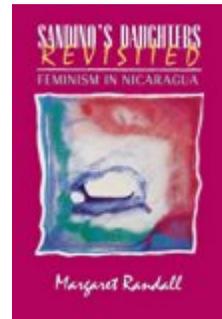


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Margaret Randall. *Sandino's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994. xvi + 311 pp. \$59.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-2024-7; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-2025-4.

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Since the defeat of the Sandinistas at the Nicaraguan polls in 1990, which surprised winners and losers alike as well as their supporters and most observers, much ink has been spilled in attempts to determine the causes. And while Nicaragua has faded from the front pages of U.S. newspapers, some are still interested in what road Nicaragua would then follow. *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, Margaret Randall's collection of twelve oral histories with women involved in the Sandinista revolution, adds insights into these and other questions. This book is useful for the specialist and non-specialist alike and has much to offer the historian, the teacher, the student, and anyone interested in learning more about the Sandinista Party and the women of Nicaragua.

With *Sandino's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua* Margaret Randall adds both to her oral history work with women in the Sandinista revolution and to a thesis elaborated in *Gathering Rage: The Failure of 20th Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda* (Monthly Review Press, 1992). This thesis was that the failure to develop a feminist agenda contributed to the failure of revolutionary movements in Latin America in the 20th century, in this case particularly to the Sandinistas' loss of power in the elections of 1990. The present volume also acts in some ways as a sequel to Randall's *Sandino's Daughters* (New Star Books, 1981), *Risking a Somersault in the Air: Conversations with Nicaraguan Writers* (Solidarity Publications, 1984), *Christians in the Nicaraguan Revolution* (New Star Books, 1983), and *Doris Tijerino: Inside the Nicaraguan Revolution* (New Star Books, 1978), a number of the informants in the latest book having appeared in one or more of the previous ones. Randall's revisiting occurred shortly after the defeat of the Sandinistas in the 1990 elections and most of

the informants had been active Sandinista Party members with high echelon jobs in the government. The loss at the polls was for all of them a surprise and cause of depression. At the same time it has, as has been noted and discussed elsewhere, contributed to a growth in both activity and autonomy in the women's movement in the country. It has also led to an increase in the level and volume of critical assessment of the Party and its failures by members who previously were more "disciplined" and believed in the necessity of maintaining a unified front as part of a revolutionary praxis in the face of attacks often supported if not created by the United States.

Randall herself worked in the Sandinista Ministry of Culture and describes herself as a revolutionary. "I have never been an impartial observer," she writes. "I make no claim to neutrality. I am with these women in their efforts to make the liberation of their gender an integral part of the Nicaraguan people's struggle for dignity and freedom" (p. xiii). After a preface in which she states her position and explains the genesis of the book, Randall presents a brief introduction in which she traces the history of the Latin American New Left, by which she means Cuba's 26th of July movement, the Chilean MIR, Nicaragua's Sandinistas "and other movements of national liberation" (p. 3). She also outlines the struggles within these movements over women's issues, particularly within the Sandinista movement. Randall traces here the issues over which her informants have struggled within the Sandinista Party, particularly the lack of autonomy of AMNLAE, the women's organization created by the Sandinistas. Randall argues, based upon the interviews, that there existed, still exists, within the Party a lack of understanding of a need for a women's organization. "Women's issues and the needs of the revolution

were too often placed in opposition to one another” (p. 28). “Since the women’s organization proved incapable of doing the one thing uniquely within its province – that is, going to battle for women around gender-specific issues – it became less and less important to women’s lives” (p. 30). In addition to the problem of the lack of autonomy of the women’s movement other themes include the 1990 electoral loss by the Sandinistas, sexism within the Party itself, the connection of Christianity of a certain stripe with revolutionary socialism, and the question of how to recreate or revive a revolutionary project in this post cold war era when we are told, and many but not all of Randall’s informants believe, that communism, narrowly defined at least, is bankrupt. Each of these issues is discussed by Randall and her informants with the collection of interviews forming a body of evidence and thought which supports Randall’s insights.

Many of the informants speak of a sense of a failure of the FSLN to fulfill its promising beginnings. Daisy Zamora, who became the vice-minister of culture after the 1979 victory, speaks of the need to develop a new conception of power which would be truly humanist, feminist. She hopes for a different conception of the world, of relations between people, and of power relations at all levels. Gioconda Belli tells Randall, “I feel we lost the revolution to a form of political machismo” (p. 188). Mirna Cunningham, a part Miskito, part Creole doctor who at the time Randall interviewed her was the national director of the Indigenous, Black, and People’s Quincentennial Campaign, tells of the sexism and ethnocentrism of the FSLN in which she has been working since her days as an undergraduate. Milu Vargas, chief council to the Council of State in 1982 and a participant in the writing of the Constitution, argues that the FSLN is the most advanced Party in Nicaragua in terms of women’s participation, perhaps in Latin America, but “...it’s certainly not a party of real equality, not yet” (p. 135).

One theme of interest which emerges from the interviews is the role played by a particular Catholic school. Five of the twelve informants attended the same school for women and all credit the school with awakening in them a sense of obligation to the less fortunate. The school, La Asuncion, was founded to educate upper-class girls. The theme of social responsibilities was prominent in the Nuns’ teaching. The informants’ memories of the school and how their experiences there stoked their activism serve as reminders and evidence that “Catholic” can mean many things and that one can be Catholic and a Marxist, though certainly not in the minds of the sisters of La Asuncion. Two of the informants, Vidaluz Mene-

ses whose father was an Ambassador to Guatemala under the last Somoza while Vidaluz was working underground with the FSLN, and Aminta Granera, whose Catholicism led her to spend five years in a convent, both speak of coming to a decision that violence was necessary. While Meneses speaks of the influence of Gandhi and pacifism in her life she also says that “...we became convinced that it was impossible to Christianize Somoza’s structures. Then we knew we had to destroy them” (p. 152). Granera also speaks of violence sometimes becoming necessary. On communism Meneses says, “I still think the Communist model is valid. If we failed, that was because of our human weaknesses, not because it wasn’t a society worth building” (p. 159). Here the informants add to the discussion of the commonality of certain Christian and Marxist visions brought out in the debates over liberation theology, especially important in Nicaragua for Ernesto Cardenal and others.

The issue of the lack of autonomy of the national women’s organization, AMNLAE, founded within and under the umbrella of the FSLN, is of great importance to Randall and the informants, as it is to international feminists. The informants’ opinions of the issue, not surprisingly, vary according to their sense of the importance of autonomy within a revolutionary movement. Michele Najlis sees AMNLAE as simply an appendage of the FSLN, run by male members of the national electorate “who frequently made terrible comments about women and women’s issues” (p. 57). Vargas recounts an explosion of women’s energy, ideas and organizational abilities during the years 1987 to 1990 which led to the call for autonomy and the demand to be able to elect their own leadership. Rita Aruz, another La Asuncion student, criticizes AMNLAE for being tied to a patriarchal model. Many of the informants talk in excited terms of the growth in autonomous women’s organizations and a more vocal and activist women’s movement as one of the positive things to come out of the fall of the FSLN from power. There is also discussion of the sexism within the Party and the few men in the leadership who spoke out for fuller participation by women and actually followed up on their rhetoric with action.

On an emotional level, one gets an overwhelming sense of the shock and disappointment at the 1990 electoral defeat. Most of the informants are critical of the campaign itself but still believed the FSLN, however out of touch with the people and in need of reform they felt it was, would win. Najlis calls the electoral campaign “a nightmare...(which) spewed slogans...(and) bought people” (p. 58). At the loss she was depressed, “it was

like we'd lost our historic opportunity to make a revolution in this country" (p. 59). The defeat devastated Daisy Zamora. She criticizes the leadership for lacking the vision necessary to do what the people expected of it. Vargas argues that the campaign wasn't aimed at ordinary women. "Anti-imperialism is fine, but there wasn't the slightest attention to the problems women face every day: physical abuse, rape, family planning, job training,...." (p. 137). Belli agrees that the party had separated itself from the ordinary people in the country. The campaign was a string of slogans with little real content, it lacked respect for what people were going through. Granera thought the FSLN was going to win and says she cried for three months straight when they didn't. She still believes that the war, the draft and the economic situation were the biggest reasons for the vote but she also believes that the FSLN was losing vital contact with the people. Dora Maria Tellez was shocked at the election loss. While she sees the draft as a major problem, she also speaks of an erosion of confidence and an over confidence on the part of the FSLN leadership. She blames the lack of ideological work, a belief within the Front that people would follow them no matter what. The loss was also totally unexpected by Arauz and Montenegro.

The electoral defeat has led to much reassessment and discussion of the validity of the FSLN's model for the future of Nicaragua, as has been discussed elsewhere. The two issues of the Party's failure to remain in power and its failure to develop a more feminist agenda and process are inseparable themes in the minds of the informants and Randall. For Tellez, the defeat has increased the role feminism plays. The feminist movement has more impact on the political ideology of the FSLN than ever, there being more space for feminism because there is no sense of a great priority, such as defense, pushing it down. While for Meneses the communist model is still valid, many of the other informants are not so sure. Tellez tells Randall that "In Latin America each revolutionary political alternative - of a traditional kind - has shown itself to be unworkable" (p. 262). Belli tells her "I now believe that

all the conventional models lead to authoritarian abuse of power....What I don't have clear, as yet, is what the alternative might be" (pp. 184-185). Sofia Montenegro believes the "old leadership is exhausted, in every way" (p. 305). While Granera says that she doesn't know enough about the term to call herself a feminist and Doris Tijerino does not consider herself a feminist the others who speak of the future identify feminism as an important element of any successes to come. For Montenegro for example, "the essence of feminism is its democratizing character...." (p. 305).

While it should be obvious by now that I found *Sandino's Daughters Revisited* illuminating and stimulating, there are a few complaints. While Randall briefly traces the New Left in Latin America, it might have been more helpful for her to fill in the less Sandinista savvy reader on some of the details of what she terms the "vendetta" against Ernesto Cardenal, then minister of culture, pursued by Rosario Murillo the wife of then President Daniel Ortega and the background behind the closing of the ministry of culture itself. On page 209, Randall writes that the U.S. Marines installed William Walker as president. This and one or two other historical inaccuracies would mislead the uninitiated reader. But these are small moments of little if any importance to Randall's points.

*Sandino's Daughters Revisited* serves as a good source for historians interested in the roles of women in the Sandinista revolution, the problems within the party concerning the exact forms these roles would take, and what has begun to happen for women and the party after the electoral defeat in 1990. It would also be useful and enjoyable reading in any undergraduate course on women in Latin America or Latin American revolutionary movements.

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