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Claribel Alegria, Darwin Flakoll. *Death of Somoza: The First-Person Story of the Guerrillas Who Assassinated the Nicaraguan Dictator.* Willamantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press, 1996. 161 pp. $12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-880684-26-9.

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One of the less explored footnotes of the Nicaraguan revolution is the fate of the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Anastasio Somoza, (second son of Anastasio Somoza Garcia) had controlled Nicaragua since 1966. He fled the country on July 17, 1979, as the forces of the FSLN overwhelmed those of the National Guard. Initially he anticipated that his place of refuge would be the United States of America. However the Carter administration made it clear that his presence was not welcomed. Moving on first to the Bahamas, Somoza eventually settled in Paraguay. He may have expected Paraguay to have been a secure resting place, but this was not to be the case. Walter LaFeber in his book *Inevitable Revolutions* describes his fate thus: "In 1980 bazooka shells shredded Somoza, his armor-plated Mercedes, and a US businessman riding with him. Several suspects were arrested, but the killers were not found" (p. 237).

Death of Somoza claims to tell the story of the "killers." It is based on accounts given to the two writers by the surviving members of the group who carried out the attack. The group, members of the Argentinian Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT), gave their accounts to Alegria and Flakoll in 1982. However, for various reasons having to do with Argentinian politics, and the role within it of the PRT, the decision to publish the story was delayed until 1993.

As an international thriller, *Death of Somoza* is a very good read. Alegria and Flakoll have done an excellent job of interweaving the accounts given to them. The book is a kind of Latin American *Day of the Jackal* with Somoza in the role of Charles De Gaulle. Interestingly, Frederick Forsyth's book was among the reading material that Ramon, the group leader, supplied as preparatory material for the operation. In the accounts related by Alegria and Flakoll, the individual characters and perspectives of the group emerge clearly. We follow the group from their initial involvement in the triumph of the Nicaraguan Revolution in 1979, their activities in helping to consolidate the revolution in the aftermath of the July takeover, their decision to make an attempt on Somoza's life, a period of training in Colombia, through to the details of the operation in Asuncion, Paraguay. The final section is particularly tense, given the difficulty in establishing Somoza's routine so that the attempt on his life could be made without a great risk to the group. The planning for the operation and the workings of the group are given in great detail, and this provides a significant insight into the workings and perspectives of revolutionary organisations.

Examining the work as a historical account, it is necessary for the reviewer to be a little more circumspect. What grounds are there for believing this account? It is unclear whether Alegria and Flakoll took steps to verify any elements of the accounts given to them, or whether any internal inconsistencies emerged from the different accounts. Given the nature of the stories that they were telling, it would be rather surprising if no differences between the accounts emerged at all. Given that the lives of the members of the group often depended on their ability to deceive, some scepticism about their stories might be a little healthy. Also to what extent, if any, have the accounts been embroidered by Alegria and Flakoll in the interests of producing a coherent and gripping narrative? Though I would not dismiss the book as a work of fiction, some attempt to corroborate the accounts would have increased its usefulness.

The book could be used to stimulate a number of discussions. A central issue is the motivation of the group. This was a group of exiled Argentinians, involved in the Nicaraguan revolution. Why should they take it upon themselves to risk their lives in carrying out this act? What right did they think they had to act as judge, jury, and executioner to Somoza? It is a little ironic that this Argentinian group should decide to execute Somoza, given that one of the early actions by the Sandinistas was the repeal of the death sentence. Certainly Somoza was a monster, but does this justify extra-judicial execution? To what extent was he a threat to the Nicaraguan revolution? Had he survived, it is possible that he could

have become a figurehead around which the contra forces might have united, but was this evident in 1979? The issue of motivation is not given a great deal of discussion in the book. Pages 34-37 deal with the initial decision, much of which seems to have been based on a need to keep the group together and active. The issue of counter-revolutionary forces is mentioned, though there does seem to be an element of the need for bringing Somoza to justice. As one character comments, "It would be a historic disgrace to permit that murderer to die peacefully in his bed." It does appear that very little time was spent agonising over whether the group had the right to dispense this justice.

A further issue is whether the Sandinistas knew of the operation. In the reported discussions at the time of the planning of the operation the group leader makes it quite clear that they were not to be involved: "The mere fact of telling them would compromise them. They aren't a guerrilla movement any longer; they're running a state, and for reasons of state they wouldn't approve." This is of course easy and convenient to say. The involvement of states in extra-territorial illegal actions is always compromising, but that has not stopped them. The Sandinistas clearly had a motive for getting rid of Somoza. They were conducting an attempt to have him extradited, but the possibility of this being successful was very small. It would have been very convenient for them to have the operation carried out by an Argentinian group, involvement with which, had it all gone wrong, could have been plausibly denied. The possibility exists that the Sandinistas not only knew of the operation, but were also its instigators.

What is it possible to learn about revolutionary groups from this book? An interesting aspect of this group's activities is their ability and willingness to move from territory to territory. When the book opens they are exiles from Argentina, based in Spain. Then they move on to Nicaragua, Colombia, Paraguay, and presumably back to Nicaragua. Underlying this shifting existence is a continued ambition to return to Argentina to continue with their activities there. Hence there is a commitment both to a Latin American revolutionary project as well as a loyalty to their country of origin.

To conclude, this book would make a useful supplementary text to modules on Central America or revolution in Latin America. It is enjoyable to read, and has a lot to say about the early period of Sandinista rule. It also opens up the possibility for raising a number of issues for discussion: on the writing of history; the problems of using personal testimonies as the basis for historical accounts; the nature of justice; and the activities of revolutionary groups.

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