

H-Net Reviews

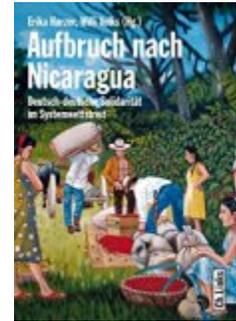
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Erika Harzer. *Aufbruch nach Nicaragua: Deutsch-deutsche Solidarität im Systemwettstreit*. Berlin: Links, Ch, 2009. 240 pp. EUR 19.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-86153-525-6.

Reviewed by H. Glenn Penny (University of Iowa)

Published on H-German (October, 2010)

Commissioned by Benita Blessing



East Meets West in Nicaragua

Aufbruch nach Nicaragua is one of a series of books that the Christoph Links Verlag has recently produced on Germans in Latin America.[1] Links, the Latin American editor for the *Berliner Zeitung* from 1980-86, who was himself in Nicaragua during the 1980s, has a keen interest in Latin America and in the efforts of German leftists (and others) to build solidarity movements. Indeed, the central point of his contribution to this volume is that solidarity in small and great acts is possible. It is also desirable.

That sentiment runs through the entire volume, which is less a history of German interactions with Nicaragua over a longer period of time than a collection of reflections from both East and West Germans on their efforts, and the efforts of their respective states, to aid Nicaraguans during the 1980s. This is not an anthology of empirical essays. Rather, it is a striking collection of short testaments—vignettes—about solidarity movements emerging within and despite the clashing political structures of the Cold War. As testaments, they are quite important. They remind us that in the midst of Cold War anxieties and animosities, people on both sides of the Berlin Wall looked toward Nicaragua and the Nicaraguan revolution with great sympathy and concern. In the 1980s, they engaged the promise of that revolution. They fashioned solidarity movements, sent aid to the Nicaraguan state and its people, pooled enough resources to travel there and, upon arriving, encountered each other as well as the people they hoped to aid. Indeed, this is one of the experiences recounted by

the contributors that will most interest readers of this list: their meetings and interactions with “the other Germans.” Those interactions were not frequent, and they were seldom pre-arranged by either East or West Germans. Nevertheless, they inform many of the narratives collected here.

For most West German activists in the 1980s, for example, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was not on their minds (p. 124). Even many Germans who arrived from the West Berlin district of Kreuzberg recall thinking little of the people on the other side of the Berlin Wall before traveling across it, as Erika Harzer did, to take their first flights to Cuba and then on to Nicaragua. What many of them found among their East German counterparts, however, was impressive. Their own state, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), was closely tied to U.S. president Ronald Reagan’s policies in Central America and thus unwilling to offer substantial assistance to the revolutionaries or even to the Nicaraguan people who were suffering human rights abuses. The East Germans, in contrast, had tremendous state support for their solidarity efforts. Consequently, they were able to help set up institutions such as the Hospital Carlos Marx, engage in nation-building projects, and move beyond local affairs. The West Germans, in contrast, were forced to organize, fundraise, and travel on their own, and they were restricted in the scope of their activities by their resources and their affiliation with the FRG. The “Systemwettstreit” (a battle of political and ideological systems) limited their abilities to act.

In contrast, that Systemwettstreit encouraged East Germans to help Nicaragua. As Matthias Dietrich explains, East German chancellor Erich Honecker had an interest in Latin America. His daughter had married a Chilean, and he was eager to take up paternal policies toward any revolutionary states that might emerge there. He believed, in fact, that the GDR could function as a model for their development. He thus favored extending relations to those states, sending them financial and technical support, and nurturing close bonds. For the GDR leadership, Nicaragua soon became second only to Cuba among Latin American states as a political ally. Strong relationships developed between the GDR and Nicaragua, including financial aid for the Latin American country. The connections became strong enough that Nicaragua's president, Daniel Ortega, traveled to East Berlin to participate in the GDR's fortieth anniversary celebrations (p. 29).

The Systemwettstreit, however, cut in multiple ways. For example, East Germans such as Dietrich and Links were impressed that many West Germans shared their interests and goals vis-à-vis Latin America. That is, despite their nations' different positions in the Cold War, they all came to support the front-line victims of global conflict. In some ways, the West Germans were more effective. East Germans often recall noticing, for instance, that the West Germans had more flexibility to choose the areas in which they wanted to focus their efforts. West Germans' opposition to their state's official stance on the revolution, as well as political and financial independence from state institutions, allowed them to act as they wished, without fear of retaliation at home (pp. 97, 99). This situation also made their limited resources more fluid and more easily directed toward everyday problems on the ground. In addition, the West Germans enjoyed a greater ability to interact with the general population, even though they were, as many Nicaraguans put it, from the "Hitler Germany" rather than the "good Germany" (pp. 36, 53, 102-103). Indeed, because of the Systemwettstreit, some citizens of the "good Germany" never had the chance to do much good. Their own state's structures inhibited their actions. A number of East German church groups hoped to assist Nicaraguans; solidarity groups organized outside of the state (four emerged in Jena alone); and these associations took shape and acted much like their counterparts in the West—with mixed results. Moved by reports of the violence and suffering, many of the East Germans who created those organizations worked avidly to assist Nicaraguans, but achieved very little because of the recal-

culant East German state. The SED regime limited their mobility, refused their travel requests, and even inhibited their ability to organize and send aid across the Atlantic. As a result, many East Germans who tried to act independently had to work against the GDR's government while attempting to aid the very people the GDR state claimed to support (p. 72).

Although those conditions will surprise few scholars of East Germany, the ways in which the East and West Germans interacted in Nicaragua will strike many as news. There is little scholarly work on such moments of cooperation abroad between the members of these states; scholars have not paid much attention to the kinds of interactions that took place in institutions like the Hospital Carlos Marx in Managua. Hermann Schaller, the former director of the hospital, writes in his recollection that the East German state was critical for the hospital's success, and under the GDR's auspices, East German military physicians and even youth groups traveled across the Atlantic to work in its halls. At the same time, he notes that the hospital's resources were always overburdened, and that the West German solidarity movement helped them a great deal: West Germans brought significant financial donations to the hospital and aided their medical efforts. West Germans contributed technical material as well, such as water pumps and electrical systems. There was, in short, critical cooperation in this third world, and Schaller remained impressed with West German activists' commitment to their cause (pp. 40-43). He was also pleased that, after German unification, after the Cold War ground to a halt, and after the hospital was transformed into the Hospital Alemán Nicaragüense (HAN), the FRG, now freed from the Systemwettstreit, stepped in to offer it direct aid.

What is most missing from this collection is a broader sense of Germans' historical presence in this part of the world. The three initial essays introduce the readers to the conditions of the 1980s, offering up the contexts of the Reagan-era and Cold War conflicts as the framework for the activists' interests, motivations, and concerns. There was, however, a longer history of German interaction in Central America. That history accounts, for example, for the German school in Managua that predated the activists' arrival by decades. A German association founded it in 1936, and it was used by many of the East German families sent by the GDR to aid the revolutionary state in the 1980s. It still exists today.[2]

That earlier history placed Germans into the Nicaraguan imagination long before these activists ar-

rived. Indeed, before the “good Germans” existed, Nicaragua was engaged in handing over its German citizens and residents to its “good neighbor,” the United States, during World War II. Afterwards, Nicaragua allowed those ethnic Germans to return, and their legacy continued. It is therefore hard to imagine that the motives of either East or West German activists to engage in solidarity movements with this state were limited to the immediate contexts of the 1980s, and it is a pity that the editors eschewed a broader contextualization for a position that is strikingly self-referential. It is also a shame that this string of testaments saw so little editorial intervention. Despite the resultant repetition and redundancy, however, this is a volume that rewards careful reading.

Notes

[1]. See inter alia Kerstin E. Finkelstein, *Ausgewandert. Wie Deutsche in aller Welt leben* (2005); Susanne Heim, Hans-Ulrich Dillmann, *Fluchtpunkt Karibik. Jüdische Emigranten in der Dominikanischen Republik* (2009); Jens Glüsing, *Das Guayana-Projekt. Ein deutsches Abenteuer am Amazonas* (2008); Jens Kirsten, *Lateinamerikanische Literatur in der DDR: Publikations- und Wirkungsgeschichte* (2004); and Bernd Wulffen, *Deutsche Spuren in Argentinien. Zwei Jahrhunderte wechselvoller Beziehungen* (2010), Wulffen, *Kuba im Umbruch. Von Fidel zu Raúl Castro* (2008), Wulffen, *Eiszeit in den Tropen. Botschafter bei Fidel Castro* (2006).

[2]. Hartmut Fröschle, *Die Deutschen in Lateinamerika : Schicksal und Leistung* (Basel: Erdmann Verl., 1979), 643.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: H. Glenn Penny. Review of Harzer, Erika, *Aufbruch nach Nicaragua: Deutsch-deutsche Solidarität im Systemwettstreit*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31335>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.