

SANDINISTA

Carlos Fonseca *and the* Nicaraguan Revolution

MATILDE ZIMMERMANN

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS Durham and London 2000

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To Arnold

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments / ix

Introduction / 1

1. Matagalpa: The Early Years, 1936–1950 / 12
2. A Rebellious Student, 1950–1958 / 28
3. The Cuban Revolution, 1958–1961 / 50
4. Founding the FSLN, 1960–1964 / 69
5. The Evolution of a Strategy, 1964–1968 / 88
6. Underground and Prison Life, 1968–1970 / 111
7. The Sandino Writings, 1970–1974 / 143
8. A Fractured Movement, 1972–1975 / 162
9. The Montaña and the Death of Fonseca, 1975–1976 / 185
10. The Revolution of 1979 / 205

Epilogue / 222

Notes / 229

Glossary of Organizations / 257

Bibliography / 259

Index / 271

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Introduction

On 7 November 1979, more than one hundred thousand people packed the Plaza de la Revolución in Managua, Nicaragua, to honor Carlos Fonseca Amador, the founder of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, FSLN). The demonstrators were overwhelmingly young men and women from poor barrios and rural villages, participants in the insurrection that, only a few months before, had toppled the four-decade-long Somoza dictatorship and swept the FSLN into power. Many thousands came to the rally armed, and they waved their rifles in the air when the crowd chanted, “Comandante Carlos, Ordene!” [At your command!].

It was the third anniversary of the date Fonseca died fighting Somoza’s army, and his remains had been exhumed and brought to the capital for reburial. The FSLN had planned a more low-key event, one that would commemorate not just Fonseca but several of the movement’s most important martyrs. But the announcement of plans to rebury Fonseca, like the call for a “final offensive” against Somoza six months earlier, generated a response that went beyond anything FSLN leaders anticipated. A simple ceremony planned for the remote town of Waslala, near the forested hillside where Fonseca died, was overwhelmed by the hundreds of peasants who arrived on mule, on horseback, and on foot, some walking for more than a day. A helicopter flew Fonseca’s remains to the town of Matagalpa, his birthplace. Nearly fifty thousand turned out, virtually the entire population of the town plus many who trekked in from the surrounding countryside. People gathered beside the highway and in small villages along the way as a car caravan carried the bones from Matagalpa to Managua.

Carlos Fonseca, though no longer alive, was the popular hero of the



Nicaragua. Map by Kikombo Ilunga Ngoy.

Nicaraguan revolution of 1979. He was much better known to the ordinary citizen than any of the people who made up the new revolutionary government. The young men and women who fought the National Guard in the insurrections of 1978 and 1979 considered themselves Sandinistas, but many knew only a few basic facts about the FSLN: its colors were the black and red of Sandino, its leader was Carlos Fonseca, it was serious about taking power, and it fought on the side of workers and peasants. That was enough.

Carlos Fonseca was also the FSLN leader who most epitomized the radical and popular character of the revolution, its anticapitalist and antilandlord dynamic. Two sayings of Fonseca's were especially prominent at the 7 November rally and preceding events. The first he appropriated from nationalist hero and guerrilla general Augusto César Sandino: "Only the workers and peasants will go all the way." The second, featured on the front page of the FSLN newspaper on 8 November, declared: "It is not simply a question of changing the individuals in power, but rather of changing the system, of overthrowing the exploiting classes and bringing the exploited classes to victory."¹

For nearly twenty years, Fonseca had been the central ideological and strategic leader of the revolutionary movement in Nicaragua. The writings that defined the political ideology of the Frente Sandinista—programmatic documents, historical and social analyses, key speeches, and manifestos—were almost without exception his work. Until his death, Carlos Fonseca also played a crucial role, even from prison or exile, in organizing the day-to-day work of the FSLN, recruiting to its ranks, expanding its political influence, and planning its military operations.

Before 1979, most people in North America and Europe, and many in Latin America, had never heard of Nicaragua, but the revolution captured the imagination of people around the world. The scruffy young FSLN guerrillas, affectionately referred to as *muchachos*, "kids," had won an armed revolution against an entrenched dictatorship. Television viewers far from Central America were shocked by the brutal violence of the Somoza government and National Guard and were impressed by the sight of ordinary people—students, housewives, workers—standing up to government tanks with homemade bombs and cobblestone barricades. Most participants in the urban and rural uprisings of early 1979 came from the lower classes, but at the end there was also widespread support for the revolution from the middle class, the Catholic Church, and even sections of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie. A genuine popular uprising finally forced President Anastasio Somoza to flee the country and destroyed the hated institution of the Na-

tional Guard. Of all the socialist and nationalist guerrilla movements that sprang up around Latin America in the decades following the Cuban revolution of 1959, only the FSLN of Nicaragua ever came to power.

It is impossible to understand this revolution or Carlos Fonseca's role in it without knowing something of Nicaragua and its history. Nicaragua in 1979 was an impoverished, underdeveloped, sparsely populated country in the middle of Central America, a region of poor and economically backward countries. The size of Illinois, Nicaragua had a population of less than 2.5 million.

When the Spanish conquered Nicaragua in the early sixteenth century, they found a land of lakes and volcanoes, of pine-covered mountains, tropical jungle, and hot, fertile plains, of vast forests of precious hardwoods. They did not, however, find what they wanted: gold and silver available for easy plunder. The most important economic activity carried out by the new rulers of Nicaragua in the early years was slave raiding, the capture and transportation of Indians to work in the silver and mercury mines of Peru. The violence of slaving, combined with the devastation of new diseases introduced by the Europeans, reduced the population of western Nicaragua from an estimated six hundred thousand to a few tens of thousands by about 1600. It took more than two centuries for the population to recover to preconquest levels.

Independence from Spain was won in the early 1820s, but the economic patterns of the colonial era persisted well into the twentieth century. Cattle raising on large haciendas was the most important commercial activity until the coffee boom of the 1880s. The production of agricultural goods for European and North American consumers dominated the market economy, making Nicaragua dependent on the vagaries of world prices, demand, and competition, and ensuring that, even in boom years, profits went mostly to wealthy landowners and merchants. The majority of the population continued to grow beans and corn much as their ancestors had before the conquest, although the decreasing size of peasant landholdings forced many into seasonal labor as well. The indigenous communities enjoyed a significant amount of autonomy, but the Indian population was also subject to coerced labor on public works and coffee plantations. Precapitalist labor relations and primitive technology were common in Nicaragua much longer than in other parts of Latin America. It was not until the cotton boom of the 1950s that fully capitalist agricultural production came to the country.

The political life of Nicaragua from independence to 1979 was characterized by the exclusion of workers and peasants from political power, the use of

violence to resolve conflicts between different factions of the dominant class, and intervention by the United States. Frequent wars between Liberals and Conservatives had little to do with ideology but rather were fueled by a jockeying for power among wealthy families and geographic rivalries between the two great colonial cities of Granada and León. In the 1850s, William Walker, an American adventurer backed initially by the U.S. government, took advantage of a war between Liberals and Conservatives to make himself president of Nicaragua, legalize slavery, and declare English the official language, before being defeated by popular resistance and a joint Central American army. In the decades before the construction of the Panama Canal, U.S. industrialist Cornelius Vanderbilt made a fortune exploiting the geographic advantages of Nicaragua to transport passengers and freight across a short land-and-water route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States intervened militarily to overthrow Liberal president José Santos Zelaya, impose Conservative Adolfo Díaz in his place, and begin a military occupation of the country that lasted, with only a few years interruption, until 1933. Nicaragua's banks, customs office, and railroads were signed over to American bankers, and the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty of 1914 gave the United States exclusive rights in perpetuity to build a canal across Nicaraguan territory.

In 1927 Augusto César Sandino, one of the Liberal generals fighting an imposed Conservative president, refused to sign a U.S.-brokered truce and went on to lead a six-year war against the U.S. Marines. The efforts of Sandino's peasant army, combined with growing opposition to the intervention inside the United States, led to the withdrawal of the American troops in 1933. Sandino was assassinated in 1934 at the orders of Anastasio Somoza García, the commander of a new U.S.-trained military force called the Guardia Nacional (National Guard). In the 1960s and 1970s, Carlos Fonseca resurrected the example of Sandino to inspire a new generation to fight against a government and National Guard led by Anastasio Somoza's sons.

Who was Carlos Fonseca? What aspects of his life and surroundings drove him to rebellion? How and why did his ideas change over time? What impact did Nicaraguan history and culture have on his political views, and to what extent was he influenced by events in the world outside Central America? Was he a Marxist? Nationalist? Internationalist? Castroist? Sandinista? How did he understand the class structure of Nicaragua, and what role did he envision for different social classes in the revolution? What was his view of the role of women in the guerrilla struggle and in postrevolution society? How did his ideas differ from those of others in the FSLN and in the broader

Left and opposition movements in Nicaragua? What difference did Carlos Fonseca make in the eventual victory of the Nicaraguan revolution, which came several years after his death?

This work, drawing on a sizable collection of hitherto unknown Fonseca writings, tells Carlos Fonseca's story by placing the development of his ideas in the context of the world in which he lived and the Nicaraguan reality he studied and fought to change. It stresses two dominant influences on Fonseca's life and political philosophy: the Cuban socialist revolution, and particularly the writings and actions of Ernesto "Che" Guevara; and the long tradition of resistance and courage on the part of Nicaraguan workers and peasants, exemplified especially by the anti-imperialist general Sandino. Carlos Fonseca followed in the footsteps of two individuals above all others, Che Guevara and Augusto César Sandino. They were Fonseca's personal heroes, and he also saw them as representing broader historical processes. Following in Che's footsteps also meant following Fidel Castro, the July 26 Movement, and the rebels who attacked the Moncada Barracks in 1953. Studying and emulating Sandino also meant learning from Indians who fought Spanish conquistadores, youths who hurled rocks at invader William Walker, and patriots who led the resistance to U.S. intervention in the decades before Sandino.

Carlos Fonseca's contribution lay in the interweaving of two themes: on the one hand, the fight for national liberation and against U.S. imperialism, and on the other the struggle for socialist revolution. His vision of a "Sandinista popular revolution" included both military victory over the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship and a social transformation to end the exploitation of Nicaraguan workers and peasants. Fonseca's goal was to build a movement that was deeply rooted in the material reality of Nicaragua and its rebel traditions symbolized by Sandino while looking to Cuba—and behind Cuba, the Russian Revolution—for inspiration and a sense of what was possible.

"It is not our job," Fonseca wrote in 1975, "to discover the universal laws that lead to the transformation of a capitalist society into a society of free men and women; our modest role is to *apply* these laws, which have already been discovered, to the conditions of our own country."² The task he set himself was not "modest"; it was difficult and dangerous, and success was far from guaranteed. Indeed, of all the guerrilla groups formed around Latin America in the years immediately following the Cuban revolution of 1959, the one that seemed at first to have the *worst* prospects for success was

probably the FSLN. The transformation of a handful of radical students into a movement leading a popular insurrection took almost two decades and was marked by more defeats than victories, prolonged periods of isolation, and the accumulation of a long list of martyrs. Even among students, the Sandinistas did not win hegemony until the decade of the sixties was well over. In the broad movement of opposition to Somoza and in the labor movement, more moderate voices than the FSLN's prevailed until the late 1970s.

Throughout this period, the FSLN was slowly winning to its ranks young students and workers, one or two at a time. Creating the kind of collective leadership that could take power at the head of a popular uprising was a long process involving sharp debate, discussion, conflicting proposals, experimentation, detours, and shared responsibilities. When the revolution occurred in 1979, everyone—friends and enemies—agreed that it was led by the FSLN. One of the themes of my work is that this experienced and committed leadership, this “vanguard” in the vocabulary of the time, was a necessary ingredient to the success of the Nicaraguan revolution. Like Che Guevara, I am convinced that one of the most important preconditions for revolution is the human one. The focus of this book is the men and women who struggled to build the FSLN through the 1960s and 1970s, and in particular the central role played by Carlos Fonseca.

Most books about the Nicaraguan revolution are by social scientists who are primarily interested in analyzing the FSLN's behavior after it came to power. They describe the ideology and program of the FSLN as it existed in the early 1980s, based on interviews and speeches of various party and government leaders, combined with some historical material from Carlos Fonseca and others. This approach enables them to show the complexity of Sandinista ideology in the early 1980s, but it does not reveal the organic development of this political ideology, the learning process, zigzags, debates, and rejection of failed strategies. It has led to several common errors, including a mystification of the process by which Sandino was chosen as a symbol, an overestimation of the importance of liberation theology in the formative period of the FSLN, and an insufficient appreciation of the role played by Carlos Fonseca at key junctures. The literature's focus on the FSLN in power creates the impression that the victory of the Nicaraguan revolution was somehow inevitable, whereas a more historical approach recovers the contingency and the drama of the process. Readers of this book may be surprised by the strength and stability of the Somoza regime during the 1960s

and early 1970s, the numerical and military weakness of the FSLN and its marginalization within the broader opposition movement, and the number of instances when the guerrilla movement could have been annihilated or just given up on the prospect of revolution.

The Nicaraguan revolution—like all revolutions—was the product of a particular national experience, history, body of traditions, and political culture. The key to developing a revolutionary nationalist ideology and program for Nicaragua was the resurrection and reinterpretation of Augusto César Sandino. In retooling the lessons of the 1920s for the needs of the 1970s, Fonseca stressed two main themes: the FSLN had to be anchored in the working class and peasantry, and it had to be prepared to take on U.S. imperialism, which he considered the main obstacle both to Nicaraguan national independence and to the struggle of the country's lower classes for social justice.

A necessary part of this process was the FSLN's rejection of the political perspectives and methods of the Communist Party. Fonseca, originally a member of the pro-Moscow party in Nicaragua, led this split at the beginning of the 1960s with his criticisms of the Communists' electoralism, their unwillingness to commit to armed struggle, and their lack of confidence in the ability of Nicaraguan workers and peasants to carry out a socialist revolution. This orientation to reform rather than revolution and to alliances with parties that represented the interests of capitalist and middle-class forces developed under Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in the 1930s and was common to all the Latin American parties that looked to Moscow for direction. Scholars of Nicaragua refer to this political philosophy as "Stalinism" or "popular frontism," or "the Third International tradition"; Carlos Fonseca called it "Browderism."³ Fonseca led a break from the Communist Party to the Left, rejecting the conservatism and bureaucratic methods of the Nicaraguan CP in favor of the revolutionary Marxism of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. Fonseca saw this turning point as a move toward, not away from, Marxism.

Some scholars argue that it was Fonseca's rejection of Marxism in favor of a more pragmatic nationalism that made the revolution of 1979 possible.⁴ Fonseca's political writings over a two-decade period show him, to the contrary, becoming more committed over time both to scientific socialism and to revolutionary Nicaraguan nationalism. Marxism and nationalism were two intertwined aspects of Fonseca's political philosophy, held together by the glue of anti-imperialism and symbolized by his constant pairing of Che Guevara and Augusto César Sandino.

I argue that the Cuban revolution of 1959 was the crucial turning point in Fonseca's political evolution, opening up the possibility of a deep-going social revolution in his own country, turning him to a study of Sandino's history, and leading directly to the formation of the FSLN. "We are the *fidelistas* generation," Fonseca said, with the goal of establishing in Nicaragua "the second free territory of the Americas."⁵

It should be noted that in the eyes of those who speak for what remains of the FSLN in the late 1990s, this is the most controversial argument of the book. Fonseca's writings, including his historical writings on Sandino and his last strategic document, written less than a month before his death, continually stress the importance of the Cuban revolution and its relevance for Nicaragua. At the time of the Nicaraguan revolution, the material aid and political inspiration of Cuba were both widely acknowledged. The FSLN—to the delight and astonishment of the Cubans—sent *twenty-six* of its thirty-six highest-ranking military officers to Havana for a celebration on 26 July 1979, only seven days after the Nicaraguan victory.⁶ At the November 1979 Managua rally commemorating Carlos Fonseca, and at other political demonstrations in the first months of the revolution, the crowd burst into chants of "Cuba! Cuba! Cuba!" and "Viva Fidel!" In the course of the 1980s, however, leaders of the FSLN mentioned Cuba less and less often, finally rewriting their own history by substituting a Swedish or Mexican model for Cuba.

Perhaps following the lead of these FSLN leaders, scholars of the revolution tend to downplay the importance of Cuba. They argue that after an early infatuation with Cuba, lasting perhaps until the defeat of Che Guevara in Bolivia in 1967, the Sandinistas abandoned the Cuban model and set out to make a different type of revolution, one that was multiclass, Christian, and nonsocialist.⁷ My study of Carlos Fonseca shows that the FSLN under his leadership, as it became more deeply rooted in Nicaraguan reality, continued at the same time to look to the Cuban revolution as an example of what was possible.

The reader should know that I have brought more than academic curiosity to this research project. I was already an active supporter of the Nicaraguan revolution when I first heard of Carlos Fonseca. In February 1980, only a few months after the rally welcoming Fonseca's remains to the capital, I made the first of many trips to Nicaragua. I lived in Managua during the early 1980s and wrote a series of pro-revolution articles chronicling the first few years of the FSLN government. During the U.S.-backed contra war, I spent one harvest picking cotton on a state farm near the war zone, and I gave talks in the United States in solidarity with the Sandinista revolution. At

the end of the decade, I moved back to Nicaragua to help on an FSLN project in the autonomous region of the northern Atlantic Coast. I was disappointed, although not surprised, when the FSLN was voted out of office in February 1990.

In the Nicaragua of the 1980s, Carlos Fonseca's image was everywhere on murals and posters. He looked a little ethereal, even snooty—half aristocrat and half Jesus Christ. As the FSLN began to publish some of Fonseca's writings, I was struck by the contrast between the way he was portrayed in these ubiquitous murals and the plain-talking radicalism of his own speech, his embrace of revolutionary violence, and his identification with the daily hardships and concerns of Nicaraguan workers and peasants. Unlike most Latin American Marxists, Carlos Fonseca wrote and spoke a language ordinary people could understand. I was impressed with his clarity and singleness of purpose, and sorry when the FSLN rather abruptly stopped publishing Fonseca's work after 1985 and let his *Obras* go out of print.

When I returned to Nicaragua in the 1990s, the revolutionary murals had been sandblasted or painted over, and speeches by FSLN politicians never mentioned Carlos Fonseca. But I met many Nicaraguans from what they themselves call the "humble classes" whose memory of him was vivid. Men and women of various ages, encountered in the market, on buses, in small towns, in a clinic waiting room, responded in virtually identical terms to the news that I was writing a biography of Carlos Fonseca. "Carlos—he was one of us. He spoke our language." And often, "He would never have let this happen to our revolution."

By the time this book was written, the FSLN had become a center-left electoral party whose platform and actions were similar to those of other reform-minded parties in and out of office around Latin America. Some of the idealistic young guerrillas who had fought alongside Fonseca had become millionaire businessmen, large landowners, or corrupt politicians. The Nicaraguan revolution was over. Most books about Latin American revolutions published in the 1990s start from this framework. These post-Cold War postmortems are primarily concerned with explaining the *defeats* of all revolutionary efforts after Cuba, including Nicaragua. Insofar as they deal with Nicaragua, their starting point is the electoral defeat of 1990, not the victorious revolution of 1979. My purpose is to try, through the central figure of Carlos Fonseca, to reconstruct the events and ideas that produced the FSLN and the revolution of 1979. What drove Fonseca and his followers? What did they say and write at the time, and how did they end up the undisputed leaders of a popular insurrection? I think it is more interesting,

important, and unusual that many thousands of Nicaraguans were ready to die for the FSLN in 1979 than that they were unwilling to vote for it a decade later.

The fictional Irish bartender Mr. Dooley once criticized the kind of history that only “tells ye what a countrhy died iv.” Like Mr. Dooley, “I’d like to know what it lived iv.”⁸

Matagalpa: The Early Years, 1936–1950

In early July 1936, a Matagalpa seamstress stopped by City Hall to register the birth of a baby boy to her neighbor Augustina Fonseca, an unmarried twenty-six-year-old washerwoman from the countryside. The clerk took down the information that the infant, born 23 June, was named Carlos Alberto Fonseca and was illegitimate.¹

As the child grew up, he came to see his world as dominated by sharp and sometimes violent contrasts: between his country of Nicaragua and United States imperialism, between the white coffee growers and merchants of the Matagalpa region and the overwhelmingly Indian coffee pickers and *campesinos*, between the tiny revolutionary group he founded and the powerful and well-armed Somoza government.

But the first contrast Carlos Fonseca Amador became aware of must have been within his own family. He lived with his mother, older brother Raúl, and eventually three younger siblings in a single windowless room about twelve feet on a side, off the kitchen patio of an aunt's house. Half a mile away was the mansion where his father, Fausto Amador Alemán, lived with his wife and children. One of the few two-story buildings in Matagalpa, the Amador residence, along with the cathedral facade half a block away, dominated the north end of town. Inside were shining mahogany floors and cabinets, mosaic tiles, a garden of flowers and trees, and elegant imported furnishings, all kept immaculate by live-in servants.

Carlos's mother, Augustina Fonseca Ubeda, had arrived in Matagalpa in about 1930 from the rainy mountain village of San Rafael del Norte. According to a local resident and distant relative of Carlos, San Rafael del Norte was "an area of simple folk, the majority of them fair-skinned, where those who had land used it to keep cattle and grow sugar cane," and the Ubeda family

were “cattle keepers, who grew some cane and some garden crops, hard-working people who lived austere; they were extremely religious and sometimes only appeared in town for Holy Week celebration.”²

Like many country people from the North, Augustina Fonseca, who was twenty years old in 1930, came to the city looking for work and fleeing the disruption of war. San Rafael del Norte was the home of Blanca Aráuz, the wife of guerrilla leader Augusto César Sandino,³ and the Segovian Mountains around the town became a war zone in the late 1920s.

Augustina, or Tina as she was known, arrived in Matagalpa with her two aunts, only slightly older than herself, Isaura and Victoria Ubeda. Tina found work as a maid at the Hotel Bermúdez, where in 1933 she gave birth to twin boys, Raúl and Carlos. (This first Carlos died as an infant.) The twins’ father was reportedly U.S. Marine Lieutenant Pennington, an officer of the anti-Sandino forces stationed in northern Nicaragua.⁴ When Isaura Ubeda acquired a comfortable corner house near Plaza Laborio at the south end of town, she allowed Tina and baby Raúl to move into a back room. This is the house in which Carlos Fonseca Amador was born.⁵

Tina’s neighbor Benita Alvarado has described her friend’s life as being “constant hard work, nothing but washing and ironing.” But Alvarado also described herself and Tina as *fiestejeras*, “party girls,” in their youth. “We all liked to dress up fancy to go out to the dance halls on the road to Jinotega,” said Alvarado, “but with Tina, the more simply she dressed, the more beautiful she was and the more she attracted men.” Augustina’s daughter-in-law said she had the “double misfortune of being both poor and beautiful.” Among Tina’s suitors in 1935 was Carlos’s father, Fausto Amador, a wealthy twenty-two year old who had just returned from school in the United States and had a reputation as a playboy and daredevil.⁶

Still unmarried, Augustina Fonseca had three more children over the next fifteen years. Each time she became pregnant—when Carlos was four and then again when he was about ten and again when he was in his midteens—Tina and her children were thrown out of Isaura’s house. Penniless and with no help from the children’s fathers, the family each time searched for a shack to stay in until the new baby was born. Carlos later described one of these temporary dwellings to a friend: around the corner from Isaura’s house, the hovel rented for forty córdobas (about five dollars) a month, and “the door wasn’t even attached—at night we had to push the beds up against it to keep it from opening.”⁷ Isaura always relented afterward, when Tina promised to change her ways, and each time she allowed the growing family to return.

In Nicaragua at the time, working-class and peasant couples commonly

lived together for many years and had children without going through the formality of marriage. Isaura Ubeda herself had this type of relationship with the saddle maker Agustín Castillo. Augustina Fonseca's pregnancies, however, all seem to have resulted from short-lived sexual encounters rather than the more stable relationships in which society recognized a family tie. Her five children all had different fathers. Friends and family members I have interviewed do not believe that any of Augustina Fonseca's pregnancies resulted from rape. At the same time, they describe her as having few options in life after she bore her first illegitimate child—especially one whose father was reputed to be a Yankee. Regarded as “damaged goods,” she had little chance of marrying or entering into a stable common-law relationship.⁸

Fonseca's strict attitude toward matrimony and monogamy may be traced in part to these early childhood experiences. At age eighteen Carlos told his close friend Ramón Gutiérrez that he had never had sexual intercourse. When Ramón asked in some astonishment why, Carlos said that he would never do to any woman what had been done to his mother. A poem Fonseca wrote for the magazine *Segovia* in 1954 contains the lines “It's good that . . . Tomasa is going to have a child. / But it's bad that . . . Tomasa's child is not going to have a father.” On trial in 1964, Fonseca was questioned about a National Guard report that he had needed treatment for venereal disease after his arrest. “Look, compañeros,” he insisted, “I am an ascetic, almost a mystic. Every minute of my time is dedicated to the revolution and to the fatherland. What you were told is false. It is pure invention.”⁹

When Carlos Fonseca registered at the national university in 1956, he wrote “servant” in the space for parent's occupation. The clerk looked up and said, “Don't you mean housewife?”

“No, I don't mean housewife,” replied Fonseca testily. “I am the son of a servant.”¹⁰

Writing to his father in 1960, Fonseca described his mother's life as “nothing but sadness, a constant tragedy.” Carlos asked for help, not for himself but for his mother:

The poor woman, at this stage of her life, has never known what it means to live in a room of her own. She has always been a slave in the kitchens of those she has worked for, and the kitchen has been the only home I have known. . . . For my mother it is a bitter experience to live with my aunt. Besides, in Matagalpa she could live in a little rented place with running water and electricity for the sum of only 100 córdobas a month. She would have my younger maternal brother and sister with her of

course. I assured her that you would help us, not really because you had any obligation to do it but because you would recognize that it would give me immeasurable satisfaction to have this dream of mine realized. When she comes to your office, I hope that you will remember that she has known nothing but sadness in this life, and that therefore she suffers deeply every time someone looks at her in a disparaging way.¹¹

Amador did not respond favorably to this plea. Augustina Fonseca lived in Isaura Ubeda's kitchen until she died from a stroke in 1967. She died penniless, and her sons had to borrow money for a simple box in which to bury her.

Carlos's father, Fausto Amador, belonged to one of the wealthiest and politically most powerful families of the region. Although no father was listed on Carlos Alberto's birth certificate or baptismal record, his Amador grandparents did appear on his baptismal certificate in 1937,¹² and sometime during Carlos's elementary school years his father began to acknowledge his parentage.

The Amador family of Matagalpa had been prominent coffee growers, merchants, and politicians since the nineteenth century. Fausto Amador's father and Carlos's grandfather was Horacio Amador, an important coffee trader who also owned coffee plantations and several houses in Matagalpa. One of Fausto's uncles, Sebastián Amador, had been the *jefe político* (political boss) of the Matagalpa region from 1915 to 1917 during the administration of Conservative president Adolfo Díaz. The Amadors, like most of the aristocratic families of Matagalpa, traditionally supported the Conservative Party, but Fausto switched his allegiance to the Nationalist Liberal Party (Partido Liberal Nacionalista, PLN) of President Anastasio Somoza García. In 1950 Fausto Amador moved with his family to Managua to administer several large Somoza enterprises. By the 1970s he owned a large amount of agricultural land in the Matagalpa and Managua regions and four luxurious homes in Managua, in addition to the Matagalpa family mansion.¹³

Shortly after the birth of Carlos Fonseca, Fausto Amador married Lola Arrieta, the daughter and granddaughter of prominent Matagalpa professionals and *cafetaleros* (coffee planters). Between 1939 and 1950, Fausto Amador and Lolita Arrieta had one daughter and three sons: Gloria, Iván, Fausto Jr., or Faustito, and Cairo. Coincidentally, Carlos Fonseca also had three brothers and a sister on his mother's side: Raúl, René, Juan Alberto, and Estela. He developed the closest relationship with Faustito Amador and Juan Alberto Fonseca, both about a decade his junior.

Carlos had a voracious appetite and would later recall the poverty, humiliation, and constant hunger of his early years, when he sold the weekly newspaper *Rumores* in the street and peddled candies to bring home a few centavos or some bread for his little brothers. One of his mother's employers, Salvador Pinera, caught her slipping leftover food to her son, and according to Carlos, "He kicked me out like a dog." A line in a 1955 poem by Fonseca reads: "The rich feed you with leftovers." In 1956, when Carlos was working as a school librarian, he was sometimes able to sneak a hungry day student into the school cafeteria as his "guest."¹⁴

Carlos had fonder memories of another of his mother's employers, Nacho Lay, the owner of the Shanghai Restaurant. The Chinese restaurant owner noticed that Carlos had to go right up to a huge wall clock to tell the time and sent him to get his first eyeglasses at the age of about ten or twelve. Fonseca wore heavy glasses for the rest of his life, and some of his letters express concern about his deteriorating vision. A high school friend remembered once asking Carlos why he looked so sad. "Well, Poet," answered Carlos, "I just got back from Managua, where I saw the eye doctor. He told me I have to stop studying or I'll be blind."

"So, Poet, what are you going to do?" asked the friend.

"Nothing, I guess I'll just go blind, because studying is my life." A gloating—and false—National Guard surveillance report assured Somoza in 1968 that "the communist Fonseca Amador is now almost completely blind."¹⁵

By the late 1940s, Carlos's poverty was relieved by some financial help from his father. Fausto Amador's wife Lolita convinced him to take responsibility for Carlos, who bore a striking physical resemblance to his father and paternal brothers and was acquiring a reputation as a brilliant student.¹⁶ Carlos visited the Amador mansion and got to know his paternal siblings and his father's wife. During this period, Fausto Amador managed the U.S.-owned La Reyna gold mine in the town of San Ramón, about thirty kilometers away (where he had a mistress and another young son), spending only weekends at the family house in Matagalpa. When Carlos began high school in 1950, according to Lolita's sister Nellie Arrieta, Fausto paid for his tuition of about ten córdobas a month, his meals at a food stall near the school, and the clothes he bought from a local shopkeeper. In 1960 Fonseca wrote to Lolita Arrieta expressing gratitude for her affection and assuring her that "the goodness you have shown both to me and to all those who have had the opportunity to be close to you, is being rewarded by the fine children you have been given." He went on to praise Iván's good-heartedness and Fausto Orlando's brilliance and to express con-

cern that Gloria's values would be corrupted by attending school in the United States.¹⁷

Writers associated with the FSLN often deny that Carlos Fonseca had any relationship with his Somocista father.¹⁸ But Fonseca's own letters and other documents reveal a different and more complicated reality. His personal letters indicate that at least until the late 1960s, Fonseca craved his father's understanding and felt intense, if tortured, affection for him. "I want to speak frankly to you," Fonseca said in a 1960 letter, "because I cannot speak to the people I love in any other way." He went on: "This isn't the first time I have told you that it is more important to me that my father understand me spiritually than that he help me financially. . . . I would be extremely happy if you could make a little trip to this country [Costa Rica], even if it were for just one day, so that I could see you and talk to you at length. Or do I have to get shot to see you?"¹⁹

In the same letter, Carlos attempted to find justification for his father's links to the Somoza dictatorship:

It sometimes makes me unhappy to think about the position you have, but I also feel justly proud of the fact that no one has ever proved to me that my father has committed a wrongful act. I say justly proud, because it is rare for anyone to get to my father's position without being buried in horrible misdeeds. And for this reason I believe that if my father had lived in a better time and place he would have put his talent at the service of society, of humanity, of progress. The voice of reason tells me that it wasn't intrigue and ambition that got my father to the high position he has today but rather simply his own abilities.

As late as 1967, by which time he had long since committed himself to revolutionary politics, Fonseca wrote a passionately personal letter to his father. He explained why he had not written for seven long years: "I found out that you had said you expected a letter from me any day because I would surely write as soon as I needed money. And a proof of how I am sometimes too sensitive is the fact that this comment of yours hurt me and prevented me from either writing you or asking for your help, even though I have needed this help more than once." Carlos did in fact ask his father in this letter for a C\$ 10,000 loan, which he promised to repay in six months with interest at the rate of "a million thank-yous percent." Fonseca told his father he appreciated "the respect you have shown for the path I have chosen in life," which appears to be filial wishful thinking, and ended his letter with a hope that the period of estrangement was over:

I want to talk to you about all the things swirling around in my head. I have wanted to see you, to talk to you at length, wanted to hear you and have you hear me. Again I want to tell you that I know you understand me, but if you could hear me talk you would understand me even better. I am not suggesting a face-to-face meeting, which I know is impossible right now for a variety of reasons. . . . For many years you were the person I dreamed about most often when I was sleeping. And these dreams were always unpleasant. But for some time this hasn't been the case. Now the dreams I have about you are pleasant. I have finally managed to understand you and to acknowledge and appreciate your fraternal [*sic*] affection.²⁰

Carlos Fonseca identified with his mother's social class. His feelings for Augustina Fonseca seem to have been a mixture of love, loyalty, and pity—and not a little guilt. He jeopardized his own safety to visit her during his years underground, and he asked his young comrades in the FSLN, at considerable risk, to bring his mother to Costa Rica and Honduras for visits. But he saw his father as a more kindred intellectual spirit. Fonseca's letters to his father are full of historical and literary analysis, as he tried to convey his evolving political ideas and motivations. Educated in the United States, Fausto Amador was bilingual in English and Spanish, and he had a reputation as a brilliant administrator. Augustina Fonseca, on the other hand, was known as much for her silence as for her beauty. Even when she was young, according to her neighbor, "she was known as someone who almost didn't talk." Some of Carlos's contemporaries who had met his mother assumed that she was illiterate, although in fact she could read and write.²¹

Less than a year after Augustina Fonseca's death, in a Mother's Day message dedicated to women whose sons and daughters had been killed by the National Guard, Fonseca claimed that she eventually came to terms with his revolutionary activity: "On this day, allow me to mention the mother of the writer of this message, my proletarian mother, whose days on earth have ended. That humble woman came to understand and say with pride that this son of hers was a true patriot."²² Other Matagalpa residents of the era remember her as pained and confused by Carlos's radicalism, and there is unfortunately no testimony from Augustina herself on the subject.

The personal anguish and social pressure the teenage Carlos suffered because of his family background were exacerbated by the small-town atmosphere of his birthplace. Matagalpa in the 1940s was a ribbon-shaped municipality of some 12,000 to 15,000 people. Almost 2,500 feet above sea level, it