



## Mirror Images: 1979 and 2018 Nicaragua in the Photography of Susan Meiselas

Susan Meiselas on the streets of León, Nicaragua, June 1979. (Photo by Alain Dejean/Sygma via Getty Images.)

### NICARAGUA

## An Endless Search for Truth

By Aryeh Neier

When I first saw Susan Meiselas’s photos of the 1978-1979 Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, I thought they looked different from any other photos I had seen. Viewing them afresh four decades later, they still look different.

There were some differences that were obvious. Almost all the war photography I had seen previously was in black and white. I suppose that war photographers worry that color would either sensationalize or prettify their images of armed conflict, which is always a nasty business. Also, of course, the photos I had seen of major conflicts — such as the two World Wars, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War — were mostly meant for publication in newspapers which then only published in black and white. Though Meiselas’s photos are in color, they are neither gory nor pretty. Her use of color seems natural and integral to her portrayal of the war in Nicaragua as a desperate extension of the struggles of daily life.

Another striking characteristic of Meiselas’s photos for me is that they were taken up close to those engaged in the struggle. Photography in a war zone is an extremely dangerous profession because it is important to the photographers to get close to the action. Meiselas’s photos seem even closer than usual.

More important, though Meiselas’s photos are not accompanied by text, a narrative emerges from the photos themselves. Her photos make it plain that what took place in Nicaragua was not a war in any conventional sense. It was an uprising fought by untrained combatants in the streets and alleys and doorways of Nicaragua’s towns and villages. The fighters did not have uniforms; they were dressed in their everyday clothes. Their weapons did not have a military heft. It is easy to imagine that many of the fighters continued to work part of the time as farm laborers or mechanics to make a living and to support their families. Some of them were probably students or teachers or low-level civil servants. Many of the fighters wore homemade masks to shield their identities and try to protect themselves against reprisals. Even though the photos do not depict cruelties by government forces nor heroic acts by the Sandinista guerrillas, they seem to suggest that this was a revolution that needed to take place.

In 1991, more than a decade after the Sandinista Revolution and shortly after the “contra” war sponsored by the Reagan administration to overturn the results of the revolution, Susan Meiselas returned to Nicaragua and sought out some of the people whose photos she had taken while the revolution was underway. She made these interviews into a film — “Pictures From a Revolution” (1991) — in which her subjects talked about their lives since the revolution. A number of the Nicaraguans she interviewed were disappointed at the way

things had turned out. Having gotten to know Meiselas in the years after the revolution, it seems to me natural that she should take this next step. After creating a body of work that had played an important role internationally in building sympathy for the Sandinista Revolution, I believe she was intent on deepening and, to an extent, correcting her own portrayal of the events that had taken place in Nicaragua.

These days, with the Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega back in power in Nicaragua, an uprising is underway against his increasingly despotic and corrupt rule. Some of those opposing Ortega now are individuals who had been allied with him at the time of the Sandinista revolution four decades ago. They had served with him in the government that took power after the revolution. Meiselas has been back in Nicaragua during this period. I have not yet seen many of the photographs she has taken on her recent trips to Nicaragua, but I am eager to. Those published here suggest that the struggle underway now is a continuation of the one that took place four decades ago. The cast of characters in power is different, but ordinary Nicaraguans are still struggling against the abuses that go with the exercise of unchecked power.

Though the quality of Susan Meiselas’s photos of Nicaragua in 1978-1979 produced a substantive body of work — and the book in which they were assembled is a work of art — she has been unwilling to let it stand on its own. Susan Meiselas wants to tell the truth about Nicaragua. As her recent photographs indicate, the truth lies in a story that has not ended.

Aryeh Neier served for 12 years as the Founding Executive Director of Human Rights Watch before becoming president of the Open Society Institute from 1993 to 2012.

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### FIRST

Left: Nicaragua. Final insurrection, Sandinista National Liberation Front. June 1979.

Right: Masaya, Nicaragua. Daily life within the barricades. Banner calls Ortega a traitor. July 1, 2018.

### SECOND

Left: Jinotepe, Nicaragua. A funeral procession for assassinated student leaders. Demonstrators carry a photograph of Arlen Siu, an FSLN guerrilla fighter killed in the mountains three years earlier. June 1978.

Right: Jinotepe, Nicaragua. Defaced FSLN mural honoring the heroism of Arlen Siu. July 2, 2018.

### THIRD

Left: Managua, Nicaragua. Wall celebrating the triumph of the Sandinistas over President Somoza. July 1979.

Right: Managua, Nicaragua. Protest messaging alongside the Masaya Highway during the March of Flowers. June 30, 2018.





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# Diptychs of Insurrection

By Lesdi Goussen

Susan Meiselas’s images documenting the overthrow of the Somoza regime in 1978-1979 have become ubiquitous for visualizing the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. A decade after these photographs were first published and well into the precarious leadership of the Sandinista government, Meiselas returned to the country in 1991 to follow up with the subjects pictured in her work. Crossing temporal coordinates, Meiselas’s photographs emerge as diptychs of insurrection, capturing the ways in which people and places transgress and transform over time.

In June 2018, just days before the inauguration of her exhibition, “Mediations,” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Susan Meiselas returned to Nicaragua. Her decision was prompted by the swelling protests that had swept across the country in a matter of weeks. With little to no media attention in the United States, these recent photographs tell a vital yet disturbingly familiar narrative. The images and their familiar compositions produce a puzzling sensation of déjà vu. Like a photographic negative, Meiselas’s contemporary pictures capture the dark gradient of a failed revolution and a disintegrating social body.

In April 2018, President Daniel Ortega issued a series of social security reforms that included changes like a 5-percent tax on pensions for elderly and disabled citizens. Protestors, primarily college students, took to the streets demanding the overturn of the reforms and calling into question the increasingly repressive conditions faced by the Nicaraguan people. Rooted in growing resentment of Ortega’s violations and abuses of power — exemplified by his 11-year rule and alterations to the country’s constitution — the student movement began to turn a spotlight on the dictatorial tendencies displayed by the president.

In the early days of the demonstrations, students and civilians were met with lethal force by paramilitary agents. The atrocities of these events quickly inspired a national uprising. As the death toll rose, protests across the country called for justice on behalf of those massacred as well as the resignation of President Ortega. Amid the violence, the Ortega administration agreed to a series of national dialogues, with the Catholic church mediating conversations between government representatives and student leaders. These dialogues proved to be short-lived and ineffective. To make matters worse, they exposed many student activists who have now been forced into exile.

With no protection from national police and paramilitary forces, protestors resorted to familiar tactics of self-defense. Reminiscent of the strategies deployed by Sandinista revolutionaries in the late 1970s, they used homemade mortars, built barricades, and relied on internal networks of communication for protection. The new generation restaged acts of national resistance through a vernacular familiar to the Nicaraguan people.

However, the present-day iteration of history tells a different story. While Sandinistas set images of the dictator Anastasio Somoza on their barricaded walls in 1979, protesters today have adapted the words of the famous revolutionary figure Augusto Sandino, hanging banners that read: “Ortega Vende Patria,” a phrase that implies the president has betrayed his own country. But not only is the current liberation front accusing Ortega of being a traitor, they are comparing him to the very dictator that the Sandinista party fought so hard to overthrow. Through ruptures like these, the broken grammar of Sandinismo and what it means to be a Sandinista reveals the instabilities of political affiliation and collective memory.

As the country continues to mourn, the pain of old wounds re-emerge. Protestors in the March of Flowers on June 30, 2018, carried images of student activists and loved ones recently massacred at the hands of the state. They retraced the steps of protestors in 1978 who likewise raised photographs of student leaders killed fighting the Somoza regime, including the student martyr Arlen Siu Bermúdez.

Though Arlen’s memory persists, the symbol of revolution that she and her contemporaries represented has been rejected by those on the frontlines today. Folded into the visual language of Sandinismo, murals of Arlen and other revolutionary leaders of that time have been defaced and destroyed. Moving away from the rhetoric of revolutionary national pride, the visual landscape of today’s resistance began to take shape. With no time to craft a cohesive visual program, protestors masked their faces and called for help, covering city walls with messages that read “SOS Nicaragua....”

In July 2018, after several months of arduous resistance and grueling hope, Ortega ordered the deployment of “Operation Clean-Up,” which authorized the use of lethal force on unarmed civilians. Declaring protests illegal, the government has come down hard on those who speak out. Facing torture, disappearance, exile, and death, Nicaraguan citizens have been forced into silence. Since the beginning of the crisis in April 2018, more than 500 people have been killed, with many unconfirmed deaths and thousands disappeared. According to the UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, more than 20,000 Nicaraguans have applied for asylum.

Today, Ortega’s authoritarian government grasps for control as countries around the world, including the United States, begin to impose sanctions on his regime.

Susan Meiselas is a documentary photographer and a member of the internationally renowned photographic cooperative Magnum Photos. She spoke for CLAS on September 10, 2018.

Lesdi Goussen is a first-generation Nicaraguan-American and a Ph.D. student in the History of Art Department at UC Berkeley.



The expansion of authoritarian control by the Ortega–Murillo regime in Nicaragua has continued. Above: Carlos Fernando Chamorro, his wife Desirée Elizondo, and other journalists are harassed by a group of riot police after asking for official documentation about the government’s occupation and shutdown of their news outlets Confidencial and Esta Semana on December 15, 2018. (Photo by Carlos Herrera/Confidencial.)