

**JanGeert Van der Post.** *El largo y sinuoso camino: Razones por las que no ha sido construido el canal de Nicaragua.* Managua: Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica, 2014. 350 S. ISBN 978-99924-2-911-2.

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In June 2013, the National Assembly of Nicaragua passed a law which set the basis for the construction of El Gran Canal linking the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. For the Law 840 in Spanish, see: <<http://sajurin.enriquebolanos.org/vega/docs/Ley%20del%20Gran%20Canal%20Gaceta.pdf>> (21.08.2015). This disputed project is the latest in a row since the quest of the doubtful strait (*estrecho dudoso*) by Christopher Columbus during his fourth voyage (1502–1504). Therefore, JanGeert van der Post's history of the various plans to construct an interoceanic canal on the territory of modern Nicaragua comes at the right time. He provides a comprehensive and systematic survey of this prolonged "national dream" (p. 16) in Nicaragua.

In the prologue van der Post emphasises his goal to present a first systematization of the various initiatives. He also intends to contribute to the ongoing debate on the construction of El Gran Canal, as mentioned above. The author then divides the book into seven chapters: The first chapter gives a short introduction into the topic and develops the research question. Chapter 2 contains a list of investigations and/or projects carried out since the beginning of the 16th century until 2012. This chronology proves to be useful, because one can easily lose track going through 72 different attempts to construct an interoceanic canal.

The use of images, photos, graphs and maps illustrating the different routes, plans, sketches and actors around the canal projects is helpful, even though some of the 98 images appear to be more of a "page filler" as there is no need of every person to be shown who happened to have a connection to Latin America (for example Charles V. or Alexander von Humboldt) and played no significant role in the canal projects in Nicaragua.

Chapters 3 and 4 distinguish between projects of major and minor impacts. Van der Post argues that those with major impacts were characterized by their effects on "inner and international authorities, considering the construction or introduction" (p. 67) of the canal. This perspective is certainly useful, particularly since foreign actors, such as France, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands or the United States of America tried to gain regional and later global influence through the canal project. However, van der Post's concentration on foreign actors, above all the USA (see especially: pp. 96–149), gives the impression that Nicaraguans themselves did not play any important role or even were non-existent in the canal projects.

In order to estimate the "seriousness" and the impacts of the various plans (chapter 5) van der Post uses the methodology of the German geographer Gerhard Sandner. The author divides the initiatives into "groups of interest", "validity of the

proposal”, “chosen route”, “technic or construction system”, “type of founding” and “effective date of the proposal” (p. 239). One of the interesting findings in this context is that until the end of the 19th century there was no direct initiative from actors inside Nicaragua. Rather, an important sector of the Nicaraguan elite, the *latifundistas* (great landowners), saw no benefits in modernizing the country through major infrastructural projects. Compared to other Central American countries, economic orientation towards the export of cash crops, such as coffee, bananas, natural rubber or exotic woods came late in Nicaragua. For an overview of the Liberal era in Nicaragua, see for example: Ciro F.S. Cardoso, Central America. The liberal Era, c. 1870–1930, in: Leslie Bethell (eds.), The Cambridge history of Latin America, vol. 5, Cambridge 2008, pp. 197–227. These commodities came primarily from the *Miskito Coast*, on the Atlantic, which can be characterized as the inner periphery of Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan elite in the centres, like Managua, Granada or León, engaged in the agro export realizing the benefits of participating at the international market and therefore the necessity to modernize the infrastructure and endorse major projects such as the construction of a canal. For the economic transformations during the last two decades of the 19th century, see: Frances Kinloch Tijerino, Historia de Nicaragua, Managua 2012, pp. 165–187. Therefore, the canal became not only an economic project, but also a political one, which “possessed the potential to convert Nicaragua into a cosmopolitan nation, economically and culturally enriched by world trade and foreign immigration.” Luciano Baracco, Nicaragua. The Imagining of a Nation. From Nineteenth-Century Liberals to Twentieth-Century Sandinistas, New York 2005, p. 34.

In the last two chapters (chapters 6 and 7) the author outlines the reasons why the various initiatives from the colonial period until the beginning of the 21st century failed. His conclusions for each period are coherent and provide insight pat-

terns for each of them. For example the lack of technical knowledge (16th century until the second decade of the 19th century), political instability (Federal Republic) and difficulties in funding and political instability caused by civil wars (Republic) or other violent conflicts like the Contra War (post 1979 period).

Although van der Post is not a social scientist by training, but a civil engineer, his language remains clear, understandable and far from being too technical. However, sometimes his style is a bit too descriptive and the reader wishes for further analysis of social and cultural aspects surrounding the canal projects. For instance, one hundred Jamaican workers started digging in 1889 near San Juan del Norte, today San Juan de Nicaragua, for the canal project of the Nicaraguan Canal Construction Company. One year later, already more than 2000 people worked there (pp. 141–143). Apart from the Jamaicans, Van der Post does not mention the regional or ethnic backgrounds of the 2000 workers in 1890. It can be suggested that the majority came from the Caribbean basin, since the most important labour force on the Miskito Coast were Afro-Caribbean people. See: Kinloch Tijerino, Historia de Nicaragua, pp. 184–185. In his book on the history of the Panama canal Mathew Parker shows that immigrants formed the workforce building the canal. Some came from France, the United States, Spain, Italy, Greece, but the majority came from the British West Indies, and found themselves in a “semi-slavery” status. See: Matthew Parker, Hell’s Gorge. The battle to built the Panama canal, London 2008, here: pp. XV–XII. Thus, issues like transnational migration, race, ethnicity, or gender could have been explored further, especially looking at the context of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua with its ethnic and cultural diversity.

Van der Post met the goal he set himself and produced a comprehensive first systematization of the canal projects in Nicaragua. Incorporating the social framework of the canal projects would

have added a relevant perspective to the else detailed analysis, especially if we look at the current protests against the construction of El Gran Canal. The protesters not only warn of the environmental risks and impacts, mainly on *Lago Cocibolca* (Lake Nicaragua) because of its importance as supplier of drinking water See: <<http://www.boletinecologico.org/cientos-marchan-contr-el-canal-interoceanico/>> (21.08.2015). , but they also accuse the Nicaraguan government of violation against human rights, for example by deporting indigenous groups at the Miskito Coast. See the hearing at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights on March 16, 2015: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOxVVwrKnBc&feature=youtu.be>> 21.08.2015).

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