

## Cultural geographies of grievance and war: Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast region in the first Sandinista revolution, 1926–1934

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**Abstract** From late 1926 to early 1934, the Nicaraguan nationalist leader General Augusto C. Sandino (1895–1934) sought to bridge a historical cultural boundary by bringing his social revolutionary project from the region of Las Segovias in Western Nicaragua to the country's Atlantic Coast region. This article examines these efforts and the reception of the peoples of the Atlantic Coast (*Costeños*) to Sandino's rebellion against US intervention in Nicaragua and Latin America. Intervening in a series of debates stretching back to the 1980s and before, the author consults a wide range of primary sources to argue that a critical mass of *Costeños* rejected Sandino's brand of Nicaraguan nationalism in favor of their own forms of historically rooted struggle meant to enhance their communities' autonomy, independence, power, and dignity in the face of multiple internal and external threats and opportunities. The responses of Miskitu Indians and Spanish-speaking wage laborers receive special attention, as do regional variations in political economies and sociocultural geographies. The essay builds on recent scholarship emphasizing the cultural and historical agency of *Costeños* in shaping their own history and is published in tandem with an online documentary and interpretive annex offering open access to over 2,000 digital images of nearly 1,000 primary documents from archives and repositories in the United States, Nicaragua, and Great Britain, at [www.SandinistaRebellion.com](http://www.SandinistaRebellion.com).

**Keywords** Augusto C. Sandino · Nicaragua · Atlantic Coast · *Costeño* · Anti-imperialism · Miskitu

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## Introduction

At midday on February 2, 1932, at the mouth of the Biltigni River, a tributary of the Río Waspuk just north of the Pis Pis mining district in northeastern Nicaragua, a heavily armed combat patrol of 11 Nicaraguan *Guardias Nacionales* and two civilian guides commanded by US Marine Lieutenant E. T. Gray surprised a Sandinista rebel column of some 75 men in their camp. After a brief firefight, six rebels lay dead; survivors scattered into the bush. The patrol recovered some 100 sacks of clothing, foodstuffs, and other goods plundered by the rebels from the US-owned Neptune Mine only days before, considered at the time, “the largest recovery of stolen loot in the history of the Guardia.” Among the captured plunder was found, “a mass of papers,” including at least four copies of a proclamation signed by A. C. Sandino, dated June 20, 1931, titled, “Manifiesto a los Hombres Oprimidos en Nuestro Litoral Atlántico.”<sup>1</sup>

Curiously, this major proclamation—unique among the dozens of manifestos, comunicués, and open letters issued by Sandino from 1927 to 1933 for being addressed specifically to the peoples of the Atlantic Coast (Costeños)—has never before been published and was effectively lost to history.<sup>2</sup> If the Sandinistas distributed this manifesto among the peoples of the Atlantic Coast region or elsewhere, none have surfaced. Stamped “Bandit Correspondence” by Guardia intelligence officers and tucked away for decades in the US National Archives, these four documents—typewritten carbon-copies, each hand-corrected by Sandino and bearing his original signature and official seal—are the only known surviving reproductions. Ironically and tellingly, what are probably the sole extant copies of Sandino’s only manifesto addressed specifically to the peoples of the Atlantic Coast were not found among Costeños but seized from a rebel column of Spanish-speaking Western Nicaraguans with imprints to spare (Figs. 1, 2).

More deeply ironic were the origins of Sandino’s movement in the waning years of the golden age of US imperialism in the circum-Caribbean (1898–1934). In true dialectical fashion, the exercise of US imperial power across the region spawned myriad antithetical struggles across the Atlantic world—from anti-imperialist intellectuals, student movements, labor unions, and political parties to the occasional armed rebellion.<sup>3</sup> By the mid-1920s, the contradictions of US imperial

<sup>1</sup> Second Lt. E. T. Gray, Contact Report, District of Neptune Mine, 4 Feb. 1932, and endorsements by R. D. McAfee and L. L. Leech, Record Group 127, Entry 202, box 12, United States National Archives, Washington D.C. (hereafter NA/[Record Group]/[Entry no.]/[box]). Available online at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1932A-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1932A-p1.html). The manifesto (trans. “Manifiesto to the Oppressed Men of Our Atlantic Littoral”) is housed in NA127/38/30 and reproduced online in high-resolution, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p8.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p8.html) (hereafter cited documents are hyperlinked to the web page on which they are housed).

<sup>2</sup> None of the published collections of Sandino’s writings include this document; for the most comprehensive of these, see Sandino (1984). For a high-resolution image of the manifesto, whose manual corrections bear the distinctive features of Sandino’s handwriting, and comprehensive list of all known extant Sandinista-produced texts, see [www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/edsn-docs.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/edsn-docs.html).

<sup>3</sup> See Salisbury (1989). The records of the United States Department of State, many in microfilm, offer a rich store of documentation on these myriad struggles, a key focus of concern for US policymakers; for a listing and inter-library loan ordering information, see [www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/USDS-Docs.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/USDS-Docs.html).

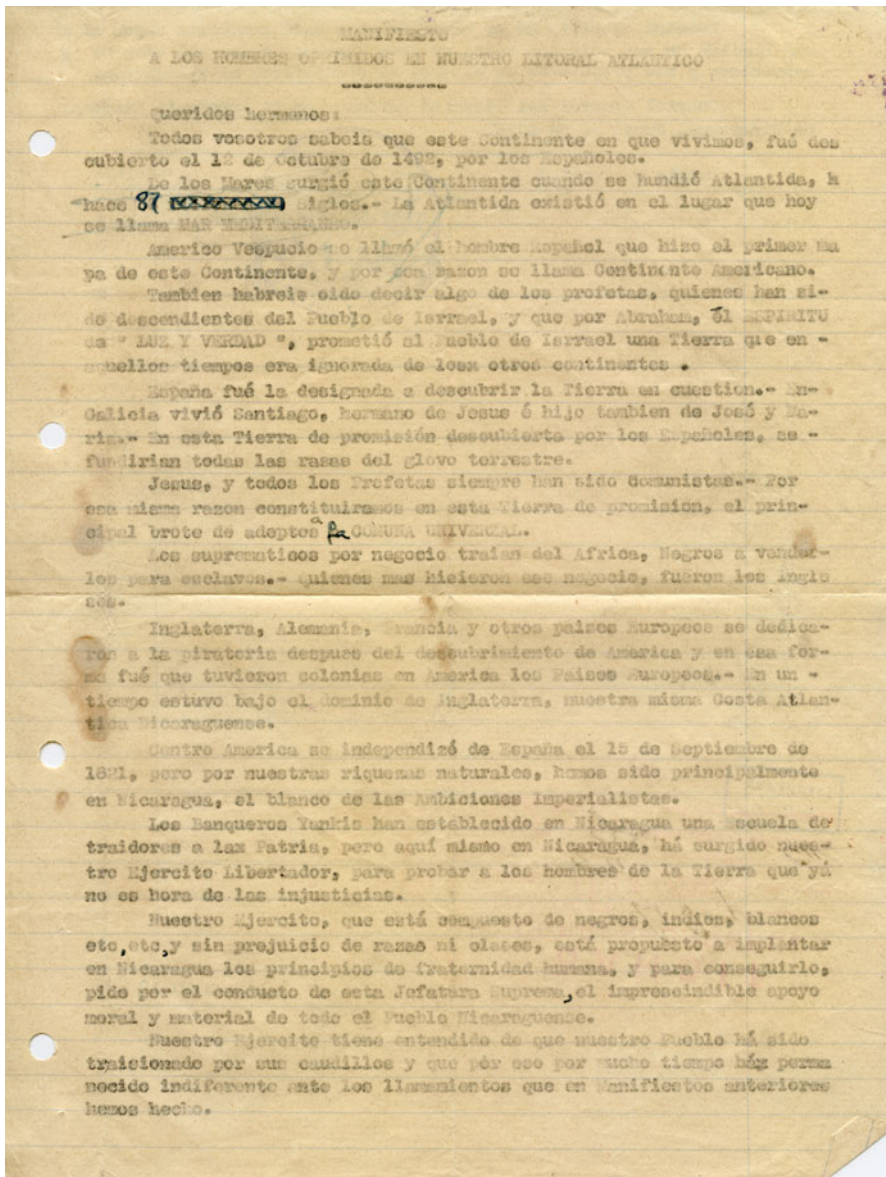
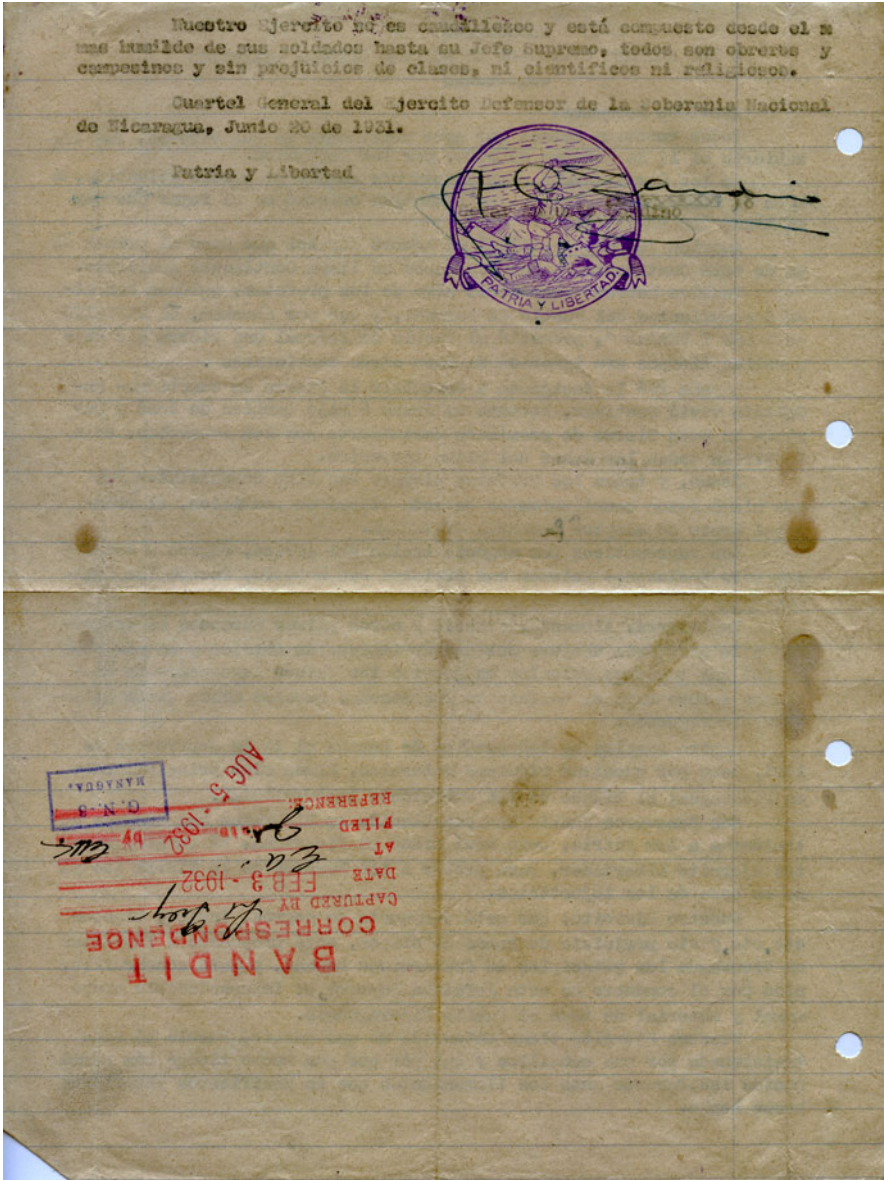


Fig. 1 General Augusto C. Sandino's forgotten Atlantic Coast Manifesto of June 20, 1931

practices had become apparent even to its architects; FDR's "Good Neighbor Policy" from 1934 was the culmination of a process of imperial drawdown begun in the mid-to-late 1920s in response to mounting contradictions at home and abroad.



**Fig. 2** Rear of General Sandino's forgotten Atlantic Coast Manifesto of June 20, 1931

At core Sandino's protest was nationalist and anti-imperialist, its epic foe conceived as US imperial power "trampling Nicaraguan sovereignty underfoot."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Quote from Augusto C. Sandino, "A Statement by Sandino to His Racial Brothers, circa July 15, 1927," in Conrad (1990: 83). On the emergence of the antecedents of the Good Neighbor Policy in the late 1920s, see Smith (1996: 60–73).

Sandino's rise from obscurity was also thick with irony. Following a broader pattern evident in many other times and places—including the Mexican Revolution, still simmering in the mid-1920s and from which Sandino derived much of his intellectual inspiration—elite faction fighting created political opportunities for subaltern leaders and groups to press their own claims and agendas. The 1926–1927 Nicaraguan Civil War pit a corrupt US-backed Conservative regime against Liberal “revolutionists.” Seizing the moment, Sandino first became a Liberal general and then, refusing to abide by the US-brokered peace (the Espino Negro Accord of May 4, 1927), became the outlaw rebel General Sandino. The USA with its treaty and military power sought to engineer national elections and create a “non-partisan constabulary” (the Guardia Nacional), following precedents in Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic—much as it has done more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan—while Sandino with his Defending Army of Nicaraguan National Sovereignty (EDSN) sought to create an alternative moral and political universe of Indo-Hispanic brotherhood free of US imperial domination and oppression.<sup>5</sup>

Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast region, on the other hand, had followed a very different historical path. For a complex of reasons explored more fully below, anti-Yankee discourse found little resonance among its diverse peoples. The contents of Sandino's forgotten Atlantic Coast manifesto thus might help to explain its relegation to textual oblivion. If many observers rightly regard Sandino as an expert propagandist, in this case, he showed a remarkably tin ear for Costeño cultural sensibilities.<sup>6</sup> Spinning out a fantastical epic narrative infused with a kind of magical-realist conception of history marked by a slew of Hispano-centric and Anglophobic images and tropes, the manifesto would likely strike most coastal folk as bizarre and semi-coherent even in its most lucid moments. In his most promising rhetorical gesture, Sandino reached out to the working people of the Atlantic Coast by emphasizing the universal and multi-ethnic nature of his army. But the manifesto's style and substance seem almost designed to alienate those whose sympathies it was intended to court. It was written in Spanish, a second or third language for many Costeños. Deeply influenced by the mystical teachings of Argentine philosopher Joaquín Trincado, it opens with Spain's discovery of the Americas before moving to obscure cultural referents like the sinking of Atlantis 87 centuries ago, the biblical prophets' embrace of the Universal Commune, and Jesus Christ's brother, St. James of Galicia.<sup>7</sup> It condemns the imperialist domination of Nicaragua by England and

<sup>5</sup> Smith (1996: 40–87).

<sup>6</sup> On Sandino's propagandizing skills, see Selser (1958), Hodges (1986). Marine–Guardia intelligence analysts grudgingly concurred with this assessment; as Marine Corps Major Hans Schmidt opined in June 1929, “Sandino is an organizer and propagandist of no mean attainments. He has exhibited a brand of Latin pose and theatrical make-believe that caught the imagination of many people.” R-2 Report, Ocotol, 30 June 1929, NA127/197.

<sup>7</sup> On June 22, 1931, 2 days after issuing this manifesto, Sandino wrote to Joaquín Trincado, saying he had just re-read Trincado's book *Los cinco amores* and thanking him for sending another of his books, *Los extremos se tocan*; see Somoza García (1936: 239–240). Significantly, Ramírez excluded this letter from his edited collection (Sandino 1984). In other words, Sandino was immersed in Trincado's books when he wrote this manifesto. Trincado, founder of the Magnetic-Spiritual School of the Universal Commune (EMECU) in Buenos Aires, exercised a profound effect on Sandino's thinking, and the Atlantic Coast manifesto includes many specific elements of Trincado's bizarre philosophy; see Hodges (1992: 88–95).

*los banqueros yankis*, offering up a narrative running directly against the grain of the Coast's long history of what anthropologist Charles Hale has aptly termed, "Anglo affinity."<sup>8</sup> For these and other reasons, the manifesto likely sounded like Greek to Miskitu Indians, Creoles, and other Costeños and was thence ignored and forgotten.

How to explain an appeal from a reputedly master propagandist that evinced such profound cultural disconnection from its intended audience? The case of Augusto C. Sandino's forgotten Atlantic Coast manifesto opens up a host of questions about his nationalist anti-imperialist rebellion and project, the reception of that rebellion by Costeños, and about the historical relationship between Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast and its western, Hispanic side. It also raises broader questions about ethnic and community identity formation, social memory, popular nationalism and mobilization, imperialism and capitalist transformation, cultural geographies of revolution and war, and divergent paths to modernity that are the subject of much recent research and debate.

This article offers a revisionist interpretation of the Sandino rebellion in Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast region. Intervening in a series of unresolved scholarly debates that stretch back to the 1980s and before, it consults an expansive corpus of mostly untapped evidence to make a series of arguments about Costeños' reception of Sandino's Sandinismo.<sup>9</sup> It begins by examining relations between Costeños and foreign capital and Moravian missionaries from the mid-nineteenth century, paying special attention to the partial and uneven nature of those relations and the Anglo affinity that by the early twentieth century had become integral to Costeño culture, and Costeños' struggles for their rights of citizenship before the state and foreign capital.

This essay's body and main focus examine relations between the peoples of the Atlantic Coast region and Sandino's Defending Army during a tumultuous and confusing eight-year period of civil war, foreign military intervention, economic dislocation, and state remaking. Probing the question from multiple angles using diverse bodies of evidence, this essay shows that, despite their best efforts and the strategic importance of the Coast to Sandino's movement, the EDSN failed to cultivate a substantial degree of sustained social support among any community of coast folk—with the partial exceptions of Western Nicaraguan wage laborers in the banana plantations around Puerto Cabezas, and to a lesser extent, Miskitu Indians in the first half of 1931 along parts of the Lower Río Coco. Even in that potentially explosive year—despite mass unemployment, a catastrophic earthquake in Managua, the drawdown of the US Marines, a concerted EDSN organizing drive on the Lower Coco, and a string of Sandinista offensives—the Atlantic Coast remained relatively quiescent. For the great majority of Costeños, Sandino's revolutionary message simply did not resonate with the social grievances they harbored, the social values they embraced, or the future they hoped to build.

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<sup>8</sup> Hale (1994: 11) and *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> The principal exception is the work of David C. Brooks, the first to make extensive use of Marine-Guardia records to illuminate the history of the Atlantic Coast during this period; see Brooks (1989, 1997).

Indeed, a thicker description of the episode at the mouth of the Biltigni River in January 1932 prefigures many of the conclusions advanced here.<sup>10</sup> The 100 sacks of plunder seized by the Guardia, for example, can be read as emblematic of the principal role of the Atlantic Coast region in Sandino's rebellion: not as a recruiting ground or locus of popular support, but as a source of capital needed for waging war, with foreign-owned export firms serving as repositories of material resources and as military and symbolic targets for Sandino's anti-imperialist crusade. As discussed below, from 1928 to 1932, the EDSN launched seven major offensives into the Guardia Nacional's Eastern Area (which extended further west than the Atlantic Coast region as defined here), all intended mainly as plundering expeditions and as military and symbolic assaults on US imperial power. That the Guardia patrol completely surprised the Sandinista column encamped on the banks of the Río Biltigni speaks to a related dynamic. Historically, guerrilla warfare is a weapon of the weak and the local populace the sea in which the guerrilla warrior swims.<sup>11</sup> This was certainly the case in Las Segovias, heartland of the rebel movement, where the EDSN enjoyed broad popular support and was "reliably informed of [the Guardia's] every movement."<sup>12</sup> The success of the surprise Guardia attack on the banks of the Río Biltigni can thus be read as symptomatic of the EDSN's failure to forge sustained organic connections with the peoples and cultures of the Atlantic Coast.

The empirical evidence that permits a detailed narrative of this particular episode speaks to a broader issue—and that is the paucity of such evidence informing most scholarship on this subject. Scholarly literature on Sandino in the Atlantic Coast tends to bifurcate into two main camps offering divergent interpretations of the degree of Costeño popular support for his revolutionary project. The "Sandino antipathy" school, represented by the works of anthropologists Mary W. Helms, Philip Dennis, and Baron Pineda, and historian David C. Brooks, holds that Costeños, particularly Miskitu Indians, tended to view Sandino's Sandinistas as bandits and outlaws and to neither support nor ally with them.<sup>13</sup> The "Sandino affinity" school, represented by historians Neill Macaulay, Volker Wunderich, and Oscar René-Vargas, and anthropologists Jorge Jenkins Molieri and Charles Hale, holds that Miskitu Indians, especially those unconverted by the Moravian Church, tended strongly to support Sandino.<sup>14</sup> The debate, which since the 1980s has carried

<sup>10</sup> See Geertz (1973: 3–30).

<sup>11</sup> See Zedong (2000).

<sup>12</sup> The Marines and Guardia repeatedly expressed grudging admiration for the rebels' intelligence apparatus, which I argue comprised their single most important strategic and tactical advantage in Las Segovias throughout the war; quote from Smith et al. (1933: 24).

<sup>13</sup> Helms (1971), Dennis (2004), Pineda (2006, 2011), Brooks (1989, 1997), Brooks and Schroeder (2011). For an astute analysis of Sandino's misrepresentation of Miskitu and Sumo Indians as Segovianos and of his hispanocentric Indo-hispanicism, see Gould (1998: 155–161). For an interpretation by a Sandinista that accords with this school, see Gordon (1985: 117–138).

<sup>14</sup> Macaulay (1985: 186–212), Jenkins Molieri (1986), Wunderich (1989, 1995): chap. 9, which reiterates much of his 1989 book; Hale (1994), Vargas (1995: 295–330), and Dunbar Ortiz (1986). For a recent reiteration of this thesis, see Arellano (2008: 74). See also Gabbert (1992: 233–250) and Vilas (1989: 50), whose brief arguments on Miskitus' reception of Sandino largely accord with this article's; for further discussion, see the critical introductions to the collection of documents housed online, organized chronologically in 53 web pages, beginning at [www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/eastcoast.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/eastcoast.html).

important political implications for ongoing struggles for Costeño cultural and political autonomy, remains unresolved.

Most substantive and judicious in the Sandino affinity school are the works of Wunderlich and Hale. Framing his conclusions as “very preliminary,” Wunderlich argues that “in general one can observe that in all the places where the indigenous were not under the direct influence of the missionaries [Moravians]... emerged the spontaneous cooperation of Miskitus and Sumus with Sandino’s EDSN”—though he also acknowledges that “the possibilities for cooperation depended on many other factors. We are not able to construct a general position of indigenous peoples.”<sup>15</sup> I would submit that the inability “to construct a general position” mainly bespeaks a need to reformulate the question. Instead of asking about degrees of support for Sandino, it would seem more fruitful to ask about how Sandino fit—or did not fit—into the historical trajectory of Miskitu and Sumu struggles to maintain their communities’ independence, autonomy, and power. Historically, indigenous peoples the world over have struggled to carve out “middle grounds” in the face of threats from more powerful outsiders—by migrating, evading, playing one group off another, forming provisional alliances when necessary, offering armed resistance when other options are exhausted—tactics deployed to maximize their communities’ autonomy, independence, and power. Framed this way, questions about the “general position” of indigenous peoples in the Sandino rebellion become more salient to indigenous lives and culture and more answerable.

Charles Hale takes a different tack, arguing that the Miskitu on the whole sympathized and cooperated with the EDSN, but over time their “Anglo affinity” and “contradictory consciousness” transformed and distorted individual and collective memories, such that by the 1970s and 1980s, most Miskitus remembered not cooperation but conflict with the EDSN.<sup>16</sup> It is a bold, creative, and ultimately unconvincing argument. Thinkers since Lao Tzu have explored the fundamentally contradictory nature of human consciousness, while the concept applied echoes discredited notions of “false consciousness” dating from at least the times of Engels. The argument that the Miskitu would so completely distort and misremember a crucial episode in their own recent past requires intricate theoretical gymnastics and expresses a marked deviation from patterns of social remembering in other times and places; it is also not supported by the preponderance of evidence in this case. Social memories are indeed malleable and social consciousness dauntingly complex, but there is no need to posit the inversion of Miskitu memories when a simpler explanation accords more with both broader patterns of social remembering and the documentary record.<sup>17</sup>

The interpretation advanced here, which largely corresponds with the Sandino antipathy school but might more aptly be called “Sandino indifference,” is simple in outline: Sandino and his rebellion were products of the history of Western Nicaragua, more specifically of the regional culture of Las Segovias; Sandino tried

<sup>15</sup> Wunderlich (1989: 15, 78–79).

<sup>16</sup> Hale (1994: 15, 36).

<sup>17</sup> The scholarly literature on the dynamics of social remembering is immense; for an especially useful treatment emphasizing the importance of attention to empirical detail, see Irwin-Zarecka (1994).



to bring his revolution to the Atlantic Coast, a vastly different region demographically, linguistically, culturally, and in every other way; his message did not resonate among the great majority of coastal folk, who remained mostly indifferent; and for that principal, reason the effort floundered. The argument is based on a synthetic reading of expansive bodies of primary sources from repositories in the United States, Great Britain, and Nicaragua. The bulk consists of the voluminous records of the US Marine Corps and Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua, housed in the US National Archives. These thousands of documents produced under the US imperial gaze offer an exceptionally fine-grained view of the period and include military and intelligence reports, letters and petitions from citizens, captured EDSN documents, propaganda sheets, newspaper articles, court transcripts, and other materials—an exceptionally rich array of evidence.<sup>18</sup> Accompanying this article is an online documentary and interpretive annex that permits readers to consult these sources and to critically evaluate the interpretations derived from them here.<sup>19</sup> This article is thus something of an experiment, a hybrid whose online component is integral to this printed text. It is hoped that this article and the accompanying online annex contribute to a resolution of this debate.

This essay is part of a larger research project on the Sandino rebellion in its heartland of Las Segovias. For some time, I purposely excluded the Atlantic Coast from detailed study. The region was clearly on the periphery of the rebellion—much like the urban centers of the Pacific Coast region—and the bewildering complexity of Las Segovias seemed enough. But over time, it became clear that understanding the rebellion's heartland meant understanding its frontiers and boundaries.<sup>20</sup> In the larger project, the main question on the Atlantic Coast concerns its role in the rebellion. The central question animating this essay is both narrower and broader: What was the *reception* of the EDSN among Costeños, especially Miskitu Indians but also among Creoles and other groups? This shifts the focus from the center to the frontier and means adopting a Costeño-centric conceptual lens. But, we also need to understand what Costeños were receiving to understand how and why they received it as they did. Hence, this essay's dual focus, from the EDSN's perspective as outsiders seeking to bring their rebellion in, and from Costeños' perspective as insiders responding to that rebellion from without.

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<sup>18</sup> Other important collections consulted here are housed in the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., the Marine Corps Historical Center in Quantico, VA, US National Archives II in College Park, MD, the Moravian Church Archives in Bethlehem, PA, the Public Record Office in London, UK, the Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica of the Universidad Centroamericana (IHCA-UCA) in Managua, Nicaragua, and the Archivo Histórico Militar, also in Managua.

<sup>19</sup> See [www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/eastcoast.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/eastcoast.html).

<sup>20</sup> For a pioneering study of the importance of regional histories in understanding broader social movements and revolutions, see Joseph (1988); on the role of borders and frontiers in social movements, see Baud and Van Schendel (1997); for a classic integration of feminist theory into borderlands studies, see Anzaldúa (1987); for a stimulating review of the literature on borderlands and frontiers in the North American context, see Adelman and Aron (1999: 814–841). On borders and frontiers in the context of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast region, see Helms (1977).

## Costeños, missionaries, foreign capital, and the Nicaraguan State to the mid-1920s

As the published literature amply demonstrates, by the early twentieth century, a generalized antipathy toward the “Spaniards” of Western Nicaragua and affinity toward the “Anglo” world of Britain and North America had become enduring features of Atlantic Coast culture.<sup>21</sup> Never conquered by the Spanish due to the semi-sedentary lifestyle and fierce military resistance of its indigenous societies, its geographical remoteness and apparent absence of exploitable mineral wealth, and the limitations of Spanish power, Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast came under the British sphere of commercial and political influence from the late 1600s. A succession of “Miskitu kings,” allied with Great Britain and nominally under British suzerainty, ostensibly governed the region for the next two centuries, though in fact effective political authority was decentralized and exercised by locally prominent “big men” and their kin and allies.<sup>22</sup> From their initial contacts with non-Iberian Europeans, first buccaneers and smugglers and then Dutch, English, and North American merchants and traders, the Miskitu actively nurtured sustained commercial relations with outsiders to enhance their material culture and bolster their political and military power vis-à-vis the “Spaniards” of Western Nicaragua and competing indigenous groups. By the mid-nineteenth century, a strong and multilayered cultural sensibility of “Anglo affinity” had emerged among the Coast’s two major social groups: Miskitu Indians and the Africa-descended Creole population centered in Bluefields.<sup>23</sup> It bears emphasizing that both of these ethnic categories—Miskitu and Creole—represent self-identifying labels for internally diverse “mixed races” that formed in specific historical moments from sustained interactions between Europeans, Africans, and indigenous peoples.<sup>24</sup>

Moravian missionaries first ventured into the region in the late 1840s, finding a fertile field for proselytizing among the Roman Catholic-resistant indigenes and Creoles. The growing Moravian presence was soon accompanied by a series of commercial booms centered on extractive export industries: the rubber boom from the 1860s and 1870s; mahogany lumbering and banana production from the 1880s; and gold and silver mining from the 1890s.<sup>25</sup> In 1894, the region was “reincorporated” into the emergent Nicaraguan nation-state based in Managua, despite fierce opposition among Creoles and the Miskitu.<sup>26</sup> By the first decades of the twentieth century, these and related export industries, dominated by US capital,

<sup>21</sup> See for example Castile (1988: 131–146), Dennis (1981: 271–296), Von Oertzen (1985: 5–28), Bourgois (1986); for a helpful annotated bibliography, see Bourgois and Hale (1989–1990).

<sup>22</sup> See Olien (1983, 1987, 1988), Dennis and Olien (1984), Helms (1983, 1986), Gabbert (1992), Holm (1978), Wunderlich et al. (1990).

<sup>23</sup> In addition to the foregoing see CIDCA (1982).

<sup>24</sup> Gabbert (1992) aptly emphasizes the specific historical contexts out of which Miskito and Creole ethnic identities formed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

<sup>25</sup> Helms (1971: 27–30), Hale (1994: 39–40), Dozier (1985: chap. 9), Naylor (1989: chap. 17), Holm (1978: chap. 1).

<sup>26</sup> See Hale (1994: chap. 2); the term “reincorporation” is José Santos Zelaya’s, president of Nicaragua from 1893 to 1909, though the term has gained general currency since Zelaya’s time.

had melded with more traditional ways of making a living to produce a highly variegated regional political economy and an exceptionally complex sociocultural and political economic mosaic. Despite this growing complexity and diversity, all major social groups came to rely on these foreign companies and the region's increasingly dense local circuits of transnational capital.

The process of capital accumulation has many faces. On the one hand, the largest foreign-owned firms—Bragmans Bluff Lumber Company (a division of Standard Fruit Company), Cuyamel Fruit Company, American Fruit Company, Bonanza Mines Company—actively segregated labor markets by race and ethnicity; evinced aggressive hostility toward labor organizing; paid piece-rates and wages as low as possible; charged company-store prices as high as possible; racked up workers' debts as much as possible; avoided paying taxes whenever possible; and in general engaged in a range of practices that together constituted the oppressive and exploitative dimension of capital accumulation on the Atlantic Coast from the 1880s to the 1930s.<sup>27</sup> But just as it would be foolish to deny these realities, it would be myopic to privilege them over the agency exercised by Costeños in pursuit of opportunities created by the expanding circulation of mostly foreign capital. The process of religious conversion is arguably altogether different, lacking a clear economic advantage for the converted, though over time the material benefits accruing through membership in the Moravian Church were likely substantial, and the Moravians made no secret of their favorable view of the companies' role in facilitating their missionary work.<sup>28</sup> In either case, to frame these processes as foreign interlopers, imposing their exploitive economic relations and religious views on Costeños is to tell but one side of a many-sided capitalist-transformation story and a misleading story about religious change.<sup>29</sup> In fact, many thousands of Costeños partially and selectively embraced the teachings of the Moravians, and the vast majority welcomed the opportunities to earn cash through wage labor.

From her fieldwork among the Miskitu in the early 1960s, the anthropologist Mary Helms formulated the helpful notion of a “purchase society”—sociologically equivalent to a “peasant society”—in which Miskitu men (in this matrilineal culture) worked sporadically in export production to earn sufficient cash to purchase guns, knives, machetes, and other goods, thus supplementing and buttressing more traditional ways of making a living through fishing, hunting, and horticulture.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> On labor conditions in the Neptune Mine, see the letter from construction engineer S. Graae, Puerto Cabezas, to the US Consulate, May 14, 1928, United States Department of State, 817.00/5739, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1928A-p6.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1928A-p6.html) (housed under 17 May 1928, S. J. Fletcher, pp. 9–10); see also Karnes (1978), Colby (2011).

<sup>28</sup> On Moravians' views of the companies, see Mueller (1931: 38–45, 148–149), and Borhek (1949: 14–17) and *passim*; on Moravians' perceptions of the relationship between Indian economic advancement and missionary success, see Circular No. 138, Guido Grossman to his “Co-workers,” 31 July 1933, p. 3, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1933+p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1933+p1.html) (“the poverty of our people... tends to keep some away from God's house”); and the letter from A. O. Dannenberger to Miss Kreitlow, 9 June 1932, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1932A-p5.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1932A-p5.html) (“The economical condition along the coast is very bad. Everywhere the church attendance goes back because the people, and especially the children, have no clothes.”). Nicaragua materials, 1931–1932, Moravian Church Archives.

<sup>29</sup> Jenkins Molieri (1986: 122–123) and *passim*; Vargas (1995: 295–330).

<sup>30</sup> Helms (1969: 325–342, 1971).

Such eclectic and partial adoption of wage labor and foreign goods—made possible by maintaining a predominantly subsistence-based economy—closely paralleled Miskitus’ reception of the teachings of the Moravian Church. Despite mass conversions in the so-called Great Awakening of the 1880s, Moravian missionaries persistently lamented moral backsliding among the faithful, from continued reliance on traditional shamans (*sukias*) and beliefs in spirits and magic to fornication, drunkenness, polygamy, female infanticide, and other “sins.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, owners and managers of export enterprises persistently complained of the inconstancy of Miskitu workers, who would work long enough to buy a desired tool or article and then vanish from the payroll.<sup>32</sup> In short, in both the religious and economic spheres, Miskitu Indians developed a selective embrace of foreign influences that help to illuminate their core social and cultural values: maintaining their communities’ independence, autonomy, integrity, and dignity in the face of multiple internal and external threats and opportunities.

For Creoles, dependence on local circuits of transnational capital was on the whole far more pronounced. A small but culturally influential social class became city-based business owners wholly reliant on the market economy, especially in Bluefields but in trading centers along the coast from San Juan del Norte to Cabo Gracias a Dios. Most Creoles worked in the mostly US-owned fruit, lumber, and mining enclaves and were wholly reliant on wage labor.<sup>33</sup> From the 1880s and 1890s, the region saw growing seasonal migration of Anglophone West Indians (“Jamaicans”) and a flood of Spanish-speaking Western Nicaraguans into the burgeoning export sector—and among Creoles, the growing influence of Afro-Caribbean cultural nationalism from the late 1910s, particularly Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association.<sup>34</sup> By the early 1920s, Spanish-speaking Western Nicaraguans, mostly recent migrants drawn to the region’s export enclaves, represented around one-half of the Atlantic Coast’s population and the only other large social class of *Costeños*. In the 1920 census, the Atlantic Coast’s 43,698 people comprised 6.8 % of Nicaragua’s 638,119 inhabitants, with 20,214 Protestants and 16,710 Miskitu-speakers, 17,418 *trigueños* (mestizos), 16,316 *cobrizos* (Indians), 5,075 *negros* (blacks), and 4,598 *blancos* (whites).<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Mueller (1931: 47–55) and *passim*; see also the yearly reports from the Nicaraguan missions, Moravian Church Archives.

<sup>32</sup> “The Indians will not stay. He is a nomadic worker... The reason the Indians get the poorer houses is because he does not stay on the job long.” Mr. McKay, Bragmans Bluff Lumber Company, interview with Major Metcalf, 26 July 1929, NA127/43A/25, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1929B-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1929B-p1.html). See also Mueller 1931: 121: “The Indian population is more or less a floating population, coming and going in search of work and money, which they need to provide the amenities of life...”.

<sup>33</sup> Pineda (2006: 21–66).

<sup>34</sup> On the influence of Garveyism among Atlantic Coast Creoles, see Gabbert (1992: 242–248).

<sup>35</sup> Figures for the Department of Bluefields (pop. 31,078) and *comarcas* of Cabo Gracias a Dios (11,728) and San Juan del Norte (892); with 9,869 Miskito-speakers in Cabo Gracias and 6,841 in Bluefields. Nicaragua 1920. In 1931, the Moravian Church enumerated 13,243 members in 14 stations, only two-thirds of the 20,214 Protestants listed in the 1920 census; Mueller (1931: 155). On January 12, 1929, the *Bluefields Weekly* (at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1929A-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1929A-p1.html)) reported a *Costeño* population of 30,000 and Nicaraguan of 600,000. The 1920 census, the first official government census in Nicaraguan history, might well have overstated the number of Spanish-speakers and mestizos, in keeping with the state’s commitment to the ideology of “Nicaragua mestiza,” see Gould (1998).

From the Reincorporation of 1894 through the first decades of the twentieth century, two related factors generated growing Costeño resentment against the central state and the “Spaniards” of the West: disproportionately high taxes, and Managua’s penchant for filling political posts with Western Nicaraguan clients and allies. A series of secessionist revolts and movements, a flurry of Creole and Miskitu petitions to the British protesting the “tyranny” of the central government, newspaper editorials, and other sources testify to this mounting animosity, which would have important implications for Costeños’ reception of the Sandinistas.<sup>36</sup>

### **Costeño collective action, ca. 1927–1933**

Read against the grain and with sufficient historical imagination, the records of the US Marines and Guardia Nacional offer an exceptionally rich and textured portrayal of the region’s social landscape in the late 1920s and early 1930s, especially when combined with records of the State Department, the Moravian Church, and other sources.<sup>37</sup> A synthetic reading of this corpus of texts reveals a patchwork quilt of ethnicities, export enclaves, religions, and indigenous, Creole, Western Nicaraguan, West Indian, and other communities that defy simple characterization and compel a more nuanced understanding of the category “Costeño,” and more broadly of the region’s economic, cultural, and ethnic geography. Because the Guardia’s prose of counterinsurgency valorized most of all its conception of “order and stability,” it zeroed in laser-like on anything that might threaten that “order.” Guardia reports convey an abundance of information on diverse topics, but focus especially on “trouble,” “disturbances,” and “discontent” regarding economic and political conditions as manifested in various forms of collective action undertaken by “agitators,” “troublemakers,” “malcontents,” and “lawless elements,” as well as, of course, anything of a military nature or having to do with Sandino.

Critically engaging with a Costeño-centric lens, the more than 1,000 documents archived online on this topic, the overarching theme that links them together, it seems to me, are the struggles of Costeños for their inalienable rights as citizens before the state and as workers before foreign capital. The Atlantic Coast depicted in these documents is a place where ordinary people take their rights very seriously. A second and countervailing theme consists of the efforts of foreign capital to exercise influence over the US and Nicaraguan governments. The dynamic tension between these contradictory pressures most arguably shaped the contours and content of US policies and Marine–Guardia actions in the region.

One sees in these reports Costeños’ struggles for rights unfolding in myriad ways on many fronts. Overwhelmingly peaceful, generally legal, and invariably intended to expand the sphere of citizens’ rights before the state and foreign capital, such collective actions ran the gamut from community organizing and forming associations and mutual-aid societies to petition-writing, boycotts, informal labor withholding, refusal to obey what were considered unjust laws and decrees and

<sup>36</sup> See Brooks (1997: 125–135), Dozier (1985: chap. 9), Hale (1994): chap. 2.

<sup>37</sup> On reading colonial and imperial documents “against the grain,” see Guha (1988: 45–86).

other forms of more passive resistance, to more confrontational tactics including strikes, protest marches, arson and incendiarism, and more rarely violent direct action.

Of the many examples, let us consider a series of reports in the months after the Espino Negro Accord of May 1927 when the Marines were just becoming acquainted with the region's social and political landscape. In late August, the manager of the Standard Fruit & Steamship Company in Puerto Cabezas noted "some small strikes and passive resistance from our fruit cutters on Vava Farm, Aubreyerri Farm and Yulu Farm... we had a strike and passive resistance on Tungla, Limos and Vakiwas" along the Río Prinzapolka, attributed to "the reduction we had made in the price of cutting."<sup>38</sup> A week later Lt. Green in Puerto Cabezas reported "serious labor agitation in this town, ... Two fires of incendiary origin occurred on property of Bragmans Bluff Lumber Company."<sup>39</sup> A company investigation revealed clear evidence of arson, "as the end of the lumber pile was saturated with kerosene [and] a one gallon can containing... kerosene, was found [nearby]."<sup>40</sup> Two weeks later, Marine Captain D. J. Kendall reported:

"Along the Rio Grande River, particularly at La Cruz and Rio Grande Bar, there is considerable labor unrest caused by idleness and lack of work as a result of the return from Puerto Cabezas of many men who went there to work for [Bragmans Bluff] but have been discharged and returned to their homes... those actually employed by the Fruit Company in banana hauling on the Company's boats have threatened to strike if their wages were not doubled and extra men were not put on to work in the crews of the boats... In the Puerto Cabezas district there is some unrest due to the discharging of superfluous labor."

He continued: "the situation there is complicated further by the efforts of the Bragmans Bluff Lumber Company to have removed from the grounds of its concession the native village of Bilway which is composed of squatters on the Company's property, but nevertheless has grown up into a town of about 800 natives."<sup>41</sup> Bilwi's squatters clearly considered it their inalienable right as citizens to live on property formally conceded to a foreign-owned firm. A week later, Kendall reported that "Rio Grande district quieting due to continued presence of Marine patrols, and of Mr. Baker, Nicaraguan manager Cuyamel Fruit Company, who has delivered an ultimatum to strike promoters and discharged malcontents among company employees." The "incendiarism and disorder" continued into the

<sup>38</sup> C. L. Veitch, Manager, Bragmans Bluff Lumber Company, Puerto Cabezas, to Standard Fruit Foreign Dept, New Orleans, 27 Aug. 1927, USDS 817.00/5041, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p4.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p4.html).

<sup>39</sup> L. B. Green, Special weekly East Nicaraguan Coast information bulletin for week ending 3 Sept. 1927, 5 Sept. 1927, NA127/43A/30, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p4.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p4.html).

<sup>40</sup> Veitch to Standard Fruit, 27 Aug. 1927, USDS 817.00/5041, at <http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p4.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Kendall, Intelligence Report, 21 Sept. 1927, NA127/43A/30, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p5.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p5.html); see also "Bilway y las Pretensiones de la Bragman: Todo Monopolio es Odioso e Inconstitucional," *Diario Moderno*, Managua, 18 Sept. 1927, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p5.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p5.html), and the excellent discussion in Pineda (2006: chap. 3).

November local elections and beyond; indeed, similar reports continued for the next five years.<sup>42</sup>

While the Marines and US and Nicaraguan governments generally supported the interests of foreign capital in these struggles and thereby act against the direct material interests of working people, a countervailing dynamic was obtained in the sphere of electoral politics. In this region of overwhelmingly Liberal sentiments and widespread disenchantment with decades of corrupt Conservative rule, many Costeños warmly welcomed the Marine occupation for providing an important point of leverage for exposing and eliminating the systemic electoral fraud and political shenanigans long practiced by Conservatives. These contradictory tendencies often played out in tandem, for instance in Kendall's intelligence report of November 9. "The attitude of the majority of the Liberals is improving also due to their dawning realization that the forces are neutral and their belief that for the first time in the history of Nicaragua there will be a free and honest election"—and in fact the Marines expended every effort to maintain neutrality between the two major political parties and supervise what were widely considered the fairest elections in Nicaraguan history to that time. He continued: "However, among the negro Liberals who are readers of Markus Garvey's [*sic*] publications, with their antagonistic articles there is a strong feeling of opposition to the Marines"—affirming historian Wolfgang Gabbert's arguments regarding the importance of Garveyism among Bluefields Creoles and yet another variation on the contradictory forces shaping both on-the-ground Marine Corps policies and the political responses of Costeños to the intervention.<sup>43</sup>

A few weeks later in Bluefields, Kendall reported "a petition signed at a liberal mass meeting... requesting the President name the commanding officer of marines as director of police in Bluefields"—one of the numerous petitions submitted to the Marines and Guardia and the US and British governments by Costeño Creoles and Indians soliciting assistance in their struggle against the "tyranny" of the national government. "The Indians and Creoles request a separation from Nicaragua, the Nicaraguans are a tyrannical nation," wrote Edward Wilson (Creole) and Alfred Gordon (Indian) "in behalf of the Mosquito Indians and Creoles of Bluefields" to the British government on May 18, 1931.<sup>44</sup> A week later, the "Sindico Gladson Bilbans" representing the Miskito Indian community in Bilwi petitioned Area Commander Col. C. A. Wynn for "a proclamation, stating to the world... that the plantations and cultivations land belonging to us Miskito Indians are looked upon as sacred ground," a request addressing but a "small portion of our present day grievance" against the Managua government.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Capt. D. J. Kendall, Intelligence Report, 18 Nov. 1927, NA127/43A/30, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p5.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p5.html).

<sup>43</sup> Capt. D. J. Kendall, Intelligence Report, 9 Nov. 1927, NA127/43A/30, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p5.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p5.html).

<sup>44</sup> "Petition on behalf of Mosquito Indians and Creoles," 18 May 1931, Reg. No. A 3768/650/8, Public Record Office, UK, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p7.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p7.html).

<sup>45</sup> "The Miskito Indians," Godfrey Williams, et al. (six signatures), Bilwi, to Area Commander C. A. Wynn, Bluefields, 15 May 1931, NA127/206/E, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p6.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p6.html).

Resolutions and petitions from Indian and Creole associations and syndicates comprised one major form of collective action exercised by Costeños during this period. So did more directly confrontational tactics such as arson, strikes, and more rarely, violent direct action. Guardia records show scores of strikes and work stoppages in the plantations, boats, and loading docks from 1928 to 1932.<sup>46</sup> The most prominent instance of violent direct action was the assault on the Guardia post at Rama on July 19, 1931—an attack that the heroic Sandinista narrative erroneously attributes to the EDSN.<sup>47</sup> As Area Commander Major C. A. Wynn described the origins of the assault,

“There were some hundred and thirty five laborers employed on the Rama–Managua Road just outside of Rama. These men gave no trouble so long as they received pay for their work. When the Government took over this project recently there was immediately apparent a feeling of discontent. This feeling burst into mutiny Sunday night, July 19th when it became known that the Government had ordered work on the road to cease, and discharged the laborers without pay. The attack on the Guardia post at Rama resulted.”<sup>48</sup>

Like the vast majority of such robberies and assaults on the Coast during this period, the assault on Rama derived from local conditions, expressed local grievances, was neither planned nor carried out by the Sandinistas.

This brief survey of the various forms of Costeño collective action before and during the Sandino rebellion as depicted in Marine–Guardia reports and other sources suggests the political fecundity of the Coast’s subaltern social landscape. Major H. H. Utley’s February 1928 observation that Bluefields “seethes with politics” also applied to Puerto Cabezas, Bilwi, and their enclave hinterlands—and indeed to much of the region.<sup>49</sup> Clearly, this was a populace steeped in traditions of collective action and struggles for rights. Remarkably, however, and paralleling his response to the struggles of indigenous communities in Boaco, Camoapa, and elsewhere in Western Nicaragua, Sandino made no effort to cultivate relations with any of the labor unions, ethnic associations, or other collectivities then active on the Coast.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, there is nothing in his oeuvre to suggest that he even knew these organizations or struggles existed.

<sup>46</sup> These might fruitfully be integrated into the compendium of Nicaragua’s twentieth-century social movements compiled by Guevara López (2008); for a synoptic review of these strikes and other episodes of workers’ direct action, see page 14 of the online documentary annex, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1920s-30s-ANNEX-14.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1920s-30s-ANNEX-14.html).

<sup>47</sup> See for example Vargas (1995: 319), Jenkins Molieri (1986: 146–147) erroneously attributes the attack on Rama to EDSN Gen. Carlos Salgado.

<sup>48</sup> C. A. Wynn, Conditions on the East Coast, 22 July 1931, RG127/202/1, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931B-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931B-p1.html); see also F. Riewe, Report of Contact at Rama, 21 July 1931, RG127/200/1, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931B-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931B-p1.html), and C. A. Davis, Monthly Record of Events for the Department of Southern Bluefields for July 1931, 11 Aug. 1931, RG127/202/2, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931B-p2.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931B-p2.html).

<sup>49</sup> Report, Major H. H. Utley, Bluefields, 18 Feb. 1928, Marine Corps Research Center [MCRC], H. H. Utley papers, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1928A-p2.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1928A-p2.html).

<sup>50</sup> Gould (1998: 155–161).



How did Sandino and the Sandinistas understand the role of the Atlantic Coast in their rebellion, and how did they act on those understandings?

### Sandinista constructions of Costeños

The principal features of Sandino's discourse on the Atlantic Coast and its place in Nicaraguan history and his rebellion are well expressed in his forgotten manifesto of June 1931. On the whole that discourse can be characterized as patronizing, misinformed, and rooted in the same Enlightenment tradition that spawned European colonialism and the dichotomous paradigm of "civilization and barbarism."<sup>51</sup> As shown in his 1933 conversations with the Nicaraguan journalist José Román, Sandino disparaged traditional Miskitu religion as "superstition" (deeply ironic in light of his own unconventional and eclectic spiritual beliefs), suppressed the *sukias*, banned production of *chicha* (a fruit-based fermented drink), compelled Miskitu, Sumu, and Zambo communities under EDSN dominion to produce at least half a hectare of cereals and tobacco per family per year, and in other ways large and small sought to eradicate and supplant diverse aspects of indigenous culture.<sup>52</sup> In this respect, the EDSN acted in ways that paralleled the Moravian missionaries they also sought to eliminate. Further, as shown in his November 21, 1930 letter to Col. Abraham Rivera, he actively pursued a pronatalist policy for Miskitu and Sumu women of the Coast and its western hinterlands, encouraging his Western Nicaraguan soldiers to "look for their 'little women' [among the indigenes] and thereby multiply the defenders of Justice."<sup>53</sup> Despite his apparent familiarity with the region, Sandino's conceptual frame consistently constructed the Atlantic Coast and its peoples in ways that rejected or disparaged the longstanding features of Costeño society and culture.

The same discourse that informed Sandino's writings and utterances percolated throughout his Defending Army. Consider, for example, the captured EDSN record-book of the expeditionary column under Generals Zacarías Padilla and Juan Santos Morales in April–May 1931, which includes several revealing passages illustrating the "otherness" of the Miskitu in the Sandinista patriotic imagination. "One must bear in mind that the Miskitus are poor and providing their immediate cooperation, it is unjust to take their things for personal use, it is better that we are obliged to give them whatever urgent necessities they need," Gen. Padilla admonished his men, framing the issue in "us-and-them" terms and implying unjust treatment of the Miskitu by his troops.<sup>54</sup> Or consider the comments of EDSN Captain Julio Castro,

<sup>51</sup> This analysis builds on Gould (1998: 155–161), and Pineda (2006: 95–107, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> Román (1983: 101–103) and *passim*; de Belausteguigoitia (1934).

<sup>53</sup> "He procurado que entre los muchachos que van con el Gral. González no vaya entre ellos ninguno que sea padre de familia, para que puedan allí mismo en el Río [Coco] buscarse sus 'hembritas' y aumenten así los Defensores de la Justicia." Sandino (1984: II: 154–155), at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1930B-p2.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1930B-p2.html).

<sup>54</sup> Captured EDSN Guard Book, Marine Corps Research Center, Personal Papers Collection, box Sandino; my translation; housed online under the date of its last entry: 29 May 1931, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p7.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p7.html).

longtime resident of the Coast and one of the few members of Sandino's army who spoke the region's indigenous tongues. "Well, the only argument I use is the club and the pistol, because that's all these Indians understand... one needs to rope them in with a lariat so that they serve you well and are content."<sup>55</sup>

The total corpus of surviving EDSN texts—around 1,400 by my count, around one-third penned by Sandino—is only a fraction of those produced in these years. By every indication, these surviving texts comprise a representative sample of the larger population, long since lost. Only a tiny proportion of these texts—around 1 %—deal with the Atlantic Coast. And most of this concerns acquiring material resources and striking blows at US imperialism. In short, reading extant EDSN texts through a Costeño-centric lens reveals a discursive landscape marked mainly by silence, punctuated by brief references expressing essentially the same cultural sensibilities as Sandino.<sup>56</sup>

Another major if neglected source on Sandinista representations are the oral testimonies of old-time rebels produced by the Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo (IES) in the early 1980s. These several thousand pages of transcribed oral histories arguably represent the most important body of primary evidence on the rebellion produced since Sandino's assassination in 1934. Part of a larger state-sponsored memory project, the IES testimonies were intended mainly to solidify the lines of ideological continuity between Sandino's struggle and the freshly minted FSLN regime. Shot through with the pro-Sandinista, anti-Yankee biases of their youthful interviewers and fraught with interpretive challenges, these sprawling testimonies offer a unique and fascinating window on the period.<sup>57</sup>

Of 66 complete transcripts made available to me—together comprising 995 pages—only one was narrated by a native Costeño. This might reasonably be attributed to IES bias in selecting its informants.<sup>58</sup> Only 10 of the 66 testimonies discuss the Atlantic Coast in a relatively substantive way: of these, eight portray Miskitu Indians or other groups of Costeños as active EDSN collaborators; and two of these eight are by prominent individuals whose lengthy testimonies clearly derived from the heroic Sandinista narrative of the 1980s.<sup>59</sup> In other words, in the

<sup>55</sup> Román 1983: 60–61: "... pues el único argumento que yo uso es el palo y la pistol, porque estos indios es lo único que entienden y aunque a usted le parezca raro, hay que volarles reata para que sirvan bien y estén contentos."

<sup>56</sup> For a complete list of all known EDSN correspondence and links to digitized versions of many of the originals, see [www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/edsn-docs.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/edsn-docs.html).

<sup>57</sup> The IES testimonies are inventoried and discussed at [www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/ies-docs.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/ies-docs.html); a documentary annex page at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1920s-30s-ANNEX-13.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1920s-30s-ANNEX-13.html)) expands on these findings.

<sup>58</sup> A comprehensive list of IES interviews in the Archivo Militar, Managua, includes 155 cassette tapes but not all interviewees' places of origin; of the 112 interviewees whose natal department is listed, only one is from the Atlantic Coast (Zelaya Dept.): Nasario Ortega of Bluefields, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1933+p3.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1933+p3.html).

<sup>59</sup> These two are Pedro Antonio Arauz, the brother of Sandino's wife Blanca Arauz, and Alfonso Alexander, a Columbian poet and novelist who served for a time in Sandino's ranks. Of the 58 manuscript pages that Arauz submitted to the IES in the early 1980s, one page deals with the Coast; and of the 43 single-spaced pages of Alexander's transcribed interviews, one page deals with the Coast.

recollections of elderly ex-rebels, the Atlantic Coast is overwhelmingly ignored—and when discussed, usually concerns material resources.

Eleven of the 66 testimonies mention Miskitu Indians—one in six. Of these, two were prompted by the interviewer's question. Seventy-six-year-old Angel Martínez Soza, originally from Quilalí, was asked whether he knew any Miskitus in Sandino's army. "No," he responded. "In that time these Miskitus were not mentioned. Now, yes. But in that time the Miskitus were not Hispanicized, they weren't in touch with our people, they were a people apart."<sup>60</sup> Seventy-year-old José María Cerro Castellón of León was asked if any Miskitus joined Sandino's army. "There were about three," he responded, before describing the negative reception the EDSN received among Costeños.<sup>61</sup> While others remembered differently, overall the IES testimonies offer compelling corroborating evidence that in the popular Sandinista patriotic imagination of the time, the Atlantic Coast was seen principally as repository of war-making resources—arms, explosives, money, goods, symbols—and conceived as a region and a people apart—"over there in the Coast" (*allá, al lado de la Costa*) in the words of one former rebel.<sup>62</sup>

### The Atlantic Coast in Sandinista revolutionary practice

Moving from representations to military and economic practice, what material role did the Atlantic Coast play in the rebellion? Strategically, the Coast and its western frontier zones were crucial to the EDSN as places of refuge and as repositories of material and symbolic resources, and the Río Coco an essential artery for the transport of arms, ammunition, and other supplies.<sup>63</sup> Costeños, however, were not part of this strategic equation. The Sandino affinity school disagrees, pointing to the

<sup>60</sup> Testimony of Angel Martínez Soza, cassette no. 60, Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo, 1983, p. 11; hereafter cited as IES [cassette no.]:[page no.]. "Q: Y usted conoció en el Ejército a tropas que fueran Miskitos? A: No. En ese tiempo los miskitos no eran españolizados, no tenían roce con la gente de nosotros, era una gente apartada, hasta ahora que ellos se han aclimatado al gremio de nosotros. Ahora sí, ya están bien españolizados."

<sup>61</sup> José María Cerro Castellón, IES 088: 11–14.

<sup>62</sup> Luis Boedeker González, IES 055: 11. Calixto Tercero González, IES 097-2-2: 6–7, recalled extensive Miskitu support: "Sí, andaban con nosotros, y buenos eran los mosquitos; y bien pegan!" (Yes, they were with us, and the Miskitu were good, and fought well!) The longest and most elaborate stories about the Coast (15 pages) and most nuanced remarks about the Miskitu were narrated by 67-year-old Ricardo Muñoz Obando, originally from El Júcaro, who as a 14-year-old boy participated in the EDSN expedition of mid-1931. Asked whether Miskitu helped Sandino's army, he replied, "Una parte, no todo Miskito, pues. Todo el que estaba al control de nosotros, nos ayudaba. Nunca puedo decirle que ellos hicieron una denuncia contra nosotros, porque ellos estaban agradecidos en la forma que entramos nosotros allí, en ese jira." ("Some did, but not all. Everywhere we controlled, they helped us. I'd never say they denounced us, because they were grateful for how we treated them on this expedition." My translation.) For more information on these IES testimonies and the methods used to evaluate their representations of the Coast and Costeños, see p. 13 the online documentary annex at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1920s-30s-ANNEX-13.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1920s-30s-ANNEX-13.html).

<sup>63</sup> Marine-Guardia records amply confirm the strategic importance to the EDSN of the Coast, its western frontier zones, and the Río Coco; see for example the reports of US Military Attaché Fred T. Cruse, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/Top100pgs/Top100-p95.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/Top100pgs/Top100-p95.html).

key role played by Miskitu boatmen.<sup>64</sup> But the Marines and Guardia also frequently used the services of Miskitu boatmen. To underscore the obvious, transporting groups of soldiers needs not entail embracing their political agenda. All observers agree on Miskitu boatmen's skills—a precious resource that would have permitted many to forge a kind of middle ground, assisting one side or the other, or both, and allying with neither.<sup>65</sup>

Instructive of broader patterns is Sandino's first military incursion into the region during the Civil War, from late December 1926 to early February 1927. Briefly, after leading an anti-Chamorrista uprising at San Albino Mine, forming the nucleus of a small revolutionary Liberal army, and hampered by a lack of arms and ammunition, Sandino journeyed down the Río Coco to the Coast to solicit the material aid of Liberal General José María Moncada. Rebuffed by Moncada, his small force circled back to Puerto Cabezas (probably Bilwi), where, with the help of some transplanted Segovian prostitutes, they procured a large supply of rifles and bullets before returning to Las Segovias to continue the fight against the Conservatives.<sup>66</sup> To these Liberal Sandinistas, the Coast mattered mainly as a place of material resources needed for waging war. Further, the only meaningful social support they received came from Spanish-speaking Western Nicaraguans and the Miskitu boatmen who transported them. These patterns would largely persist for the next six years.

From a materialist perspective, Sandinista actions in the Coast can be characterized as a series of sporadic military incursions intended to garner material, human, and symbolic resources for the war effort in the West. The 69 months from May 1927 to February 1933 saw seven distinct EDSN military incursions into the Guardia's Eastern Area—a military jurisdiction that included the Pis Pis and Siuna mining districts, which as I argue below do *not* belong in the Atlantic Coast region defined in sociocultural terms. The longest lasted 18 weeks; most were much briefer. All were conceived and carried out as “expeditions” from home bases in the eastern Segovias, southwestern Jinotega, and the Upper Río Coco and Río Bocay valleys.<sup>67</sup>

Each of these episodes generated a good deal of documentation and evinced similar patterns of property destruction and appropriation and violence against Americans and Marine–Guardia collaborators. Materially, these raiding expeditions became functionally akin to the historical role of the national government as a systematic drain on the region's capital. As noted above, from the Reincorporation of 1894, the Atlantic Coast contributed a disproportionately large percentage of the state's revenue through import and excise taxes. From a Costeño perspective, the

<sup>64</sup> Arellano (2008: 74); Vargas (1995: 304–308), citing García Salgado (1979: 38–39), Urbano Gilbert (1979: 157), and de Belausteguigoitia (1934: 192–193); see also Jenkins Molieri (1986: 137–158), and Hale (1994: 53–56).

<sup>65</sup> Of the many fine descriptions of Miskitus' waterborne skills, none are richer than Napier Bell (1989).

<sup>66</sup> Sandino (1984: I: 82–84, and II: 387–388), Román (1983: 88–89). The precise manner of Sandino's acquisition of arms in January 1927 is the subject of considerable controversy marked by conflicting evidence, as explored in the online documentary annex, p. 11, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p2A.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1927-p2A.html).

<sup>67</sup> These seven offensives are examined in the online documentary annex, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1920s-30s-ANNEX.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1920s-30s-ANNEX.html).

state drained capital from the region through high taxes, the rebels through plundering expeditions and taxes.<sup>68</sup> In both cases, the net effect was to siphon capital out of the region's centers of capital accumulation. The capital siphoned by the state ended up in Managua, while that seized by the EDSN ended up mainly in Honduras, the rebels smuggling this plunder to Las Segovias and across the northern border where it found a ready market among Honduran borderland merchants. The rebels thus effectively reproduced the role of the state, generating a comparable degree of disenchantment among many of the region's inhabitants.

"Bananas are already overtaxed," lamented the *Bluefields Weekly* on January 5, 1929, in a typical complaint about the high excise duties imposed from Managua, decrying what it called, "this hideous banana tax... We want to hear a once for all amen that bananas shall not be taxed."<sup>69</sup> Five days later, a rustic handwritten semi-literate petition from the Miskitu community of Tungla to the "commander in chief of the U.S.M.C." politely but firmly insisted that "there should be some kind of protection, should be sent here for fear of rebels and outlawed people," in a clear if indirect reference to the Sandinistas.<sup>70</sup> Rumors of impending Sandinista attacks swirled throughout the region during this period. The sizeable Miskitu community of Tungla lay on the banks of the Río Prinzapolka in the heart of the banana zone—the same zone that the *Bluefields Weekly* complained was being materially damaged by excessive taxes from Managua.

## Defining the Atlantic Coast region

At this point, it will be useful to offer a more precise geographical definition of the Atlantic Coast region and its main sub-regions. My point of departure is an illuminating map produced by the Guardia in early 1929 that identified three zones: "Pacified," "Disputed," and "Unoccupied." The "Pacified Zone" included the entire Atlantic Coast region and most of the Guardia's Eastern Area, save a slender ribbon of "disputed" territory extending from Chontales north to the Río Coco, including the Pis Pis and Siuna mining districts. In other words, in January 1929, the Guardia considered the entire Atlantic Coast region "pacified," despite having fewer than 300 troops in a handful of outposts supported by two garrisons in Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields.<sup>71</sup> Explicitly state-centric, defining social spaces by the degree of state penetration and inhabitants' political orientation relative to the state

<sup>68</sup> Sandino also imposed taxes on exports, for instance his tax on mahogany cut on the Upper Coco and Poteca valleys starting in mid-November 1927, extended to the entire Río Coco watershed in July 1930; see the statement of Enrique Gulke, 28 June 1928, NA127/220/1, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1928A-p8.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1928A-p8.html), and Sandino (1984): I: 201-02, 220, and II: 122, "Regulaciones sobre el corte de madera," 8 July 1930, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1930B-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1930B-p1.html).

<sup>69</sup> *Bluefields Weekly*, 5 Jan. 1929, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1929A-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1929A-p1.html).

<sup>70</sup> Stephen Boudien, Tungla, to Commanding Officer USMC, Puerto Cabezas, RG127/204/1, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1929A-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1929A-p1.html).

<sup>71</sup> The untitled map appears in Smith et al. (1933: opposite 44).



**Fig. 3** Guardia Nacional map of Nicaragua's pacified, disputed, and unoccupied zones, Jan. 1929

and its military, the map nonetheless offers new and helpful ways of conceptualizing the country's social and cultural landscape (Fig. 3).

Onto this map, let us now superimpose the maps of densest Miskitu settlement on the Lower Río Coco and the ríos Prinzipolka and Grande; the Creole zone around Bluefields; the principal banana plantations and lumbering camps; the interior mining districts; foreign commissaries; Moravian mission stations; the sparsely inhabited zones between the ríos Patuca and Coco in Honduras and in the Bocay River Valley, inhabited by mostly Sumu and Miskitu Indians; and Las Segovias, heartland of the rebel movement. The resulting interactive map, which cannot be represented adequately in a black-and-white print journal and hence is only available online, offers new ways of conceiving of the country's social and cultural geography—especially when read in tandem with the hundreds of radiograms, intelligence, and other reports describing the mining districts and sparsely settled interior zones in north-central Nicaragua and southeastern Honduras (including the

Bocay, Waspuk, Upper Coco, and Upper Patuca river valleys).<sup>72</sup> Together these texts suggest that in sociocultural terms, these remote and isolated interior areas are most fruitfully conceived as transition zones between the Atlantic Coast and the “Spanish” West. Defined culturally and socially, the Atlantic Coast region thus extended inland only 50 or so miles, except along the thin lines that marked the pathways of the major river systems, especially in the north along the Río Coco—the country’s largest river and its principal east–west artery, as well as the cultural heartland of the Miskitu Indians—where it continued to roughly the mouth of the Río Waspuk (generally considered some 200 miles upriver) or arguably as far as the town of Bocay, thence merging into the sparsely inhabited transition zone between the Eastern and Western parts of the country.

Using these same social and cultural criteria, three main sub-regions made up the Atlantic Coast region proper: (1) Bluefields and its hinterlands, including the banana plantations up the Río Escondido, past Rama another 25 miles or so into the interior along the ríos Siquia, Mico, and Rama, south to the Costa Rican border, and north roughly to the Río Prinzapolka; (2) Puerto Cabezas and its hinterlands, including the banana plantations and lumber camps along the ríos Cocalaya and Wawa; (3) the Lower Río Coco and its tributaries, from Cabo Gracias a Dios west to the mouth of the Río Waspuk, or perhaps as far as Bocay.<sup>73</sup> In social-geographical terms, the Atlantic Coast region thus did *not* include the Bocay, Upper Coco or Poteca valleys or the Pis Pis or Siuna mining districts. While some people living in these zones surely self-identified as “Costeños,” especially the mining districts, the evidence seems clear that most did not.<sup>74</sup>

### Marines and Guardia representations of Costeños and the rebellion

Just as Marine–Guardia records and processes of war and upheaval can help us to define more precisely the geographical boundaries of the Atlantic Coast, so too they offer a compelling window on Costeños’ attitudes toward both sides and their principal patterns of collective action. Despite their persistently misleading and inaccurate portrayal of the Sandinistas as “bandits and outlaws,” the Marines–Guardia proved increasingly adept at uncovering evidence of rebel activity and civilians’ political sympathies, as the documentary record on Las Segovias makes plain. If a zone or district appeared “bandit infested,” that is, marked by generalized popular support for the rebels, Guardia reports repeatedly hammered the point. That was their mission: to “protect American lives and property” and “exterminate bandits” from the national territory, and they used most every tool at their disposal to achieve those ends. Notably, by 1931–32, just as Sandino strove to expand his

<sup>72</sup> See the first page of the online documentary annex, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1920s-30s-ANNEX.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1920s-30s-ANNEX.html).

<sup>73</sup> See Mörner (1993).

<sup>74</sup> Butressing the many detailed descriptions of the social composition of these zones in the archives of the Marines and Guardia are the observations of one of Hale’s informants that in the Somoza years (1936–1979) the term “Waspuk” was considered by Costeños a kind of epithet for “uncivilized”; Hale (1994: 82).

rebellion outside Las Segovias into the Pacific and Atlantic Coast regions, Marine–Guardia spy networks became considerably denser and more sophisticated. For nearly six years, the Marines and Guardia expended every effort to generate an accurate understanding of the size, strength, numbers, weapons, locations, and probable intentions of enemy forces across the country and the degree of popular support they enjoyed in specific locales—a task they improved upon greatly over time.

For instance, when we read the following passages in Capt. H. Rose’s July 1928 report on the La Luz mining district—“inhabitants mostly Nicaraguans, very few Indians. Natives who have been in the bush for last two months have returned to their homes, ... I suspect the most influential of the citizens of this neighborhood of being pro-Sandino—looking upon him as a liberator... In the vicinity of Siuna large numbers of people are engaged in washing gold from Siuna Creek”—there are many reasons to consider these comments mostly credible, especially if different reports make similar observations over a period of time.<sup>75</sup>

What of the, “spontaneous cooperation of [unconverted] Miskitus and Sumus with Sandino’s Defending Army,” as argued by Wunderlich?<sup>76</sup> Guardia records show bountiful instances of Miskitu cooperation with both sides. The flurry of radiograms and reports generated during Captain M. A. Edson’s Río Coco expedition show scores of Miskitu men acting as guides, boatmen, informants, scouts, and in many other capacities. Whether their cooperation was “spontaneous” is another question—indeed, in this case, it was clearly not, instead arranged through Bocay businessman Alfred Webster and paid for to the tune of 80 cents per day per boatman.<sup>77</sup> Instances of “cooperation” that appear “spontaneous” in the written record most likely stemmed from actors’ careful calculations of probable rewards and dangers. In July 1931, two marine pilots were “forced down in the jungles” of the coastal interior by enemy fire. For days, the aviators slogged through mosquito-infested swamps and jungles east toward Puerto Cabezas. “At times we waded up to our necks in muck, mire and rushes. To our great relief we met a friendly Indian from Sandy Bay, a trading post of the United Fruit Company. He was hunting alligators... the Indian helped us into his pipante [canoe]... and we finally arrived in Sandy Bay about dusk. Here we were the guests of other Indians, some of whom spoke spotty English. They gave us hot coffee, tortillas, and six eggs each.”<sup>78</sup> Is this episode best interpreted as evidence for Miskitus’ “spontaneous support” for the Marines and the US intervention? Clearly not—though it can be read as illustrating aspects of the Miskitu culture of hospitality and a telling instance of lending assistance under certain circumstances.

<sup>75</sup> Excerpts from Capt. Rose’s report in Lt. W. C. Hall, Intelligence Report, 8 July 1928, NA127/204/1, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1928B-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1928B-p1.html).

<sup>76</sup> Wunderlich (1989: 15).

<sup>77</sup> “Please accept my thanks for securing the Indians who have been working for me for the past 2 months. All of them with the exception of one have been excellent...” Capt. M. A. Edson, Poteca, to Alfred Webster, Bocay, 24 Dec. 1928, Library of Congress, Merritt A. Edson Papers, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1928B-p6.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1928B-p6.html).

<sup>78</sup> Heritage (1932: 13–17), at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1932A-p4.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1932A-p4.html).



My reading of the documentary record is that Miskitu individuals and communities routinely lent limited and partial support to both the EDSN and the Marines–Guardia when circumstances required, but worked mainly to maintain the integrity and autonomy of their culture and communities in the face of threats from both sides. Many credible reports offer detailed descriptions of the EDSN robbing, kidnapping, and forcing labor from Miskitu individuals and communities, for instance the April 1932 report by Guardia 2nd Lt. Francisco Gaitan<sup>79</sup>:

“On the 20th of the present month, about 8:00 a.m., several pitpans with Mosquito Indians went down the River [Río Coco] from Saulala, Santo Domingo, Laguna Tara, Pranza and Urapany who the day before had gone to bring bananas from their properties and to sell the bananas to the contractor of the company B. L. C. [Bragmans Bluff Lumber Company] of Puerto Cabezas, Señor Eduardo Araña, who travels by Urapany on the Coko River about 30 miles from this Headquarters [Kisalaya]. On further questioning they stated that they had seen the bandits who had gone after them and that two Indians who had gone along with them had disappeared and possibly had been made prisoners or killed by the bandits.”

The next day, “an old woman, Silvia Martinez, a mosquito Indian who was made prisoner by the bandits a couple of days ago at Urapany returned to our camp; while she was with her husband picking bananas bandits appeared, her husband ran away but she could not do it and was apprehended by the bandits.” Gaitan had no reason to lie or embellish regarding the economic activities of these Miskitu Indians. If the official Guardia discourse that the Sandinistas were “bandits and outlaws” provides the undergirding structure of his narrative, there is little reason to doubt his description of these Miskitu collectively growing, harvesting, and selling bananas to a contractor representing Bragmans Bluff. What might reasonably be doubted is the depiction of the EDSN taking these Miskitu prisoner. Perhaps Silvia Martinez voluntarily joined the rebels briefly to share information and camaraderie before returning to her community. Without more evidence, it is impossible to determine in this case. With an accumulated body of information on similar incidents over time and space, an accurate answer becomes more probable. By my reading, this accumulated body of evidence strongly suggests that Silvia Martinez and the other “two Indians” were indeed temporarily seized as prisoners by the EDSN, probably to serve as food preparers and camp laborers.<sup>80</sup>

One might continue in this vein, identifying a series of discrete episodes showing both Miskitu conflict and collaboration with both sides. But such an approach might be justly critiqued as anecdotal—a series of unique, uncorroborated, and ultimately unknowable events strung together into a tendentious narrative and thus inconclusive of broader patterns. In what follows I therefore attempt an arguably more “objective” method by undertaking a content analysis of five major types of texts

<sup>79</sup> F. Gaitain, Kisalaya, 22 April 1932, RG127/202/1, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1932A-p3.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1932A-p3.html). Gaitan was writing an institutional history of the Guardia Nacional: Gaitan (1929–1932).

<sup>80</sup> See the homepage for the 53 web pages housing these documents, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/eastcoast.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/eastcoast.html).

produced by the Guardia that were integral to their counterinsurgency campaign: (1) GN-2 intelligence reports, (2) patrol and combat reports, (3) troop distribution reports, (4) periodic and miscellaneous intelligence reports, and (5) Guardia Nacional newsletters. These five major types of counterinsurgency texts, as well as the 1929 Guardia map and other documents, all point to the generalized absence of Costeño popular support for the rebels.

### GN-2 reports

The GN-2s represented a major centralization of the Guardia's military intelligence dissemination apparatus. Before the first GN-2 report of September 1, 1930, no single intelligence report covered the whole country. Instead each area, regiment, and battalion produced its own periodic serial intelligence report (B-2s, R-2s, and Bn-2s, respectively), slotting information into standardized categories that changed over time, such as, "Location of the Enemy Elements," "Units in Contact," "Enemy Supply and Equipment," and others. Continuing through December 1, 1932, with each edition covering the previous month, the GN-2s make it possible to compare the quantity of text in these categories devoted to different regions and zones. By their very nature, the GN-2s focus on the "problem" areas and ignore the quiescent. Analyzing quantities of text relative to space, I argue, offers a useful measure of counterinsurgency energies expended per spatial unit and thus also serves as an accurate barometer of relative intensities of rebel activity in space and time.<sup>81</sup>

Content analysis reveals that these 27 GN-2 reports, comprising 567 pages—an average of 21 pages per month—contain 48 pages of text on the Atlantic Coast, or 8.5 % of the total. Notably, the period covered by these GN-2s (August 1930–November 1932) includes six of the seven EDSN incursions into the region. In other words, close to 90 % of the intelligence that the Guardia deemed worth disseminating in its most comprehensive and inclusive reporting mechanism dealt with issues relating to "organized banditry" in Western Nicaragua, mainly Las Segovias and adjacent areas in Honduras. Indeed, the quantity of text devoted to Honduras and the Honduran borderlands was more than twice that devoted to the Coast. Had the GN-2s existed from the beginning of the war, the proportion treating the Coast would likely be well under 5 %.

### Patrol and combat reports

These key counterinsurgency texts were produced by field officers to inform their superiors of noteworthy incidents during their ground-based patrols and any intelligence gleaned while "hunting bandits." A thorough search in the US National Archives has identified over 1,200 such reports. Of these, 54 took place in the Atlantic Coast region, or 4.5 % of the total. A comparable fraction of military

<sup>81</sup> One GN-2 Report, for April 1932, has not been located and is excluded from this analysis; for a list of the serial intelligence reports identified to date, including the GN-2s, see [www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/IR-Docs.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/IR-Docs.html).

“contacts” took place in the Atlantic Coast—a “contact” defined as a military encounter between opposing ground forces in which both sides discharged firearms. By my count, of the 735 military contacts between the EDSN and the Marines and Guardia from July 1927 to February 1933, thirty took place in the Atlantic Coast region—defined generously to include the Pis Pis and Siuna mining districts—or 4.1 %. In other words, more than 95 % of the war’s military engagements took place outside the Atlantic Coast region.<sup>82</sup>

### Troop distribution reports

The Eastern Area was one of the last parts of the country to be organized as a military district, when in late February 1928, seven Guardia officers arrived in Bluefields to begin the organization—nearly a year after Sandino launched his rebellion in Las Segovias. On December 31, 1929, the Guardia Nacional was comprised of 2,219 officers and enlisted men, with 214 stationed in the Eastern Area—9.6 % of the total. By early 1930, the Marines and Guardia considered withdrawing all troops from the entire Eastern Area, given its relative quiescence and the costs of maintaining an armed occupation. The only “critical points in the Area” were seen as “Puerto Cabezas and railway extension to the northwest... Foreign developments in the vicinity of Bluefields... [and the] La Luz Mining Area.” None were considered under serious threat.<sup>83</sup> On December 31, 1932, on the eve of the Marine withdrawal—after a series of major Sandinista offensives into the region (see below)—the proportion of Guardia stationed in the Eastern Area had risen to 13.2 % (330 of 2,507 officers and enlisted men).<sup>84</sup> Of these 330, about one-third (107) were stationed in the Coast’s two major cities—Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields. Absent repeated EDSN incursions and the economic value of US-owned properties in the region, Guardia troop dispositions would likely have been substantially lower.

### Periodic and miscellaneous intelligence reports

The predominant representation in the great majority of these types of reports from stations in the Atlantic Coast can be summarized in one word: “quiet.” Typical were the comments of Marine Lt. W. W. Benson in a personal letter of July 1930 from Puerto Cabezas to fellow Leatherneck Lt. W. C. Hall in Bluefields, in the wake of Sandinista General Pedrón’s brief raid on Bonanza Mine in mid-May. “Things are all quiet now... As far as the rest of the East Coast is concerned, things are pretty dull.”<sup>85</sup> The Eastern Area’s Record of Events for July 1930 similarly reported, “No contacts with enemy forces during this period... General state of the territory

<sup>82</sup> Schroeder (1993: 321–340), at [www.sandinorebellion.com/mjs/Schroeder-1993Dissertation.pdf](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/mjs/Schroeder-1993Dissertation.pdf).

<sup>83</sup> Major C. H. Metcalf, 11 March 1930, RG127/204/1, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1930A-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1930A-p1.html).

<sup>84</sup> Data in this paragraph from Smith et al. (1933: 12, 15–16, 220); see also the GN troops distribution reports in Nicaragua for 1931–1932, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/GNTroopDispositions.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/GNTroopDispositions.html).

<sup>85</sup> Benson to Hall, 7 July 1930, LOC/Edson/19, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1930B-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1930B-p1.html).

occupied: QUIET... No known enemy in this area at the present time.”<sup>86</sup> This was during the same period that Las Segovias seethed with popular resentment against the Marines and Guardia and teemed with rebel bands. In this same month of July 1930, in a rebel surge following Sandino’s return from Mexico, Guardia intelligence reports for the Northern and Central Areas (encompassing the departments of Nueva Segovia, Estelí, northern Chinandega, and Jinotega) reported 11 active rebel *jefes* (chieftains) and 14 military contacts—an average of one armed encounter every 2.2 days.<sup>87</sup> The Atlantic Coast region saw nothing remotely comparable.

### Guardia Nacional newsletters

These weekly-to-biweekly documents are filled mainly with the comings and goings of regiments, battalions, and squads, along with exemplary or especially notable patrol, combat, and intelligence reports and other odds and ends. Evidently intended to help nurture a sense of collective identity among the Guardia, the newsletters provided a common textual reference for soldiers to turn to and find out what their buddies were up to, what a model patrol report looked like, what the latest “dope” showed about the “bandits”—and to provide a common vocabulary and conceptual framework for the institution as a whole.

Analyzing a representative sample of 74 newsletters from April 1931 to December 1932, together comprising 1,419 pages, reveals that less than 5 % of the text deals with the Atlantic Coast region.<sup>88</sup> In other words, more than 95 % of the text in these newsletters dealt with events *outside* the Atlantic Coast region—again defined generously to include the Pis Pis and Siuna mining districts and the Bocay and Upper Coco valleys, and during the period of the most intense Sandinista efforts to integrate the region into the struggle.

These five key types of counterinsurgency text together offer compelling evidence that the Atlantic Coast remained relatively quiescent during the same period that Las Segovias boiled over in a campesino-based popular rebellion and that the great majority of Costeños followed political paths that did not include supporting Sandino.

### The potentially revolutionary moment of 1931

The most important exception came with the EDSN’s the first major offensive into the heart of the region, and the most dramatic and popularly remembered: General Pedro Blandón’s attack on Puerto Cabezas and its environs in April 1931, which ended in Blandón’s death and an ambiguous defeat for the rebels. Driven back to Las Segovias after failing to spark the hoped-for uprising, the expedition also

<sup>86</sup> J. Marston, Record of Events for July 1930, Eastern Area, 31 July 1930, RG127/202/2, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1930B-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1930B-p1.html).

<sup>87</sup> E. E. Larson, B-2 Report, Managua, 1 Aug. 1930, RG127/43A/4.

<sup>88</sup> See [www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/GNNNewslettersHome.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/GNNPgs/GNNNewslettersHome.html).

prompted a major shift in US policy abandoning continued military protection of “American lives and property” in Nicaragua.<sup>89</sup>

When Sandino began planning for the operation in late 1930, the revolutionary moment seemed ripe. Worldwide economic depression had hammered the fruit, lumber, and mining industries across the circum-Caribbean, throwing thousands of resident and migrant laborers out of work and causing major disruptions for many Costeño families and communities. The US Marines were drawing down and transferring field operations to the institution they had created and nurtured for nearly four years, the Guardia Nacional, whose constitutionality was arguable and whose loyalties seemed uncertain, especially among enlisted men. On 31 March, a devastating earthquake left Managua in ruins, killing 10,000 people and adding to the sense of impending dramatic social rupture. Across Central America, labor, radical, and revolutionary movements pushed their organizing efforts full throttle, evinced in particular by the ill-fated Communist uprising in El Salvador in January 1932. If there was ever a time for a Sandinista breakthrough, this was it.

Determined to bring his armed protest into the maw of the beast of US imperialism, Sandino hoped to take Puerto Cabezas, home to Bragmans Bluff Lumber Company and site of the country’s largest and most valuable US properties. A foraging and recruiting expedition down the Río Coco led by Col. Abraham Rivera preceded the offensive.<sup>90</sup> Sandinista propaganda sheets first appeared along the Lower Río Coco and in the streets of Puerto Cabezas in February, though the two-month-old Spanish-language manifesto was addressed not to Costeños but to Nicaraguan workers and campesinos.<sup>91</sup> A second scouting and foraging expedition, led by Gen. Pedrón in the Tungla and El Gallo districts, was undertaken in late February and March.<sup>92</sup>

In an event that later became seared into Costeño popular memory, on March 31 (the same day as the Managua earthquake), General Blandón ordered the beheading of Moravian minister, Karl Bregenzer, at Musawas near the mouth of the Biltigne River on the Río Waspuk.<sup>93</sup> Accusing the German missionary of being an American

<sup>89</sup> Sec. State Stimson to U.S. Minister, Managua, 16 April 1931, in United States Department of State (1926–1931: II: 808) and *passim*, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p3.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p3.html); see also Macaulay (1985:198–199).

<sup>90</sup> Telegram, Navy Dept. to State Dept., 27 Jan. 1931, USDS 317.115/B73; J. Marston, Depredations of the ‘bandit’ group on the Wanks River, Bluefields, 2 Feb. 1931, NA127/200/file E; C. R. Darrah, Patrol Report, Puerto Cabezas, 3 Feb. 1931, NA127/202/14, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p1.html), and H. Stent, Intelligence, Puerto Cabezas, 20 Feb. 1931, NA127/43A/14, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p2.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p2.html).

<sup>91</sup> W. W. Benson, Transmittal of copies of the Sandino Proclamation found in CUM, Puerto Cabezas, 4 Feb. 1931, NA127/200/file E, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p1.html). Actually the first evidence of EDSN handbills on the East Coast came during Sandino’s yearlong sojourn to Mexico, in October 1929; see Sandino Situation, Major Fred T. Cruse, Military Attaché, San José, Costa Rica, 11 Nov. 1929, NA165/77/box 2653, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1929B-p2.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1929B-p2.html).

<sup>92</sup> J. Marston, Conditions in the Eastern Area, Puerto Cabezas, 18 March 1931, NA127/202/file 34, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p2.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p2.html).

<sup>93</sup> On Bregenzer’s well-documented murder, see the letter of his wife Elizabeth Bregenzer to Dr. S. H. Gapp, 22 April 1931, Moravian Church Archives, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p3.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p3.html); see also Somoza García (1936: 220–222) (listed under 7 April 1931, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p3.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p3.html)), and Wunderlich (1989: chap. 5).

spy, and in keeping with Sandino's express desire to rid the zone of its "priests" (a clear reference to the Moravians), Blandón transformed Bregenger into a martyr and alienated many Costeños from Sandino's cause.<sup>94</sup> Equally alienating for many was the spectacular violence against Americans and "collaborators" that accompanied the offensive; altogether, the Sandinistas butchered seventeen civilians during the brief offensive (eight US citizens, four "Jamaicans," and five others, including Bregenger).<sup>95</sup> Blandón's own martyrdom two weeks later, soon followed by the military defeat of the rebel offensive, seems an ironically fitting coda to the expedition, which failed to generate the hoped-for mass uprising among working-class Costeños. Most receptive to the offensive were working-class Spanish-speaking Western Nicaraguans, comprising roughly half the district's population. But given the lightning-like nature of the incursion and the Guardia's aggressive response, this nascent local support soon dissipated—support that rekindled in later EDSN offensives, but never reached a mass critical enough to threaten the stability of the regime.

Further north, in early 1931, the Guardia began receiving reports of Sandinista organizing among the Miskitu on the lower Río Coco, an initiative led by Col. Abraham Rivera and Gen. Adolfo Cockburn. Of mixed English and Miskitu parentage, Cockburn, like Rivera, was a political "big man" among local Miskitu and a key cultural intermediary between the EDSN and Miskitu on the Lower Coco. Owner of a farm called Pitkira near Sacklin, Cockburn had been elected Deputy in the National Assembly and secretly commissioned as a general in Sandino's army—the only EDSN officer to hold a position in the national government. In spring 1931, he was reportedly distributing plundered loot among the Miskitu from his small store at Pitkira.<sup>96</sup> This Cockburn-and-Rivera organizing drive on the Lower Río Coco in spring 1931 generated what was probably the most sustained community support the EDSN ever received in the Atlantic Coast. If it is difficult to penetrate the veil of military reportage to gauge the nature and extent of Miskitu receptivity, it appears to have been based less on ideological adherence to Sandino's program than on personal loyalties to Cockburn and Rivera. Whatever EDSN support Cockburn had cultivated among the Miskitu around Sacklin evaporated after the Guardia killed him in October under highly suspicious circumstances.<sup>97</sup> From late 1931 to mid-1932, a series of hard-fought EDSN offensives rekindled some Costeño support around Puerto Cabezas and elsewhere, especially among unemployed Spanish-

<sup>94</sup> Wunderlich (1989: chap. 5); Brooks (1997: 354–370); Sandino to Abraham Rivera, 21 Feb. 1931, in Sandino (1984: II: 163), at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p2.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p2.html).

<sup>95</sup> List of Foreign Civilians Killed Near Puerto Cabezas, US Special Service Squadron, 5 May, 1931, Sec. Navy General Correspondence, 1925–1940, Box 2008, file EF49, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p5.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p5.html). On Costeños' negative reception of EDSN spectacular violence, see Brooks (1997: 356–370).

<sup>96</sup> J. Marston, Intelligence Report on Activities of Sandino, Blandon, and Cockburn, Bluefields, 4 May 1931, NA127/200/file E, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p5.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931A-p5.html).

<sup>97</sup> E. J. Surprenant, Report of Death of Adolfo Cockburn, Kisalaya, 4 Oct. 1931, and associated statements and endorsements, NA127/43A/30, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931B-p3.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931B-p3.html).

speaking wage laborers, sparking deep concerns among some counterinsurgency actors. But by the end of the year, these Sandinista surges, too, had fizzled out.<sup>98</sup>

## Conclusion

The closing rhetorical appeal in Sandino's forgotten Atlantic Coast manifesto of June 1931 proclaims: "Our Army, which is composed of Negroes, Indians, whites, etc. etc., and without bias of races or classes, is dedicated to implanting the principles of human fraternity in Nicaragua." A huge conceptual leap separates the vaguely defined "principle of human fraternity" (and its mystical precursor here, "the Universal Commune") from the far more specific concepts of inalienable rights, citizenship, and an accountable state. The manifesto continues:

"This Supreme Command asks for the ineffable moral and material support of all of the Nicaraguan People. Our Army understands that our people have been betrayed by their caudillo leaders and that, for this reason, *they have remained indifferent [ha permanecido indiferente]* before the calls to action that previous Manifestos like this one have made" (my emphasis).

In some ways this is a remarkable admission. Read against the grain, Sandino explicitly acknowledges the overwhelming response of Costeños to his carefully planned offensives in the first half of 1931: *indifference*. This is precisely the argument I am making here—though Sandino attributes that indifference to "betrayal by their caudillo leaders" rather than a fundamental conflict of cultural values and material interests.

The manifesto reaches its final appeal: "Our Army is not a caudillo army, and is composed from the most humble of its soldiers to its Supreme Chief, all are workers and peasants and without prejudice in regard to [social] class, technocrat-intellectual [*científicos*] or religion." It is an oddly negative closing with its tone of denial and protestation: I am *not* a caudillo, we are *not* prejudiced—this is not the stuff of great propaganda. Further, most Miskitu and many Costeños saw themselves as neither peasant nor worker—the only two social classes Sandino conceived as fit for inclusion in his army. For all its gestures toward inclusion, it is a peculiarly exclusionary construction. In addition, judging from his conversations with José Román and his writings, the EDSN *did* hold a clear position on the religion of the Moravians and Miskitu paganism. These are but some of the closing appeal's more obvious problems. Little wonder the manifesto was forgotten: as an appeal to Costeños, it is a disaster.

"There might be isolated instances of individuals expressing a favorable attitude toward the assistance of Sandino and his efforts," reported Major A. B. Sage from Bluefields in April 1928, "but there is no widespread feeling in this direction."<sup>99</sup> His comments apply to the Coast as a whole for most of the war, with some local

<sup>98</sup> See [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931B-p1.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1931B-p1.html) and the 12 web pages to follow.

<sup>99</sup> Major A. B. Sage, Intelligence Report of Incidents, 8 April 1928, NA127/197/1, at [www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1928A-p3.html](http://www.sandinorebellion.com/EastCoast/EC1928A-p3.html).

exceptions during parts of 1931–1932. This was not the case in the sparsely populated Bocay or Upper Coco valleys, the disputed zone between the ríos Coco and Patuca in Honduras, or the mining districts, most of whose inhabitants remained decidedly pro-Sandinista for virtually the entire war—zones that all lay outside the Atlantic Coast region defined in sociocultural terms. As for the Creoles around Bluefields and the West Indian migrant labor communities around Puerto Cabezas and elsewhere, no one argues they supported Sandino, rendering the question moot. Instead of taking up arms against US imperialism, disgruntled Creoles, West Indians, and Miskitu Indians opted to engage in the various forms of collective action surveyed above. Secure and dignified labor, a living wage, social peace, cultural and political autonomy, and at the core, the rights of citizenship before the state and foreign capital—these were the specific aspirations to which political appeals to Costeños would most likely resonate. Denunciations of imperialism and Wall Street bankers and promotion of “the Universal Commune” and the “principle of human fraternity” in the end gained little traction.

In some ways, this was an entirely predictable set of responses for communities so dependent on local circuits of transnational, mostly US capital. Unlike Sandino, the vast majority of Costeños did not want to expel the US Marines or destroy US capitalism in Nicaragua. In a grand Enlightenment tradition, many sought instead to strike a bargain and *modus vivendi* with capital and the state, their main objective to exercise their full rights of citizenship and achieve genuine equality before the law. Notably, the terms “citizen,” “citizenship,” and “rights” do not appear in Sandino’s Atlantic Coast manifesto, just as they scarcely appear in his oeuvre. Put simply, the patriotic story he told was not about citizenship. In contrast, Costeños’ struggles in the banana plantations, mahogany camps, railroads, and loading docks appear inspired by locally inflected appropriations of Enlightenment notions of the inalienable rights of citizens before the state and capital. One might argue that Costeños were thus engaged in more “modern” forms of struggle than Sandino’s, which discursively hinged on defending Nicaraguan national honor and the rights of the nation vis-à-vis other nations. But this would be to privilege liberal-capitalist republican forms of modernity as “more modern” than other paths.<sup>100</sup> It is perhaps better said that Sandino’s and Costeños’ sets of grievances and aspirations were very differently constituted and expressed divergent visions of their respective communities’ past, present, and future. In these times of crisis and upheaval, for brief moments, these differences were bridged and common ground forged. But this was the exception. More commonly the process of war and upheaval brought those differences into even sharper relief. For Costeños, those differences mostly bred *indifference*—for a committed revolutionary like Sandino, perhaps the most confounding enemy of all.

Of course, this was not the first revolutionary movement to try and fail to expand beyond its cultural heartland, or the last. If one were to put Che Guevara’s iconic 1967 Bolivian debacle on one pole of a spectrum gauging the plausibility or likelihood of success, Sandino’s Atlantic Coast offensives of 1931–1932 would

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<sup>100</sup> For a provocative discussion of political-epistemic alternatives to historically dominant modes of Western modernity, see Mignolo (2011).



belong somewhere in the middle. Che parachuted into Bolivia blind, turned himself into a martyr, and in the process laid to rest his own “foco” theory of revolution. Sandino, in contrast, laid a foundation of sorts and worked hard to build on it. His was a years-long project, and in 1931–1932, he came relatively close. But in the end, the chasm separating the Atlantic Coast’s cultural geographies of grievance, aspiration, and struggle from those of Western Nicaragua and Las Segovias proved too vast to bridge.

In the preface to what is arguably the most theoretically sophisticated college-level English-language world history textbook on the market today, authors Robert Tignor et al. identify five “guiding principles” shaping their analysis. The fourth of these consists of “an emphasis on connections and what we call disconnections across societal and cultural boundaries... [and] the resistances of peoples living within and outside societies to connections that threatened to put them in subordinate positions or to rob them of their independence.”<sup>101</sup> This essay has shown that for a complex of historically grounded reasons, most Costeños responded to Sandino’s rebellion in ways consistent with their historical struggles to minimize their subordination and maximize their autonomy and independence vis-à-vis the “Spaniards” of the West, which came to include the political project of Sandinismo. Of course, all social movements and armed rebellions waged in pursuit of liberation and independence ultimately confront a host of such geo-cultural borders and boundaries, the characteristics of which vary as widely as the capacity of such movements to surmount them. The specific contours of each case must be examined on its own merits, in light of all extant empirical evidence. Readers are thus invited to interrogate the nearly 2,300 pages of documents archived online on this topic, to judge for themselves whether this historical record—as fragmentary, partial, and flawed as it is—supports the interpretations and arguments advanced here. Or—and this is the beauty of such open-access online archives—to pursue questions that constraints of space and imagination have left unexamined here.

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<sup>101</sup> Tignor et al. (2011: xxvii).

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