926, USDS 817.00/4355; Consejo Nacional de Elecciones, p. 58.

department in 1926; Luis Paguaga was named to the former post for the 1926 elections; José María Paguaga was Ocotál's Deputy in the National Assembly in 1910, and appointed Senator in the National Assembly by Emiliano Chamorro in 1925.²⁷ Vicente, Celso, Jesús, Emilio, and Gonzalo Paguaga (the relations between all of these Paguagas is unclear), while evidently not as politically active as other members of their clan, did own large coffee and cattle estates, some near Dipilto to the northwest of Ocotál.²⁸

Abraham Gutiérrez Lobo, another of Hernández's principal patrons, was a prominent attorney, sometime District Judge, owner of considerable properties in and around Ocotál, and holder of various political offices from at least 1910.²⁹ His family's house still stands adjacent to Ocotál's central square, a position of prominence in the hierarchical space of the Spanish colonial town. The Gutiérrez family, like the Paguagas, Lobos, and others, imagined themselves as 'Spanish' – propertied, educated, cultured, white-skinned, of European physiognomy – a breed apart from the darker-skinned mestizos and 'primitive' *indios*.³⁰ A reactionary arch-Conservative in 1927, Abraham Gutiérrez was also a shrewd political opportunist, judging from his alliances with the brief Liberal Madriz regime in 1910, Conservative regimes from 1910 to 1924 and from 1925 to 1928, and the Liberal Moncada regime in 1929, when he was named *Administrador de Rentas* for Ocotál.³¹

The Lobo clan also formed part of this provincial elite. Pedro Lobo, another of Hernández's patrons, was a public accountant, employed by the US-owned San Albino Mine, a prominent merchant, owner of substantial landholdings around Ocotál and El Jícaro, and holder of numerous local political offices through the 1910s and 1920s.³² When the Marines occupied Ocotál in June 1927 he served as their chief translator; later in the year he served briefly as Chief of Police.³³ Ramón Lobo had been

²⁷ *El Centroamericano*, 21 and 22 Dec. 1923; *La Noticia*, 30 Sept. and 4 Nov. 1926; USDS 817.00/4355; *La Gaceta*, 27 Oct. 1924, in USDS 817.00/5030; Celia Guillén de Herrera, *Nueva Segovia* (Telpaneca and León, 1945), p. 232.

²⁸ Declarations of Anastacio Hernández, Miguel Hernández, and José Eulalio Torres, NA127/192/5/Hernández, Anastacio, hereafter cited as *Hernández File*.

²⁹ See fn. 27, above; in Memo to Major Schmidt from L. B. Reagan, Ocotál, 5 Mar. 1929 (NA127/220/2) Gutiérrez Lobo is identified as a former civil judge for Nueva Segovia; in 1918 Gutiérrez Lobo was accused of being a Zelayista and Administrador de Rentas during the brief regime of Madriz in 1910; Jeffrey L. Gould, personal communication.

³⁰ Interviews by the author, Ocotál, Oct. 1990.

³¹ On the latter post, *La Tribuna*, Managua, 13 March 1929.

³² *Hernández File*; Testimony of Lizandro Ardon Molina, IES interview no. 032, p. 2 (hereafter cited as IES [interview no.]: [page no.]); José Paul Barahona, IES untitled ms., begins 'A raíz del derrocamiento del gobierno de Solórzano', p. 2.

³³ *La Noticia*, 17, 20, 31 Aug. 1927; Nueva Segovia Expedition, V. F. Bleasdale, 21 Aug. 1927, NA127/43A/29.

politically active since at least the time of Zelaya; by the early 1920s he was one of the most prominent merchants in the department; Pastor Lobo was a wealthy cattle rancher, owner of the hacienda San Luis a few miles west of Ocotul.³⁴

The available sources reveal little about the ties that bound these provincial Conservative notables to Emiliano Chamorro's circle in Granada; documentary evidence on the subject is either non-existent or still in private hands. The work of Carlos Vilas and other suggests how reasonable it would be to surmise that such relations were densely woven, highly personalistic, structured around family networks, and infused with as much conflict and factionalism as cooperation and interdependence.³⁵ From an extant 1922 Liberal León newspaper, for instance, we learn that during the presidency of Diego Chamorro, the 'Paguaga brothers' had become leading members of a newly-formed 'Conservative League of the Segovias' under the (apparent) leadership of Vice-President Bartolomé Martínez. The League, painted as a major 'schism in the breast of Conservatism,' was reportedly 'formed by members of the same political colour in order to counteract the policies of President Chamorro, which have brought the departments of the north to ruin', and included prominent Conservatives from Estelí, Matagalpa, and Jinotega as well as Nueva Segovia.³⁶ On the other hand, provincial Conservatives often travelled to Granada and elsewhere to confer with their 'co-religionists'; some sent their children to boarding schools in the Granada area.³⁷ It is likely that relations among Conservatives within Ocotul itself were similarly double-edged, though here too the available evidence is slim.³⁸

³⁴ On Ramón Lobo, *El Centroamericano*, 7 May 1922; *La Noticia*, 25 Aug. 1927. According to one elderly resident of the region, interviewed in the early 1980s and commenting upon the process of land concentration in the early 20th century, 'Pastor Lobo had made a pact with the devil', accumulating his wealth through commerce, contraband, and land swindles. CIERA, *Nicaragua*, pp. 124–6. See also Intelligence information obtained from Abrosia López Alfaro, Somoto, 17 May 1932, NA127/202/1/1.3.

³⁵ See Carlos Vilas, 'Family Affairs: Class, Lineage and Politics in Contemporary Nicaragua', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, no. 24 (May 1992); also read David Whisnant, *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places: The Politics of Culture in Nicaragua* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

³⁶ *El Centroamericano*, 8 March 1922; see also Gould, 'El café, el trabajo, y la comunidad indígena', and '¡Vana ilusión!'.

³⁷ In May 1922 Ramón Lobo brought some of his children and a niece to Granada to enroll them in the schools there; *El Centroamericano*, 7 May 1922.

³⁸ Private archives in the region might hold some clues concerning the relations among and between leading Conservatives during this period. It is noteworthy that one Marine officer reported that 'The Paguagas apparently have no social contact with other people in the city and are generally poorly thought of'. Intelligence Report, 8 Oct. 1927, NA127/198/1. This is the only such report encountered, and it would be

In any case, by the mid-1920s the leading Liberals of the region, excluded from power for most of a generation, were determined to loosen the Conservative stranglehold – men like Alejandro Cedra of Pueblo Nuevo, José María Huete and Humberto Solís of Ocotal, and many others.³⁹ By mid-1926 they were given their chance.

Liberal-Conservative gang violence in the Segovias after Espino Negro

Emiliano Chamorro's *coup d'état* of 25 October 1925 sparked intense Liberal opposition and the Constitutionalist War of 1926–27. By the summer and fall of 1926, Liberal armies (or gangs or bands) began springing up all across western Nicaragua. Francisco Sequeira (or Cabulla), Benito López, Carlos Salgado, and more than a dozen other guerrilla chieftains began harassing government troops throughout the western Segovias and all along the Honduran border.⁴⁰ Further east, near El Jícaro, another band was organised by Augusto Sandino, formerly a mechanic in the oil fields of Mexico and more recently a clerk in the US-owned San Albino Mine. Armed bands would suddenly appear, attack a patrol or garrison, and either melt back into the populace or flee across the border into Honduras. While most such bands were linked in some fashion to the larger Constitutionalist movement led by Sacasa and Moncada, their organisation and mobilisation in the Segovias remained a mostly local affair.⁴¹ In response, Conservative powerholders across the region unleashed a wave of beatings, rapes, and murders against the Liberal-inclined civil populace.⁴² From the end of 1926 until May 1927, the Segovias were engulfed in full-blown civil war; in the words of one contemporary, by mid-January the entire region was 'in misery and desolation, houses on all sides filled with grief, haciendas ruined,

imprudent to accord it too much weight; as it stands it might be basically accurate, or a political foe's confidential whisperings into a green Marine's ear, or a Paguaga-inspired bid to divert attention.

³⁹ Elected as Deputies to the National Assembly in the elections of 1924 and expelled and replaced by Emiliano Chamorro after Oct. 1925; see Dennis to Kellogg, 11 Dec. 1926, USDS 817.00/4355; on Alejandro Cerda, a general in Moncada's Liberal Army, see NA127/209/2.

⁴⁰ *La Noticia*, 15, 28, 31 Aug. 1926; 1, 9, 20 Sept. 1926. On Cabulla see Miguel Jarquín Vallejos, *La muerte de Cabulla* (El Viejo, Nicaragua, 1974).

⁴¹ See Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', chap. 4.

⁴² Memories of these outrages remained strong into the 1980s; see the interview with Camilo Guillén in Claribel Alegría and D. J. Flakoll, *Nicaragua: la revolución sandinista* (Mexico D.F., 1982), pp. 51–4 ff., and the IES testimonies cited in Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', chap. 4.

businesses broken, crops destroyed, men mutilated by the most horrible of tortures...'.⁴³

Then, in a more famous episode, came Special Envoy Henry Stimson and the US-engineered Espino Negro Accords (or Treaty of Tipitapa) of 4 May 1927, which formally ended the war. The Accords called for, among other things, 'free and fair' US-supervised presidential elections in November 1928 – elections that the Liberals were expected to win in a landslide. Espino Negro thus ensured the end of the Chamorrista-dominated political *status quo*, and was the hinge upon which the Anastacio Hernández violence turned. As subsequent events made clear, the war between and among Liberals and Conservatives had a dynamic and momentum of its own which the peace accords transformed and deflected but by no means stopped. The civil war had ended, but lesser conflicts, especially in rural areas, continued apace. In fact, in the short-term the peace accords only added fuel to the fire. By calling for the creation of a lame-duck Conservative presidency (under Adolfo Díaz) which would rule for the next eighteen months, Espino Negro created a sure-fire recipe for continuing political violence. During these critical eighteen months, local gangs filled the power vacuum created by the dissolution of the national state, as periodic waves of Conservative violence coursed through every department in the country except the Conservative strongholds of Chontales, Boaco, Rivas and Granada.⁴⁴ The six months between May and November 1927 were especially explosive, with from twenty to thirty armed gangs mobilised by leading Conservatives in the Segovias alone.⁴⁵ Espino Negro called for both armies to demobilise, though hundreds of Conservative soldiers retained their weapons, while most Liberals, victorious in the field of battle, were disarmed. By late May the Marines and Guardia were only beginning to enter the Segovias, in response to the activities of Sandino's small group of rebels, busily engaged in the El Jícaro-El Chipote region, far to the north and east of the main zones of Conservative and Liberal gang activity.⁴⁶ Thus, most of the violence in the northern departments between May 1927 and

⁴³ Ignacio Vargas to Eberhardt, 18 Jan. 1927, USDS 817.00/4592.

⁴⁴ The major newspapers of the period chronicle this violence, including *El Diario Nicaragüense* (Granada), *La Noticia* (Managua) and *El Centroamericano* (León).

⁴⁵ They included gangs led by Timoteo Blanco, Juan Alberto Briones, Fidencio Carazo, David and Antonio Cárdenas, Francisco and José Castillo, Leoncio Díaz, Agustín Flores, Clemente Gaitan, Anastacio Hernández, Marcelino Hernández, Antonio Huete, Carlos Lobo, Santos Lobo, Encarnación López, Teodoro López, Simón Mendoza, José Martínez, Filemón Molina, Concepción Pérez, Tiburcio Polanco, Abelino Rodríguez, Julian Sevilla, Toribio Solórzano, José Eulalio Torres, and Medardo Vallejos; see *Hernández File*; *La Noticia*, 10 and 21 Aug., 28 Sept., 5 Oct., 3, 10, and 11 Nov. 1927; Intelligence Reports from Ocotil, June–Dec. 1927, NA127/198/1.

⁴⁶ On the Sandinistas during this period see Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', chaps. 6–8.

November 1928, which historians and others have attributed to the Sandinistas, was actually the work of local Liberal and Conservative gangs and their respective allies.⁴⁷

The most bitterly fought bone of contention among and between Liberals and Conservatives in the summer of 1927 stemmed from an ambiguous stipulation in the Espino Negro Accords which called for Liberals to assume immediate control over six of the country's twelve *jefaturas políticas*: León, Chinandega, Estelí, Nueva Segovia, Jinotega, and Bluefields. What the Accords did not stipulate was who would fill the posts under the new *jefes políticos*, particularly the judgeships, chiefs of police, and local tax collectorships. Moncada and his appointees demanded that these offices devolve to Liberal control; Díaz and the Conservatives balked, while the State Department walked a tightrope between the two still-warring parties.⁴⁸

Moncadista Liberals were generally euphoric at the prospect of genuinely 'free and fair' US-supervised elections in November 1928. Chamorrista Conservatives, on the other hand, fully expected to lose, and from May 1927 many worked feverishly to disrupt the electoral process. (Sandino, in turn, branded members of both parties 'traitors' precisely because the Accords mandated a continued US military presence.) The first recorded wave of political violence in the hills and valleys surrounding Ocotal took place less than three weeks after the treaty was signed, when Anastacio Hernández and his gang killed and mutilated six men, an episode described in greater detail below. By mid-1927, accusations against 'the Paguaga brothers', and especially Gustavo Paguaga, peppered the Liberal newspapers of León and Managua. 'The Paguagas should know that they have spilled the blood of many innocent people', announced the northern correspondent for *La Noticia* in mid-August, 'and that the public conscience is rising up against them, fingering them as the only ones responsible for the massacres committed in Mosonte, Dipilto, El Jícaro, and Telpaneca.'⁴⁹ One Ocotal Liberal correctly

⁴⁷ Anastacio Somoza, *El verdadero Sandino, o el calvario de las Segovias* (Managua, 1936), catalogued 23 murders and mutilations from Aug. to Nov. 1927 in the western Segovias and blamed all on the Sandinistas; most were probably the work of Conservative gangs. Two documented instances in which Somoza laid the blame at the wrong doorstep were the deaths of Marcos López and Claudio Gómez (*El verdadero Sandino*, p. 67), which eyewitness María Apolonia Muñoz (*Hernández File*) testified were the work of Anastacio Hernández.

⁴⁸ Eberhardt to Kellogg, 31 May 1927, USDS 817.00/4879; Eberhardt to Kellogg, 30 June 1927, 817.00/4922; Kellogg to Eberhardt, 13 July 1927, 817.00/4930a; Stimson to Moncada, 14 July 1927, and Stimson to Eberhardt, same date, 817.00/4938.5.

⁴⁹ *La Noticia*, 13 Aug. 1927; in late August, J. Ramón Téllez, former Chief of Police in Ocotal, repeated the charge, adding that, 'The Paguagas, who for all time have been the scourges of Nueva Segovia, are the ones who really run the Department', *La Noticia*, 31 Aug. 1927.

charged that 'the circle of Chamorristas here [in Ocotal] has been arming and sustaining Anastacio Hernández,..., and the national government believes that he is performing a valuable service.'⁵⁰ Hernández's father put the matter plainly:

Those who have helped Anastacio with money, arms, ammunition and in other ways are Don Abraham Gutiérrez Lobo, Gustavo Paguaga, and Pedro Lobo. Especially, Don Gustavo Paguaga helped him get arms, because in earlier times when he was *Jefe Político* he hid many arms and later gave them to Anastacio for him to kill his enemies and all the Liberals he could find. Always when Anastacio committed some murder he would send them notice or come in person to tell these men what had happened.⁵¹

There was even a rumour that Anastacio Hernández was the son of Gustavo Paguaga; while not biologically true, this does reveal something of the intensity of this particular patron-client relationship.⁵²

As early as July 1927, soon after the Battle of Ocotal had demonstrated Sandino's commitment to resist the North American occupation by force of arms, Liberal newspapers in Managua and León began accusing Conservatives of secretly aiding his rebellion. 'I have observed', wrote the publisher and editor of the Managua daily *La Noticia*, Juan Ramón Aviles, 'that the Conservatives are content with [the Sandino] rebellion. Three days ago a young conservative told me that "Sandino is a patriot".' For Aviles, the motivations driving the Conservatives were obvious: 'They are hoping that the state of disorder they are creating will force the Americans to cancel the elections.'⁵³ Even the politically-unsavvy Marine Corps intelligence apparatus began to discern the rudiments of the Chamorrista strategy. By early 1928, Marine intelligence began to report that Emiliano Chamorro 'had requested his followers to aid Sandino and to encourage the state of anarchy in the [northern] area'.⁵⁴ A week before the 1928 elections, Marine Lieutenant A. C. Larsen summed up the political situation:

The Conservative party knows very well that if they go to the polls they are going to be defeated by the Liberals. As the Elections are going to be supervised by the

⁵⁰ *La Noticia*, 16 Nov. 1927; also see *La Tribuna*, 23 March 1929, in which Anastacio Hernández's father implicated Gustavo Paguaga and Abraham Gutiérrez Lobo in sponsoring his son's violence.

⁵¹ Deposition of Miguel Hernández, *Hernández File*.

⁵² Rumour cited in Intelligence Report, Ocotal, 29 Oct. 1927, NA127/198/1.

⁵³ *La Noticia*, 20 July 1927; a similar conclusion was reached by Thomas J. Dodd, Jr., 'United States in Nicaraguan Politics: Supervised Elections, 1927-1932', unpubl. PhD diss., George Washington University, Washington D.C., 1966.

⁵⁴ Quote from B-2 Report, Managua, 27 Dec. 1927; see also H. Schmidt, Estimate of the Political, Economical, and Civil Situation, 12 Feb. 1928, NA127/43A/3.

Americans who will not allow any kinds of fraud, it would be a stupid thing to vote. Under these circumstances, they have decided to start trouble all over the country with the intention of stopping the elections and to keep in power Adolfo Díaz.⁵⁵

Larsen's analysis actually applied to the whole of the preceding eighteen months.

In early June 1927, as the Marines escorted the new Liberal *Jefe Político* Arnaldo Ramírez into Ocotál, they were walking more or less blindfolded into a minefield of political conflicts. Overall they were about as confused as the situation into which they had stumbled. 'Found town to be occupied by detachment of Liberal soldiers under charge of Jefe Politico', wrote Major Pierce of his entry into Ocotál on 9 June.

Old Jefe Politico reported a band of Conservatives outside this town by whom they were in fear of attack. No exact information could be obtained of how many or when they had last been observed. ... I find no police here, no system of civil law whatsoever in effect, the Government offices are in a state of disorder and I believe no attention has been paid to the rights of the people. The soldiers have been subsisting simply by taking any property desired.

A day earlier, Major Pierce had inspected the town of Totogalpa, south of Ocotál, where he encountered 'a small band of Liberal soldiers occupying the town, who were apparently living by plundering the cattle in that vicinity'. From this band he had confiscated three rifles, two pistols, and several machetes. 'This, in my opinion, indicates a state of lawlessness which I believe exists throughout this area.' A week later he toured the town of Telpáneca, southeast of Ocotál. 'Bands pass in this vicinity now and then, usually reported as being about fifty (50) in each party (unreliable) no information as to the total number.'⁵⁶ Major Pierce's observations notwithstanding, it is evident that 'civil law' in the region had become entwined with and effectively subsumed under gang law, which moved with a dynamic of its own.

Conservative violence continued through the rainy summer months, as the municipal elections neared and Liberal pressures to assume control over local political posts intensified. In early July the (Liberal) Municipal Secretary of Condega notified the (Conservative) *Ministerio de Gobernación* that on 29 June, 'a group of bandits attacked the [Liberal] civic guard that we have here; they killed the old man Francisco Reyes; they carried away our telegraphic apparatus, and persecuted the telegraph operator.' Soon

⁵⁵ R-2 Report, Managua, 29 Oct. 1928, NA127/209/1.

⁵⁶ Major Pierce, Field Messages No. 3, Ocotál, 10 June, and No. 9, Telpáneca, 18 June 1927, NA127/220/7.

afterward the same gang reportedly seized and hanged three individuals in Palacaguina. It was suspected that the gang gathered and received arms in Pueblo Nuevo. 'Also around El Consuelo there are various bandits', the report continued. 'Families in Condega are fleeing for fear of being murdered. When the Americans pass by the bandits hide and afterward they reappear and continue their evil deeds.'⁵⁷ In mid-July *La Noticia* reported that 'a horrible crime' had been committed in Estelí. 'A patrol of three individuals armed with rifles and machetes arrived at the house of don Napoleón Casco with the object of murdering him. Four of his sons left in his defence and his brother-in-law Luis Moncada. The criminals fell on the five and killed them with machete blows.'⁵⁸ In early August the Liberal Police Chief of Ocotal, General Tellez reported that 'society in Ocotal is in a constant state of anxiety (*en constante zozobra*) and every day the crisis of banditry is getting worse.'⁵⁹ In mid-August it was reported that 'around Pueblo Nuevo and Guasuyuca there is a small band of bandits operating', and a few weeks later that 'Conservatives armed with national rifles are killing Liberals who have been arriving from Condega almost daily'. In early November, 'a large group of armed bandits' was reported 'in Portillo Grande, between Somoto and Pueblo Nuevo.... The bodies of two men hacked by machetes were found on a road near Somoto', while two weeks later, 'a group of around fifty rebels and murderers... committing every kind of atrocity' was reported around El Angel, northwest of Limay.⁶⁰ Such reports were legion.

Anastacio Hernández and his gang(s) began their second major wave of killings in the rural areas around Ocotal and Telpaneca on 9 September 1927, and continued sporadically through November. By mid-September streams of refugees were pouring into Estelí, Ocotal, Somoto, and Telpaneca, the only towns in the north garrisoned by the Marines until after the November electoral period.⁶¹ 'All the valleys in the jurisdiction of Somoto', lamented one newspaper report of late September, 'and the villages of Yalaguina, Palacaguina, Mozonte, etc., have been completely emptied of their inhabitants, who have abandoned their properties to save their lives and are heading for Somoto, which today is the refuge of the desolated Segovianos.'⁶² In all 47 persons were reported killed by the

⁵⁷ *La Noticia*, 6 July 1927.

⁵⁸ *La Noticia*, 21 July 1927.

⁵⁹ Later that month, in the pre-dawn hours of the day Téllez was scheduled to leave for Managua, his house in Ocotal was attacked by a small group of Conservatives. Unharméd, he journeyed to Managua and in an interview with the press blamed the upsurge in Segovian violence on Anastacio Hernández and Gustavo Paguaga; he was promptly arrested and confined in the National Penitentiary by the Díaz government; soon after, he was deported; see *La Noticia*, 10 and 31 Aug., 8 and 13 Sept. 1927.

⁶⁰ *La Noticia*, 17 Aug., 30 Sept., 30 Oct., 8 and 18 Nov. 1927.

⁶¹ *La Noticia*, 28 Sept., 14 Oct., 8 Nov. 1927. ⁶² *La Noticia*, 28 Sept. 1927.

Hernández gang from May to November, though he probably killed many more.⁶³

In mid-November Hernández was defeated by a rival Liberal gang led by José León Díaz (later a general in Sandino's army) and Simón Jirón (or 'Pichingo,' later a private 'scout' or gang leader employed by the Marines). The Liberal Díaz-Pichingo gang was reportedly mobilised by leading Liberals of the region for the express purpose of defending themselves against Conservative violence. As one Liberal participant tactfully described it,

What happened is the following. Since neither the Americans nor the police had bothered to pursue Anastacio Hernández, or had not been able to do so because their activities were so focused against Sandino, and since the situation was so intolerable, with so many murders, the Liberals in the region banded together in order to attack and disperse his gang.⁶⁴

Anastacio Hernández told a similar story from prison.⁶⁵ After their defeat, Hernández and his surviving followers fled into Honduras; a few months later, he was arrested by the Honduran authorities and extradited to Nicaragua, where he was accused of more than 47 murders and sentenced to life in prison by the Marines, who circumvented the Nicaraguan courts to put him there; he remained in prison until at least 1930, after which his paper trail ends.⁶⁶

Local-regional Conservative *caudillos* were partly successful in this all-out drive to disrupt the electoral process. Municipal elections in Nueva

⁶³ List of 47 persons murdered by Anastacio Hernández gang, no date, c. Feb. 1928, *Hernández File*.

⁶⁴ *La Noticia*, 16 Nov. 1927; Díaz and Pichingo were hired by the Liberals, according to this anonymous and detailed account, which corresponds closely to a detailed biography of José León Díaz by US Marine Corps Capt. G. F. Stockes, who wrote: 'When Anastacio Hernández took the field in August 1927, declaring he was going to kill every Liberal in the Somoto district, it seems that [José León] Díaz was selected by the Liberals to oppose Hernández' (B-2 Report, 18 July 1929, Managua, NA127/43A/4); Stockes's account conforms in many specifics to the testimony of Pastor Ramírez Majía, IES 094-1-3.

⁶⁵ Hernández declaration reproduced in full in Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', Appendix C.

⁶⁶ Hernández was admitted to the National Penitentiary on 30 April 1928; he and Torres were conscripted into the Casual Company of the Guardia Nacional on 10 Oct. 1928, a common practice with Liberal and Conservative 'bandits', since, as the Marine officer in charge of the case wrote, 'there existed no court by which these former bandits could be tried'. It appears that top Marines were especially appalled by the facts of the case and pursued its prosecution vigorously; a handwritten note by General Beadle emphatically ordered that Hernández and Torres be not released without his express written authorisation; *Hernández File*. Significantly, none of Hernández's patrons were convicted of any crime, despite a wealth of evidence against them.

Segovia, scheduled for early November 1927, were cancelled 'because', in the words of the northern correspondent for *La Noticia*, 'the local electoral boards are disintegrating, lacking all voter registration lists and all of the materials necessary for a proper election'.⁶⁷ Throughout the rest of the country, outside of Granada, Chontales, Boaco, Rivas, and parts of Matagalpa, the Liberals won the November 1927 municipal elections by a landslide.⁶⁸

Honduran authorities were intimately involved in Segovian gang warfare during this period. By early October 1927 Marine-Guardia intelligence had discovered that 'Anastacio Hernández is a Conservative and his method had usually been to operate near the border with the assistance of the Conservative element on the Honduras side'.⁶⁹ After the November elections were cancelled, a Marine analyst summed up the general situation in the Segovias:

...many bandit groups range at will, robbing, murdering, raping, and burning the homes of their political and personal enemies...conditions along the Honduranian border north of Cinco Pinos are similar, and are further complicated by raiding bands of Honduranian criminals and remnants of the former Conservative Army of Nicaragua who refused to turn in their arms. These bands make their headquarters at the hacienda of the Jefe Politico of Choluteca, Honduras, who is undoubtedly in league with them.⁷⁰

A month later the Segovias were reportedly 'still infested by roving bands of bandits', especially 'along the Honduranian border.... These bands along the border have an apparently safe refuge on the Honduranian side from which they sally forth, commit their depredations, and return to Honduras'. San Marcos de Colón and Las Manos in Honduras were reported as 'hang-outs for bandits operating in Nicaragua, and we have continuous reports that these bandits are protected and actually assisted by Honduranian officials'.⁷¹ The chronic weakness and instability of the Honduran state through the 1920s gave local authorities in the border departments broad autonomy, while dense power networks, Liberal and Conservative, stretched back and forth across the border.⁷² Local *caudillos*

⁶⁷ *La Noticia*, 6 Nov. 1927; the Marines reported much the same thing, e.g. Intelligence report, R. W. Peard, Ocotal, 7 Nov. 1927, NA127/43A/3.

⁶⁸ *La Noticia*, 8 Nov. 1927.

⁶⁹ Intelligence Report, Ocotal, 8 Oct. 1927, NA127/198/1.

⁷⁰ Intelligence Report, Ocotal, 13 Nov. 1927, NA127/198/1.

⁷¹ Intelligence Report, Ocotal, 11 Dec. 1927, NA127/197/176.1.

⁷² On Honduran politics during this period see James D. Rudolph (ed.), *Honduras: A Country Study* (Washington D.C., 1984), chap. 1; James Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus* (London, 1988), pp. 66–8; and the works reviewed by Dario A. Euraque, 'Social, Economic, and Political Aspects of the Carías Dictatorship in Honduras: The Historiography', *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 29, no. 1 (1994). From 1927 through 1932, Marine-Guardia intelligence reports consistently bemoaned the non-

often owned land on both sides of the border, while some occupied political posts in both countries simultaneously.⁷³

Political gang violence also extended into the southern and eastern Segovias, especially the rural areas surrounding Estelí, La Trinidad, Limay, Darío, San Ramón and Matagalpa. These regions also saw more or less continuous gang violence during this period, most sponsored by local Conservative authorities – majors, judges, and police chiefs in particular.⁷⁴ After the Liberal victory in the 1928 presidential elections, most (though not all) local-regional Conservative *caudillos* grudgingly acceded to the new political order, and the major source of rural political violence shifted to the triangular war between the Marines-Guardia, the Sandinista rebels, and the Segovian civil populace.⁷⁵

Thus, despite enormous efforts, including scores of pitched battles and hundreds of beatings, mutilations, tortures, rapes, and murders, the Conservative bid failed. Yet despite their eventual failure, it is apparent that those organising this violence hoped and expected to succeed, hopes and expectations presumably anchored in a wealth of prior experience. In the Segovias, such gambits as these were clearly nothing new.

Reading the Hernández violence

The foregoing survey of *post*-Espino Negro political gang activity in the Segovias is based on sources at least twice removed from the events they

cooperation of Honduran authorities along the border; for interesting remarks on the autonomy of Honduran authorities near Potrerillo del Sur during this period see Gregorio Urbano Gilbert, *Junto a Sandino* (Santo Domingo, 1979), pp. 27–30.

⁷³ Quote from Repatriation of destitute Nicaraguans in Honduras, Rossell, Ocotal, 18 Aug. 1928, NA 127/220/2. For an example of the latter points, in Nov. 1927 Francisco Albir of Ocotal, who owned substantial landholdings in both Nicaragua and Honduras, reportedly acted as both Alcalde of Ocotal and Honduran Consul there; Weekly Memorandum No. 4, Peard, Ocotal, 20 Nov. 1927, NA127/43A/3.

⁷⁴ Estelí and La Trinidad Liberal-Conservative gang violence continued until the Nov. 1928 elections, by which time most gang leaders and members had been amnestied, imprisoned, or killed; prominent Conservative gang organisers around La Trinidad included Chief of Police Carmen Vilchez, Mayor Gertrudis Mairena, and Juez de Mesta Marcelino Hernández; relevant Marine-Guardia correspondence and telegrams in NA127/209/5 and /12; prisoner casefiles in NA127/202/16/76. Estelí Conservative violence organised in part by Federico Briones, wealthy merchant and member of the Departmental Electoral Board, and his brother Juan Alberto Briones, former Director of Police in Estelí; NA/127/192/1/ Briones. Conservative gang activity around Darío sponsored in part by J. Arturo Makus, Deputy in the National Assembly after Oct. 1925 and Military Chief and Provost Marshal during the Civil War; NA127/29/6. On Matagalpa, San Ramón, and Limay, NA127/200/D, /202/35, and /209/1 and /2.

⁷⁵ Some Conservative *caudillos* and gang members did continue to operate after 1928; see Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', pp. 358–67.

describe. This is not the case in what follows. By a fortuitous combination of circumstances, the case of Anastacio Hernández became (to my knowledge) the most well documented instance of local-regional political violence in Nicaraguan history before Somoza.⁷⁶ The documents – which are not easy or painless to read – fall into four main categories: (1) twenty depositions of eyewitness survivors of Hernández gang attacks; (2) the prison ‘declarations’ of Hernández and his occasional ally José Torres; (3) related Marine-Guardia and newspaper reports; and (4) the oral testimonies compiled by the Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo in the early 1980s (including the Arauz manuscript quoted above). The first two sets of documents provide a fine-grained, insider’s look at the language and practice of political violence in this time and place, as expressed in the words and stories of victims and perpetrators; the latter two offer corroborating evidence and add important details.

The following pages outline my interpretation of select aspects of this corpus of texts. The Hernández violence is examined here as a multi-layered social and cultural phenomenon embedded within and expressing discrete sets of social relations. Beginning with the twenty depositions, I explore the relations-in-violence among and between gang leaders and members, their murdered victims, surviving witnesses, and their larger social world. The gangs’ intentions, I suggest, were expressed in the very structure of the violence they produced. Hernández’s most basic aim was to defend and enhance the power of Ocotol’s leading Chamorristas and their favoured subordinates, including himself. He pursued this aim by mobilising local allies into armed gangs in order spectacularly to kill and terrorise a select fraction of his and his patrons’ actual and potential enemies. In so doing he hoped to eliminate some foes outright and create a paralysing sense of danger, uncertainty, and fear among any others who might dare to challenge his or his patrons’ power. Particular attention is paid to the strategies used to produce that fear, and to the local, personal, and familial relations expressed in the violence. The focus then shifts to the prison declarations of Hernández and Torres, and the relations-in-violence among and between gang leaders, their patrons, and the same social world. Special attention is paid to the idioms and dynamics of gang mobilisation and organisation. Finally, I consider the role of ethnic politics in the violence, and suggest some of the ways the violence was interpreted and responded to by its targets, before turning to the Sandinista rebels’ appropriation of the Conservatives’ basic tools of political struggle.

⁷⁶ Since I have not researched the period after 1934 in any detail, the last two words remain conjectural.

Let us begin with the violence itself. In late February and early March 1928, evidently prodded by General Beadle's horror upon learning of the case, Marine-Guardia investigators produced twenty depositions of eyewitnesses to fifteen separate acts of violence committed by the Hernández gangs from May to November 1927. In spite of their spare, sterile language, these extraordinary documents provide a view of rural politics that is rarely seen or even perceived by outside observers. It is perhaps best to let the documents first speak for themselves; two describing the same incident are quoted in full:

I, Marcelino Gómez, married, 72 years old, resident of Mosonte in the valley of Los Arados, declare that I know Anastacio Hernández, and that on 24 May 1927 around 5:00 a.m. a group of armed men entered my house shooting their guns around my house, when they seized my son-in-law Domingo Gómez, two sons and another son-in-law of mine were shot at but managed to escape through the kitchen. They tied up their prisoner, and they broke down the doors, and sacked all they could take, beating my wife, and they shot my son-in-law in the abdomen, afterward taking him out and about fifty yards from the house the group stopped, then Anastacio ordered that they cut off my son-in-law Domingo's head, Santiago Gómez and his brother Terencio executed the order, after which Anastacio macheted the corpse while the other played an accordion and shouted 'vivas' for Anastacio. Those whom I recognised were Timoteo Blanco of Dipilto, Julián Sevilla, Miguel López, Antonio Sebastián and Miguel Aguilar, Erasmo Gómez, Felipe Gómez, Narciso Hernández, Rogelio Amaya, and others more whom I did not recognise, there were about thirty and when they left they were still shouting. That is all I know and I sign, Marcelino Gómez. [Recorded in Ocotál, 20 February 1928.]

And a second view of the same incident:

I, María Estebana Gómez, widow, 33 years old, resident of Mosonte, declare that I know Anastacio Hernández and that on 24 May 1927 he arrived at my house in the valley of Los Arados at around 6:00 a.m., breaking down the doors, taking my husband Domingo Gómez prisoner, who was in the kitchen, they tied him up, and Francisco López shot him in the abdomen. After this Terencio Gómez, Santiago Gómez, Juan F. Gómez, and Erasmo Gómez took him about fifty yards away from the house, where Hernández ordered that they cut my husband's head off, the order was executed by Santiago Gómez and Anastacio also gave him various machete cuts in his back. Those who were with Anastacio raped me (*me ultrajaron*), the same with my little niece. Julián Sevilla along with Anastacio gave orders to have me shot. The bandits were Ismael Gómez, Elisio Gómez, Blas López, Ramón Guillermo Gómez, Narciso Hernández, Rogelio Amaya son-in-law of Anastacio, Felipe Marín, Marcelino Sierras, Purificación Gómez, José María López, José Miguel Aguilar, Sebastián Aguilar, Timoteo Blanco, Gerónimo Pastrana and others more whom I do not remember. This is all I know, and I sign, María Estebana Gómez. [Recorded in Ocotál, 20 February 1928.]

The 24 May killings continued; altogether, according to eight eyewitnesses, six persons were murdered by the gang on that day. The

depositions are silent on the four months to follow. During this period, Hernández's attacks probably continued intermittently as he and his followers straddled the border to avoid the freshly arriving Marines (who first forayed into the Segovias in late May) and vied with a host of competing gangs, including several headed by Sandino. Then on 9 and 10 September 1927, a reconstituted Hernández gang committed another series of attacks. On these two days nine persons were killed and their bodies mutilated. The killings continued sporadically through November. Typical was the deposition of Eugenia Landero, resident of the valley of Zazalo near Mosonte, who declared:

On 9 September 1927, at about noon, Anastacio Hernández with his band arrived at my house in the valley of Zazalo. They fired their guns off in front of the house, then they came in and Anastacio personally cut my husband's head off, after he and Timoteo Blanco had shot him. Norberto López, my brother-in-law, was murdered in the same way by order of Anastacio, the order being executed by David and Antonio Cárdenas. They took my brother-in-law Tomás López out and near the house, where they hanged him with his hands tied behind his back for a long while, after which they took him along and he never showed up again. They say they killed him in El Zapote. Those in the company of Anastacio were [15 first and last names], and others more whom I did not recognise. I bring also the hat of my dead husband which shows the machete blows. This is all I know, I do not sign for not knowing how to write. X [her mark]

The episodes of violence described in these depositions share a tangled knot of attributes. Intended to communicate an array of messages – to witnesses, survivors, the larger social world – the violence was at once highly public, personal, and locally rooted; deeply gendered and sexualised; and based on intersecting relations of family, community, party, ethnicity and class.⁷⁷ The following pages work to disentangle these attributes while remaining mindful of their more fundamental unity.

These ritualised spectacles were intended to create and disperse social memories of violence; they suggest a political culture with a highly developed capacity collectively to remember such episodes.⁷⁸ The gang made no effort to hide its work; on the contrary, few efforts were spared

⁷⁷ On action as texts see Paul Ricoeur, 'The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text', and other essays, in Ricoeur (ed.), *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, 1981), and John B. Thompson, 'Action, Ideology, and the Text', *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge, 1984).

⁷⁸ For classic treatments of the relationship between spectacular violence and politics, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1979); and Michael Taussig, 'Culture of Terror – Space of Death. Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 26, no. 3 (July 1984).

to make it public knowledge – before, during and especially after the event itself. Gunblasts and shouts commonly announced the attacks; the music, shouts, ‘vivas’, and gunshots described by Marcelino Gómez commonly accompanied the killings and mutilations. The mutilated remains of at least half the victims were displayed on or along well-travelled roads. ‘Four men were attacked from behind with machetes and literally hacked to pieces’, as one startled Marine officer in Ocotál reported the murders committed by Hernández and his gang on 13–14 October 1927. ‘These persons had evidently been brought from some distance to the scene of the crime and were apparently defenceless as two of them were tied together with rope. Their bodies were, to all appearances, purposely left in the centre of the main road as a warning to the populace of the town and to the military garrison.’⁷⁹ The act of mutilation was most commonly performed by the gang leader, who was usually very thorough; one witness deposed that ‘it was impossible to put their corpses together since they were cut up into pieces’.⁸⁰ The violence was also made public by the harrowing stories told and retold by those who witnessed and survived it – most commonly, women, children, and the elderly. Every attack had its surviving eyewitnesses, a clear sign that gang leaders assigned to them the role of audience, or chroniclers, charged with remembering and telling their kin, neighbours, friends, and fellow community members what they had seen and experienced.

Certain patterns recur throughout these episodes. Violence was directed at the body, the home, and the family. All of the dead were family men in the prime of their lives, either married or of marriageable age. Nearly all were attacked in or near their homes. Most were taken some distance away from their homes, their hands bound with rope, before they were killed and their corpses mutilated. Most were husbands and fathers. At least half were aged thirty or younger. Women, young children, and the elderly were brutalised but usually left alive. Women were sometimes beaten and raped but never killed, ensuring that the violence would become public knowledge and publicly remembered.

The violence was made public in other ways, some of which are suggested in Pedro Antonio Arauz’s narrative introducing this article. Arauz’s spectacle, as a kind of ideal type, differed in some ways from the depositions’. Such night-time orgies apparently saw little killing but an abundance of terror, and served to fuse terror and sexuality even more

⁷⁹ Intelligence Report, Ocotál, 15 Oct. 1927, NA127/198/1. The same murders are described in the deposition of Celedonio Martínez, *Hernández File*.

⁸⁰ ‘...fue imposible reunir sus cuerpos pues fueron hechoz pedazos’. Deposition of Gerónima López, *Hernández File*.

profoundly than the attacks on peoples' homes. Though Arauz explicitly mentions neither consensual sexual relations nor rape at such night-time 'dances', it is reasonable to surmise that 'the women who refused to go to the dance' – no less than those who felt they had little choice but to go – were not only terrorised into dancing but beaten, tortured, and raped. Likewise the attacks on homes; while María Estebana Gómez was the only deponent to charge rape (of herself and her 'little niece'), it seems likely that rape accompanied the killings more frequently than the depositions indicate.⁸¹

This sexualisation of political violence opens up a host of questions about the relationship between gender culture and political culture in this time and place, and in Segovian and Nicaraguan history generally. While there is little direct evidence concerning discourses and practices of masculinity or the honour-shame complex among the Segovian poor during this period, useful comparisons can be drawn from the more recent Segovian past and related scholarship on gender relations elsewhere in Latin America.⁸² Such comparisons suggest that one intention of the gang leaders was to dishonour male victims by violently transgressing the latter's domination of their women's sexuality; as in the rest of Hispanic America, for elites and subalterns, to a rape a woman was to dishonour, emasculate, and feminise the man who claimed sexual rights to her. In the case of the Hernández gangs, it could plausibly be argued that the

⁸¹ Little is known of the conditions under which these depositions were produced, other than that most were recorded in Ocotlán; it would be useful to know more about the investigators' agendas, in particular, what they allowed to be said and what they insisted be left unsaid. It would not be difficult to imagine numerous reasons why rape might have been on the investigators' list of proscribed topics – most obviously, to avoid having the same charge levelled against the Marines and Guardia.

⁸² For a compelling look at the relationship between gender culture, sexuality, and political culture among the rural poor in late colonial Mexico, see Steve J. Stern, *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men, and Power in Late Colonial Mexico* (Chapel Hill, 1995). See also Asunción Lavrín (ed.), *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America* (Lincoln, Neb., 1989); Verena Martínez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Color in Nineteenth-Century Cuba* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1974); Ramón Gutiérrez, 'Honor Ideology, Marriage Negotiation, and Class-Gender Domination in New Mexico, 1690–1846', *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Winter 1985); and his *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford, 1991). For a stimulating survey of gender struggles in Nicaraguan history and culture, see Whisnant, *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places*, pp. 383–433 ff. On domestic violence in 1980s Nicaragua see Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley, 1992); Lancaster observes that 'The discourse of violence is itself highly gendered' (p. 41). The month I spent living and working with a smallholding peasant family in the eastern Segovias in September–October 1990 brought home with special force some of the underlying dynamics of gender relations, inequalities, and violence in the region; my strong sense is that these dynamics had changed little from the 1920s.

symbolic rapists were the Conservative *caudillos*, with the actual rapists embodying and symbolising the power of their patrons.⁸³ The ‘dances’ described by Arauz and the rapes reported by María Estebana Gómez exemplify another way the gangs worked to generate an abiding sense of fear – in this case, men’s fear of dishonour and feminisation through the violent sexual transgressions of their women, and women’s fear of the act of rape itself and its aftermath of dishonour and shame.

The violence described by Arauz appears more festive and celebratory than that described in the depositions, a performance in which Hernández and his followers ‘found the greatest pleasure’: guitars, accordions, music, dance, song, and very probably drink, torture, and rape – all integral to the region’s political economy of fear. Many such songs were probably paeans to their party and patrons, another potent public signal. Despite obvious differences, the attacks on homes and these night-time ‘dances’ appear marked by broadly similar intentions – most importantly, the creation of a field of social memories of terror and fear through the absolute violation of their victims’ humanity: doors broken down, religious images smashed (one woman claimed that Hernández burned and destroyed all the religious ‘images’ in her home⁸⁴), possessions robbed, loved ones beaten, women and girls raped, men and boys seized, bound, hacked, shot, tortured, killed, their corpses chopped to bits, followed by night-time ‘dances’ around tables full of decapitated heads. Desecration of the religiously sacred was evidently a conscious intention of the gang; in this folk Catholic culture, for instance, the mutilations seem intended not only to violate utterly the humanity of their victims, but to prevent the proper burial of their remains. To create social power, in short, Hernández worked to blanket the topography of everyday life with an overpowering, paralysing memory of fear, created through the ritual transformation of familiar places into places of violence, bloodshed, agony and death.

What of the social and political backgrounds of the victims, and the victims’ relations to Conservative patrons and gangs before the violence? The evidence here is slim; the investigators evidently did not care about this aspect of the case. One plain fact is that victims tended to be families. This indicates that the violence was less directed at individuals – though it certainly was that – than at extended families or segments of extended families. A related fact, and one of the most significant to emerge from this

⁸³ As Steve Stern observes, ‘Most graphically and tangibly, privileged men affirmed a superior masculinity by taking or abusing the women of men too weak to protect female relatives and property’. *The Secret History of Gender*, p. 167.

⁸⁴ Deposition of Paula López, *Hernández File*.

entire body of evidence, is that this was not anonymous violence. Instead, victims and perpetrators usually knew each other, by name and by face – a clear sign that all of the actors here, or nearly all, were members of mutually acquainted local families and communities. All of the murders described in the depositions took place in or near small rural communities. All of the targets were locals. Most were evidently rural folk of modest means, peasants or farmers. None, it appears, were prominent *políticos*. Of the twenty deponents in the Hernández file, four were signing literate (three women and one man), and sixteen not (twelve women and four men) – an illiteracy rate of 80%. One murdered victim, Pedro Gómez, was reported to be a Liberal ranchowner in the Dipilto Mountains. Another, Valentín Rodríguez, was described as the ‘servant’ of the prominent Ocotol Conservative José Peralta. Three of the depositions were recorded by the Liberal attorney Nicanor Espinosa of Telpaneca, suggesting that in these cases the victims had Liberal affiliations. Beyond this the evidence says little.

What of the gang members? Pedro Antonio Arauz’s vignette and a number of Marine-Guardia reports imply that Hernández and his subordinates were Conservative soldiers demobilised from the just-ended civil war. If so, they were probably members of local militias. It seems unlikely that they had been regular soldiers in the National Army, most of whom were evidently forced conscripts serving in units unattached to specific locales.⁸⁵ As we will see, Hernández had resided in and around Ocotol in the service of his patrons for at least six years before the outbreak of the civil war. The same was probably true of most of his subordinates and allies. Significantly, within the gang family names predominated. Most gang members were evidently related to others in the gang by marriage or blood.⁸⁶ On 24 May 1927, for instance, Cayetano Gómez and his sons Aquileo, Felipe, Ismael, and Elisión were all members of the gang. So were the brothers Antonio and David Cárdenas, and Terencio and Santiago Gómez. The latter two were in turn described as Hernández’s ‘political nephews’ (*sobrinos políticos*). Also present were Hernández’s son Narciso and his son-in-law Rogelio Amaya. The same

⁸⁵ On the forced conscription campaigns of the Conservatives see Harold N. Denny, *Dollars for Bullets* (New York, 1929); C. B. Carter, ‘The Kentucky Feud in Nicaragua’, *The World’s Work*, no. 54 (July 1927), pp. 312–321; *The New York Times*, Aug. 21, 1927; United States House of Representatives, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives Regarding Conditions in Nicaragua and Mexico* (Washington D.C., 1927).

⁸⁶ Of the 41 men who comprised the Hernández gang on 9 Sept., there were fourteen López’s, five Ruiz’s, four Zamora’s, three Torres’s, two each for Vásquez, Landero, and Cárdenas; on 10 Sept. there were four Pastrana’s, three Medina’s and Ruiz’s, and two Muñoz’s; *Hernández File*.

pattern continued, with an entirely different set of men (including no less than fourteen López's and eight Ruiz's) in early September.

Further, in an intriguing pattern, several victims' and perpetrators' family names overlapped – including Gómez, López, Zamora, Melgara, Amaya, and Pastrana – suggesting that some of this violence may have been intra-familial. Indeed, the actions of the gang leader himself demonstrate that at least some of it was. On his killing spree of 24 May 1927, Anastacio Hernández chanced to meet his brother Francisco and his wife on a road near Los Arados and ordered his brother killed. Those executing the order with gunblasts to the head were Anastacio's 'political nephews', the Gómez brothers. Anastacio's son Narciso was also a member of the gang.⁸⁷ Hernández also tried to kill his father Miguel Hernández on more than one occasion, once in the company of his son (and his father's grandson) Narciso. 'My son Anastacio has always tried to kill me, and my wife', lamented the father after his son's imprisonment. '... All his life he has persecuted me, he has burned my pastures, wrecked my fences, and destroyed my property He said he would not leave until he had the head of his father and the tongue of his mother.'⁸⁸ Evidently the Hernández family was as polarised and conflict-ridden as the larger rural society in which they lived. In this light it does not seem unreasonable to surmise that the families of gang members and their victims were in some instances related. That the violence extended into the most fundamental unit of social organisation – the patriarchal family – points to the extent to which it was bound up with the very fabric of everyday life and social relations in the countryside.

All of this suggests that the Hernández gangs' ritualised public political violence was also profoundly personal. In this social milieu, 'personal' and 'political' were not mutually exclusive spheres but mutually constitutive; as in the case of Hernández's murder of his brother and repeated threats against his father and mother, different mixes of 'personal' and 'political' motives probably obtained for each episode. The same underlying intent – to eliminate some enemies and immobilise the rest – was pursued in either case.

Stories of Conservative violence in the wake of Espino Negro as told by Sandino's former soldiers in the early 1980s tend to support the above interpretations. Such stories describe a pattern of widespread, more or less indiscriminate Conservative violence against the civilian populace across the region, as depicted here in José Paul Barahona's account of the origins of the San Albino uprising of October 1926:

⁸⁷ Deposition of Placida Osegueda, wife of Francisco Hernández, *Hernández File*.

⁸⁸ Depositions of Miguel Hernández, *Hernández File*.

One day, news arrived at San Albino that the troops of Adolfo Díaz had arrived in Murra and assassinated Inés Ochoa and Lilo Leal, had raped two girls, María Salomé and Concepción Cárdenas, burned the house of the old woman Luisa Mendoza, broken the leg of Lisandro Colindres, wounded Rigoberto Colindres, and captured Filiberto Barahona, who escaped and went to give warning to San Albino. It was then that we began our rebellion...⁸⁹

In outline if not detail, Barahona's recollections here are buttressed by many others. Angel Martínez Soza, for instance, recalled that 'The days of Conservative control were wretched; if a man was a Liberal, they hanged him; if he had a woman, they raped her; and so everyone was inflamed against the Conservative rule'.⁹⁰ These and many similar recollections make abundantly clear that during this period Conservative powerholders worked systematically, through private armies, to create and disseminate an acute sense of fear among all who might dare challenge their power.

The prison 'declarations' of Hernández and Torres amplify and sharpen our view of these processes. Without these curious documents – more accurately described as brief responses to interrogations transformed into declarative sentences – there would be only a string of allegations linking Hernández, Torres, and Ocotál's Chamorristas to the violence.⁹² With them we have irrefutable evidence – confessions, really – that both men committed their crimes in the service of regional Chamorrista *caudillos*, and another kind of window into the inner workings of Segovian political struggles and gang warfare at the end of the civil war, and presumably for a long time before.

While both declarations are laden with lies and inconsistencies, the lies are patterned, making it fairly unproblematic to winnow the grain from the chaff. Throughout their interrogations, Hernández and Torres were working to deny their own guilt and blame others (a difficult tack to follow, given their guilt), while also working to identify their principal patrons (doubtless on the presumption that these 'good friends' would work to secure their quick release).⁹² This and much else indicates that

⁸⁹ José Paul Barahona, untitled IES ms., begins 'A raíz del derrocamiento del gobierno de Solórzano...'

⁹⁰ Angel Martínez Soza, IES 060: 1. See also the testimonies of José Flores Gradys (IES 058), Calixto Tercero González (IES 095, 097), Camilo Guillén in Claribel Alegria and D. J. Flakoll, *Nicaragua: la revolución sandinista* (Mexico D.F., 1982), pp. 51–9 ff., and Luciano Gutiérrez Herrera (IES 102).

⁹¹ The appearance and structure of the 'declarations' (both pencilled by the same fast-paced hand) indicates that they were constructed from a protracted dialogue between Marine-Guardia investigators and their prisoners; e.g.: Question: What is your name? Answer: Anastacio Hernández. Declaration reads: 'My name is Anastacio Hernández.'

⁹² Under rigorous interrogation it was inevitable that these two contradictory lines would intersect, as they did in the following rather confusing excerpts from Hernández's declaration: '... what I did with my soldiers was defend myself from Sandino, I never

those parts of the declarations describing relations with more powerful patrons are accurate. For instance, Hernández claimed that in 1924 he was jailed in Ocotál, and that Abraham Gutiérrez Lobo secured his release – a claim substantiated by at least four other sources.⁹³ There is little reason to doubt that Hernández was once, as he claimed, sub-director of police in Ocotál, or that he was Abraham Gutiérrez's secretary in 1920; or that Torres was once a tax collector in Ocotál and local judge in El Jícaro, as Torres claimed. Regional *caudillos* commonly doled out lucrative political posts to clients and allies, and other evidence makes clear that such men were capable of extreme brutality in the discharge of their offices.⁹⁴ If it is possible to imagine a political universe or social milieu in which Anastacio Hernández is the sub-director of police and José Torres the tax collector and local judge, it is possible to begin to imagine the Segovias in the 1910s and '20s. Hernández seems to have been eager to admit his politics and finger his patrons:

... I state that all the Paguagas are good friends of mine, so is Gutiérrez Lobo and Pedro Lobo.... The Hondurans said I was a Sandinista, and I said I was a soldier

attacked anyone, I have not signed a single guarantee, the Conservatives needed guarantees so my troops would not bother them and I gave them in this district, all the Conservatives were my soldiers...' It is clear that this phrasing was imposed by the interrogators. The passage makes more sense if we attempt imaginatively to reconstruct the dialogue from which it was fashioned, e.g.: Q: What were you and your men doing? A: What I did with my soldiers was defend myself from Sandino. Q: What about all those you attacked? A: I never attacked anyone! Q: What about all the guarantees you signed? A: I never signed a single guarantee! Q: Come on, we know you signed guarantees! Look, here are some you signed for Conservatives [scraps of paper placed before the prisoner]. Why did you sign them? A: They needed them so my troops would not bother them. Q: So then you did issue guarantees around Ocotál? A: Yes, I gave them, so what? Q: Who were your soldiers? A: All the Conservatives!....

⁹³ *El Centroamericano*, 8 June 1924, reported that the Jefe Político of Nueva Segovia informed the Ministerio de Gobernación that Anastacio Hernández had been captured near Mosonte; the charge was attempted patricide. The editor noted that, 'Frankly, in these cases we accept the application of the lynch law'. Hernández's father Miguel Hernández told a similar story in his 1928 deposition (*Hernández File*), portions of which were excerpted in *La Tribuna* (Managua), 23 March 1929. In his annual report to the Ministro de Gobernación for 1924, the Jefe Político of Nueva Segovia reported that Anastacio Hernández had been released from prison by the District Judge (probably Abraham Gutiérrez Lobo) and was currently serving as the District Judge's secretary and employee; *Memoria de la gobernación*, 1924, p. 208, in USDS 817.00/4998. The battle Hernández described against José León Díaz in Nov. 1927, in which he was defeated and forced to flee to Honduras, is likewise corroborated by other evidence, including *La Noticia*, 16 Nov. 1927; G. Stockes, B-2 Report, 18 July 1929, NA127/43A/4; Testimony of Pastor Ramírez Mejía, IES 094.

⁹⁴ See Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', chap. 4.

of Chamorro, and I really am (*yo dije que era soldado de Chamorro y soy realmente*).... We received instructions from Gutiérrez Lobo not to let the Liberals alone, and always to attack them (*que no nos dejáramos de los Liberales, y que siempre los atacáramos*)...all the Conservatives were my soldiers...the instructions I gave to Torres were to protect the Conservatives...I was not a chief but a soldier, I was a chief....

The apparent contradiction in this last remark captures the ambiguities of Hernández's structural position as both elite and subordinate, autonomous gang chief and obedient soldier. Torres, in a revealing set of passages, mapped out the principal lines of conflict and alliance:

We [he and Hernández] were with a Honduran chief, pursuing the Sandinistas, his name is Medardo Vallejos, I threatened Anastacio [Zamora] because he was backed up by the forces of Vallejos...Vallejos was chief of the Chamorristas, and Anastacio Hernández was a Chamorrista chief, and we belonged to the Chamorrista party, we were receiving orders from Cornelio Sandoval who lives in San Marcos de Colón [Honduras] and owns a farm in Dipilto, he used to get arms and send them to us, Vallejos was first chief, and Hernández second.... I do not know of any orders Gutiérrez Lobo sent to [Anastacio] Hernández, Lobo asked me often to quit Vallejos....⁹⁵

Hernández and Torres described a world bound together by old and new friendships and riven with factionalism and competition, a world held together by trust, cooperation, and alliance and torn apart by competition, distrust, betrayal and vendetta. Partly as a result of the conditions under which these documents were produced, they described a world peopled by 'good men' and 'very good friends' (*íntimo amigo mío*, *muy buen amigo mío*, *es buen hombre*, *soy buen hombre*) and 'not friends' (*no es amigo*, *es sandinista*), a world of men one has 'been with' (*Torres anda conmigo desde agosto*, *Torres andaba con gente del El Júcaro*) and men one has 'never been with' (*nunca anduvo conmigo*, *nunca ha andado conmigo*). They described a world in which regional *caudillos* routinely forged alliances with local gang leaders, and local gang leaders with each other and local gang members, with the men in each tier providing their underlings with money and arms and telling them who to threaten, who to attack, who to kill or terrorise, and who to protect or 'guarantee'.⁹⁶ At

⁹⁵ In late 1927 Medardo Vallejos was described by a Marine lieutenant: 'bandit leader... Mardardo Ballejo... constantly making raids and depredations on Nicaraguans living near the border.... The people voiced anxiety and alarm about the bandit Ballejo.' Patrol Report, Bellinger, Somoto, 7 Nov. 1927, NA127/43A/20.

⁹⁶ According to one otherwise credible account, Gustavo Paguaga gave Hernández the names of 200 persons to kill, and Hernández was captured with this list and another on which were written the names of thirty of his victims; *La Noticia*, 16 Nov. 1927.

the same time, these gang leaders and members were not the mere tools of wealthy patrons but autonomous agents ('Lobo asked me often to quit Vallejos') who could and did choose for whom and under what conditions they would ply their trade.

These stories, and the language in which they were told, have much in common with the stories and reports documenting the creation and recreation of Liberal 'armies' in the Segovias during the civil war, and Sandinista 'columns' during Sandino's rebellion.⁹⁷ In each case, local men came together under charismatic *caudillos* or *jefes* to form locally-rooted violence-producing groups that can be conceived more usefully as fluid and contingent processes than as solidified institutions, composed more of dense and shifting webs of personal relations than of static hierarchical chains of command. There were also key differences between different types of violence-producing groups, especially with regard to the resources and aims of the patronage networks that sustained them. Segovian Liberal armies were patronised and led by both elite and popular *caudillos*, while Sandino's rebels were led overwhelmingly by local illiterate worker-peasant-Indian *jefes* and patronised by a goodly portion of the region's labouring poor. If friendships between patrons, gang leaders, and gang members were sometimes lifelong affairs – and there is no reason to suppose that for Hernández and Ocotál's Chamorristas this was not the case – alliances could also be reconfigured under new circumstances ('Lobo asked me often to quit Vallejos'; 'Torres was with me since August'). Identities and allegiances were multiple, shifting, and riddled with contradictions – as in Torres's allusion to the friction between himself and Abraham Gutiérrez Lobo, his intimate partner's longstanding and trusted patron, and between Gutiérrez Lobo and Medardo Vallejos, who in turn was described as 'chief of the Chamorristas'. Precisely what was going on here and elsewhere is not entirely clear; what is clear is that such tension-ridden relationships were common.

The idiom of 'guarantees' (*garantías*), a term used four times by Hernández and eight by Torres, deserves closer inspection. Hernández dictated:

... what I did with my soldiers was defend myself against Sandino, I never attacked anyone, I have not signed a single guarantee, the Conservatives needed guarantees so my troops would not bother them and I gave them in this district.... In Dipilto none of the coffee-growers participated in any pact, Anastacio Zamora had guarantees from the Liberals signed by José León Díaz, I never gave any guarantee to Zamora....

⁹⁷ See Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', chaps. 4–5, 8.

Torres, for his part, declared:

I remember I sent a letter to Anastacio Zamora, telling him he had no guarantee... I threatened Anastacio [Zamora] because he was backed up by the forces of Vallejos, Vallejos signed to give guarantees and I signed them for those in the agreement, so our troops would not bother them, we gave them guarantees so that our forces would not bother them, individuals who had no guarantee I would take a bit of something or some of his property... I signed only one guarantee, I signed for Anastacio Zamora, and as he was with us, I gave it to him.... In Dipilto there is no one with guarantees signed by me, Antonio Prado, Augustín Ferrafino, and Eulogio Pastran, coffee growers in a pact together, had guarantees to pick their coffee, [the Paguaga family] was guaranteed to pick their coffee...⁹⁸

Much in these texts is cryptic, phrased in a kind of shorthand that assumed prior familiarity with its principal personages and conceptual categories. It is nonetheless clear that 'guarantees' were central to the practical operation of gang warfare and the rural political economy during this period. Guarantees were issued or denied to individuals, families, and collectivities (like groups of coffee growers). To guarantee (*garantizar*) was to issue a formal promise not to injure, kill, or destroy property. Guarantees for life and property were exchanged or issued for money, goods, services, or whatever else the gang demanded. Conversely, to lack or be denied a guarantee was to leave oneself open to attack. A guarantee could thus be a lifesaver, as it was for Julio Maradiaga, seized by Torres in November 1927 but set free because, in his own words, 'I had guarantees given by Abelino Herrera of El Jícaro'.⁹⁹ A Segovian guarantee was unlike the 'protection' forcibly peddled by Chicago gangsters during this period, or the 'guarantees for lives and property' routinely issued by the State Department or British Foreign Office. It most commonly implied neither active defence against the violence of other gangs nor a promise that retribution would be served on outside violators.¹⁰⁰ Rather, it was a precious personal and group possession, a

⁹⁸ Anastacio Zamora, with whom both Torres and Hernández seem obsessed in these declarations, was reportedly killed by Sandinistas under Juan Pablo Umazor in April 1929; B-2 Report, 22 April 1929, NA127/43A/4.

⁹⁹ Deposition of Julio Maradiaga, *Hernández File*; Abelino Herrera was later commended for his 'meritorious services' to the Marines, and was reportedly on Sandino's 'death list' for treason; Recommendation for meritorious services rendered by native, Potter, Ocotal, 24 April 1928, NA127/220/2.

¹⁰⁰ For one example of the State Department's idiom of 'guarantees', in March 1927 the US Minister in Managua reported that the Otis and Mengel Mahogany Co. on the east coast was 'making urgent requests for more ample guarantee and better protection'. Eberhardt to Kellogg, 18 March 1927, 817.00/4667; for the British Foreign Office see 817.00/4666.

formal promise that the gang would not injure or kill those who did what they were told.

Such a system could only arise from and reproduce conditions of extreme political confusion, uncertainty, and instability. For those under threat there were only two foolproof solutions: secure guarantees from all active gangs, or opt out of the system altogether. The first was generally impracticable, since gangs often waged war against each other, though it was a strategy pursued by many and sometimes did work in practice.¹⁰¹ The latter solution – opting out of the system – was commonly pursued in the form of temporary and permanent migration, though for many migration was an impractical or unacceptable alternative. Yet if the guarantee system was inherently risky and insecure, it also worked well enough in practice to blanket the political landscape of the Segovias long before Hernández and Torres appeared on the scene and long after they were gone. Significantly, the Sandinistas employed an identical language from the beginning to the end of their rebellion: the scores of generals, colonels, judges, police chiefs, tax collectors, and other civil and military authorities of the Defending Army were continually issuing and revoking guarantees.¹⁰² Indeed, once one's eye becomes sensitised to the term, guarantees begin to crop up throughout the documents from this period.

This idiom of guarantees reveals, at a concrete and quotidian level, the extent to which sovereignties in the Segovias were in fact localised. The logic of the system – ‘surrender what is demanded or you will be robbed, injured, or killed’ – expressed the extreme decentralisation of the legitimate use of violence. In this system, anyone with the will and social and material resources to use violence could arrogate unto themselves the legitimate right to do so. One way to map this decentralisation would be to map guarantees – a map of who guaranteed whom would be a map of

¹⁰¹ In March 1929, to cite one such instance, Luis Antonio Osorio, owner of the hacienda Oyote near the Honduran border, secured a guarantee from Sandinista general Carlos Salgado; seven months earlier, in Aug. 1928, he had secured a letter from Captain Holmes, USMC, ‘request[ing] that every consideration be shown him and his family and their servants’. Papers found in Osorio’s hacienda at Oyote, 16 April 1931, NA127/209/8.

¹⁰² Three examples: From a Marine-Guardia intelligence report: ‘One of the chief sources of revenue for the bandits [Sandinistas] is extortion from wealthy finca owners for ‘protection’... Benjamin Lou of San Juan has admitted paying for ‘guarantees’...’ Letter from Sandinista Alejandro Molina to father, Yalí, 10 Dec. 1928: ‘...I had received guarantees for you but when the General [Sandino] found out that Humberto was your business manager he ordered that your properties be molested...’ Letter from Sandinista Colonel P. Sánchez to Luis Frenzel, Jinotega, 12 Dec. 1928: ‘...the guarantee of the machos [Yankees] is worth nothing to us...’ B-2 Reports, 14 and 28 Jan. 1929, NA127/43A/4.

contending networks of power.¹⁰³ The product of a highly dangerous and unpredictable political field, the guarantee system was an expression of the fundamental organising principles of gang violence and political-economic struggle in the Segovias, the central dilemmas of the system played out countless times in the hills and valleys of the region. Deeply rooted in the region's political culture, the system persists, in modified form, to this day.¹⁰⁴

Anastacio Hernández and many of his friends and victims were born and raised in the *comunidad indígena* of Mosonte. What role did ethnic and village-level politics play in the violence? While the details remain opaque, considerable evidence suggests that both were crucial. For one, many of the most violence-prone towns, villages, and communities in the western Segovias during this period were also (or had recently been) *comunidades indígenas* dating back to the early colonial period: not only Mosonte (which remained a viable *comunidad* well into the 1950s), but Somoto, Palacagüina, Condega, Yalagüina, Telpaneca, Totogalpa, and San Lucas, among others.¹⁰⁵ Further, as noted above, the destruction of many existing *comunidades* by the Nicaraguan state and coffee growers from the 1870s, combined with land expropriation and coercive labour control mechanisms, generated deep resentments among many Indians across the region. After the overthrow of Zelaya's Liberal regime (1893–1909), Segovian Conservative *caudillos* were evidently well served by representing themselves as bulwarks against this liberal onslaught.¹⁰⁶ From 1911 to at least 1924, as Jeffrey Gould has shown, the political leaders of indigenous

¹⁰³ Elliptical references in both declarations to a 'coffee-growers pact' around Dipilto suggests that material interests in production and trade were intimately bound up with political relations and control of local political offices; regional political battles may have had as much to do with commercial competition and the developing political economy of coffee as with competition over the allocative resources of the state. Unfortunately, the literature on the coffee economy in the western Segovias is slim and exploration of this connection must await further investigation; see CIERA, *Nicaragua*, chaps. 2–4.

¹⁰⁴ Based on numerous interviews conducted by the author in and around Ocotal and Yalí in September and October 1990.

¹⁰⁵ For an overview of the history of indigenous communities in the western Segovias see CIERA, *Nicaragua*, chaps. 1–3; on Mosonte, pp. 60–1 ff.; on the survival of Mosonte's *comunidad* into the 1950s, Jeffrey Gould, personal communication. That the places mentioned were especially violence-prone is evidenced in part by an analysis of the social geography of rebel activity during Sandino's rebellion; see Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', chap. 8. According to the 1920 census, 93 persons lived in Mosonte proper and 1329 resided in its surrounding hamlets; *Censo general de 1920*, p. 289.

¹⁰⁶ On the Conservative vision of the state see Walter, *The Regime of Anastacio Somoza*, pp. 9–22 ff.; on Conservative *caudillo* politics see Gould, ¡*Vana ilusión!* and 'El café, el trabajo, y la comunidad indígena'.

communities in other parts of Nicaragua – including Matagalpa, Jinotega, Chontales, and Boaco departments – formed part of a powerful ‘Indian-Conservative alliance’, cobbled together (separately) by Emiliano Chamorro and Bartolomé Martínez as part of a larger electoral strategy in the *post*-Zelaya years.¹⁰⁷ Mosonte was evidently firmly integrated into this alliance; by the outbreak of the 1926–27 civil war it was, in the memory of one former Liberal solidier, a Chamorrista stronghold with a reputation for extreme violence.¹⁰⁸ By the 1910s at the latest, the dominant faction of Mosonte’s political leadership evidently had allied with Emiliano Chamorro and his local ally Gustavo Paguaga. Given that political factionalism and power struggles in surviving *comunidades* were rife, and given the explosive dynamics of the *post*-Espino Negro political landscape, it is reasonable to conclude that the Hernández violence had its origins in Chamorro and Paguaga’s plan to disrupt the 1927 and 1928 elections, ongoing factional battles within Mosonte’s political leadership, and a stew of related local struggles – with the latter two sets of struggles absent from the documentary record. By the spring of 1927, one would probably have seen an ascendant faction of Mosonte’s leadership expressing support for either Moncadista Liberals or anti-Chamorrista Conservatives under Carlos Cuadra Pasos – or perhaps two ascendant factions – with Hernández charged with eliminating the most active supporters of these rivals to Chamorro, Paguaga, and their allies.¹⁰⁹ This, at any rate, seems the most likely scenario.

Outbreaks of political violence also rocked the *comunidad indígena* of San Lucas, south of Somoto, in 1922. Significantly, one Fidencio Carazo, a gang leader associated with Anastacio Hernández in 1927, was reportedly involved in the 1922 San Lucas violence.¹¹⁰ During the September 1922 electoral campaign, Fidencio Carazo at the head of three men reportedly attacked and wounded one resident of San Lucas; five years later, during

¹⁰⁷ See Gould, *¡Vana ilusión!*

¹⁰⁸ In 1980, Lizandro Ardón Molina, former employee of the San Albino mine and a Liberal during the 1926–27 Civil War, told a story about carting guns to Sandino’s forces near Murra in late 1926; ‘But we weren’t able to pass directly on the road that passed through Mosonte, because there was an immense [Conservative] garrison there, 30 or 40 soldiers at least, and I’ll tell you what – God himself wouldn’t have passed through there!’ His trepidation makes more sense in the light of the Hernández violence; IES 032: 7.

¹⁰⁹ It is noteworthy that the Liberal Party won by a small margin (102 to 80) in Mosonte in the 1928 presidential elections; Consejo Nacional de Elecciones, p. 37.

¹¹⁰ The name of Fidencio Carazo of San Lucas appears in a fragment of a second declaration by Anastacio Hernández that identifies both allies and victims indiscriminately; *Hernández File*. San Lucas violence appears in *La Gaceta*, 18 Aug., 8 and 13 Sept., 30 Nov., and 27 Dec. 1922. *La Gaceta* notes kindly provided by Jeffrey Gould; a systematic mining of this source would probably reveal much more along these lines.

the November 1927 electoral campaign, a gang under the same Fidencio Carazo reportedly killed nine persons, seven of whom were members of the same family, in Santa Isabel, a stone's throw from San Lucas, and four other persons in San Lucas itself.¹¹¹ In 1930 and 1931 the same Fidencio Carazo was reportedly an active gang leader around San Lucas allied with the Sandinista rebels.¹¹² San Lucas also saw a disproportionately large number of local gang leaders during the years of Sandino's rebellion, as did other surviving or former indigenous communities in the region.¹¹³ Mosonte, on the other hand, evidently did not (though Anastacio's brother Inés Hernández was an active Sandinista gang leader).¹¹⁴

In sum, while much here is murky, obscured by the silences and biases of the available evidence, it is clear that violent political battles in the western Segovias' towns, villages, and surviving *comunidades indígenas* were endemic, had long genealogies, and were deeply institutionalised at a local level; it is also clear that the 1927 Hernández violence emerged from the contingent intersection of ethnic, village-level, regional, and national-level political struggles. But while one might safely conclude that these entwining struggles for power profoundly shaped the Hernández violence, the precise roles and relative importance of different levels and kinds of struggle must remain, for now, largely a mystery.

This, then, is a survey of some aspects of the Chamorrista's *post*-civil war offensive in the Segovias. Yet in the end they failed. As subsequent events made clear, by the late 1920s spectacular gang violence by itself was not, on the whole, a terribly effective way of maintaining power. On the contrary, there is much to indicate that the violence was garnering ever-diminishing returns. Most rural dwellers evidently harboured deep animosities towards local Conservative bosses and were eager to be rid of them – a dynamic eloquently expressed by Angel Martínez Soza, above.¹¹⁵ Subsequent voting patterns indicate that most Segovianos were not so much cowed into passivity by Conservative violence as fed up with it, as they were fed up with Conservative rule generally: in 1928, and again in

¹¹¹ *La Gaceta*, 8 Sept. 1922; Patrol Report, Bellinger, Somoto, 7 Nov. 1927, NA127/198/1; Somoza, *El verdadero Sandino*, p. 76. Somoza incorrectly identified Carazo as a Sandinista.

¹¹² GN-2 Reports, 1 Dec. 1930, and 1 Dec. 1931, NA127/43A/29.

¹¹³ See Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', chap. 8.

¹¹⁴ R-2 Report, Ocotal, 15 April 1928, and Patrol Report, Trogler, 21 Sept. 1929, NA127/212/1.

¹¹⁵ This was attested to in part by widespread popular support for local Liberal gangs during the Civil War, and for Sandino's rebels afterward. The IES testimonies reveal both widespread Conservative violence from mid-1926 and deep and widely-shared resentments against local-regional Conservative powerholders; see Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', chaps. 4–5.

1932, the Liberal Party won the presidential elections in Nueva Segovia by a landslide.¹¹⁶ The days of locally-produced spectacular violence as a way of maintaining political power were coming to an end.

Yet not all was failure, and despite the eventual outcome of these battles, the nature and magnitude of the Conservative effort should be enough to give serious pause. Since the 1960s, historians of agrarian social movements have devoted much of their attention to the process of political mobilisation among subordinate groups. The actions of the Hernández gangs suggest that they might fruitfully broaden their vision to encompass the no less critical process of political immobilisation through the propagation of fear. The gang activities examined above might help to explain Gustavo Paguaga's election by a slim margin to the Chamber of Deputies in 1928, and Abraham Gutiérrez Lobo's appointment as *Administrador de Rentas* by the Liberal Moncada regime in 1929.¹¹⁷ These and other Chamorristas evidently had demonstrated, through their continued personal control over the means of organised violence, that they were still powers to be reckoned with.

Sandinista violence

The cases of Anastacio Hernández's brother Inés, Fidencio Carazo, and dozens of other local actors suggest only some of the many continuities that emerged between the 1926–27 civil war and the popular-nationalist, anti-imperialist struggle waged by Augusto César Sandino. For nearly six years – from May 1927 to January 1933 – Sandino led an armed rebellion against the US Marines and the Guardia Nacional in the cause of national independence.¹¹⁸ Sandino's rebellion, born of civil war, retained many features of the battles from which it arose. His Liberal Army, and later, his Defending Army of Nicaraguan National Sovereignty, were in many ways the products of the political-cultural environment of the Segovias, created within it, effectively caged within it, and enabled and constrained by its logics. The idioms and practices of Segovian political struggle and civil warfare – especially selective property destruction and confiscation, gang warfare and gang violence, ritual terror, and the guarantee system

¹¹⁶ Consejo Nacional de Elecciones, p. 55; Walter, *The Regime of Anastacio Somoza*, p. 62.

¹¹⁷ Consejo Nacional de Elecciones, 58; *La Tribuna*, 13 March 1929.

¹¹⁸ Sandino held that Espino Negro, by allowing US troops on Nicaraguan soil, violated Nicaraguan national sovereignty; his principal aim in rebelling, as he articulated it from beginning to end, was to expel US troops. To date the best studies of the rebellion are Gregorio Selser, *Sandino, general de hombres libres*, 2 vols. (Buenos Aires, 1959), and Neill Macaulay, *The Sandino Affair* (North Carolina, 1985). See also Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor'.

– were directly appropriated by Sandino's rebels in their struggle for state power.

Sandino's Sandinistas have long been accused of horrific atrocities against the civilian populace of the Segovias. The most damning and consequential condemnation came in 1936, when Anastasio Somoza García, Jefe Director of the Guardia Nacional (and by a recent *coup d'état* soon to be President of the Republic) published a scathing indictment against the entire rebellion.¹¹⁹ Sandino, claimed Somoza, had been nothing more than a bloodthirsty criminal, the leader of gangs of cutthroats and brigands who for the better part of a decade had brutally terrorised the innocent countryfolk of the Segovias. Essentially a compilation of captured documents, carefully selected, deceptively edited, and tied together by a transparently tendentious storyline, Somoza's book claimed to provide irrefutable evidence of hundreds of atrocities committed by Sandino's rebels. The book – which still carries considerable authority across much of Nicaragua – soon became the anchor of what might be termed the Somocista narrative of Sandinismo, a story whose aim was to destroy Sandino's heroic image and delegitimise the popular-nationalist, anti-imperialist programme for which he had fought and died.

Somoza was correct in that the Sandinistas killed and mutilated many Nicaraguan civilians; as I argue more fully elsewhere, Sandino's rebellion was as much a regional civil war as a nationalist, anti-imperialist crusade.¹²⁰ Indeed, close examination reveals that the violence of the Sandinistas exhibited remarkable parallels with the violence of the Hernández gangs. Compare the depositions cited above, for instance, with the following account of a ritualised killing committed by troops under Sandinista General Pedro Altamirano at the Javalí Mines in Chontales in August 1931; as a captive German engineer later described it,

The headman ... took [a prisoner] to an outpost behind a church accompanied by a man playing an accordion. The headman executed a war dance around the victim to the tunes of weird music, letting his machete come down grazing the man's face, cutting and scratching him every so often. As the music became wilder he suddenly struck the man behind the ear, felling him. He then, with one blow, severed the head from the body.¹²¹

Anastasio Hernández employed ritual terror and spectacular violence to produce fear. So did Sandino's rebels, and often. For but one further

¹¹⁹ Somoza, *El verdadero Sandino*. Sandino was assassinated in Managua in Feb. 1934 by members of Somoza's National Guard.

¹²⁰ The latter point is a central argument of Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor'.

¹²¹ Statement of Mr. W. Pfäeffle, formerly Manager of the Javalí Mine, Managua, 2 Aug. 1931, NA127/202/2/9; also described in Somoza, *El verdadero Sandino*, pp. 249–52.

example, consider the machete murders and mutilations that took place in the village of San Marcos, near Jinotega, on the eve of the 1928 presidential elections. Around one o'clock in the morning a gang under Sandinista General Pedro Altamirano, or Pedrón, surprised three Liberal leaders in the home of a fellow Liberal. They were dragged from their beds and killed and mutilated inside and near the house. 'I came to town [San Marcos]... where I encountered, horribly cut up and in underclothes, without socks, my unfortunate companions....' reported one shocked Liberal. 'That place was the most sinister and tragic that my eyes have ever seen. It was an atrocious crime, a savagery without precedent.'¹²² As we have seen, however, such Sandinista 'savagery' had plenty of precedents. Pedrón made plain the political and public character of the murders: the mutilated bodies were left on the main road through San Marcos, while some locals and others were reportedly seized and warned that

a similar fate awaited the other leaders of the Liberal party; at least one of these captives was taken down and shown the bodies, so as to further impress the example upon him... Altamirano took advantage of conversations with various of those he captured to declare the political character of this brutal crime, to state that it was... intended as an example [to] the Liberals, especially the leaders and propagandists... only 'a beginning' of what was to follow.¹²³

As early as 1928 the rebels had become infamous for their brutality, for their *corte de chaleco* or 'waist cut', in which the victim was decapitated, the arms and legs severed, and the abdomen sliced open; the *corte de cumbo* or 'skull cut,' in which the top of the head was cut off and the brain exposed, soon followed by convulsions and death; the *corte de blumers*, in which the legs were severed at the knees and the hands cut off, and the victim left to bleed to death; placing the severed penis in the decapitated victim's mouth; and other gruesome practices.¹²⁴ While there are no official tallies, the Sandinistas did kill many hundreds of civilian Nicaraguans during the course of their rebellion, many in ways strongly reminiscent of Hernández.

The reasons behind the violence were rooted in both the political culture of the Segovias and the exigencies of war. At one level, as we have seen, violence and terror were basic tools of Segovian political struggle.

¹²² Statement of José Santos Rivera, 10 Oct. 1928, NA127/220/861.

¹²³ Memorandum on the murder of J. C. Mendieta and party, 1-2 Oct. 1928, Parker, 4 Oct. 1928, NA127/220/7/861.

¹²⁴ Techniques summarised in Somoza, *El verdadero Sandino*, pp. 279-80; captured Sandinista correspondence (many in original in the National Archives) is replete with references to these methods; see Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', chap.

Combined with this was the vastly superior military might of the Marines and Guardia. Throughout the rebellion the many semi-autonomous bands of the Defending Army were consistently compelled to assume a defensive posture against an extremely aggressive and often ruthless foe. Just as important (and despite Sandinista mythologies to the contrary), the Marines did not invade the Segovias all by themselves. Insinuating themselves deeply into the cracks and fissures of Segovian society, they comprised only the most visible element in what quickly emerged as a broad and deeply-rooted anti-Sandinista alliance. By the time of Moncada's election in November 1928, many thousands of Segovianos had come to see their interests more closely aligned with the Marines and Guardia than with Sandino. Despite overwhelming popular support for the rebels throughout large parts of the Segovias, opposition was very strong among a substantial proportion of the populace (especially townsfolk, middle-sized peasant farmers, traders and merchants, coffee growers, cattle ranchers, and landlords, but excluding no social class); 'treason' was a constant problem; 'traitors' were everywhere.¹²⁵ Guerrilla wars are inherently messy, brutal affairs, and this was no exception. As Sandino himself tried to explain in a 'Manifesto to the Capitalists Notified by Our Army in Jinotega, Matagalpa, Estelí, and Ocotal' in November 1931. 'Liberty is won not with flowers but with bullets, and for this reason we have been compelled to utilise the *cortes de chaleco, cumbo, y blumer*.'¹²⁶ Rebel violence against other Nicaraguans was integral to the process of rebellion.

Yet despite their many similarities, Conservative and Sandinista violence were diametrically opposed in a fundamental sense: Hernández, Torres, and others sowed terror in order to keep those in power in power, while Sandinista violence, by the lights of its leaders, was intended to expel the murderous Marines, to defend the nation's honour and restore national sovereignty, and most broadly, to empower the historically disempowered, the labouring poor. Sandino's was as much a moral revolution as a political and social one; the Defending Army's strict moral codes against rape, for instance, sharply distinguished Sandinista violence against civilians from previous gang practices.¹²⁷ A fundamentally different moral tenor seems to have infused most Sandinista gangs, which in any case could not have survived long without overwhelming popular support in the locales in which they operated. Of course the reality was

¹²⁵ See Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', chaps. 8–11.

¹²⁶ Sergio Ramírez (ed.), *Augusto C. Sandino, el pensamiento vivo*, 2 vols. (Managua, 1984), vol. 2, p. 203. The first clause became a well known aphorism of Sandino's; the second has tended to be ignored.

¹²⁷ See Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', chap. 6, esp. p. 248.

messier than the ideals. Personal vendettas and retribution co-existed with the noblest intentions of an all-volunteer army. But the basic point remains: Sandino's rebels seized on a language and a set of practices that had long been employed by the dominant classes and grafted them onto a radically different vocabulary and project of nationalism and social justice. This re-crafting ran parallel to Sandino's re-appropriation of the dominant classes' languages of nationalism and national sovereignty – for perhaps the first time in Nicaraguan history, these oft-heard patriotic rhetorics were re-constructed to privilege the historically subordinate, the worker-peasant-Indian majority.¹²⁸ The ideals of national and popular sovereignty legitimated Sandinista violence, while the goal of keeping Gustavo Pangua and company in power animated Hernández. The means employed by Conservatives, Liberals, and Sandinistas were much the same, but the ends – at least by the lights of official rebel discourse – a universe apart.

At the same time, Sandino's rebellion had important unintended consequences. There was in fact a double irony at work here. On the one hand, the more intensively the Marines and Guardia terrorised the lower orders of the Segovian countryside, the more they promoted the cause they sought to destroy. On the other hand, Sandino's growing power as a regional *caudillo* with national aspirations heightened the fears of the United States and the Moncada regime and led to the increasing centralisation, professionalisation, and empowerment of the Guardia – especially in the Segovias, with its dense networks of anti-rebel spies and informants. Sandino's power grew considerably from mid-1930 to the end of 1932, but the power of the Guardia grew far more.¹²⁹ By the time of the Marine withdrawal in early 1933, control over the means of organised violence had devolved into two opposing camps: Sandino's Defending Army and the Guardia Nacional, headed by Somoza. With the elimination of Sandino, the Guardia would stand alone, as it did after 1934. In the context of Roosevelt's Good Neighbour Policy, dramatically weakened local-regional *caudillo* control over the means of organised violence, and a divided opposition, the foundations were thus laid for the consolidation of the Somocista state.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Gould, *¡Vana ilusión!*, p. 401, notes that the leaders of the 1881 Matagalpa Indian Uprising employed a language of 'the nation'; while such popular reappropriations during periods of upheaval were probably commoner than the available evidence indicates, Sandino's was the first to make a significant impact at the national level.

¹²⁹ Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty*, chaps. 5–7; Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', pp. 473–84 ff.

¹³⁰ See Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty*; Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza*.

Conclusion

Political violence and terror are by now disturbingly familiar subjects for historians and analysts of modern Central America. The post-1959 florescence of marxist-inspired popular revolutionary and guerrilla movements, the US-supported counterinsurgency programmes, state-sponsored repression and terror, paramilitary death squads, all have received extensive treatment in the literature.¹³¹ Yet if it is possible to draw parallels between the upsurges of violence examined here and more recent death squad activity in El Salvador, Guatemala, or elsewhere, to do so shrouds perhaps more than it reveals. It not only obscures basic differences in world-historical time, but in the nature of the perpetrators and the state to which they were linked. This was not the 1970s or 1980s but the mid-1920s – and to my knowledge there is no scholarly research on death squad activity in Central America before the 1932 El Salvador *Matanza* (an event, in any case, in a class by itself).¹³² This was not the violence of a modern authoritarian-bureaucratic state, but of beleaguered Old-Regime local-regional *caudillos* linked to a patrimonial state in the throes of radical transformation towards more modern state forms. These *caudillos* were clearly working within a long-established tradition, one organised on the principle that the ultimate site of political contestation in the countryside was the human body, that to practice politics was to wage war – systematically to apply organised violence in order to compel one's opponent to fulfill one's will.¹³³ Their actions make plain that the sustained capacity to inflict physical injury had long been one of the primary determinants of power relations in rural Nicaragua, that personal

¹³¹ For earlier treatments see Gabriel Aguilera Peralta, *Dialéctica del terror en Guatemala* (San José, 1981), and Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (New York, 1984). For more recent works and guides to further reading see the voluminous publications of America's Watch and Amnesty International, including America's Watch, *El Salvador's Decade of Terror* (New Haven, 1991); Amnesty International, *Guatemala: The Human Rights Record* (London, 1987), and *Honduras: Civilian Authority – Military Power: Human Rights Violations in the 1980s* (London, 1988); see also James Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus*; Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power* (Boulder, 1991); Jim Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside* (Chapel Hill, 1994); Robert M. Carmack (ed.), *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* (Norman, OK, 1988). For a comparative perspective see Martha K. Huggins (ed.), *Vigilantism and the State in Modern Latin America: Essays on Extralegal Violence* (New York, 1991); and Deborah Poole (ed.), *Unruly Order: Violence, Power, and Cultural Identity in the High Provinces of Southern Peru* (Boulder, 1994).

¹³² An exception might be Ana Patricia Alvarenga, 'Reshaping the Ethics of Power: A History of Violence in Western Rural El Salvador, 1880–1932', unpubl. PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1994, which I was unable to review before the completion of this article.

¹³³ Paraphrase of Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (New York, 1968), p. 101.

control over the means of organised violence had long constituted a central pivot upon which had turned the outcomes of elections and deal-making and other ways of making power – and not only during periods of relative state incoherence.¹³⁴

At one level, then, the postwar mushrooming of gang violence in the Segovias and elsewhere can be interpreted as the paroxysms of a mortally wounded state and ruling bloc, a desperate slashing back against the combined power of widespread popular discontent, the ascendent Liberal Party, and intensifying US imperialist intervention. At another level, the violence expressed many ongoing struggles within Segovian society, a micro-universe of conflict-ridden relations, developed over time, among and between families, households, parties, communities, patrons and clients, and various layers of the state. In this light, perhaps the most striking thing about this violence is its utterly homegrown, local character. During this period gangs seem to have sprung out of the very soil of the Segovias, organically meshed into the very fabric of social life. This violence was organised not by technocrats or a military command structure or an official arm of the state, but by networks of local-regional political bosses afraid of losing power or hoping to enhance it. It was committed not by masked or uniformed soldiers or School-of-the-Americas-trained professionals but by members of local communities, neighbours, acquaintances, perhaps at times even kin. In a time and place where 80 to 90 per cent of the population earned their living from the soil, it is exceedingly likely that most gang leaders and members were poor, illiterate workers and peasants, members of local families and communities, enmeshed in complex relationships with more powerful local-regional patrons. In sporadic and contingent cycles men were mobilised into gangs in order to inflict physical injury on others and then reintegrated themselves into the daily routines of rural life. Even Hernández went to plant tobacco and beans after his defeat by Sandino, or so he claimed (and if he lied he doubtless told the most plausible lie). At one level these gangs were tools of the dominant, instruments of power to be wielded at critical moments. Yet the men who formed them were not only tools but autonomous agents following their own lights, working to enhance their own power under historically given conditions. Anastacio Hernández headed up a kind of paramilitary death squad, but the category seems a crude imposition on a different kind of social phenomenon. More precisely he headed up a Segovian gang, or series of gangs, each an

¹³⁴ In this sense the Segovias were very different from other regions in Latin America, e.g., Richard Graham's 19th century provincial Brazil, where violence apparently played a very different and far less central role; see his *Patronage and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* (Stanford, 1990), esp. chap. 3.

expression of the deep divisions that had long rent the social and political fabric of the region.

The *raison d'être* of such gangs was to produce power through fear, and fear through ritual, public violence; to generate a social field and memory of fear, a collective sensibility diffused throughout the social body and penetrating the most fundamental units of social organisation, including the patriarchal family. It was the capillary dispersion of this sensibility, down to the level of the household, the family, and the individual body (or the efforts to so disperse it) – part and parcel of its homegrown, local, organic qualities – which most profoundly marked this violence.

None of this was new; in fact it gives every indication of being very old. The eruptions of violence sketched above were only the latest in a long series of (similar?) political convulsions in the region stretching back at least to the 1840s – Palacagüina, Totogalpa, Telpaneca, Somoto, San Lucas, Mosonte, these and dozens of other towns and communities across the Segovias all have extraordinarily long and complex and violent political histories (which needless to say have never been written) and have doubtless produced many characters cut from the same cloth as Hernández. Before 1926 the evidence is spotty, but it is clear that from at least 1926 until 1934 gang violence was endemic to the western Segovias, after which it was effectively caged by the Somocista state.¹³⁵ At the same time, it is also clear that by the late 1920s, local-regional political violence was largely ineffective, by itself, as a way of producing or maintaining political power. Increasingly, the critical mass of social power emanated from a militarised central state, in turn under the shadow of the United States. By 1934, these more ancient modes of local-regional *caudillo* domination had been largely eclipsed by, or entwined with, more modern forms of state-centred coercion, domination, and control. After forty-three years of authoritarian rule, the 1979 Sandinista Revolution and 1980s *contra* war effectively dissolved the state's monopoly of violence and Segovian gang violence mushroomed once more (and its omnipresence of late in the Segovias, where 'unsolved murders with political overtones [continue to] occur almost daily', represents perhaps as good a measure as any of the contemporary cohesiveness of the Nicaraguan state).¹³⁶ In

¹³⁵ Much of the rebel organisational infrastructure eroded during the year of peace (Feb. 1933 to Feb. 1934), and after Sandino's assassination on 21 Feb. 1934, all remnants were crushed by the National Guard; Pedrón's band was the last to hold out, until his death in late 1937; see Jesús Miguel Blandón, *Entre Sandino y Fonseca* (Managua, 1981), pp. 10–11; see also Schroeder, 'To Defend Our Nation's Honor', chaps. 1, 11.

¹³⁶ Quote from *The New York Times*, 16 Feb. 1993; a perusal of recent issues of *Barricada*, *Nuevo Diario* and *La Prensa* amply confirms this assertion; on the complexities of the post-1990 Segovian political landscape see 'Centroamérica: The Month in Review', Resource Center of the Americas, Minneapolis.

this sense perhaps we can begin to speak – with great caution and specificity – of a kind of Segovian ‘gang political culture’, a historically developed set of practices, rituals, symbols, and idioms through which political struggles have been (and to some extent continue to be) pursued during periods of state crisis.¹³⁷

Until the mid-1920s, organised gang violence had been, by and large, a tool of the dominant. Ironically, Sandino’s rebels, acting by the lights of a fundamentally different moral compass, seized on many of the same means to exploit the weakness of the national state and advance their own agendas. The peasant-worker-Indian soldiers of Sandino’s Defending Army were entirely unoriginal in how they used murders, mutilations, and terror for political ends. Both rebels and *cuatreros* waged their battles upon the same political-cultural turf of the Segovias; emerging from and remaining embedded within that milieu, the Sandinistas, not surprisingly, partook of those same idioms and practices – though to challenge, not defend, existing relations of power, which led to a further irony: the centralisation and empowerment of the central state and the violent suppression of Sandinismo by the ‘dogs’ (*perros*) of the Guardia Nacional after 1934.¹³⁸

All of this is not to suggest that before 1926 local-regional violence was the only key to power, or that it vanished completely after 1936. Many

¹³⁷ Perhaps the most salient difference between pre-1930 and post-1979 gang violence is a greater degree of separation between local-regional political bosses and the gangs themselves, a ‘democratisation’ of sorts in the use of violence, with local peasant-workers forming gangs largely independent of caudillo control, some in order to pressure the state for land, credits, and other productive resources. See ‘Centroamérica: The Week in Review’, esp. 1988–1994.

¹³⁸ The literature on the brutality of the Guardia is extensive; see Millet, *Guardians of the Dynasty*; Walter, *The Regime of Anastasio Somoza*, pp. 212–6; Joaquín Chamorro C., *Los Somoza: Una estirpe sangrienta* (Buenos Aires, 1979), pp. 17–28 ff. ‘Perros’ was the most popular Sandinista term of abuse for the Guardia; e.g., Ascención Iglesias Rivera, IES 065: 3, and Cosme Castro Andino, IES 049: 2. It should be noted that the terms used in the title of this essay to identify the historical movement in the organisation of violence from the Conservatives to the Sandinistas to the Guardia – ‘horse thieves to rebels to dogs’ – are intended to convey as well the fractured nature of historical memory in Nicaragua. ‘Cuatrero’ – the term favoured by one prominent elderly Ocotol Liberal in 1990, and as such, I suspect, representative of a more general pattern – effectively depoliticises Hernández’s violence and erases his actual role as a Conservative gang leader and mass murderer (perhaps by 1990, after eleven years of Sandinista rule, the old divisions between Liberals and Conservatives had been sufficiently smoothed over; it should also be noted that when this interview was conducted in 1990 I was only dimly aware of the Hernández case, and hence was ill-equipped to follow up on my informant’s remark); the term ‘rebels’ might be considered merely descriptive, lacking any significant political connotations, but this is not the case, since the term contradicts the Somocista portrayal of the Sandinistas as ‘bandits’; and the term ‘dogs’ embodies the Sandinista version of the Nicaraguan past. Historical memories in Nicaragua are as fractured as its politics, a subject that has not received the attention it deserves.

ways of making power in the pre-Somoza years remain hidden from view by the biases and silences in the available evidence. A more complete story would link organised violence to the formation and transformation of local-regional patronage networks, alliances, and coalitions, and with elections; it would encompass more effectively the rapidly changing terrain of land and labour relations, and consider more thoroughly the connections between competitions for state offices and contending material interests in production and exchange. It would explore how individuals, families, and communities remembered episodes of violence, and how those memories continued to shape peoples' identities and the relations of power in which they were embedded. And it would relate organised political violence to sources of violence not stemming directly from struggles over political office: gender relations, interpersonal conflicts, family feuds, ethnic revolts and uprisings, battles over land, labour, and the products of labour, all were key sites of struggle and fonts of violence. And all connected in ways we have only begun to understand.

Yet despite the foregoing's many exclusions and silences, the current state of the literature seems to call for a renewed emphasis on the roles of local and regional politics, power, the state, and indigenously produced violence in shaping social relations of all kinds in Nicaraguan and Segovian history, and it is in this light that the imbalances of the present essay might be evaluated.¹³⁹ Further investigations into pre-Somoza (and perhaps *post*-Somoza) struggles over land, labour, ethnic identity, and state power should find that the role of local-regional organised violence was of definitive importance to all of these processes. If history is made through struggle, such violence in the Segovias and elsewhere had long been one of the central axes upon which struggle, and hence history, turned – an unsettling conclusion whose comparative implications stretch far beyond this place and time. For students of Nicaraguan and Central American history – and, I would venture, for students of most post-colonial societies in capitalist transition with weak and fractured central states in transition to more modern state forms – these are among the grim and perhaps the central lessons to be learned from the case of the forty-eight year old gang leader and horse thief from Mosonte.

¹³⁹ Much recent literature evidences a peculiar blind spot on the subject; for instance, Burns's *Patriarch and Folk*, an otherwise landmark survey of Nicaraguan history up to the mid-19th century, pays scant attention to political violence in shaping power relations between 'folk' and 'patriarch'; a similar silence inhabits CIERA's impressive 1985 agrarian history of the western Segovias, *Nicaragua*. An important exception here is Jeffrey Gould's work, which pays close empirical attention to the role of violence and coercion in shaping Indian-ladino relations in the Matagalpa and Jinotega highland coffee zones; see his *¡Vana ilusión!* and 'El café, el trabajo, y la comunidad indígena'.