

**TRIUMPH OF THE PEOPLE****George Black**

Zed Press 1981 pbk £5.50

*ISBN 086232 036 4***NICARAGUA: THE SANDINISTA  
REVOLUTION****Henri Weber**

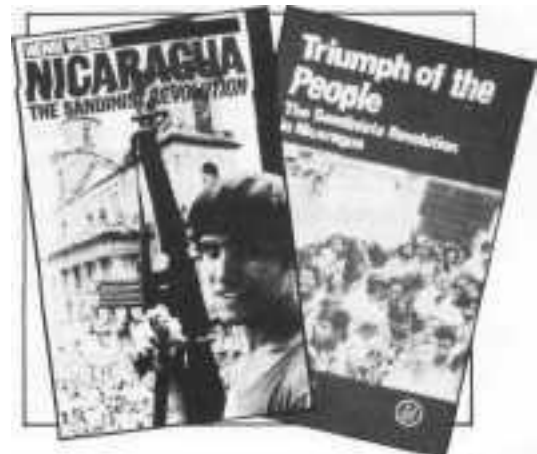
Verso 1981 pbk £2.95

*ISBN 86091 7428*

As the United States administration hots up its campaign to destabilise the two-year old Sandinista revolution, the struggle for power in neighbouring Guatemala and El Salvador, where left-wing guerrilla movements have been inspired by the Sandinistas' example, is soon likely to reach a climax. So it is a particularly opportune time for two books on the Nicaraguan revolution to hit the market.

The North American propaganda insists that since taking power in Nicaragua the Sandinistas have betrayed earlier promises to install democracy and are leading the country into the Soviet camp and towards a 'totalitarian' system. Both George Black and Henri Weber devote a refreshing amount of space to the question of whether Nicaragua is or is not democratic and make us realise just how ignorant and insidious the US campaign is.

On the issue of elections, the Sandinistas argue that the mass of the population voted for the revolution with their blood and that



rather than hold elections the immediate priority is to develop basic education and health infrastructure which will lay the basis for any authentic future democracy.

Henri Weber too is sympathetic to the Nicaraguan government's position. Chapter six of his book is an excellent critical essay on the 'revolutionary democracy' which, Weber claims, exists in the country:

'A revolutionary democracy really exists in Nicaragua whatever its contradictions, excesses and limitations. In a country backward in every respect with no tradition of democracy, bled white for half a century by a ferocious dictatorship, a socialist revolution has brought forth a pluralist and open society in which democracy is more or less respected.'

Weber's discussion of the shortcomings of this revolutionary democracy is honest. The various mass organisations — the Sandinista trade unions, the Sandinista women's organisation, the Sandinista Defence Committees based on local communities, the Sandinista youth organisations — have allowed for increased popular participation. But these organisations are not, Weber argues, genuinely independent from the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Their leaders are more often than not political appointees of the FSLN rather than representatives elected by the members of the

organisations themselves. Weber praises the Sandinistas' tolerance in permitting the continued existence and freedom to operate of oppositional trade unions and political parties and says the FSLN's refusal to hold elections at the moment is totally understandable. But he adds that elections — which allow the population to choose between representatives of different political lines — must be part of any future authentic socialist democracy. Finally he argues that the FSLN must acknowledge much more openly its restrictions on democracy:

'Perhaps a better way is not possible under existing conditions but in that case it would be preferable to say so and get on with the job instead of turning weaknesses into virtues and presenting as a "higher form of democracy" what is manifestly an inferior form imposed by historical circumstances.'

Of course all these points are niceties which will not be grasped by those currently in charge of US foreign policy. The main fear of the Reagan administration is the way in which Nicaragua has become a beacon for socialists elsewhere in Latin America. The Sandinista revolution marked a significant turn-around for the popular movement in Latin America. After a decade of defeats it showed standing armies were not invincible

and that revolutionaries could win state power through armed struggle.

The merit of George Black's well written and closely textured account is that it makes the reader realise what an immense political achievement this was. The author makes extensive use of his own taped interviews with participants in the struggle and of the Sandinista fighters' own accounts, making available to the English reader some of the richness of the political debate which was so central to the FSLN's own development.

The accounts of the FSLN's military masterstrokes — such as their Juan Jose Quezada operation in December 1974, when the FSLN kidnapped a number of foreign diplomats in Managua, a move which effectively announced their re-entrance into Nicaraguan politics after a period of isolation; the seizure of the National Palace in Managua in August 1978 by a Sandinista commando unit, the popularity of which convinced the FSLN to launch their September offensive; and the brilliant and audacious retreat from Managua by an FSLN unit along with 6,000 civilians in the final days of the war — are all excellently described.

In contrast Henri Weber's account of the revolutionary process is very thin indeed. 70% of the source material for Weber's book seems as if it comes from the French Tro-



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tyskist movement and it shows through in the analysis which tends to underestimate the specificity of the Nicaraguan experience. It is almost as if victory was always inevitable and that the Nicaraguan revolution is simply a test case which illustrates a universal truth. Weber's analysis of the FSLN is particularly weak. The insurrectional tendency of the FSLN effectively led moves to unify the organisation — split between prolonged popular war and proletarian tendencies - in 1978 and 1979 — and Weber dispenses with the myth that it was a social democratic tendency. But his own account of the factional struggle and the process of unity is occasionally inaccurate and generally leaves much to be desired.

It must be said too that the style of Weber's book is occasionally off-putting. Rebellions are always 'drowned in blood' never suppressed, workers always 'toil' never work. Finally although Weber has visited Nicaragua this is not immediately apparent from reading the book which is littered with geographical inaccuracies.

**John Fantham**