

Nicaragua and the Contra: European Internationalists Fought - and Died - for Sandinismo

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The internationalists. Some may consider them simply tourists. I don't know how they are looked upon in official U.S. circles. Reagan calls them 'terrorists.' Of course, they do terrify him, and rightly so. The internationalists in the field of culture, health, construction, information ... internationalists in solidarity, to put it simply. In the chapel in the little settlement of Santa Clara a Delegate of the Word defined them clearly: 'The internationalists internationalize love.'

—Bishop Pedro Casaldaliga

In the 1980s many thousands of people from all over Europe and North America traveled to Nicaragua to demonstrate their solidarity with the Nicaraguan Revolution led by the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN). They joined women and men from all over Latin America and the Caribbean who also rallied in a great wave of solidarity defending Nicaragua's revolution against the terrorist aggression of the U.S. government under President Reagan. For people in North America, the foremost figure of that solidarity is Benjamin Linder, who was murdered by U.S. armed and supported Contra fighters in 1987. Less remembered are European martyrs like Albrecht Pflaum from Germany and Pierre Grosjean from France, both doctors, who were murdered in separate Contra attacks in 1983. 2016 marks thirty years since the deaths in 1986 of five other Europeans. Maurice Demierre, Joël Fieux, Ambrosio Mogorón, Yvan Leyvraz and Berndt Koberstein. It is worth remembering these people now because their example and vision entirely contradict what Europe has become under the misrule of the European elites.



Pierre Grosjean and Albrecht Pflaum

Maurice Dèmierre was a Swiss agronomist working in rural areas of Nicaragua's north western department of Chinandega. From a devout Catholic family, Maurice was sentenced to three months in prison as a conscientious objector against his country's national military service. He was 28 when his vehicle set off a couple of U.S. Claymore mines on Feb. 16, 1986. The explosion killed Maurice and five of his Nicaraguan passengers. Such incidents were very common in Nicaragua because the U.S. government encouraged the Contra fighters it armed and trained to deliberately target civilians so as to create fear and paralyze normal social and economic activity.

Among the most notorious of these attacks were one near San Juan de Limay and another near San Jose de Bocay destroying public transport vehicles and murdering almost 60 people all told, leaving dozens wounded. Attacks on doctors, teachers and agricultural advisers were also a deliberate Contra tactic encouraged by their U.S. advisers.

Ambrosio Mogorron was a Basque doctor in the area around San Jose de Bocay in northern Jinotega one of the most intense war zones at the time. He too, like Maurice Dèmierre, died on May 24, 1986 along with 9 others when a U.S. anti-tank mine detonated under his pick-up vehicle, carrying 12 Nicaraguans, while he was helping organize a vaccination campaign in the many remote communities around San José de Bocay. His Nicaraguan co worker Senia remembers,

“When we brought the bodies to San José de Bocay it was night time. People resisted believing it was Ambrosio and kept lifting the coffin cover to be sure it was him, with much weeping. They brought him every kind of flower. If the Contra had any support in the area it certainly fell away with Ambrosio’s death.”

At the time he died Ambrosio had been working for years accumulating data on leishmaniasis, the much feared disease better know as “mountain leprosy” and had accumulated analysis of around 2500 cases in the region.



Maurice Demierre and Ambrosio Mogorron

Orlando Rizo was the regional director of health in those days and recalls “Ambrosio was indeed what you might call a popular leader. I don’t think the Contra respected him. They respected nothing and their Radio “September 15th” had threatened him. But it’s quite possible he gave medical attention to family members of Contra fighters. It’s normal for us to do that in certain areas if the family turns up for a consultation. For us, Ambrosio symbolized life. He had three qualities, a deep conviction of the cause of the people and what it meant to work, live and if necessary die for that cause. Then his bravery, working for six years in really difficult circumstances and, finally, his humility. He was an example for all of us.”

In the deadliest attack involving European volunteers, five people were killed when their vehicle was ambushed near Zompopera in northern Nicaragua on the way south to Matagalpa. This attack killed Yvan Leyvraz, Joël Fieux and Berndt Koberstein as well as their Nicaraguan comrades, Mario Acevedo and William Blandón. Yvan, 31 when he died, was an electrician from Lausanne, Switzerland. He had left his country objecting to its policy of national military service and traveled through Latin America before arriving in Nicaragua in 1983. For a while Yvan worked around the town of La Dalia. A woman Nicaraguan cooperative member remembers, “Here in the country around Yale we’d never seen a housing project for people in poverty. It was something unusual, seeing the effort those comrades made to build 42 houses and the school. People were grateful for that help since we’d never had it before. Yvan finished the project here and went to build projects elsewhere while we continued finishing building the settlement. At the same time in La Dalia we trained a group of workers to coordinate with the brigade of Swiss workers. When Yvan left, people were ready to carry on building.”

Berndt Koberstein, 29, was a German mechanic from Freiberg, then in East Germany, who first came to Nicaragua in 1981 to help install a printing press for the Sandinista Youth. Very active in his local communist party in Germany, Berndt intensified his solidarity work after the murder of Albrecht "Tonio" Pflaum in 1983. He returned to Nicaragua to work in the town of Wiwilí in northern Jinotega installing drinking water systems for local people there. When the vehicle Berndt and his companions traveled in was attacked, Berndt was unarmed and was shot dead during the combat. Yvan Leyvraz was killed by a rocket propelled grenade as he tried to get out from the vehicle under fire. Joël Fieux took a weapon and fired back at the Contra attackers until he too was shot dead.



Yvan Leyvraz, Joel Fieux and Berndt Koberstein

From France, Joël Fieux, a communications worker, was 28 when he died. He had left France to avoid military service there in 1980 and settled in Nicaragua in 1983. Joël's partner Fatima remembers,

"We were good friends and accomplices too, as well as being a couple. He liked the country life, friendships with rural people, getting to know rural idiosyncrasies and problems... He was never afraid of getting involved in the difficulties of the war and getting out to the farthest corners of the region around Jinotega and Matagalpa, setting up radio communications for the people facing the brunt of the Contra war...I don't want to talk about his absence because I prefer having his presence here in my heart and I think many people feel the same as me, remembering his way of being. For some he was a teacher, for others an unruly worker, a dreamer, a great cook who loved his food, a great friend, and for me, my great love."

At Ben Linder's funeral in Matagalpa in 1987 following his murder in La Camaleona near San José de Bocay, Daniel Ortega said,

"From La Camaleona where the mercenaries murdered him following the plans of the CIA , to El Cuá, Río San Juan, Oregon and Washington, the song full of love, full of peace, and of Benjamin Linder's hopes, multiplies with his sacrifice. What's more powerful than war? And what is more powerful than a hundred million dollars or the threat of invasion? Far more powerful is the power of love among peoples, the example and sacrifice of people like Benjamin..."

Similarly, leading Sandinista strategist Orlando Nuñez Soto wrote in relation to these internationalist martyrs,

"In every historical moment, a part of youth reminds older generations of the need for and the commitment to freedom. Each generation sees a mortal struggle in which each of us choose either to defend the status quo or to change it. Maurice, Yvan, Joël and Berndt, like so many young people were on the side of hope to be able to change the world so as to build a new world".

As contemporary Europe struggles to free itself from its squalid, corrupt elites and to remake itself from its all too pressing history of brutal colonialism and genocidal war, its peoples could well take inspiration from the great example of their heroes and martyrs in

the cause of international peace and justice in Nicaragua.

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