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The Burning House

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Until it reached into our lives and destroyed the tranquility that we had

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deal in 1
2177N, 94° 12' 07.8" W. iPhone Photograph. 2018
was unk
Even thou
already tal
Nobody kn
Arkansas.
knew anytl
a very small number of people.
When did you guys hear
about Mena, anyways? You're
a lot younger than I am.

32' 21.77N, 94° 12' 07.8" W. iPhone Photograph. 2018
important meetings canceled.
Also can claim a small portion for him not being elected as Governor of Virginia. People who were trying to propagan-
dize against him called me up

because
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ators, Bill
s long and
y Reed's.
has been
had their
led out of
this, and
I mean, he
or investi-
aundersing
going on in Mena. Ugh, I don't
have enough time to explain
it, but he basically lost his job,
was run out of government,
all this terrible stuff happened
to him, because he was trying

21 THE BURNING HOUSE

Ileana Selejan

Before speaking of war, I will begin with peace. The Contra War officially ended the night of April 19th, 1990, as a cease-fire agreement between the Nicaraguan government and counter-revolutionary leaders was finally signed. Previously, there had been several failed attempts at negotiating a permanent truce, most notably the Sapoá accord of 1988. The hope now was that recently concluded elections and a peaceful transition of power would carve the path towards national reconciliation. Nicaragua's new president, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, was sworn in on the 25th of April and the disarmament of the Contra armies began the next day. It had been an unexpected, yet definitive, electoral defeat of Daniel Ortega and the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front).¹ The explanation for this dramatic turn of events was as simple as it was complex. Leaving political allegiances aside, a majority of Nicaraguans went to the polls and voted against the war. Out of a population of merely 4 million, the conflict left 30,000 casualties, countless injured, thousands of refugees and internally displaced people living in conditions of extreme poverty. The damage was long-term.

The demobilization and disarmament of the Contra armies, locally known as the *Resistencia Nicaragüense* [Nicaraguan Resistance], began with a formal ceremony in the town of San Pedro de Lóvago, in the department of Chontales, on June 27. In front of a large gathering of people, the uniformed Israel Galeano (aka "Comandante Franklin") then chief-of-staff of the *Resistencia* armies, lifted his weapon into the air, as if with a rallying call, and handed it over to Violeta Chamorro. The new president, dressed symbolically in white, returned the gesture with an embrace. An estimated 25,000 combatants surrendered, following his lead. The peace process took up most of the decade of the 1990s. The controversial SMP (*Servicio Militar Patriótico*) conscription law, in operation since 1983, was abolished almost immediately after Chamorro assumed power, and the national army reduced its numbers from 96,000 to 17,000. According to army statistics, only 17,883 weapons were retrieved from the Contras, while more than 44,000 were kept.² A portion of the decommissioned arsenal was buried in concrete during another ceremony held on September 28th, in Managua, at a site later known as the Parque de la Paz. Video footage and pictures of the event show trucks discarding AKs and rifles into the freshly dug-out pit; the crowd presses close to the edge, peering in. Left abandoned for many years, the site has been covered up by a large urban renewal project initiated during the new Ortega presidency, the Luis Alfonso Velásquez municipal park.³

It has been 29 years since the official end of the war. The Contras have scattered amongst the civilian population, some entering politics, even in support of the FSLN, others as part of the opposition. As Adolfo Calero, leader of the US backed FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Force) stated in an interview: "Before dawn, the North Americans said: 'Abandon those people. Tell them goodbye and return to the political struggle in Nicaragua.'"⁴ Indeed, some sought to continue the armed battle from the US.⁵ Groups of *rearmados* [rearmed] have been active in the Northern regions of Nicaragua, possibly throughout these years, yet have received little to no attention at all.⁶

21.1 The FSLN had been in power since overturning the regime of the US-backed dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle in July of 1979, following a nation-wide insurrection that had begun the previous year. The 1980s were a decade of revolution, and the FSLN managed to maintain power in spite of the war. Daniel Ortega, a member of the Junta of National Reconstruction, was elected president in 1984. These were the first democratically held elections since the Somoza family dictatorship was installed in 1936.

21.2 Keyling T. Romero, "El día que Nicaragua le dijo adiós a las armas," *La Prensa* (28 January, 2018).

21.3 Daniel Ortega returned to power in 2007, yet under the auspices of a reconfigured FSLN that had been abandoned by many key members from its revolutionary phase. In the years, since he has consolidated power over all branches of government—judiciary, legislative and executive—effectively disabling the opposition.

21.4 "De la noche a la mañana, los norteamericanos nos dijeron: abandonen a esta gente, díganles good bye y regresen a la lucha política en Nicaragua." Carlos Salinas, "Adolfo Calero, el hombre de la CIA en Nicaragua" *El País* (3 April, 2012).

21.5 The US had provided significant aid for Contras, both economic and military, effectively fuelling the war for close to a decade. Once Congress passed legislation to limit these actions (see the Boland Amendment, 1982-84), covert strategies were implemented. Finally, the Iran-Contra scandal from 1985-86, and the congressional hearings of the following year, revealed the extent to which the Reagan administration was involved in the war, attempting to sabotage the Sandinista regime. In a trial brought against the US in June 1986, the International Court of Justice ruled in favour of Nicaragua. However, the verdict was never enforced.

21.6 Frances Robles, "Ortega vs. the Contras: Nicaragua Endures an '80s Revival," *The New York Times* (7 March, 2016).

Nonetheless, claims have been made against the Ortega government since the Sandinista return to power in 2007, accusing the military of harassment and even assassinations of former Contras. Occasional reports of isolated clashes have been featured in the local media, although information is often scant. Other than a string of embattled conspiracies, it seems like the conflict has slowly burned itself out.

The dominant rhetoric of successful reconciliation has turned the war into a closed chapter, while successive governments have failed to deliver on promises made to reintegrate and improve the living conditions of ex-combatants. Indeed, recent events suggest that wounds are far from healed. The town of Waslala, located in the Northern Caribbean Autonomous Region was a Contra stronghold during the war.⁷ A large number of veterans still live there, in a neighbourhood called “Comandante 380” in honour of Enrique Bermúdez, commander-in-chief of the Contra and a former colonel in Somoza’s National Guard, who was assassinated in 1991. Earlier this year, following controversial municipal elections nationwide, the Sandinista party claimed the mayor’s office in town despite overwhelming opposition. A few days thereafter, a prominently installed public sculpture of Comandante 380 was destroyed, provoking a string of violent events. Since Ortega’s return to power, the Sandinista party, in its current pink-clad guise and steeped in pious Christianity, has consolidated ideological control over national post-revolutionary memory. The violent erasure of any alternative sites of memory, be they legitimate in the eyes of the majority or not, has become less symbolic and more direct.

Perhaps inadvertently, memory-infused loci of contested power have been flaring up across the country. These “slow burns” have

turned into all-consuming fires, both real and symbolic, and since April large-scale protests against Ortega, vice-president (and his wife) Rosario Murillo, and the FSLN have shaken the regime to its foundations. Since May, San Pedro de Lóvago has become an important site of resistance, having set up “tranques” or barricades that have stunted and occasionally altogether blocked commercial traffic through the eastern agricultural regions of Nicaragua. The *Movimiento Campesino* [Peasant Movement], which has many members here, has been at the forefront of resistance against Ortega due to the government’s unilateral and authoritarian handling of a proposed plan to build an inter-oceanic canal that would cross farm land and protected natural parks. Police and pro-government paramilitaries forcefully dismantled the barricade following a violent attack on the 14th of July, which resulted in numerous victims. Official media have declared the town liberated of blockades (“*libre de tranques*”) by “the people”... Whomever the government’s notion of “the people” might represent, the local citizenry is still counting its dead and searching for the disappeared. Medardo Mairena Sequeira, one of the leaders of the movement, has meanwhile been arrested and charged with terrorism. He is a representative of the *Alianza Cívica* [Civic Alliance], a coalition that includes the student movement and private sector groups, and that has sought to negotiate with the regime as part of national dialogue mediated by the Catholic Church.

It has become difficult to separate the reality of the present from the awareness of the past. How to write about older wounds, when fresh ones are opening alongside? I’m looking to understand the present absurdity and senseless war through the experience of others. Many of those men and women were just kids, teenagers, deprived of their youth. Last year in October, on the pier of the Caribbean town of Pearl Lagoon, I meet a rather curious man. He was eager to talk. His son was to arrive from Managua. “He’s a university student there,” the man tells me proudly. He was from the nearby village of Awás, and said that I should visit.

21.7 The RAN and RAAS (North and South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Regions) were granted autonomy in 1987, following a long process of negotiation between the Sandinista government and opposing indigenous groups. Amongst these groups, the Miskitu were heavily involved in the Contra resistance.

to do what they told him to do. One part of the government wanted him to do this, another war the but mar den

details in Reed’s book. Ya know, things that are in passing. In one place, he talks about this one guy

no one paying attention, but if you’re flying a military transport plane, you need to have dedicated

You ever seen these ancient old movies: *Airport*, *Airport 2*, *Airport 5*, *Airport 17*? These were serious

Did you know the CIA uses the same contract people as the mafia does? The CIA engages in

At the end of the fall, a critical source for this project will move away from Arkansas, where he has lived and worked for the past several decades. “My family needs me in Florida.”

He was the first person we met regarding what he calls the “Mena mess,” and he was the strongest bridge we had between Fayetteville and Mena, this present and that past. Living and having lived most of my life in the Northeast, all this stuff more than 1,000 miles south could feel so un-physical, so un-breathing. It’s hard to say how things would have unfolded if it weren’t for that November day in 2016 when we met him outside the student union at the University of Arkansas. He was perfect: he’d been at the center of it all, incessant, and he was still there. He was sitting there in all black: a black button down shirt, black slacks, black shoes, with a white fedora with black band. He dons this black daily, in protest of the Trump administration. “It is not often that anyone asks about Mena,” he began, and then continued without a breath.

22.1 August. Matty Davis. 2018

my own pathetic bits of investigation ended up verifying some

oo, ya know, they might have 10 times on a dirt strip with

killed everyone on board in Angola. This was in 1989 or ’90.

have the same needs. They can’t be traceable.

portish (such a secret anyway longer. But if you listen to people who

ple. you tors k to ey. hey hat were ort-eld. ver: NG, L.D. my, oul- ons ur’e are this ery ave ross lers and lear her are e to e to uff. hat? ime vert n to ent. fore for ame oset air-ger.

"What do you do for a living?" he asks.

"I write."

"Maybe you'd like to hear my story,
I was with the Contra, you know."

What followed was a condensed story of extreme pain and unforgivable sorrow: "They marched into the village one day, and told my mother they will burn our house unless she lets me go." This wasn't just his story. It was that of so many other Miskitu men of his age. If he's in his mid-forties now, and was recruited in 1986, he must have been 13 or 14 at the time. His being there that afternoon, on those dusty roads, in broad daylight... his very presence, chatty, friendly, and eerily calm, shaped itself into another kind of statement, monumentally silent.

Listening to him, I was reminded of Werner Herzog's short film, *Ballad of the Little Soldier*, from 1984. It begins with a long shot of a child in uniform who, while hugging an AK, sings to the radio tune of "La de la Mochila Azul," a popular Mexican love song. Absentminded, his eyes drift into the distance, as the camera cuts to images of other child soldiers training in a Miskitu Contra camp. Circumstances around the making of the film remain rather obscure, and Herzog has apparently denied any directly political intent. Former Sandinista cultural workers remember the film as highly controversial, however, and the participation of child soldiers in the war remains a censored subject to this day.

Coincidentally, buried amongst my files, I find a recording of a BBC interview with a former Sandinista commando, Daniel Alegria (whom I learn was also the personal bodyguard of Sandinista founder and Minister of Interior Tomás Borge, and a staff member of the party newspaper *Barricada*).⁸ He speaks of an ambush gone wrong: "[...] One of the things that I'll never forget, was that I saw this little boy, he must have been maybe 12, not more, with an M16 and a blue Contra uniform. He was shooting and he killed one of ours. For him it was a game, you know? It seemed like he was playing Cowboys and Indians. And he'd get up and run, and then dive back down and we could all see him. He was so exposed... He probably thought he was Superman... until finally he got shot by one of ours, and killed. Then when we rounded them all up, you know, how usually you bring the bodies back and put them in a big pile, and usually you do that with the help of mules or horses. All these bodies, when they get there, their pants and half way down their legs. It's very undignified. I remember seeing this kid, and he was, you know, he was an adolescent. He didn't have any pubic hair or anything, and it really shocked all of us because although the conscription age was ridiculously low at 16, we didn't have boy soldiers. And it was a very sad moment."

This war with its twists and turns, twists and turns... "*La Guerra me atraviesa históricamente* [war passes through me, historically...]," writes my friend Irene Agudelo. What a beautifully devastating phrase. Her recently published book started quite a debate.⁹ It began at the book launch, during the lengthy Q&A and continued thereafter. Who knows how it may have continued, had it not been stopped short by the street protests which began in April at the gates of the same university where we had all gathered that evening. One of the invited guests had been a Contra. A woman. I wrote down in my notebook a few phrases that she repeated several times: "*Lo mas triste*" [the saddest part], "*Fue doloroso*" [it was painful], and "*Jamas se me va olvidar*" [I will never forget].

Most of the pictures I have seen of the Contras are of men in uniforms, unequivocally in camouflage. I have noticed that former combatants have started sharing images from their photo albums, some of which make their way onto blogs and social media sites. The largest archive I have had access to thus far is that of Columbian photographer Arturo Robles, now in the collection of the Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica in Managua—the same archive Irene used to research her book. I remember poring over the slides and contact sheets with one of the archivists at the Institute

for hours and hours on end. I wasn't allowed to take pictures of the pictures, so I had to rely on notes and drawings, most of which are indecipherable. For an image captioned "Contras in Chontales June '87" in parenthesis, I write: "Men walking towards house uphill, landscape, good!" A copied note, sent out by Robles to his editor at JB Pictures in New York reads: "Roll #7 Group of North American students who are building houses for the refugees from the war (displaced). They are building the houses in Las Colinas, close to Yali, 90 miles from Managua, which is an area of constant fighting." Robles published his pictures regularly in US magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. In July 2014, I interviewed him in Bogotá. When I asked about the types of images these magazines were interested in buying, he said: "combat, military confrontations, and the outcome thereof... the injured, the dead, people crying, all the ensuing chaos. So, you have pictures of people running, shooting, hiding, explosions, the injured being transported, the fallen... sometimes during combat you would see peasant houses, most of which were made of wood, and after a shooting, there were deaths... one would have to retrieve information about those who died, the distressed families..."

Before speaking of war, I began with peace. Nicaragua has been engulfed by waves of violence once more. Since the most recent protests began on April 18th, police and government paramilitary groups have not ceased the repression of all dissent. Numerous comparisons have been made between the uprising and the 1978-79 Sandinista Revolution, against which the people have now turned. The circumstances are entirely different, and the FSLN, its ethos and identity, have been unrecognisably transformed. The revolution itself is entirely different this time, and there seems to be enough determination to maintain peaceful resistance and to keep pressuring the regime. One can only hope for a swift resolution. Highly optimistic perspective? Perhaps. That defiant attitude, however, against all odds, was exactly what made the former revolution last, and reignite.

have been in Mena for a while, they'll tell ya that they've known all along that there's spooky stuff going on there. They just couldn't prove it.

deal coke in the '80s, you make a lot of money. And that's gotta be laundered too. So those suitcases probably weren't directly tied to Barry Seal. They were probably tied to somebody getting their drugs as a falloff from those operations.

delivered by ICBM. These were operations that the Pentagon was very interested in, which by the way are massively illegal because the U.S. had signed the chemical weapons ban.

But you see Ronald Reagan didn't agree with that, so he said

Michael Maizels

I talked to a woman who runs

He told us about Oliver North and how he personally cost North \$25,000; about how his state trooper investigator friend received a package of anthrax; about how Mena has a community of retired ex-CIA officers who fell in love with the climate, tranquility, and cheap land while on assignment in the region; about how what happened in Mena isn't unique to Mena, having been part of the "octopus"; about how stuff that happened in Panama, the Philippines, Colombia somehow all linked and connected back to the "freaking Mena airport"; about how the "Mena thing" crossed and entangled itself with paramount operations being run by the Pentagon; about the cocaine epidemic in the '80s and the death of college basketball star Len Bias; about a local kid from Mena who'd gotten a job at the airport and died when the C-130 for which he was a mechanic and happened to be aboard was bombed over Angola... He then got up without notice from his chair in Fayetteville's Hog Haus Brewing Co. and left. He had a meeting with a guy in his office in 15 minutes.

I've described him as having the air of an old-world storyteller, belonging to the oral tradition whose stories live perpetually and exclusively inside, and never on the page. When he spoke of the "Mena business," it had the urgency of something about to be destroyed and lost forever. He shared everything he knew. And while it felt like everything, it also felt endless. There was never enough time.

I had transcribed all of our conversation that day at the Hog Haus. Understandably, although he initially agreed to have the transcript published, he decided that it would be best not to put himself out there again, feeling lucky (unlike so many others) that his life hadn't been "virtually destroyed." In response to my proposed compromises for salvaging the interview, he said, "Let's let it rest there." This all feels appropriate, in a semi-painful way.

I'd like to take a moment to formally say thank you to him. I promise I will return your black button down shirt.

22.2 October. Matty Davis. 2018

So the supply is constant and people start dealing. When you spoons, we're talking biological, chemical weapons designed to be and they hide the body of the real Clinton when they replaced

17 18
19 20
21 22
23 24

21.8 BBC Witness, "Fighting the Contras" (14 February, 2014) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01rw5gh>.

21.9 Irene Agudelo Builes, *Contramemoria discurso e imágenes sobre/desde la Contra 1979-1989*, Managua: INHCA/UCA, 2017.