

## THE BRIGADISTA EXPERIENCE IN THE NICARAGUAN LITERACY CRUSADE 1980

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*Using a broader range of primary sources than is customarily employed, this paper aims to contribute to understanding of the experiences of the young literacy teachers (brigadistas) in the 1980 Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade. The diaries and essays used in the study provide a more complex account of the brigadista experience than can be found in existing celebratory literature on the Crusade. Three aspects of the brigadista experience in particular will be examined; the pressure young people were under to participate, the relationships between brigadistas and their rural families and the realities of work undertaken by brigadistas in the rural setting.*

*In every home a classroom  
Every table a school desk  
Every Nicaraguan a teacher!<sup>1</sup>*

This was one of the many slogans of the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade (CNA) that was held in 1980 less than seven months after the victory of the Sandinista revolution in July 1979. The slogan reflects the ideals and even some of the practicalities of the campaign. The message was that learning was possible anywhere and that every person has something worthwhile to give and to teach others.

On the eve of the revolution, Nicaragua lay in ruins after years of armed conflict and a long history of corruption and foreign interference.<sup>2</sup> Nicaragua lacked infrastructure, it was heavily in debt but still the new leaders pursued this ambitious campaign through the goodwill of tens of thousands of volunteers, generous international aid, and a willingness of organizers and participants alike, to adapt to challenging situations. Literacy classes were held in people's homes, in factories, under trees near a family's corn plot- anywhere there was space. Classes were taught by anyone who could read and write. They were housewives, factory workers, members of the army, policemen and women and school children. Of the approximately 100,000 literacy teachers 60,000 were students, the majority high school students, who, due to their mobility, were sent out into the countryside to teach their rural compatriots to read and write. Illiteracy was 50% on the eve of the crusade. It was much higher in rural areas and higher still among the female population. After five months illiteracy was reduced to 12.9% and Nicaragua was awarded with the UNESCO literacy prize that year.<sup>3</sup>

The young literacy volunteers were called *brigadistas* (brigade members) and formed part of the People's Literacy Army (EPA)<sup>4</sup>. Each belonged to a squadron of around 30 students and in the majority of cases were from the same school or institution and were of the same sex. They left the cities for places throughout the nation; to the mountains, to the hot lowlands of the Pacific, to the steamy jungles of the Atlantic Coast.<sup>5</sup> Some traveled for days to reach their destinations, first in caravans of buses and trucks and then on horse back or dugout canoe or on foot. Many *brigadistas* were sent to isolated places that would be cut off from the rest of

the country during the wet season. Some places had no electricity or running water, no schools, healthcare or sanitation. Many of the places these young Nicaraguan students were sent had been neglected by the central government for decades. As well as teaching their rural compatriots, *brigadistas* would also learn from their adopted families. They would learn how to use a machete, make tortillas, plant and harvest crops and wash clothes in the river. It was hoped that the experience would be mutually beneficial for the inhabitants of two very different worlds.

The CNA was a political project and organizers were quick to define it as such.<sup>6</sup> The campaign was seen as a way of uniting the nation and inviting all citizens to take part in the process of transforming society. It was designed to create “the new man” and “new woman”; to facilitate a shift in thinking where people were encouraged to think and act with the logic of the “logic of the majority” in mind.<sup>7</sup> Learning to read and write was to be part of the process of conscientización (consciousness raising), whereby newly literate students would be given the skills to identify the reasons for their oppression and begin to work towards finding solutions to those problems.<sup>8</sup> For the *brigadistas*, the experience of living and working alongside the rural population was to be a learning process also. It was considered very important for *brigadistas* to be involved in a positive program after so many years of violence and after persecution by the National Guard when in Nicaragua it was virtually a crime to be young.<sup>9</sup> The Crusade was undertaken with such urgency in order to capitalize on the momentum and euphoria of the revolutionary victory, where people had real hope that they were working towards building a better future for Nicaragua. The Crusade was seen to be a way of maintaining and encouraging support for the revolution and as a means of disseminating information about the ideals and objectives of the Sandinistas. It would also allow organizers to gather detailed information about the state of health, education, infrastructure and housing in order to begin the arduous task of reconstruction.<sup>10</sup>

This paper aims to contribute to an understanding of the experiences of the young *brigadistas* during the five month Literacy Crusade by making use of primary sources that have seldom been used to date. Scholarship on the CNA has tended to focus on the Crusade as a way of transforming political culture, as an awakening of political consciousness or as a pedagogical project rather than focusing on the experiences of the *brigadistas* themselves. Studies that refer to the *brigadistas* generally use the same few sources to illustrate their experiences. Most sources on the CNA use Sheryl Hirshon’s *And Also Teach them to Read* and Valerie Miller’s *Between Struggle and Hope. The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade*<sup>11</sup>. For this paper, however, I make use of a broader range of primary documents than is customarily employed.<sup>12</sup> The principal sources are six *brigadista* field diaries<sup>13</sup> and a collection of essays by *brigadistas* reflecting on their experiences during the campaign.<sup>14</sup> Two personal testimonies are also used; *El Abridistado* by José Danilo Centeno and *Apuntes de un Brigadista* by Carlos Tello Díaz.<sup>15</sup>

These personal accounts provide a deeper insight into aspects of the *brigadista* experience in much of the official literature on the crusade. Three aspects of *brigadista* experience in particular are the focus of this study; the extent to which young Nicaraguans were pressured to join the Crusade, the extent to which they were integrated into the working life of their rural host families and the relationships between *brigadistas* and the *campesinos* they were teaching to read and write.

The CNA is a continued source of pride for the Nicaraguan people. The overwhelming success of the campaign has been documented in numerous publications. Unsurprisingly, such literature focuses on the positives aspects of the Campaign and the benefits for both *brigadistas* and their rural students.<sup>16</sup> The primary accounts of the diaries and essays often provide a different perspective on the official view. An example of this is the extent to which *brigadistas* were pressured to join the Crusade. In much of the celebratory literature on the CNA it is assumed that participation in the Crusade was voluntary.<sup>17</sup> A closer reading of additional primary sources, indicate, however, that young people were placed under incredible moral, peer and public pressure to join and remain part of the Crusade. It is also often assumed that *brigadistas* would work alongside rural families during the day and then teach in the evening, yet due to

the *brigadista's* incredible workload, or due to an absence of expectations by *campesino* families; for some *brigadistas*, work was only a small part of their experience. Finally, the CNA has often been presented as a challenging but wonderful experience where mutually beneficial and comfortable relationships formed between *brigadistas* and their rural host families. While it is clear that many formed enduring relationships, some *brigadistas* were unable to move past their prejudices about rural people.

Curiously, there were considerable differences between the ways *brigadistas* wrote about their experiences in the field diaries and the essays, even though they were written less than two years apart. I provide a brief analysis of the political context in which the two sources were written and the audience and purpose of the given sources in an attempt to explain such discrepancies.

The *brigadistas* were students aged 12 years or over who had finished at least sixth grade of primary school. The majority were High School students although there were university students and a small number had just completed primary school.<sup>18</sup> Involvement in the Crusade was officially voluntary; participants were often referred to as young volunteers, however the pressures to participate were enormous. Young people were placed under considerable moral, peer and public pressure to join the campaign. In the official literature, such as the *Manual del Brigadista*, it was stressed that *brigadistas* must have parental permission to participate in the crusade.<sup>19</sup> Yet four of the *brigadistas* who entered the essay competition did not, initially at least, have the permission of their parents to join the campaign and in spite of parental concerns, some young Nicaraguans joined regardless. *Brigadista* Hugo noted that such was the reluctance of parents to let their children take part in the campaign, that his school organized a special Catholic mass where the *responsable*<sup>20</sup> of his squadron spoke to the mothers to try and convince them to let their children go.<sup>21</sup>

During the five months of the campaign, normal primary, secondary and university classes were suspended so that students could work as *brigadistas* and to free up regular teachers to work as supervisors and coordinators. Yet, for non- participants this was not to be an extended summer holiday. Involvement in the Literacy Crusade actually counted towards completion of the academic year. For some, this was the reason they chose to participate. *Brigadista* Fernando said, 'Well, I'm just here for my grades, I don't like all the political stuff. I just want to get through so I pass.'<sup>22</sup> For some *brigadistas*, the decision to participate in the campaign was motivated by practical concerns rather than through personal desire or ideological belief.

There was also considerable moral pressure on *brigadistas* to participate since a good part of the political meanings inscribed within the Crusade saw the mobilization as a means to honour the lives of those who had fought and died to free Nicaragua from dictatorial rule. This very sentiment is expressed in the full title of the Crusade, *The National Literacy Crusade: Heroes and Martyrs of the Revolution*. Crusade director Father Fernando Cardenal wrote in the conclusion of his essay on the objectives of the crusade, 'I believe that we should feel an obligation to our martyrs, I believe that we should never forget that 50,000 Nicaraguans died to begin what we are now intending to achieve, and what is worse than death is to die for nothing.'<sup>23</sup> Even more forceful was his comment that, 'We believe that it will be a national campaign in two ways, part of the nation will be teaching and part of the nation will be learning. Anyone who is not on one side or the other will have to consider himself a traitor to the fallen.'<sup>24</sup> It was also common practice during the crusade to name brigades or squadrons after fallen comrades, for example, the *Escuadra Javier Cabezas Lacayo* named after a 14 year old guerrilla fighter who died during the insurrection.

The Crusade was heavily publicized before it began in March 1980 and it was impossible, in the cities at least, to avoid hearing about the upcoming literacy mobilization. Information was disseminated and the importance of the campaign was promoted by radio and television, on billboards, advertisements in magazines, through public meetings and through information sessions run at schools and universities. The national lottery included images related to the CNA on the lottery tickets as did boxes of matches.<sup>25</sup> One *brigadista* recalls taking part in a march to raise awareness of the Crusade and to promote it, taking

part in a mock funeral, symbolically laying ignorance to rest. 'One time we "buried ignorance" we made a box with ignorance inside and went around everybody. Then we made a coffin we later buried.'<sup>26</sup> Many *brigadistas* committed considerable time and energy to raising funds and collecting supplies for the Crusade. Juan remembers an entertaining means of revenue-raising. He was involved in "kidnapping" the local policeman and demanding a ransom of pencils, money or notebooks. Sheryl Hirshon writes, 'The propaganda campaign built; marches, hikes, fund-raising dances, slogan contests, music- and, nourished by the kids' own enthusiasm, the needed response began to come.'<sup>27</sup> The constant barrage of messages urging young people to participate and the sense that it was their moral obligation to do so indicates the immense pressure that *brigadistas* were under to become involved in the CNA.

The pressure to stay in the crusade was also significant. The responsibility for the success or failure seemed to lie squarely on the shoulders of the *brigadistas*. A lack of commitment could jeopardize the entire undertaking. *Brigadista* Francisco recalls the rumours spread that *brigadistas* would be murdered and the *campesino* family would mistreat them. He said, 'to tell the truth, hearing these rumours made me a little bit scared and I wanted to give up, but no, I kept going, because I knew if everyone got scared the campaign would be a disaster.'<sup>28</sup> Those *brigadistas* who, due to homesickness, laziness, immaturity, illness or fear, left the campaign, were called "deserters". *Brigadista* José Danilo Centeno describes how a list of deserters would be displayed in the coordinators office for all to see. Francisco was unable to join the crusade initially due to illness. He felt bad that his friends had already left and he was, 'relaxing at home like a coward.' When his mother went to pick up his uniform he had already been placed on the list of deserters.<sup>29</sup> This harsh assessment of those who were unable or unwilling to see the crusade through to its completion undoubtedly put pressure on other *brigadistas* to stay.

In spite of the immense pressures on *brigadistas* to stay, it is unsurprising that some *brigadistas* left before the five months of the campaign was completed due to the difficulties inherent in living and working in isolated rural areas. These young people had to deal with challenging living conditions, illness, homesickness and fear of attack from counterrevolutionaries while being far from the safety and comfort of home. *Brigadistas* were often shocked by the impoverished conditions of rural Nicaraguans. *Brigadista* Maria Pérez Valle encountered inhumane conditions; 'There were eight children completely nude. The pigs and cows were living with the people. There was no difference between the animals and the children. The only water was dirty.'<sup>30</sup> For Silvio, 'Night times in the mountains were unbearable. The mosquitoes didn't let you sleep. The food wasn't very good, we sometimes got to eat meat when they caught a *guilla*, deer or armadillo. We had to resign ourselves to these degrading conditions.'<sup>31</sup> It was reported that in the early stages of the campaign a number of *brigadistas* abandoned their teaching posts due to hunger.<sup>32</sup> One boy recalls having to sleep outside for lack of room in the shop he was to be living in.<sup>33</sup> Rómulo Sánchez wrote of the terrible problem of diarrhea that affected most people where he was placed and also the problem of malnutrition. One child had an enormous belly, 'I don't know how many parasites the poor thing would have.'<sup>34</sup>

Another reality of rural life was the constant problem of illness. There was no medicine and many rural areas had no access to doctors or clinics let along hospitals. In the wet season it was often impossible for people to leave their communities because of the terrible conditions of the roads. If they were sick they had to endure the pain and hope the illness would pass. A campaign supervisor commented,

*The majority of the volunteers get intestinal infections from the water they drink and continue drinking. Some kids ended up as veritable human sieves thanks to the efficient daily labour of the fleas and ticks that have clearly decided not to cooperate with the crusade.'*<sup>35</sup>

*Lepra de Montaña* (mountain leprosy) was common in rural areas; an affliction that would leave sores on the victims face that would refuse to heal. Glenda Isabel suffered from an ongoing intestinal infection that often had her doubled over in pain.<sup>36</sup> Ariel spent four days in bed after being bitten by a bug no one could identify.<sup>37</sup>

Not only did *brigadistas* leave the comfort of their own homes to spend five months living and working in difficult conditions, many *brigadistas* express considerable fear of attack by counterrevolutionaries (The *Contra*). A deliberate strategy of the counterrevolutionaries was to spread rumours of the dangers *brigadistas* and their host families would face during the campaign. Such scare mongering was designed to derail the Crusade by discouraging the participation of the rural population and making parents reluctant to send their children into the arms of the hated former National Guardsmen (the core of the *Contra* forces) who had a long history of brutality in Nicaragua<sup>38</sup>. Enrique remembered being frightened at night time. 'We slept in the corridor and because of the fear that the *Contra* would arrive - we barely slept.'<sup>39</sup>

The fears *brigadistas* and their families had regarding their safety were well founded. In the months just after the revolutionary victory, strategic attacks sent a very clear message about how the *Contras* intended to defeat the Sandinistas. Targets were community leaders, the spokespeople for the mass organizations, and teachers. A clandestine radio station delivered threats via the air waves. While it was not until 1981 that the Reagan administration initiated its covert war on the Sandinistas, even in 1980 Nicaraguans were being attacked by former National Guardsmen in incursions from neighbouring Honduras. It is estimated that around 6,000 former Guardsmen had fled Nicaragua after July 1979. During the CNA, 9 *brigadistas* were assassinated by counterrevolution and on May 13 1980, close to the Honduran border, *brigadista* Georgino Andrade was murdered by former National Guardsmen. The incident was widely publicized and rather than deterring participants of the campaign, it actually spurred them on. Georgino Andrade became another martyr of the revolution and it was thought that success in the campaign would be a way of honouring a life lost and increased people's determination to continue the struggle.<sup>40</sup> At the time of the attack Interior Minister Tomas Borge claimed that there were at least 30 military training camps in Honduras.<sup>41</sup> It is clear that the dangers facing *brigadistas* in the CNA were very real, yet most of the violence committed was confined to territory on the Honduran border and many *brigadistas* lived far from these areas. A careful reading of field diaries and other primary sources indicates that the pressures to join and to stay in the Crusade were enormous.

Central to the consciousness raising process was that *brigadistas* were to live with *campesino* families and participate in their daily lives by working alongside them. The young *brigadistas* would experience the realities and struggles of the lives of their rural compatriots, and they would see the extent of their poverty and understand the legacy of a system that ignored the needs of a significant sector of the population. The official campaign literature suggests that during the day *brigadistas* would work with their host families in whatever activity they were involved in and that they would conduct classes in the evening when people were free to attend.<sup>42</sup> The diaries and additional primary sources indicate, however, that *brigadista's* experiences working varied considerably. Many *brigadistas* mention helping with various activities such as milking the cows, making tortillas, fetching water and firewood, planting crops and picking coffee. It is clear that many *brigadistas* learned new skills and did help out with household chores and work in the fields, yet the extent to which *brigadistas* contributed their labour varied greatly depending on additional CNA responsibilities, the expectations of host families and individual work ethic.

In the *Manual del Brigadista* one of the responsibilities of the *brigadista* was to 'Make time each day to work alongside the *campesino* and *ama de casa* (housewife) - facilitating a better integration that will enable you to overcome any possible resistance to learning.'<sup>43</sup> Given all of the other responsibilities the *brigadistas*, helping their host families with chores would certainly not be their main activity of the day. *Brigadistas* were expected to prepare for and conduct classes, which involved studying the literacy materials and the political topics for discussion. Most *brigadistas* note that they spent time during the day

to prepare for their literacy classes. Unlike the 1961 Cuban Literacy Campaign, where *brigadistas* would teach only one small class, many Nicaraguan *brigadistas* were often in charge of several classes.<sup>44</sup> The classes often had to be conducted at different times to accommodate varying schedules or students may have been grouped according to age or ability.<sup>45</sup> Some *brigadistas* were also required to travel considerable distances to take classes in neighbouring communities some several hours away on foot. They were also expected to attend squadron meetings and workshops and write regularly in their field diaries. In addition *brigadistas* were required to undertake investigations about the local community such as collecting local histories and folklore, collecting examples of local flora and recording information about archeological sites and artifacts. *Brigadistas* also contributed to community projects. Robert Arnove writes that during the campaign *brigadistas* assisted in the construction of 96 schools and 2862 latrines.<sup>46</sup>

Some *brigadistas* mention their involvement in activities as though they were isolated incidents. Francisco writes that his host family was insistent that he did not work much because, 'I would get too much sun, become stupid and not be able to finish my studies.'<sup>47</sup> For the first few months Nubia did little in the *milpa* (family corn crop). The main chore she did was carry firewood and huge bunches of bananas back to the house. She said, 'The families insisted that we didn't work on these things, that it was their job.'<sup>48</sup> Pilar explained that she helped out so that class could start earlier, suggesting that she contributed to the workload in order to facilitate the classes rather than as an expected or regular duty. She also mentions that 'one day' she helped to scare the birds away.<sup>49</sup> Sheryl Hirshon provided numerous examples of the *brigadistas* in her charge who avoided working alongside their host families; 'Aside from one or two, I had yet to see any *brigadista* actually out in the fields working. "I have allergies, they swore, or, "The sun gives me a headache," or, most unanswerable of all, "My family hasn't got any land and I'm not gonna donate my time to the *Patrón*."<sup>50</sup>

The Literacy Crusade has typically been portrayed in official celebratory literature as a meeting of two worlds where relationships were positive and mutually beneficial even if, to begin with, relationships were strained.<sup>51</sup> The primary sources used in this study provide many examples of *brigadistas* writing about the very positive experiences they had with their *campesino* host families and speaking of the great reluctance to leave at the end of the five months. It is clear that valuable lessons were learned and lasting relationships were formed, yet there are some examples that suggest a lack of mutual respect between the *brigadistas* and their host families and some instances where it appears that participants were unable to overcome existing prejudices.

When the Crusade was coming to an end many *brigadistas* were sad to leave their new families. Equally, *campesino* families were sad to see *brigadistas* return to the cities. Sheryl Hirshon wrote as her squadron was preparing to return to the city, 'For those staying behind, it would be more wake than party. The loss of a now-loved brother, son, teacher. An end to the laughter and richness these strange city kids had brought into their lives.' She also reported that the *campesino* families spoke with pride of the young *brigadistas* who were living with them and during her visits to check whether *brigadistas* were pulling their weight around the house she noted, 'the families, not knowing exactly what was expected of their *brigadista*, tended to be protective of him in questioning.'<sup>52</sup> She writes that most *brigadistas* maintained contact with their adopted *campesino* families. 'Most of the *brigadistas* have been back to visit their *campesino* families at least once, but the many tasks the revolution has demanded of its youth... has left precious little time for the long trip into the country.'<sup>53</sup> In many cases, *brigadistas* refer to the *campesino* family as '*padres adoptivos*' (adopted parents) which suggests a relationship more intimate and more enduring than a friend or *compañero* (comrade).

There were examples of *brigadistas* who were unable to shake their prejudices about rural people. Arnoldo wrote, 'The peasant is hard to deal with, you try to teach him but he won't listen to you and he gets angry.'<sup>54</sup> Glenda Isabel wrote quite patronizingly of her student's enthusiasm to learn; 'My students are like excited children who come to take the class. They take good care of their books and workbooks and some

men looked for *costalitos* embroidered to put them in.<sup>55</sup> She also writes about the time she caught the woman she was living with, Doña Yolanda, reading her diary. 'I don't know why the *campesinos* where I live have the bad habit of touching everything and looking through my things.'<sup>56</sup>

In a study of the degree of support that was fostered by *brigadistas* of various classes, as a result of their participation in the Literacy Crusade, there were instances reported where *brigadistas* were arrogant and talked down to people.<sup>57</sup> In recognition of these problems and in attempt to rectify them the *Juventud Sandinista* (Sandinista youth mass organization) disseminated a pamphlet titled, "What's going on with the Sandinista Youth anyway?"<sup>58</sup>

Some rural families were initially reluctant to support the campaign and were suspicious of the *brigadistas*. One *brigadista* claims that the *campesino* family he stayed with thought that the *brigadistas* were communists. He writes, 'we made them understand that we were good Catholics like them.'<sup>59</sup> Another *brigadista* was asked if he was Cuban and if he believed in god. For the *campesinos* associating *brigadistas* and the Literacy Crusade with Cubans was often quite negative.<sup>60</sup> 17 year old Maria Elena wrote, 'At first it was very difficult. The people seemed to have a certain fear of us because there were rumours circulating that we were communists; if people we were going to teach had chickens or pigs that we would eat them, and such nonsense. It was clear that the peasants were afraid of us.' Unfortunately there are few sources on the CNA from the *campesino* perspective, making analysis difficult. Many accounts by peasants focus on the impact that becoming literate had on their lives rather than how they felt about the *brigadistas*. The accounts are often quite short, extracts of interviews or short letters rather than the more sustained accounts of the *brigadistas*.

There was quite a difference in the attitudes towards *campesinos* in the two principle sources used in this study and a general pattern emerged. By considering the political and social context in which the accounts were written and thus the reasons that such differences may have occurred, will contribute to a broader understanding of the *brigadista* experience. When first reading the *brigadista's* field diaries I was struck by the absence of comments made about their host families. This was in contrast with the accounts by *brigadistas* in the essay competition where *campesinos* were referred to more and were a feature of their experience. In the diaries *brigadistas* rarely spoke of the families they were staying with nor did they make comparisons their own city existence and the lives of boys and girls their age. Their commentary tended to centre on their own difficulties; the pains and inconveniences of traveling from place to place, of having to sleep on hard planks for beds and being served the same food at every meal. The *brigadistas* do not seem to be making overt connections between their struggles and the daily realities of the *campesinos*. Glenda Isabel Morales Velásquez never laments the conditions that her compatriots are accustomed to, in her diary, unless it is in relation to her own suffering. In his diary José de la Cruz Baca, emphasizes the quality of the oral history interviews he takes and whether it is worthwhile for the national project. He makes no observations about the ways that recalling these experiences may have been upsetting to the interviewees, nor does he comment on the content of the stories themselves. If he was shocked or upset or felt compassion for the interviewees, it is not recorded.

It is possible that this lack of empathy was be due to the instructions given in the *brigadista* manual which indicated that the diaries were to be reflections on the teaching process, and a stimulus for discussion when the brigade met for progress workshops. It also may be that the *Brigada de Rescate Histórico* had quite different experiences during the crusade given that they were interacting with many more people than ordinary *brigadistas*. It is possible that for the *brigadistas* working in this program, their more transient existence meant that their relationships did not have the same chance to develop and were therefore less enduring. The incongruence between the *brigadista's* accounts of their interpersonal relationships in the diaries and the supposed egalitarian spirit of the crusade suggests that the city/ country relationships were not always comfortable and positive as is often assumed.

The differences between the attitude towards country people in the diaries and the essay competition have a lot to do I suspect, with their distinct audience and purpose and the political context in which each was written. The diary was a personal reflection, although it was to be shared at meetings with other *brigadistas*. The essay competition was a personal account, but for a broader audience. It was written later on at a time when the rhetoric of the revolution is more likely to have been entrenched in public discourse, and as the competition was a government initiative perhaps the entrants were writing what they considered to be acceptable. The diaries were individualistic, while the essays were more cautious about presenting the author's commitment to the Crusade and to the revolution. Yet it is also possible that *brigadistas* were unable to process the experience while they were living it and it may have taken time and distance to appreciate the meaning of the Crusade. Another possible reason for the difference between the two sources is the political atmosphere in which they were each written. The diaries were written at the time of the campaign (March to August 1980) while the diaries were written the following year. In early 1980 Nicaragua was relatively unified. It had received generous international support for the CNA, had the support of the Catholic Church and while US President Carter was still in office Nicaragua continued to receive aid.<sup>61</sup> Late 1980 and early 1981 saw the emergence of greater divisions from within Nicaragua and an escalation of diplomatic, military and economic aggression from outside the country. Ronald Reagan was inaugurated in January 1981 and made his intentions to destabilize the Sandinista government immediately clear. November of that same year Congress approved \$19 million in aid for the CIA to provide training and support for the *contras*.<sup>62</sup> In October 1980 the Catholic Church withdrew support from the revolution. This reflected an internal split in the church hierarchy, with the papal decree that priests should not become involved in politics. The essays were written at a time of great uncertainty and perhaps those who already supported the revolution felt a greater need to promote and even defend the revolutionary project than did those who were writing diaries during the campaign.

Political culture inflects the ways that people are able to speak about their involvement in the revolution.

An aspect of political culture that seems to have influenced the way *brigadistas* wrote of their experience was that criticism was acceptable and even encouraged. People were invited to participate in discussing their problems and difficulties and becoming involved in finding solutions to the problems. The idea was that people would exercise '*poder popular*' popular power.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, some of the most senior members of the new leadership, fronted up to public meetings to hear what the people wanted and needed. This openness was also reflected in the fact that an opposition newspaper was allowed and that the Government of National Reconstruction, was a transitional government that was made up of members of various groups including the bourgeoisie.<sup>64</sup> The structure of the CNA itself reflected this participatory culture; *brigadistas* were to attend meetings with their squadron leader and were encouraged to identify problems and together work towards solving them. This may explain in part why *brigadistas* felt able to complain and write about how the challenges they faced affected them as individuals.<sup>65</sup>

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Careful readings of *brigadista* field diaries and essays have provided a deeper understanding of aspects of the *brigadista* experience. It is clear that many *brigadistas* were under immense pressure to join the campaign and continue to be part of it in spite of difficulties, illness and danger. From primary accounts it is evident that *brigadistas* were involved in farm work and household chores to varying degrees depending on the attitudes of both the *brigadistas* and their rural host families and the additional responsibilities the young volunteers may have had. Relationships between *brigadistas* and their rural families were not always positive, even by the end of the Crusade, contrary to many official and celebratory accounts of the Crusade.

The political landscape in Nicaragua has changed dramatically since the literacy crusade. After the Sandinistas' electoral loss in 1990 many of the social programs were "rolled back" as Nicaragua embraced neo-liberal economic policy.<sup>66</sup> In the 1990s the public memory of the literacy crusade was virtually erased.

The literacy museum was closed and its contents mysteriously disappeared, never to be recovered.<sup>67</sup> This was part of a broader pattern to erase the memory of the Sandinista period. Since the mid 2000s there has been a revival of interest in the campaign. A new museum was inaugurated in 2005 with one of the main objectives being to preserve the memory of the crusade so that Nicaragua's youth might learn from the spirit of the *brigadistas* of 1980.<sup>68</sup> In 2007, soon after he was inaugurated, FSLN president, Daniel Ortega made a presidential decree that Nicaragua would be free of illiteracy by 19 July 2009, to coincide with the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the triumph of the revolution. The literacy campaign, called 'De Marti a Fidel' employs Cuban designed methodology but shares many similarities with the 1980 Literacy Campaign. It is high school students who are the literacy teachers and campaign celebrations throughout the country use the Literacy Crusade anthem, the same logo and much of the same discourse as the campaign nearly 30 years ago.

It is in this climate of renewed interest that I intend to visit Nicaragua to access the other 56 *brigadista* field diaries that are available in the Universidad de Centroamerica archives in Managua. I also hope to conduct numerous oral history interviews with former *brigadistas* in order to supplement this study. The interviews will, of course, come with their own problems, particularly given the ways that subsequent experiences affect the ways we remember the past. Yet I think that the distance will provide an interesting contrast to the contemporary primary sources. With the essays, diaries and more recent interviews perhaps a clearer picture will emerge of this "meeting of two worlds".<sup>69</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 Cited in R. Arnove, *Education and Revolution in Nicaragua*, New York, Praeger, 1986, p. 19.
- 2 50,000 Nicaraguans lost their lives in the insurrection to free the country from the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the third in the Somoza family dictatorship that spanned four decades. When Somoza fled the country Nicaragua had a \$1.64 billion debt. For details of the Insurrection and its aftermath see G. Black, *Triumph of the People. The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua*, London, Zed Press, 1981.
- 3 The official statistics of the CNA are disputed. The dramatic fall to 12.9% does not include those Nicaraguans over the age of 10 who were, for numerous reasons such as poor eyesight, learning difficulties or old age, unable to learn to read and write. In spite of these contested figures Nicaragua was awarded the UNESCO Nadezhda Krupskaya Literacy Award for 1980. See Arnove, pp. 27-28.
- 4 Military terminology was used throughout the campaign. The crusade was conceived as a continuation of the revolutionary struggle with the aim of defeating the enemy, illiteracy. The organization of the crusade was like a national military operation with people assigned to fronts that corresponded to the battle zones of the insurrection.
- 5 The lowland region up to the eastern Caribbean coast is referred to as the Atlantic Coast.
- 6 The campaign was described as a political act with pedagogical implications rather than a pedagogical act with political implications. It was argued that all forms of education are political even if it is merely designed to maintain the status quo. Roberto Saenz quoted in S. Hirshon, *And Also Teach them to Read*, Westport, Lawrence Hill and Company, 1983 p.7.
- 7 Where decisions were to be made in the interests of the vast majority, Nicaragua's poor population.
- 8 The idea of consciousness raising (*conscientización*) through education is based on Paolo Freire's educational philosophy that considers the liberating possibilities of education. See P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London, Penguin, 1972.
- 9 Some young men were captured and executed on the shores of Lake Managua as warning to others who might be considering joining the FSLN (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*). See J. Booth, *The End and the Beginning. The Nicaraguan Revolution* Second Edition, Boulder, Westview Press, 1985, p. 95.
- 10 For the objectives of the literacy crusade see F.Cardenal, 'Objetivos de la Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización. Alfabetización: Proyecto Político' in *Nicaragua Triunfa en la Alfabetización, Documentos y Testimonios de la Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización*, San José, Ministerio de Educación, 1981, pp. 27-36.
- 11 V. Miller, *Between Struggle and Hope. The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1985.
- 12 Former La Trobe University student, Daniel Knot left a considerable archive after having lived several years in Nicaragua during the 1980s. Documents and booklets include information about health, education, defense and indigenous rights. Another useful text is a collection of documents, newspaper articles, interviews, literacy materials and teaching guides called *Nicaragua, Triunfa en la Alfabetización (Nicaragua, Victorious in Literacy)*.
- 13 A. Musset, *Hombres Nuevos en otro Mundo: la Nicaragua del 80 en los diarios de la Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización*, Managua: IHNCA-UCA, 2005. The brigadistas were part of the *Brigada de Rescate Histórico*- a group of around 214 brigadistas

- who were responsible for taking oral history interviews with people who had been involved in the insurrection. 62 of these field diaries can be accessed in the IHNCA-UCA archive.
- 14 C. Alemán Ocampo, *Y También Enséñenles a Leer*, Managua, Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1984. 'And also teach them to read,' was a famous catch cry of the CNA. It refers to an order given by revolutionary martyr Carlos Fonseca Armador when the revolutionary struggle was in its infancy. Under the cover of the mountains in North West Nicaragua, Sandinistas were training their forces to use weaponry and Fonseca was to famously tell his troops that as well as dismantling and reassembling weapons they should, 'Also teach them to read'.
- 15 J.D. Centeno, *El Abridista*, Sandino Vive website, <http://www.sandinovive.org/cna/docs/abrigadisto2.pdf> accessed 12.10.08. C.T. Díaz, *Apuntes de un Brigadista*. La Cruzada de Alfabetización en Nicaragua, Mexico City, CREA, 1985.
- 16 Such texts that celebrate the Literacy Campaign include, *The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade*. Second War of Liberation, Toronto, Union Labour at Action Print, 1982. *Nicaragua. Truifna en la Alfabetizacion*. Documentos y Testimonios de la Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetizacion, San Jose, Ministerio de Educacion, 1981. MacAdam, C, 'Towards Democracy: The Literacy Crusade in Nicaragua,' *International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale de l'Education*, 1984, *La Educación en Cuatro Años de Revolución*, Managua, Ministerio de Educación, 1983. *Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización*, Nicaragua Libre, 1980, Managua, Ministerio de Educación, 1980. Bautista Arrien, J, *Nicaragua: Revolución y Proyecto Educativo*, Managua, Nicaragua Libre, 1980. Armes, L, 'La Alfabetizacion en Nicaragua,' *Nueva Sociedad*, July-August, 1981, pp.85-102. Barndt, D, *To Change This House*. Popular Education Under the Sandinistas, Toronto, Between the Lines, 1991.
- 17 There are many examples of English language reports on the CNA that were used by organizations in solidarity with Nicaragua to highlight the positive social changes that were taking place in an attempt to influence international opinion about the Sandinistas and counteract the rightist propaganda. Such organizations also hoped to influence foreign policy, particularly of the United States which pursued an aggressively anti-Sandinista program. For example; R.M Torres, *Nicaragua: Revolución Popular*, Educación Popular, Mexico, Serie Primera Linea, 1985. *Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización*. Nicaragua Libre 1980, Managua, Ministerio de Educación, date no specified, G. Black and J. Bevan, *The Loss of Fear*. Education in Nicaragua Before and After the Revolution, London, Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign, 1980, Nicaragua Libre. *A Free Nation! Committees in Solidarity with Central America and the Caribbean*, 1986. *The Dawning of Nicaragua*, Managua, Instituto de Información de Centroamérica y del Caribe, 1983 and Luis Armes, 'La Alfabetización en Nicaragua,' *Nueva Sociedad*, Jul-Aug 1981, pp.85-102.
- 18 *Manual del Brigadista*, Ejército Popular de Alfabetizadores, Managua, Ministerio de Educación, 1980, p.6. The Manual was an information booklet given to all brigadistas. It was a guide to participant's rights and responsibilities, including the pledge and official anthems of the Crusade and the FSLN.
- 19 *Manual del Brigadista*, p. 8.
- 20 A responsible was responsible for a squadron of brigadistas. He or she would ensure that brigadistas were being looked after and that they were working effectively towards achieving the goals of the Crusade.
- 21 Hugo cited in Alemán Ocampo, p. 35.
- 22 Hirshon, p. 143.
- 23 Cardenal, p. 36.
- 24 F. Cardenal, 'Revolución Sandinista y Educación;', *Encuentro*, no. 15, UCA Managua, p. 150.
- 25 *La Alfabetización en Marcha*, Managua, Ministerio de Educación, 1980, p. 17.
- 26 Francisco cited in Alemán Ocampo, p. 30
- 27 Hirshon, p. 11.
- 28 Francisco cited in Alemán Ocampo, p. 30. *Contra* is short for the Spanish *contrarevolucionario* (counterrevolutionary).
- 29 Francisco cited in Alemán Ocampo, p. 43.
- 30 Pérez Valle cited in Miller, p. 167.
- 31 Silvio cited in Alemán Ocampo, pp. 77-78.
- 32 Miller, p. 166.
- 33 Alemán Ocampo, p. 79.
- 34 Rómulo cited in Musset, p. 75.
- 35 A. Von Rechnitz, 'Diario' *Barricada*, 9 September 1980 cited in Miller, p. 166.
- 36 Glenda Isabel cited in Musset, p. 121.
- 37 Ariel cited in Alemán Ocampo, p. 106.
- 38 The Guardia Nacional (National Guard) was the military power behind the Somoza dictatorship. The Guardia were encouraged to supplement their modest income by collecting bribes and running illegal rackets. Given their corrupt practices, the guardia isolated themselves from the people and it was in their interests to keep the dictatorship in power in order to continue to exploit the general population. Dissent was met with brutality and terror.
- 39 Enrique cited in Alemán Ocampo, p. 60.

- 40 Public rallies in Managua called for the assassins of Andrade to be given the death penalty. The government committed to harsh retribution to anyone who harmed a brigadista. *Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización*, p. 37.
- 41 A. Bendaña, 'Enemy at the Door', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, May/June 1980, p. 31.
- 42 *Manual del Brigadista*, p. 8.
- 43 *Manual del Brigadista*, p. 8.
- 44 See A. Lorenzetto and K. Neys, *UNESCO Methods and Means Utilized in Cuba to Eliminate Illiteracy*, UNESCO Mission, March 1964 for details of the organization, the structure and an evaluation of the outcomes of the Cuban Literacy Campaign.
- 45 The responsibility of the brigadista is to organize student in to groups; young people separated from adults in different class times, *Manual del Brigadista*, p.17.
- 46 Arnove, p. 26.
- 47 Francisco cited in Alemán Ocampo, p. 85.
- 48 Nubia cited in Alemán Ocampo, p. 86.
- 49 Pilar cited in Alemán Ocampo, p. 151.
- 50 Hirshon, p. 69.
- 51 F. Cardenal and V. Miller, 'Nicaragua1980: the Battle for the ABCs', *Harvard Educational Review*, 51 February 1981, p. 12.
- 52 Hirshon, p. 56.
- 53 Hirshon, p. 220.
- 54 J. Flora, J. McFadden, R. Warner, 'The Growth of Class Struggle: the impact of the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade on the Political Consciousness of Youth Literacy Workers,' *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 10, no. 1, 1983, p. 55.
- 55 Glenda Isabel cited in Musset, p. 118.
- 56 Glenda Isabel cited in Musset, p. 116.
- 57 The study was undertaken by the Juventud Sandinista, see Flora et al, p. 56.
- 58 Flora et al, p. 56.
- 59 Enrique cited in Alemán Ocampo, p. 59
- 60 Such was the resentment of Cubans that in the Atlantic town of Bluefields, locals protested the presence of the Cuban teachers. Around 500 Cuban teachers participated in the CNA. Due to their experience, the Cubans were selected to work in the most isolated and challenging parts of the country. For this reason, many Cuban teachers were sent to work on the Atlantic Coast, a region that is more ethnically heterogeneous than the rest of the nation- it was one of the areas least receptive to the Revolution and the program of the FSLN. For details see J. Freeland, *A Special Place in History: The Atlantic Coast in the Nicaraguan Revolution*, London, Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign, 1988.
- 61 A. Bradstock, *Saints and Sandinistas: the Catholic Church in Nicaragua and its response to the Revolution*, London, Epworth, 1987, p.31.
- 62 H. Sklar, *Washington's War on Nicaragua*, Boston, South End Press, 1988, p. 100.
- 63 'Popular Democracy: Taking the First Steps', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, May/June 1980, p.27.
- 64 A. Benjamin, *Nicaragua: Dynamics of an Unfinished Revolution*, San Francisco, Walnut Publishing Co, 1989, p. 19.
- 65 By contrast brigadistas in the 1961 Cuban Literacy Campaign were less likely to complain about their experiences. Criticism was not encouraged in Cuba and people were seen to be either whole heartedly in support of the revolution or completely against it. In a famous speech to intellectuals in 1960, Fidel Castro indicated that there was no alternative than to support the revolution, 'Within the revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing.' F. Castro, 'Words to the Intellectuals, 30 June 1961, LANIC Castro Speech Data Base, <http://info.lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro.html>, updated 14 August 2006, accessed 18 October 2008. Such a view left no room for opposition or even criticism of the revolution. Discussion is taken from S. O'Shea, 'The Cuban Literacy Campaign: The Conrado Benítez Brigadistas', La Trobe University Honours Thesis, unpublished, 2007.
- 66 F. Babb, *After Revolution: Mapping Gender and Cultural Politics in Neoliberal Nicaragua*, Austin, The University of Texas Press, 2001.
- 67 D. Whisnant, *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places: the Politics of Culture in Nicaragua*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1995, pp. 210-211.
- 68 In 2005-6 a mobile interactive museum on the CNA traveled throughout Nicaragua. The museum aimed at educating students about the achievements of the Crusade and to inspire young people to become involved in shaping the nation's future. It is hoped that young people will take on some of the values and the spirit of the brigadistas of 1980. See 'El Tren Cultural de la Alfabetización Recorre Nicaragua,' *Infolac Profile of the Information Society in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Vol. 19, No. 4, October –December, 2006, pp. 10-15.
- 69 See S. O'Shea, 'Welcome to Managua's International Airport: Three Decades of Memory Wars in Nicaragua,' *JILAR*, Vol. 14, no 1, July 2008. In this article I follow the fierce battle for public memory in Nicaragua over the past four decades and consider how this might affect the ways people remember the past and I examine the complex interplay between public and private memory, particularly in light of the recent revival in interest of the CNA.

