Levels of Analysis and Variation in Civil War Violence and Restraint: Ideology and Contestation in Nicaragua

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Abstract

How can we analyze violence against civilians in civil wars over time and with attention both to local context and international comparability? I argue that we should integrate theories across levels of analysis, applying this to testing existing theories of civil war violence and state repression in the case of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) in Nicaragua. Using interviews, archival evidence, and human rights reports, I argue that compared to domestic rivals and from an international perspective, the FSLN generally exhibited restraint, limiting violence against civilians due to an ideological commitment to discipline and civilian protection. Disaggregating the geographic and temporal contexts of violations at the subnational level reveals, however, that significant violence occurred where the FSLN had less territorial control, fewer civilian ties, and looser discipline, supporting contestation and command and control theories. Theories of violence may therefore explain variation at one level of analysis and not others within a given case, emphasizing the need for within-case disaggregation in explaining and comparing patterns of violence and state repression in civil wars, and the importance of unpacking violence committed by more restrained actors.

Resumen

¿Cómo podemos analizar la violencia que tiene lugar contra los civiles en las guerras civiles a lo largo del tiempo y de forma que también prestemos atención tanto al contexto local como a la comparabilidad internacional? Argumentamos que debemos integrar las teorías en todos los niveles de análisis, de manera que podamos usar esto para poner a prueba las teorías existentes sobre la violencia en la guerra civil y la represión estatal en el caso del Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) en Nicaragua. Utilizamos entrevistas, pruebas de archivo e informes de derechos humanos, los cuales nos permiten argumentar que, en comparación con sus rivales nacionales y desde una perspectiva internacional, el FSLN, en general, mostró moderación y limitó actos de violencia contra civiles debido a un compromiso ideológico con la disciplina y la protección civil. Sin embargo, si desglosamos los contextos geográficos y temporales de las violaciones a nivel subnacional, podemos observar que se produjeron actos de violencia significativos cuando el FSLN tenía menos control territorial, menos vínculos civiles y una disciplina más laxa, lo que respalda las teorías de impugnación y de mando y control. Por lo tanto, es posible que las teorías de la violencia puedan explicar la variación para un nivel de análisis, pero no para otros dentro de un caso determinado. Enfatizamos, por ello, la necesidad de llevar a cabo una desagregación dentro de cada caso con el fin de explicar y comparar los patrones de violencia y de represión estatal en las guerras civiles, así como la importancia de desentrañar la violencia cometida por aquellos agentes más restringidos.
Résumé
Comment pouvons-nous analyser la violence à l’encontre de civils lors de guerres civiles dans le temps et en tenant compte du contexte local comme de la comparabilité internationale? J’affirme que nous devrions intégrer les théories à différents niveaux d’analyse, avant de l’appliquer à l’évaluation de théories existantes sur la violence lors de guerres civiles et la répression étatique dans le cas du Front sandiniste de libération nationale (FSLN) au Nicaragua. À l’aide d’entretiens, de preuves archivistiques et de rapports relatifs aux droits de l’homme, j’affirme que, comparé à ses concurrents nationaux et dans une perspective internationale, le FSLN a généralement fait preuve de retenue. Son engagement idéologique à la discipline et la protection civile a permis de limiter la violence à l’encontre de civils. Néanmoins, la décomposition des contextes géographiques et temporels des violations au niveau infranational révèle qu’un taux significatif de violence est intervenu aux endroits où le contrôle territorial du FSLN était plus faible, où il possédait moins de liens avec les civils et où sa discipline était plus laxiste, ce qui vient confirmer les théories de la contestation et du commandement et du contrôle. Les théories de la violence pourraient donc expliquer la variation à un niveau d’analyse et non à d’autres dans un cas donné, ce qui souligne la nécessité d’une décomposition au sein d’un cas afin d’expliquer et de comparer les schémas de violence et de répression étatique lors de guerres civiles, ainsi que l’importance de décortiquer les actes de violence commis par les acteurs qui font preuve de davantage de retenue.

Keywords: civil war, violence, restraint, repression, Latin America, ideology
Palabras clave: guerra civil, violencia, restricción, represión, América Latina, ideología
Mots clés: guerre civile, violence, retenue, répression, Amérique latine, idéologie

Introduction
Variation in civil war violence and state repression has been explained by myriad theories or correlated with a range of social, political, and economic variables. Understanding violence against civilians in a particular conflict or by an organization or government across levels of analysis and over time, however, requires integrating theories to account for domestic- and organizational-level temporal variation, cross-national comparison, and the specific subnational- and individual-level contexts in which violence is directly committed (Weidmann 2011; Kalyvas 2012; Straus 2012; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2017; Maynard 2019; Balcells and Stanton 2021).

To do so, I test existing theories of civil war violence and state repression in the case of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN, or Sandinistas) of Nicaragua across its periods fighting as rebels from 1963 to 1979 and as a government facing insurgencies from 1979 to 1990. Using archival material, interviews, and human rights reports, I analyze subnational variation within Nicaragua and place FSLN violence in a cross-national perspective to “advanc[e] knowledge across scales” (Géraudy, Moncada, and Snyder 2019, 363), leveraging single-case analysis for both theory-testing and comparison (Rueschemeyer 2003; Slater and Ziblatt 2013). Examining the applicability of theories of violence against civilians across levels of analysis more completely explains observed patterns within a given conflict, following Balcells and Stanton’s (2021) call to move beyond discussions of macro- and micro-level explanations for violence and to instead comparatively analyze the international, domestic, subnational, organizational, and individual levels to better contextualize violence.1

I argue that FSLN commitment to the leftist ideology of Sandinismo (combining Marxism–Leninism, Liberation Theology, and anti-imperialist nationalism) explains its comparative restraint at the international, domestic, and organizational levels in limiting violence against civilians, exhibiting more restraint than governments and armed groups in Nicaragua and abroad with both similar and rival ideologies. Subnationally, violence was concentrated in contested regions where the FSLN had less territorial control and less information about the

1 While I follow Balcells and Stanton’s (2021) distinction among five levels at which to analyze violence, these levels are not completely separate, with dynamics at one level potentially affecting policies or behavior at another in an interacting “system of violence” (Richani 2002).
population, following Kalyvas’s (2006) predictions, and individual-level violence especially targeted suspected enemy collaborators or was motivated by revenge. I also suggest that in contested regions, which tended to be further from Nicaragua’s demographic and political core, forces had less central oversight, limiting mechanisms of command and control and continued political education critical for organization-level ideology and policies to translate into restraint (Hoover Green 2018; Manekin 2020). Predictions that democratic settings and shifts toward democracy reduce physical integrity violations (Davenport 2007a, 10-14) apply sometimes and are contradicted at others.

Cases of restraint receive less scholarly and media attention (though see Stanton 2016; Hoover Green 2018) and are more difficult to study than cases of widespread violence, since less attention means less data availability (Balcels and Stanton 2021, 63). Understanding when restraint breaks down and how restrained organizations’ domestic and subnational patterns of violence compare to those of more violent groups and states remains analytically important. Furthermore, overall restraint does not diminish the deep impacts of violent acts on victims, families, and communities, with civil war violence having short- and long-run political (Daly 2022; Liu 2022), social (Wood 2015; Shcterinina 2022), and economic (Justino, Brück, and Verwimp 2013) effects.2

After reviewing existing work, I develop my argument that FSLN policies and patterns of violence were shaped at the domestic and organizational levels by ideology and at the subnational level by the dynamics of contestation and control over civilians and territory. I then discuss the data used to examine FSLN violence before analyzing FSLN forces’ policies and practices. The discussion and conclusion reassess the argument and alternative explanations, consider the FSLN in comparative and contemporary perspectives, and discuss implications for policy and future research.

Existing Theories

From the civil wars literature, I focus on theories of ideology and of contestation and control, showing how they may be complementary rather than displacing each other. Violence against civilians can be facilitated or constrained by rebel or government ideological commitment during civil wars (Straus 2012; Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Hoover Green 2018; Revkin and Wood 2021). Ideologies are relatively clear, coherent sets of beliefs or ideas that define a constituency and what sociopolitical goals and actions should be pursued in that constituency’s interests, sometimes prescribing the strategies best suited for achieving these goals (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014). Ideologies emphasizing inclusiveness, equality, and responsiveness to civilians (Stanton 2016), when reinforced through political education and discipline, can generate restraint, “curtailing indiscriminate violence against civilians and seeking to limit discriminate violence in brutality and quantity” (Thaler 2012, 547)—though organization-level ideological salience coexists with individual-level variation in motives, behavior, and ideological adherence (Scharpf 2018; Maynard 2019).

At the subnational level, Kalyvas’s (2006) “logic of violence” holds that relative state or rebel control over an area determines whether violence against civilians is indiscriminate, selective, or absent. More selective violence is expected in zones where one side is dominant and possesses information about civilian loyalties; indiscriminate violence will be more likely in zones of contestation where an actor has more limited control and information.

I test these ideological and contestation explanations against other common explanations for civil war violence or restraint across the FSLN’s periods as rebels and once in power: targeting based on ethnicity (e.g., Gurr 1993); violence to terrorize a population, coerce compliance, or demonstrate capabilities (Kalyvas 2006; Downes 2007; Hultman 2007, 2009; Stanton 2013); restraint to attract or maintain domestic and international support (Jo 2015; Stanton 2016; Koloma Beck and Werron 2018); opponents’ violence incentivizing restraint (De la Calle 2017; Gibilisco, Kenkel, and Rueda 2022); and democratization leading to diminishing violence by state forces (Davenport 2007b; Davenport and Inman 2012).

Ideology and Contestation

FSLN violence as rebels and then in government in the 1980s is best explained by the theory of ideology and restraint at the domestic and organizational levels and theories of contestation and control at the subnational and individual levels.3 An armed group or government organized around an overarching ideology will enact policies and seek to shape members’ behavior in line with this ideology. The FSLN’s ideology, Sandinismo, was de-

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2 Though research should not focus only on legacies of violence (Arjona 2021).

3 Similar to Balcels’ (2017) findings about Republican forces’ violence in the Spanish Civil War.
developed after the beginnings of guerrilla organization and fighting in the 1960s, remaining the group’s “central ideological pillar.” Sandinismo combined elements of Marxism–Leninism, nationalist anti-imperialism (based on the struggle of early twentieth century guerrilla leader Augusto Cesar Sandino), and Catholic liberation theology into a coherent ideology aiming to transform the state and economy for the benefit of the poor majority, while rejecting United States dominance in the Americas (Hodges 1986; Gilbert 1988; Wright 1995; Reed 2002).

Even after victory and transitioning from rebels to government, the FSLN displayed continuity in its ideology and practices (Cotter 1993), similar to other victorious rebels (e.g., García-Ponce and Wantchekon 2023). Marxism–Leninism provides an organizational blueprint for political-military groups (see, e.g., Kalyvas and Balcells 2010; Hoover Green 2018). Many Marxist–Leninist groups have emphasized the inclusion of broad sectors of society and reliance on popular support, factors correlated with restraint from violence against civilians (Stanton 2016; Fortna, Lotito, and Rubin 2018). In many civil wars, Marxist–Leninist organizations’ ideological adherence and discipline have translated into greater restraint and selectivity in violence (Wood 2009; Thaler 2012; Hoover Green 2018)—though there are also cases where revolutionary Marxist-Leninist governments, like in the Soviet Union, have ideologically justified mass violence, while Maoist groups in China, Cambodia, and Peru have been extremely violent toward those ideologically deemed class enemies (e.g., Javed 2022). Leaders attempt to put ideology into practice through indoctrination and socialization during military training to instill ideological consciousness and discipline among security forces (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Hoover Green 2018), though some ideological consciousness may develop through bottom-up, horizontal socialization mechanisms too (Parkinson 2021).

Ideology shapes action when actors are committed to it or are held to it. Even after indoctrination and training, ground-level forces’ ideological commitment tends to remain lower than leaders’, necessitating disciplinary structures and continued socialization to ensure ideological compliance (Hoover Green 2018; Maynard 2019). In areas where forces are committed to a restraining ideology, violence will likely be more limited and selective. Where ideological commitment has not been deeply internalized across forces, ideological adherence and discipline will likely break down quickly when lines of communication fail or command becomes highly decentralized (Staniland 2014; Worsnop 2017), increasing the likelihood of unrestrained violence against civilians. Leaders may also at times tolerate and excuse violations of organizational policies and norms (Wood 2018; Revkin and Wood 2021).

The theory of contestation enters again here because communication and central command and control tend to be worst in peripheral areas, where state presence is historically more limited and insurgencies are most likely to erupt (e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2003). In such areas of limited state control and difficulties ensuring ideological and policy adherence, state forces will likely commit increased, less selective violence, lacking information to distinguish among rebels or collaborators and ordinary civilians, while the same applies for rebels in areas of greater state influence (Kalyvas 2006). Even when an organization is politically committed to restraint, the peripheral nature of contested areas may diminish command and control over front-line forces, reducing enforcement of group rules and norms and putting civilians at greater risk (Staniland 2014; McQuinn et al. 2021). Contestation can also lead to frustrations and breakdowns in adherence and discipline over time amid hardship, losses, and stress, even among individuals who have internalized ideological goals and norms. Finally, what areas are contested or not may also be shaped by communities’ receptiveness to or rejection of an armed group or government’s ideology, making contestation sometimes a downstream effect of ideology.

Data

Comprehensive, disaggregated data on civil war violence and rigorous death estimates (e.g., Raleigh 2012; Hoover Green and Ball 2019) are unavailable for Nicaragua during the revolutionary war against the Somoza dictatorship and for the civil war between the FSLN government and contra rebel forces. The two most used quantitative datasets on human rights violations, Cingranelli-Richards or CIRI (Cingranelli and Richards 2010) and Political Terror Scale or PTS (Wood and Gibney 2010), are both unreliable for Nicaragua, as they are based on US Department of State human rights reports, which during the 1980s (e.g., United States Department of State 1986a) exaggerated and fabricated human rights abuses to paint the FSLN government as extremely repressive (Americas Watch 1982b, 12–4; 1984, 17–8; 1985a), choosing “to disseminate war propaganda and pass it off as human rights information” (Americas Watch 1986, 2). Beyond Nicaragua, Cold War-era State Department reports were systematically biased against non-US allies and especially leftist governments (Poe, Carey,

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4 Interview with Dora María Téllez (FSLN guerrilla leader turned cabinet minister), 2015.
and Vazquez 2001; Qian and Yanagizawa 2009). Despite CIRI and PTS coders checking State Department reports against Amnesty International reports—which vary in detail across countries (Hendrix and Wong 2014)—the ratings remain insufficiently precise to reliably rank Nicaragua’s human rights record against other countries (Amnesty International 1984, 4). Nicaraguan newspaper reports might reveal additional incidents of violence against civilians, but like newspaper data elsewhere (Davenport and Ball 2002), they are also biased. Government media had incentives not to report on FSLN abuses, while the main independent newspaper, La Prensa, was strongly in opposition but was also heavily censored.

I therefore qualitatively analyze international human rights group reports (primarily from Amnesty International and Americas Watch) as the best indicators of the types, targets, and extent of FSLN violence in Nicaragua. Human rights groups can never fully investigate all violations that are reported or occur (see, e.g., Americas Watch 1989, 14), but in Nicaragua, the FSLN government’s amenability to investigators; the relative presence of investigators in most areas; 5 civilians’ willingness to talk; and the presence of domestic human rights activists and foreign journalists ensured strong access to information (Americas Watch 1985b, 7–8; 1986, 137–8), reducing the likelihood of underreporting major or systematic abuses. The government, though, may have tried to keep foreign investigators away from certain sites, and international investigators and truth commissions still miss some atrocities (Sprekels 2012), so these data are representative, but not exhaustive.

I also rely on data gathered during archival research at the Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (IHNCA) over multiple trips between 2013 and 2017, including speeches and interview transcripts from FSLN leaders, FSLN documents and periodicals, and laws. 6 These archival materials include reports from Nicaragua’s human rights organizations, the Comisión Permanente de Derechos Humanos (CPDH) and Comisión Nacional para la Promoción y Protección de los Derechos Humanos (CNPPDH). Both had their biases: the CPDH was independent, yet received some US funding and generally opposed the FSLN, while the FSLN created the CNPPDH as an independent yet government-funded counterweight to the CPDH (Envío team 1989; Seligson and McElhinny 1996).

Furthermore, I incorporate relevant evidence from semi-structured interviews with twenty former FSLN military and political officials, FSLN opponents, and civil society actors, conducted in Nicaragua in 2015 and 2017. The interviews were conducted with an initial purposive sample and some additional snowball sampling, and focused on FSLN military and political plans, policies, and practices as rebels and once in power (research was approved by Harvard University’s Committee on the Use of Human Subjects). 7 Interviews are cited in footnotes. Due to repression in Nicaragua since 2018, names are omitted for quoted or cited living interviewees who are not prominent public figures today. The online appendix provides further details about archival and interview research. I supplement these primary data with secondary sources.

Together, these data allow us to assess the patterns of FSLN wartime violence against civilians, including abuses both in combat areas and elsewhere. 8 The next section describes FSLN political education and indoctrination programs, human rights policies, and political-military organizations, which shaped patterns of violence.

Sandinismo and Instilling Organizational Restraint

FSLN leaders emphasized ideology as a source of unity, motivation, and discipline from the early years as a guerrilla group, whose clandestine nature required intense, “almost religious” discipline and dedication to collective ideals that “require[d] a commitment orienting the totality of members’ actions” (Martí i Puig 2002, 13). Already in 1969, the FSLN envisioned creating, once in power, a “patriotic, revolutionary people’s army” driven by “revolutionary ideals” (Gilbert 1988, 62), which became the Ejército Popular Sandinista (EPS) after victory in 1979.

A journalist active in Nicaragua in the 1980s said international human rights groups were present throughout the country and focused heavily on documenting government abuses (interview, 2015).

Call numbers are provided at the end of citations for rarer sources accessed at the IHNCA that may be unavailable elsewhere.

7 I interviewed fourteen former FSLN military and political officials, four civil society actors, and two strong FSLN opponents. Following the receipt of informed verbal consent, interviews were recorded. No interviewees requested anonymity when offered. See online appendix for further information.

8 Civil wars scholarship focuses primarily on violence against civilians in military areas of operation (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2017), though violations off the battlefield may be as bad, or worse, than in combat areas (Davenport 2007a; Leiby 2015).
Throughout the guerrilla struggle, the FSLN exercised little territorial control but focused on attacking government security forces rather than targeting civilians. Some members were executed for allegedly violating organizational rules and committing violence against civilians (e.g., Hernández 1982, 74–5). The FSLN divided in 1975–1977 between three “tendencies” that differed over how best to topple the regime, had slightly different views of Marxism–Leninism, and competed for control over recruits and operations (Tirado López 1980; Pérez 1992; Mosingher 2019), yet the tendencies all remained committed to avoiding violence against civilians, and the organization fully reunited in 1978 with a power-sharing agreement.10

In 1978 and 1979, as the revolution expanded and became “a war of all the people, all who could participate in this struggle,”11 the FSLN ensured new recruits received both political and military education (Chamorro 1979), indoctrinating them with “revolutionary ideals... including the idea that, in the new system, members of the armed forces would be the servants, not the masters, of the people” (Walker 1991, 79–80). Training materials emphasized ideological discipline and adherence, to “be revolutionary in theory and in practice... even more in deed than in word” (Comisión Política y Militar del Frente Sur “Benjamín Zeledon” n.d., 14). A policy of restraint was also made explicit in point twenty of the “Sandinista Program” released in 1978, which stated that under the FSLN, “torture and political killings will disappear” (Dirección Nacional del Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional 1979, 254–5).

After victory in July 1979, the FSLN, with close central control (e.g., Krujì 2008), continued ensuring political education and indoctrination were heavily emphasized in constructing the new government and in EPS training, consolidating Sandinismo as the revolution’s ideological basis and restraint as official military policy (Gorman and Walker 1985, 99). The EPS’s educational materials emphasized military discipline’s basis in “strong political consciousness and in the Sandinista education of its fighters” (Dirección Política E.P.S. 1984, 53). “Political and ideological education of the people” became more difficult after the new insurgent “Contra War” expanded in the mid-1980s, but it continued to be a priority for the EPS until late in the war.12 “Contra forces” was an umbrella term for the larger, heavily US-backed Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (FDN), based in Honduras and operating mainly in north-central Nicaragua; Indigenous and Afro-descendant forces operating primarily on the Atlantic Coast,13 who were mainly seeking autonomy but at times cooperated with the FDN; and the Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática (ARDE) in southern Nicaragua.

Politization in the EPS was supposed to be structurally ensured, as “the general staff of the EPS consisted exclusively of veteran Sandinistas, and “Political and Cultural Sections” headed by Sandinista militants were established in all units of the EPS and the Sandinista police for purposes of ‘political education’” (Foran and Goodwin 1993, 225). Security forces were argued to “acquire a conscious and voluntary discipline” (Revista Segovia 1987), a discipline based “not in repression, nor fear of punishment, but in political consciousness” (Dirección Política E.P.S. 1984, 53). Yet while ideological structures and training can play a constraining role, they are a necessary but insufficient factor in restraining violence (Maynard 2019). Officers, for instance, received continuous instructions about protecting human rights and were supposed to work with the military’s hundreds of political education officers, but “as in any part of the world... there were still abuses,”14 since not every member of a military organization will internalize ideological commitments; absent such commitments, compliance must be enforced, which, as discussed below, becomes more difficult in contested areas.

The first major policy issue the FSLN faced was how to treat former enemies. During the rebellion and as victory neared, recruits “were admonished, urged, and, in most cases, convinced not to treat their vanquished enemy... with a spirit of cruel vengeance” (Walker 1991, 79–80). The FSLN decided Somoza security force members would receive trials under existing laws, but with the preexisting death penalty abol-

9 This view of the split as primarily about differences in military strategy, with ideology secondary, was echoed by high-ranking FSLN interviewees: interviews with Joaquín Cuadra (FSLN guerrilla leader turned EPS general), Dora María Téllez, Víctor Hugo Tinoco (FSLN guerrilla leader turned diplomat), and Hugo Torres (FSLN guerrilla leader turned EPS general), 2015.

10 The more strategically Maoist and Guerovist Guerra Popular Prolongada tendency did have the greatest post-victory influence in the Ministry of the Interior’s particularly feared security forces (e.g., Miranda and Ratliff 1993, 190–3).

11 Interview with Jaime Wheelock (FSLN guerrilla leader turned member of the National Directorate and agriculture minister), 2015.

12 Interview with a former FSLN guerrilla turned EPS staff officer, 2015.

13 More accurately called the Caribbean Coast today.

14 Interview with Hugo Torres, 2015.
ished (Borge 1981, 10). Special courts created to try ex-Guardias violated international norms of due process (International Commission of Jurists 1980; Linfeld 1991, 286–7), but likely saved many ex-Guardias’ lives amid popular desire for revenge. Based on their ideological commitments, the FSLN also embraced international human rights laws and norms. The Fundamental Statute of Rights and Guarantees of the Nicaraguan People, adopted 1 month after victory, “incorporated, often verbatim, key provisions of the UN Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights,” forbidding “cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment,” with all rights ostensibly irrevocable, even in war (Reding 1991, 18). In September 1979, the decade-old American Convention on Human Rights was ratified, making it Nicaraguan law (Gobierno de Nicaragua 1979).

Military training continued emphasizing “the need for security personnel to protect and support, rather than abuse and mistreat, their fellow citizens” (Walker 1991, 82), with detailed educational materials for soldiers “explaining how they needed to behave toward the population.” Restraint was supposed to be instilled in “the mentality of Ministry of the Interior and EPS troops” (Ministerio de Justicia and Centro de Investigaciones Jurídico y Político 1983, 167) and enforced by officers. While there was an organizational-level policy of restraint (Cuadra Lacayo 2000), later abuses suggest potential limits of FSLN forces’ ideological commitment or enforcement of ideologically guided policies.

Assessing Levels and Patterns of FSLN Violence

Little evidence is available on FSLN violence against civilians before taking power, with most reports focused on the Somoza regime’s brutal efforts to repress rebellion and dissent (IACHR 1978; Fragoso and Artucio 1980; Seligson and McElhinny 1996). FSLN abuses and summary executions surely occurred, with popular tribunals operating in FSLN-occupied areas and sentencing some regime agents to execution (Fragoso and Artucio 1980, 36), but no significant evidence has emerged in over 40 years suggesting the FSLN engaged in systematic abuses during the insurrectionary period, and the FSLN explicitly avoided acts of terrorism, unlike guerrillas in Algeria or Vietnam. This was similar to other Central American leftist rebels’ relative restraint: truth commissions in both Guatemala and El Salvador found that rebels committed around 10 percent of human rights violations, versus 85–90 percent by government forces (UN 1993; CEH 1999). A more detailed empirical assessment of FSLN violence with reliable records becomes possible from around July 1979’s final battle for Managua through the 1980s civil war.

Indiscriminate Attacks on Noncombatants

In power, FSLN forces rarely engaged in indiscriminate attacks. A meta-analysis of 1982–1985 human rights reports found only two incidents, causing eleven deaths, occurred due to “indiscriminate attacks by army patrols in a war situation” (CIJR 1987, 52–3). Late in the war, however, combat stress, suspicion, and reduced training and socialization of conscripts contributed to some EPS forces becoming less restrained in contested areas; Americas Watch (1988, 94) received reports “that the Army is highly suspicious of civilians in many remote areas, and has become trigger-happy.” Aerial bombing by FSLN forces was generally rare and narrowly targeted (e.g., Americas Watch 1986, 81–2). The government used aerial and artillery bombardment when contra forces were concentrated in large groups, but reportedly took care to avoid civilians (Americas Watch 1985b, 61–2). This limitation of indiscriminate mass attacks is consistent with an ideology prescribing restraint being enacted through socialization and policies, versus ideologies that justify and encourage mass violence (Straus 2015; Hoover Green 2018).

Extrajudicial Executions

An uncertain number of Guardia Nacional members and other Somoza supporters were killed around the July 1979 revolutionary victory. FSLN officials acknowledged these killings, though their official policy was to arrest and try Guardia members and high-ranking somocistas. FSLN officials estimated at least 100 such executions occurred around Nicaragua “carried out by our forces,” claiming “We could not control them” (Borge 1980, 86; see also Reding 1991, 18; Rivera Quintero 1989, 261).

15 Later, “Popular Anti-Somocista Tribunals” established in 1983 under a state of emergency during the war against contra rebels violated norms of judicial independence from political influence, but did not violate international law (Steinberg 1987).

16 Interview with Hugo Torres, 2015.

17 Interview with Joaquin Cuadra, 2015. Cuadra claimed, “It was cleaner [than other wars] during all of the fight against Somoza.” See also Torres (2005, 37).

18 In 1974, though, FSLN leader Humberto Ortega tacitly endorsed popular revenge violence against...
the CPDH recorded reports of at least forty-three summary executions in the immediate postvictory period, with seven men allegedly killed while in custody (CPDH 1982). Independent reports found the FSLN generally tried to stop summary justice (Pax Christi Internacional 1981, 14; Americas Watch 1982b, 27) and “succeeded in preventing a massacre” (Fragoso and Artuco 1980, 36), before arresting many execution perpetrators (Amnesty International 1980, 156). In addition, eighteen prisoners were executed at La Polvora prison, with the prison commander dismissed and detained, but ultimately not brought to trial (CPDH 1982; CIIR 1987, 47). The last known summary execution of an ex-Guardia was on August 15, 1979 (Fragoso and Artuco 1980, 36), less than a month after the revolutionary victory.

Most imprisoned ex-Guardias were released over the next 2 years, though in July 1981, remaining detainees in the Zona Franca prison rioted, and Ministry of the Interior forces opened fire, killing sixteen (Miranda and Ratliff 1993, 192–3; Núñez de Escorcia 2014). Beyond ex-Guardias, the most notorious extrajudicial execution occurred in 1980, when FSLN agents killed business leader Jorge Salazar, an ideological enemy who was allegedly plotting an armed uprising but was unarmored when shot, while there were also cases of people shot and sometimes killed after allegedly not stopping at checkpoints, with an unclear degree of warning (CPDH 1982).

The most serious and extensive killings FSLN forces are known to have committed during the war occurred in 1981–1982 in the heavily indigenous northeastern Atlantic Coast region and in 1983–1984 and 1987–1989 in north-central Nicaragua (America Watch 1988). Refugees in Honduras alleged that EPS soldiers in December 1981 killed forty to fifty Indigenous Miskito miners in Leimus, near a recently robbed mine (America Watch 1982b, 64–5); the government belatedly investigated, never releasing the results (America Watch 1983, 31; 1984, 3, 1985b). Subsequent investigations found thirteen to seventeen people were killed out of thirty-five who had been detained (America Watch 1985a, 22–3; Amnesty International 1986, 9; CIIR 1987, 105), though local investigators and historians later reported higher tolls (Jarquin 2018, 98). In 1982, FSLN forces killed seven Miskito youths at Walpa Siksa; the commanding officer responsible was summarily executed by his superiors in the field, and other perpetrators were prosecuted (America Watch 1985a, 22–3). Sixty-nine Miskitos arrested in the Puerto Cabezas area also disappeared in custody between July and October 1982. Subsequent government pension payments to their dependents were considered an admission that these people had been killed by FSLN forces, with government reports mentioning twenty-one Miskito deaths in custody in 1982 (America Watch 1986, 61; Amnesty International 1986, 31; CIIR 1987, 107). In the north-central mountains, abuses occurred in late 1983–early 1984 in the Pantasma area of Jinotega. Following contra attacks that killed dozens of civilians, EPS forces “responded with a wave of human rights violations” against suspected rebel supporters; the government appointed a special prosecutor to investigate alleged killings and torture, and forty-one soldiers were tried, of whom thirteen were sentenced to prison (Amnesty International 1986, 25).

America Watch (1986, 133) from 1980 to 1986 found nearly 300 “recorded killings outside of combat and disappearances by the Nicaraguan government,” with another evaluation finding 119 nonbattlefield civilian deaths between 1982 and 1985 (CIIR 1987, 52–3). Killings were generally of individuals or very small groups (America Watch 1983, 31; 1985b, 1987, 14–6), rather than large massacres, and there was no policy or pattern of violence toward wounded and captured contra combatants (America Watch 1985a, 24). There were also allegations that individuals who were evading military conscription or helping others do so were killed or faced death threats (e.g., Peralta 2023), seen as betraying the revolution at a time it needed defending.

There were concerns in 1987–1989 that executing suspected contra collaborators had become more common in remote conflict zones, though in some cases it was unclear if victims were executed after capture or died in combat (America Watch 1988, 89–93). Amnesty International (1989, 1) reported that “Dozens of peasants have been killed recently in war zones in Nicaragua by government troops and security forces.” America Watch (1989, 6–7) found evidence of at least seventy-four murders and fourteen disappearances reportedly involving Dirección General de Seguridad del Estado (DGSE, or State Security) and EPS forces, primarily in remote, Somoza-supporting forces (Ortega Saavedra 1981, 18), and the FSLN sometimes let mobs attack “enemies” (Miranda and Ratliff 1993, 196–7).

At least three ex-Guardias were reportedly lynched in Granada and Masaya (Núñez Tellez 1980, 129, 134; Tellez 1985, 100–1). There were also allegations that up to seventeen people in an evangelical Protestant community near the Honduran border were killed by soldiers in April 1982 (Shea 1990).

Though after the war a grave was found with six people in rural Jinotega apparently killed in 1985 by EPS forces (CIDH 1993).
mountainous north-central areas around Matagalpa and Jinotega, where forces “engaged in selective kidnappings and assassinations of persons they suspected of being couriers for, or collaborators with, the contras.” The government investigated and generally sought to prosecute reported cases.

Late in the war, however, while there was not evidence of higher-ups commanding or directly condoning extrajudicial killings as we might expect if commanders’ ideological adherence had lapsed (Thaler 2012), investigators found the government was slow to act to launch investigations and seek accountability, and some individuals who had previously been convicted were released early, suggesting increasing tolerance for abuses (Americas Watch 1989; Amnesty International 1989). Additional abuses also occurred in remote areas of the east-central Chontales and Boaco regions, where combat increased late in the war around 1989, but human rights investigations there were more difficult throughout the war (Americas Watch 1989, 14). In 1992, investigators found six mass graves in Boaco containing the bodies of seventy-five people allegedly murdered by DGSE agents in 1985 for supporting the contras (CIDH 1993).

Disappearances

Disappearances were one of the most notorious features of Cold War-era state repression in Latin America (e.g., McSherry 2005; Menjívar and Rodríguez 2005), yet Americas Watch stated in 1982, “‘Disappearances’... are not common in Nicaragua, as they have been in Argentina and El Salvador in recent years” (1982b, 16–7). They reiterated in 1984 that the FSLN “does not have a centrally directed policy of forced disappearances” (Americas Watch 1984, 20), confirming this later in the decade (Americas Watch 1986, 1987; CIJR 1987, 1988).

The CPDH was primarily concerned with disappearances (CPDH 1982), yet cases they raised generally differed from “enforced disappearances” elsewhere in Latin America, and other rights groups criticized the CPDH for labeling as “disappearances” cases where individuals were arrested but communication or records errors meant their families were not promptly notified (Pax Christi Internacional 1981, 31–2; Americas Watch 1982b, 17; CPDDH 1986, 11–2). In some cases, detainees were ultimately never accounted for, but usually they quickly surfaced. For instance, fifteen people reported as “disappeared” in January and February 1982 turned up alive (Americas Watch 1983, 31–2), and “the high proportion of those who disappear later reappear[ed]” (Americas Watch 1984, 20)—with the Puerto Cabezas case above a clear exception. The government did improve notification and records systems, with reforms by 1984 ensuring arrests “in Managua and other large cities are accounted for almost immediately” (Americas Watch 1984, 20). Inadequate notification of arrests continued especially in rural and conflict-prone areas, though primarily due to administrative errors, not policy (Americas Watch 1983, 31–2; 1986, 34; 1987, 68–70), suggesting shortcomings in policing and prisons—and actual disappearances—were most prevalent in contested areas.

Torture and Prisoner Abuse

Torture was consistently found to be neither FSLN policy nor systematic practice. The FSLN, upon taking power, “engaged in a campaign against torture and ill-treatment of prisoners” (Fragoso and Artucio 1980, 36–7). An early Americas Watch report “found widespread agreement, even among the government’s strongest critics, that physical torture is not practiced in Nicaragua today” (1982b, 12, emphasis original); Americas Watch (1986, 29) still wrote 4 years later that “torture... is not practiced in Nicaragua as a means of eliciting information or confessions, nor as a form of punishment,” a finding echoed in 1988 (Americas Watch 1988).

Cases of torture were reported, however, as well as beatings and abuse of detainees. Prisoner abuse and torture likely occurred in the chaos and aftermath of victory around July 19, 1979 (Borge 1980, 86), but abuses under early FSLN rule “were not authorized by higher authorities” (IACHR 1981, 109). The CPDH (1982) reported allegations of beatings and possibly torture of prisoners in 1979–1980, and Miskito men imprisoned in Puerto Cabezas on the Atlantic Coast in 1981 and 1982 reported being beaten (Americas Watch 1983, 32–3; Amnesty International 1986, 9). When incidents were publicly reported, they tended to be punished (Americas Watch 1982a, 9; Amnesty International 1986, 25).

22 See also Amnesty International (1989). Especially in rural areas, most complaints about abuses were against Ministry of the interior-commanded DGSE agents: interview with former NGO worker in Nicaragua during the civil war, 2015. The DGSE also committed abuses in urban prisons (Kinzer 2007, 180–2; United States Department of State 1986b).

23 A former FSLN guerilla turned EPS staff officer said that in the early 1980s, however, to maintain combat strength, some abuse-committing officers were not punished, but were put in a special unit, the Batallón de Lucha Irregular Heriberto Reyes; predictably, these officers continued committing violence against civilians (interview, 2015). See also Camacho (2016, 159).
FSLN forces, though, and especially State Security agents, also used interrogation techniques—like forcing prisoners into uncomfortable, closet-like cells—that many consider excessive pressure or torture, even if these acts did not necessarily cause lasting physical damage (Americas Watch 1982b, 15–6; CIIR 1987, 54; Lawyers Committee for Human Rights 1987, 13; Amnesty International 1989, 34–5). In the later years of the war, the FSLN ended these practices and appears to have stopped most torture (Americas Watch 1987, 8), with “few well-documented reports or personal testimonies of the use of physical torture” in detention centers or in combat areas from 1986 to 1989 (Amnesty International 1989, 34–5)—though some people killed in northern Nicaragua during this period showed signs of torture (Americas Watch 1989, 6–7). In these cases of torture, military personnel or state security officials may have justified their behavior as suppressing counterrevolutionary threats, but torture was neither endorsed by Sandinista ideology nor ordered by commanders, like it was, for instance, in Argentina under the military dictatorship (DuBois 1990; Scharpf 2018).

Sexual Violence
Sexual violence by FSLN security forces appears to have been rare and often punished, though underreporting is pervasive in both wartime and peacetime (Leiby 2009; Nordás and Cohen 2021). Brown (2001, 25–6) says “Reports of rapes of peasant women were common” in the central mountains. He provides no further substantiating evidence, but given that this was the most militarily contested region, sexual violence was likely more prevalent there than elsewhere. After 1984 operations in a Miskito area near Puerto Cabezas, the commanding lieutenant was sentenced to 18 years imprisonment for rape (Amnesty International 1986, 25). In 1986, three women accused of supporting contra forces alleged they were raped while detained near Nueva Guinea; troublingly, no trials or punishment had occurred as of 1988 (Americas Watch 1987, 16–8; 1988, 98). An early 1988 case, however, resulted in the conviction of four soldiers for raping four women while robbing their house (Americas Watch 1988, 98). There were surely unreported incidents of sexual violence, though sexual violence by FSLN forces does not appear to have been frequent or systematic, was neither used consistently for socialization nor as a weapon of war, and was not generally tolerated by commanders (see Cohen 2016; Wood 2018).24

Forced Resettlement
Forced relocation is common in counterinsurgency wars (Zhukov 2015), and the FSLN government engaged in multiple controversial forced relocations of Indigenous communities in the Atlantic Coast region.25 In early 1982, government forces relocated approximately 8,500 Miskitos and other Indigenous persons from villages in the Rio Coco area to new settlements elsewhere on the Atlantic Coast, with little advance warning (Jarquin 2018). The evacuated area had seen significant fighting and contra incursions, so human rights groups accepted the military’s legal right to relocate people and found no evidence evacuees were intentionally harmed during the relocation process, though accidental and medical deaths occurred (Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua 1982; Americas Watch 1982b; IACHR 1983; Jarquin 2018). Americas Watch (1982b, 74) concluded that relocations fed legitimate Miskito grievances but were not conducted “either to punish or detain that population,” while “the large majority of the total Miskito population (some 75,000–120,000) were not relocated at all.” Forced relocations occurred again in late 1982 and 1985 following combat in areas near the Honduran border, and while these again entailed short notice, no physical abuses were found (Americas Watch 1984, 10; 1986, 9). Conditions were initially rough in resettlement villages but quickly improved with relative freedom of movement and activities (Americas Watch 1982b, 70–1; CIIR 1987, 106; Linfeld 1991, 278). In 1986, when security near the Honduran border had improved, the government assisted approximately 14,800 evacuees in returning to their home areas (Americas Watch 1986, 7–8), suggesting there had neither been plans for permanently relocating and “ethnically cleansing” populations nor for categorically repressing Indigenous populations, as we would expect (Straus 2015) if the FSLN’s ideology had been ethnonationalist and justified violence against non-mestizo populations.

Contestation and Violence
Ideological adherence and discipline led to overall relative restraint by FSLN forces at the domestic and organizational levels and shaped subnational and individual-level behavior, with individual and unit-level restraint sexual violence by contra men against women members (Kampwirth 2001, 101–4).

Some expropriations conducted by local FSLN officials likely evicted modestly successful rural smallholder farmers and ranchers without necessarily resettling them (Torres 2010).
and limited selective or categorical violence against ideologically labeled “counterrevolutionaries” in much of the country. In analyzing where and when less selective and more abusive violence was perpetrated, Kalyvas’s (2006) theory of contestation and control is borne out: violence against civilians occurred predominantly in contested areas of greater contra activity, where FSLN forces maintained coercive capacity but lacked full control and information about inhabitants. During the 1980s, contra forces rarely held any territory within Nicaragua, with exceptions on the Atlantic Coast, where Indigenous rebels controlled some areas, and in portions of the central mountains, where the earliest anti-FSLN revolts occurred (Seligson and McElhinny 1996; Horton 1998). On the Atlantic Coast, FSLN forces did not know the territory or population, while in the central mountains they faced local suspicion and contra support (Bendaña 1991; Horton 1998; Brown 2001). In both these regions, the FSLN “did not understand” the people, making it more difficult to “know if someone was or was not collaborating with [the contras]. . . in these frontier and rural zones where the war was more active,” contributing to limited control and more violence against civilians. Ideology in part shaped contestation in these regions, as grievances were related to FSLN attempts to impose political, social, and economic systems that clashed with peasant and Indigenous moral economies (Bendaña 1991; CIPRES 1991; Dennis 1993; Batalion 2015).

Reports “of torture, arbitrary killings, and unacknowledged detention” received by Amnesty Internacional were mainly from “remote areas undergoing armed conflict” (1986, 1). The Leimus killings occurred in an isolated area of the Atlantic Coast where contra forces had been highly active and where there were “weak links” in government forces’ “chain of command” (Amics Watch 1982b, 66). In the months before the incident, contra forces had tortured, murdered, and mutilated twelve militiamen and seven soldiors in nearby San Carlos (Amnesty International 1986, 26; CIIR 1987, 105–6), generating FSLN anger and suspicion. In the Walpa Siksa incident, in another remote Atlantic Coast area, discipline broke down on multiple levels: not only did EPS troops commit murder, but the responsible officer was then executed without trial, breaching laws and military procedure. Americas Watch (1985a, 22–3) said both incidents “occurred in remote, conflicted areas [with] no evidence that what took place was directed or condoned by the central Government.” Other violence, such as prisoner abuses, was also largely confined to remote areas, like the Puerto Cabezas prison on the Atlantic Coast (Americas Watch 1982b, 9; 1983, 32–3; 1984, 28).

Even if an organization has tried to instill ideological principles in forces, this must go beyond training and also include discipline and consistent reinforcement (Hoover Green 2018; Maynard 2019). The FSLN once in power established a hierarchical military structure with centralized control, which can, under normal circumstances, ensure that officers and troops at lower levels follow directives and are disciplined for violating them, whether commanders are seeking to restrain or encourage violence (e.g., Mitchell 2004; Haer 2015). However, when forces are operating in areas where communications and central oversight are difficult, they are more likely to abandon organizational principles and policies (Hoover Green 2018; Manekin 2020), as in the FSLN case, leading to breakdowns in restraint.

Abuse allegations continued to cluster in contested areas late in the war, with disappearance and killing allegations in “remote areas” of the central mountains and Atlantic Coast where civilians were “generally perceived as being sympathetic to the contras” (Americas Watch 1988, 2) and in rural areas of Boaco and Chontales in east-central Nicaragua (Americas Watch 1989, 14). Abuses in the northern mountains occurred in areas where “the contras enjoy considerable support from the population. . . [and where] the war has created profound and lasting wounds in the social fabric” (Americas Watch 1989, 7). FSLN leader Luis Carrión later admitted that violence in these regions was likely more prevalent than the FSLN acknowledged and that some known abuses went unpunished (Watson Institute 2019). At the individual or small unit levels, revenge after contra violence often motivated abuses, as in the Pantasma killings in 1983–1984 and later killings of alleged contra supporters (e.g., Americas Watch 1989, 33–4). Abuses did not take place in all contested areas, however, with ex-

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26 According to Luis Carrión, when the FSLN first took power, many abuses were a product of individual officials’ over-zealous ideological dogmatism, “viewing the petit-bourgeois as the enemy,” the view of the contras’ rebellion, meanwhile, as “a mercenary war, and so anyone involved in aiding the contras was also a mercenary,” also led to abuses (FSLN guerrilla leader turned National Directorate member and Deputy Minister of the Interior, interview, 2015).

27 Interview with Luis Carrión, 2015.

28 Interview with Victor Hugo Tinoco, 2015.

29 Between September 1981 and January 1982, sixty Sandinista troops and civilian officials were killed in Miskito regions, including in San Carlos (Jarquin 2018, 98).
tremely limited reports of EPS violence against civilians along the Costa Rican border (e.g., CPDH 1982).

Though indiscriminate physical violence was highly rare, FSLN forces did conduct indiscriminate arrests of alleged contra collaborators who were, according to Carrion, from “rural areas, areas where the war is being fought” (Lawyers Committee for Human Rights 1987, 5). The government recognized its inability to accurately identify contra collaborators in remote areas was leading to abuses and making residents support the contras (MIDINRA 1984, 38–40), and so began increasingly keeping soldiers in their home regions where they would possess local knowledge (CNPPDH 1987, 8; Portocarrero 1986, 29). These observations both highlight the importance of information in contested areas in shaping patterns of violence (Kalyvas 2006) and how it interacts with disciplinary problems due to difficulties in projecting central control over forces to ensure ideological adherence and policy compliance (Staniland 2014; Worsnop 2017; Hoover Green 2018; McQuinn et al. 2021).

**Alternative Explanations**

Were FSLN restraint and observed patterns of violence the product of ideology and contestation dynamics alone, or were other variables at work? Here I consider several potential competing explanations: ethnicity, audience effects (i.e., violence designed to terrorize or restraint aiming to build and maintain support), opponents’ behavior, and democratization.

**Ethnicity**

Ethnicity is the most obvious competing explanation, since ethnic minorities are frequently targeted in civil wars (Gurr 1993, 2000), especially when they are territorially concentrated (e.g., Toft 2003), and FSLN abuses and killings disproportionately took place in the heavily Indigenous Atlantic Coast region. Yet the Atlantic Coast, especially near the Honduran border, was also the site of much of the war’s combat and contestation. Violence was not indiscriminate within Indigenous areas as we would expect in categorical ethnic violence, like in Guatemala (CEH 1999); much of Nicaragua’s Indigenous population remained unaffected by FSLN violence, and the FSLN had significant support in the region and later in the war agreed to Indigenous autonomy (e.g., Dennis 1993; Meringer 2010). The FSLN’s ideological vision of the Nicaraguan nation was a multiracial one, including Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. This made it similar to the African National Congress’s commitment to “nonracialism,” which restrained violence against South Africa’s white minority (Davis 1987, 120–4; Goodwin 2007), versus ethnonationalist ideologies that see ethnic outsiders as enemies to be suppressed or expelled, justifying mass violence (Straus 2015). Ethnic differences increased information problems and suspicion for FSLN forces from the Pacific Coast, but there is no evidence victims were systematically targeted due to their Indigenous or Afro-descendant identity.

**Domestic and International Audiences**

Policies of violence and restraint may also be adopted with an eye toward domestic and international audiences. Groups might use violence to coerce a population into submission or to demonstrate capabilities and resolve and attract support (Kalyvas 2006; Hultman 2007, 2009; Stanton 2013; Fortna 2015), or they might use restraint to demonstrate their concern for popular well-being in order to garner domestic or international support (Jo 2015; Stanton 2016; Fortna, Lottito, and Rubin 2018; Koloma Beck and Werron 2018).

The FSLN policy of restraint as rebels and commitment to build less abusive security forces than the Somoza regime helped the organization attract support domestically, but it was adopted sincerely out of a desire to represent and protect most Nicaraguans, rather than merely strategically. As outlined in the FSLN’s Historical Program, the group considered it critical to build revolutionary forces and then a state army exercising “conscientious discipline,” building ties to the population and avoiding abuses in line with overall commitments to guaranteeing “individual liberties and respect for human rights” (FSLN 1969). These commitments were adopted at a time when the FSLN had limited domestic support but continued guiding FSLN policy through the revolution and into their control of the state.

Unlike in many other revolutionary states, there was no “reign of terror” in FSLN-governed Nicaragua designed to terrorize the population into submission (O’Kane 1991). There is also no evidence the FSLN sought to use violence to terrorize, disperse, or eliminate the population in contested areas (cf. Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay 2004): “paradoxically, the more moderate measures the Sandinistas did take against rebellious peasants often seemed to have strengthened their resolve and resistance to the revolution,” yet this did not lead the FSLN to escalate repression (Horton 1998, 213–4). Forced relocation had mixed motives: coercion was

30 See Schwartz (2023) on how the FSLN redesigned its land reform efforts to try to regain peasants’ allegiance when early policies were fueling rural resistance.
used strategically (see Schwartz and Straus 2018) to remove people from potential contra influence in warzones, but relocation also occurred due to legitimate fears the government could not protect civilians in their homes—though greater civilian decision-making autonomy was warranted. When the FSLN did use violence against “counterrevolutionaries” in an intentional, centrally directed manner, this was also done out of an ideological conviction that the revolution needed to be protected against all enemies, rather than to gain popular support or acclaim; the killing of businessman Jorge Salazar, for instance, was very unpopular, as many Nicaraguans doubted claims that he was plotting to overthrow the FSLN government (Dickey 1980).

FSLN restraint could also have been a product of international human rights norms and laws and transnational advocacy networks creating pressure to avoid abuses (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Jo 2015; Stanton 2016; Koloma Beck and Werron 2018). The FSLN was attentive to foreign governments’ and publics’ concerns with human rights before and after taking power (e.g., Ortega Saavedra 2004; Van Ommen 2024, 342). Once in control of the state, the FSLN welcomed international human rights organizations and allowed domestic organizations to work independently and cooperate with international groups (Americas Watch 1986, 137–8). FSLN leaders “understood that any abuses would have a negative effect” on them internationally,31 especially in an environment of increased international attention to human rights after the 1977 adoption of the Geneva Conventions’ Additional Protocols.

Yet the FSLN’s ideologically motivated human rights norms and policies were “based in its guerrilla origins,” and the principles of the Historical Program (FSLN 1969), seeking “discipline [and] respect” for the population.32 Former FSLN guerrilla and later military commander Joaquín Cuadra argues FSLN guerrillas’ slogan “‘Implacable in combat, generous in victory’. . . was probably more effective than a few formal courses on humanitarian law. It summed up an ethical and political attitude that guided the insurgents” (Cuadra Lacayo 2000, 944). And while, after victory, military officers had “permanent education efforts about international humanitarian law,” the FSLN often acted to prevent and punish abuses without rights organization pressure33—though pressure seemed more necessary in some cases later in the war (Americas Watch 1989).

Other rebel organizations like Algeria’s National Liberation Front (FLN), which inspired FSLN leaders (e.g., Zimmermann 2001, 73–8), had made the endorsement of the Geneva Conventions and international law a centerpiece of their struggles against repressive governments (Greenberg 1970). FSLN leaders knew that ratifying human rights treaties and abiding by them aided international legitimacy, signaling a month before victory in 1979 their plan to follow the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Charter of the Organization of American States, and then ratifying the American Convention on Human Rights 2 months after taking power (Fox 1987, 20).

FSLN leaders “did not feel much pressure” from outside actors to curtail human rights abuses once in power,34 however, and were willing to ignore international concerns when they felt violence was justified, recognizing that foreign audiences would always find things to criticize, whether sincerely or in bad faith (Van Ommen 2024).35 In the late 1970s, for example, FSLN leaders argued violent struggle was needed to overthrow Somoza, even as some international solidarity activists expressed misgivings, and in the late 1980s, the FSLN dismissed international condemnations, including from European allies, of police crackdowns on protesters (Van Ommen 2024, 19, 206).

The FSLN’s endorsement of international human rights laws and its relative restraint were useful in defanging US claims that Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sabotage and US support for contra forces were justified by FSLN human rights violations; the International Court of Justice in 1986, in one of the most influential cases in international law (Hight 1987; Hoss, Villalondo, and Sivakumaran 2012), found that the FSLN’s enthusiastic willingness to pledge adherence to human rights treaties, allow visits of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and respond to IACHR findings satisfied international legal obligations.36 I would argue that international law reinforced prior FSLN ideological commitments to building less abusive security forces and representing Nicaragua’s poor majority, rather than

31 Interview with Luis Carrión, 2015.
32 Interview with Hugo Torres, 2015.
33 Interview with Hugo Torres, 2015.
34 Interview with Víctor Hugo Tinoco, 2015.
35 In any case, US Congressional debates centered on FSLN foreign policy and potential costs of intervention (Forsythe 1988, 92–6), while the Reagan administration exaggerated abuse reports regardless of FSLN policy (Americas Watch 1985a; Van Ommen 2024), so there was little reason to expect FSLN actions would affect US policy.
determining the socialization and policies of FSLN guerrillas and their forces once in power.\textsuperscript{37}

**Opponents’ Behavior**

Related to concerns with external audiences, one additional alternative explanation for restraint is the opponent’s level of violence (De la Calle 2017; Gibilisco, Kenkel, and Rueda 2022). During both the wars against the Somoza regime and against contra forces, the FSLN was by far the more restrained side. When facing a brutal and indiscriminate opponent, limiting violence may be the best strategy to attract civilian support. This was perhaps the case in El Salvador, where heavy state repression increased restrained insurgents’ support and recruitment (Wood 2003). By contrast, the Rwanda Patriotic Front, in its invasion to topple the genocidal Hutu Power regime, committed its own indiscriminate, though less extensive, mass violence (Reyntjens 1996), while Sendero Luminoso in Peru escalated, rather than moderated, its violence against civilians in the face of government brutality (McClintock 1998).

In the FSLN case, the development of Sandinista ideology’s commitment to human rights was intertwined with the Somoza regime and Guardia Nacional’s abuses (e.g., Nolan 1984; Hodges 1986), and this continued to shape policies once in power. As Hugo Torres put it, “Discipline, respect of the population, demonstrating a difference from the Somoza regime, from the criminal, repressive Guardia Nacional” shaped training among FSLN guerrillas and “in the ranks of the military, of the police [after the triumph].”\textsuperscript{38} These policies continued after the rise of the contra forces and their escalating violence, even as it became clear to FSLN leaders that many Nicaraguans blamed them for economic hardships and political restrictions and that North American and European audiences would continue criticizing the FSLN human rights record despite it being far better than the contras and Central American rivals (Van Ommen 2024, 212, 216).

**Democratization**

There is conflicting evidence in the FSLN case on the level of democracy or democratization trends predicting levels of repression by FSLN forces once in power (Davenport 2007a; Davenport and Inman 2012). The FSLN was more politically inclusive and less repressive than the Somoza regime, but shifts in the level of democracy under FSLN rule were not clearly correlated with shifts in violence. The most significant change came in March 1982 when a state of emergency was declared, which lasted until January 1988 and restricted civil liberties like freedoms of expression and assembly. Major abuses, however, occurred before (Leimus), during (Puerto Cabezas), and after the state of emergency (north-central mountains) (Americas Watch 1988, 2–3; Amnesty International 1989, 53). Nicaragua’s 1984 general elections—while not completely free and fair, a democratizing step (Shugart 1987)—also did not change domestic and organization-level repression.

**FSLN Violence and Restraint in Comparative Perspective**

In Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood’s (2017) “pattern of violence” framework, the FSLN’s repertoire of violence included extrajudicial killing, forced displacement, torture and prisoner abuse, and, occasionally, indiscriminate attacks on civilians and sexual violence. The highest frequency events were extrajudicial killings and prisoner abuse, though forced displacement likely affected the largest number of people. The targeting of violence was primarily toward two groups: suspected enemy collaborators (disproportionately Indigenous people and rural peasants) and prisoners.

Comparing human rights records across states or organizations is difficult, and a truth commission would likely uncover more crimes committed by FSLN forces (Núñez de Escorca 2014), but the FSLN still compares favorably to its rivals and peers. The Somoza regime was extremely violent in repressing dissent and in counterinsurgency, including widespread torture, killings, and indiscriminate aerial bombardments (IACHR 1978; Fragosio and Artucio 1980, 57–71). Non-Indigenous contra forces, especially the FDN, were notorious for widespread intentional violence against civilians (e.g., Brody 1985; Americas Watch 1985b), committing killings with “gratuitous brutality,” including torture, mutilation, and killing family members (Americas Watch 1986, 10). While FSLN forces were found responsible for approximately 130 civilian deaths from 1982 to 1985 (10 percent), contra forces killed at least 1,185 civilians (CIIR 1987, 52–3). Ignoring civilian rights was “a de facto policy of the contra forces,” and “violence against civilians [was] so systematic as to alter public feeling toward the rebel forces in some areas formerly

37 The main contra force, the FDN, also did not pledge to follow international human rights laws until 1987 (Jo 2015, 297), so the FSLN’s adherence to international law after victory was not a competitive move.

38 Interview with Hugo Torres, 2015.
sympathetic to them” (Americas Watch 1987, 19–20). Violence against civilians was official FDN policy, prescribed by the operations manual fighters received from the CIA (Tayacán 1985), and late in the war contra forces “continued to kill civilians or prisoners placed hors de combat,” ignoring human rights investigators (Americas Watch 1989, 25).

Within Central America, the FSLN had a much better human rights record than El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras’s governments, and the same held for right-wing South American governments (e.g., Americas Watch 1982a, 6, 1984, 20). Prisoners were not routinely subjected to “physical torture such as beatings, electric shock, or dunkings in water...” commonplace in, for example, El Salvador, Guatemala, or Chile” (Americas Watch 1985c, v). Left-wing Salvadorans were disproportionately victimized by El Salvador’s right-wing government in their country’s civil war, but in Nicaragua’s conflict, conservative opponents of the FSLN were no more likely overall to suffer violence than FSLN supporters themselves (Seligson and McElhinny 1996); this reinforces that the FSLN’s ideology did not permit unrestrained violence against ideological opponents. While many crimes still went unpunished, the FSLN was also more proactive in trying and frequently convicting security force members for criminal violations of human rights, “unlike El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras” (CIIR 1988, 68).

The FSLN’s restraint in comparative, international, and domestic-level perspectives does not change the deep impacts and lasting harms of FSLN violence for victims and their families and communities, pointing to the continued practical and analytical importance of investigating patterns of violence committed by relatively restrained groups. Decades after human rights violations have taken place, in-depth investigations and accountability, truth commissions, and recognition can become more difficult politically and practically, but efforts still matter for those affected by violence.39

Unlike neighboring El Salvador and Guatemala, Nicaragua has never had a truth commission (see Núñez de Escorca 2014; Bothmann 2015). To help end the war, the FSLN proposed and contra commanders quickly agreed to an amnesty and no truth commission. As former EPS general Joaquín Cuadra put it, “Your dead are your dead and my dead are my dead, your excesses are your excesses and my excesses are my excesses. Forget about it. We need to move forward.”40 This political pact and the postwar government letting FSLN leaders retain command of the armed forces helped forge stability. Yet it also foreclosed possibilities for reckoning and reconciliation and meant individuals who had potentially overheard abuses remained in positions of power, even as at least seventy-five mass graves were reportedly discovered in the early 1990s (CIDH 1993).41 Wartime enmities remained strong, and there was significant early 1990s violence between rearmed former contras and demobilized FSLN forces, as well as state security forces, resulting in hundreds of deaths and thousands of other abuses, especially in north-central Nicaragua and parts of the Atlantic Coast, areas contested during the war (CENIDH 1993, 1994; CIAV-OEA 1998; Rueda-Estrada 2015).

The end-of-war amnesty, wartime abuses, and revolutionary legacies have recently received renewed attention (Jarquin 2020; Ramirez 2021; Miranda Aburto 2022). The contemporary FSLN and revolutionary-era leader Daniel Ortega, in power again since 2007, launched a fierce, lethal campaign of repression following mass protests in 2018, turning Nicaragua today into a totalitarian state (e.g., Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes 2018; Thaler and Mosinger 2022). Illustrating the internalization of revolutionary-era commitments to human rights, however, many of the Nicaraguan human rights organizations that criticize Ortega and the government today are headed by former FSLN members who “brought their ideas and practices” into civil society (Jarquin 2019, 287). Accountability for more contemporary abuses is understandably a higher priority, but the enduring salience of wartime identities and grievances and the possibilities for fully documenting and acknowledging those who suffered violence point to the continued importance of a truth commission for the 1980s period.

Conclusion

The FSLN’s domestic and organization-level restraint—seeking to avoid violence against civilians in policy and practice and never systematically attacking civilians or political opponents—was rooted in its ideology of Sandinismo, which sought to liberate Nicaragua from oppression and the pervasive fear of violence under the

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39 For instance, victims and families affected by state-sponsored mass atrocities in 1960s Indonesia held an International People’s Tribunal in The Hague in 2015 following decades of impunity and inaction.

40 For interview, 2015.

41 Limiting the reach of transitional justice measures can help secure peace or democratic transitions (Nalepa 2022; Ansorg and Kurtenbach 2023), but failure to hold violent actors accountable may also lead to longer-term backlashes against peace agreements, undermining democratic stability (Meléndez-Sánchez 2021).
Somoza dynasty. Yet FSLN forces committed a variety of abuses. These were concentrated in regions where control was contested, FSLN forces lacked information about civilian loyalties, and central command was limited. Combining theories of ideology (e.g., Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014) with theories of contestation (Kalyvas 2006) and command and control (e.g., Hoover Green 2018) therefore best explains the prevalence and distribution of FSLN violence across levels of analysis.

Ideally, I would also have been able to see if specific military units were associated with higher levels of abuse, since particular officers and unit cultures can play a key role in shaping socialization toward restraint or violence (Bell and Terry 2021), and archives may document violations that were missing from human rights and truth commission reports (Leiby 2009). Abuses were concentrated in military regions I and VI in the central mountains, region VII and the eastern section of region VI on the Atlantic Coast, and parts of region V around Boaco and Chontales, narrowing the potential units involved since certain units were in different regions at different times (see Ejército de Nicaragua 2009). These more granular data might be present in Nicaragua’s military archives, which unfortunately have been closed to outside researchers since the early 2000s.

Finally, this article shows the benefits of exploring determinants of patterns of violence across levels of analysis (Balcells and Stanton 2021). At the international, domestic, and organizational levels, FSLN policies and practices can be compared to international norms and the policies and practices of other organizations and governments at home and abroad. At the subnational and individual levels, it is possible to explore the context of when and where policies were followed or broken, as well as individual or group motivations for violence. This allows for comparison without sacrificing too much nuance, a useful approach in continuing to unravel the politics of civil wars, while also highlighting the need for domestic and/or international efforts for transitional justice in cases where it has been lacking.

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Supplementary Information
Supplementary information is available in the Journal of Global Security Studies data archive.

References


